

Borderlines and Battlefields: How Historical Narratives Fuel the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict

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Introduction

In July 2025, the long-dormant conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over stretches of their shared frontier erupted once again into open hostilities, marking the most severe clashes since 2011². Artillery exchanges and aerial bombardments in the contested zone near the Preah Vihear temple forced thousands of civilians to flee, drew the attention of the United Nations Security Council, and prompted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to facilitate the deployment of regional observers in an effort to stabilize a fragile ceasefire³. This escalation illustrates how disputes rooted in century-old colonial treaties and maps continue to reverberate in contemporary Southeast Asia, destabilizing communities and straining regional institutions.



Source: *Thailand-Cambodia Conflict, 2025*. (Britannica)

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² 'Cambodia-Thailand Border Clashes: Urgent Private Meeting', *Security Council Report*, n.d., accessed 28 August 2025, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/07/cambodia-thailand-border-clashes-urgent-private-meeting.php>.

³ *Cambodia-Thailand: Border Violence Turns More Violent and Deadly — Expert Comment* | ACLED, 8 August 2025, <https://acleddata.com/expert-comment/cambodia-thailand-border-violence-turns-more-violent-and-deadly-expert-comment>.

Yet the persistence of the Thai-Cambodian border conflict cannot be explained by legal ambiguities alone. Historical narratives – whether embedded in Thai conceptions of the “geo-body” that define natural frontiers⁴, or in Cambodian claims to civilizational guardianship over sacred sites such as Preah Vihear⁵ – play a decisive role in shaping public opinion, elite political strategies, and ultimately military postures. These narratives routinely override technical processes of delimitation and demarcation, frustrating international rulings and bilateral mechanisms.

This commentary contends that unless the deeply entrenched historical imaginaries underpinning the dispute are critically addressed, legal rulings and temporary ceasefires will remain inadequate, merely postponing rather than preventing the recurrent transformation of cultural landmarks into sites of violent confrontation.

A Century of Contestation

The Thai-Cambodian border dispute traces back to colonial-era treaties between France and Siam in the early twentieth century. The 1904 Franco-Siamese Treaty established the Dangrek Mountains’ watershed as the frontier, but French surveyors’ 1907 Annex I Map departed from this principle by placing the eleventh-century Preah Vihear temple on Cambodian territory. For decades, Siamese and later Thai authorities appeared to accept this cartographic outcome – publishing the map and using it officially without objection – until the issue resurfaced in the mid-twentieth century, forming a key element in the International Court of Justice’s (ICJ) later reasoning⁶.



Source: *Cambodia and Thailand: A historic border dispute* (FRANCE 24, July 2025, Graphic Studio France Médias Monde)

⁴ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

⁵ Astrid Noren-Nilsson, *Cambodia’s Second Kingdom: Nation, Imagination, and Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501725944>.

⁶ P. Cuasay, ‘Borders on the Fantastic: Mimesis, Violence, and Landscape at the Temple of Preah Vihear’, *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 4 (1998): 849–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X98002893>.

The dispute reignited in 2008 when Cambodia secured Preah Vihear's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While Phnom Penh celebrated the listing as recognition of cultural guardianship, nationalist movements in Thailand, notably the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), condemned it as a loss of sovereignty⁷. Armed clashes followed between 2008 and 2011, resulting in civilian casualties and mass displacement, prompting ASEAN's first-ever mediation in an intra-regional border conflict.

In response to continuing tensions, Cambodia returned to the ICJ in 2011 to request an interpretation of its 1962 judgment. The ICJ clarified in 2013 that the "promontory" of the temple, including its immediate vicinity, belonged to Cambodia, again ordering Thai withdrawal⁸. Yet the Court refrained from determining the wider frontier, leaving this task to the bilateral Joint Boundary Commission (JBC). This narrow judicial scope has perpetuated ambiguity, sustaining competing narratives and periodic confrontations⁹.

The Power of Narratives: Sovereignty, Symbolism, and Political Struggles

At the heart of the Thai-Cambodian border dispute lies not only a contest over cartographic lines, but also the force of historical narratives that give those lines meaning. In Thailand, national consciousness of territory has long been shaped by what Thongchai Winichakul terms the "geo-body" – the idea that the state's natural and rightful borders correspond to easily intelligible physical features, such as mountain watersheds¹⁰. Within this worldview, the Franco-Siamese treaties of 1904 and 1907, and especially the *Annex I Map* that placed Preah Vihear on the Cambodian side, are often portrayed in school textbooks and public discourse as colonial impositions. The ICJ's 1962 reliance on this map is thus framed by nationalist actors as a historical injustice, priming the Thai public to view concessions as betrayals of sovereignty¹¹.

For Cambodia, Preah Vihear has been cast as a symbol of Khmer civilizational patrimony and national rebirth. Since the country's political re-foundation in the 1990s, successive governments have leveraged the temple as proof of Cambodia's role as the guardian of Angkorian heritage¹².

⁷ Nichan Singhaputargun, 'The Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple Dispute: Its Past, Present and Future', in *Contemporary Conflicts in Southeast Asia: Towards a New ASEAN Way of Conflict Management*, ed. Mikio Oishi (Springer, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0042-3_6.

⁸ Alessandro Chechi, 'The 2013 Judgment of the ICJ in the Temple of Preah Vihear Case and the Protection of World Cultural Heritage Sites in Wartime', *Asian Journal of International Law* 6, no. 2 (2016): 353–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2044251315000156>.

⁹ Charnvit Kasetsiri et al., *Preah Vihear: A Guide to the Thai-Cambodian Conflict and Its Solutions* (White Lotus Press, 2013), <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1970304959855395356>.

¹⁰ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

¹¹ Shane Strate, 'A Pile of Stones? Preah Vihear as a Thai Symbol of National Humiliation', *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 1 (2013): 41–68, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2013.0139>.

¹² Lynn Meskell, 'World Heritage and WikiLeaks: Territory, Trade, and Temples on the Thai-Cambodian Border', *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 1 (2016): 72–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/684643>.



Source: Preah Vihear Temple - UNESCO website (Ko Hon Chiu Vincent - 2011)

This discourse reached its height during the 2008–2013 period, when Phnom Penh presented the UNESCO World Heritage inscription as both a diplomatic triumph and a reaffirmation of sovereignty. In moments of crisis, such as the 2008 border clashes, this framing mobilized public support and shored up the legitimacy of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

Political entrepreneurs in both countries have exploited these narratives to serve partisan ends¹³. In Thailand, the PAD used the Preah Vihear dispute in 2008 to undermine the Samak Sundaravej government, accusing it of treachery in negotiating with Cambodia. In Cambodia, the CPP portrayed Thai resistance to UNESCO’s decision as evidence of hostility toward Khmer heritage, thereby consolidating nationalist support. The World Heritage listing itself, originally a conservation measure, became securitized: what might have been a technical cultural dossier was transformed into a litmus test of sovereignty, increasing the political costs of compromise and making the temple a battlefield of both memory and arms¹⁴.

From Courts to Social Media: Factors Sustaining the Conflict

Despite repeated adjudications and mediation efforts, the Thai-Cambodian border dispute endures because legal rulings have never been sufficient to contain the political forces that animate it. The ICJ’s 1962 and 2013 decisions clarified Cambodian sovereignty over the temple and its immediate promontory but left unresolved the broader question of delimitation and demarcation along the frontier¹⁵. This narrow judicial scope has created a law-politics gap: nationalist actors on both sides “fill the gaps” with historical narratives that demand uncompromising positions, obliging political elites and military institutions to uphold maximalist claims even when legal obligations point toward compromise¹⁶.

¹³ Singhaputargun, ‘The Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple Dispute’.

¹⁴ Mesckell, ‘World Heritage and WikiLeaks’.

¹⁵ David P. Riesenberg, ‘Request for Interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the Case Concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand) (I.C.J.)’, *International Legal Materials* 54, no. 1 (2015): 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.5305/intelegamate.54.1.0053>.

¹⁶ Nicole Jenne, ‘Preah Vihear: A Guide to the Thai-Cambodian Conflict and Its Solutions by Charnvit Kasetsiri, Pou Sothirak, and Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Review)’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2014): 168–70.

Institutional weakness compounds this challenge. The bilateral JBC, charged with technical demarcation, has been repeatedly paralyzed by domestic political crises in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh. In Thailand, parliamentary disputes and leadership changes have stalled ratification of JBC agreements, while in Cambodia, ruling elites have resisted steps that could be framed domestically as concessions¹⁷. Observer mechanisms, whether proposed by ASEAN in 2011 or reintroduced in 2025, remain temporary and fragile.

The information environment further accelerates escalation. Social media platforms amplify rumors of territorial incursions, allegations of UNESCO conspiracies, or purported leaks of boundary maps, spreading narratives faster than official communication channels can contain them¹⁸. Such rumor cycles inflame public sentiment and constrain leaders' room for maneuver.

Regional and International Dynamics

Beyond internal narratives and institutional challenges, the Thailand-Cambodia conflict is deeply influenced by competing external interests, particularly those of China and the United States. China has increasingly positioned itself as both a strategic patron and diplomatic mediator in the region. Through a combination of economic levers, soft power, and stabilization efforts, Beijing seeks to reaffirm its influence over Cambodia, projecting a narrative of regional stewardship¹⁹. For example, since 2022, China has financed the renovation of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base – expanding its berth, pier, and repair facilities – raising concerns in Washington about Beijing's potential to extend military influence into the Gulf of Thailand and the broader South China Sea region²⁰. Cambodia, however, insists the base remains sovereign and accessible to all friendly navies, denying any exclusive Chinese presence.



Source: Cambodia's Ream Naval Base (New York Times, 2024²¹)

¹⁷ Jenne, 'Preah Vihear'.

¹⁸ Singhaputargun, 'The Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple Dispute'.

¹⁹ Daniel C. O'Neill and Daniel C. O'Neill, *Sino-Cambodian Ties That Bind*, Hong Kong University Press, 25 December 2018, 112–45, <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/97898888455966.003.0006>.

²⁰ Oxford Analytica, 'China Port Plan Will Strain US-Cambodia Ties', *Expert Briefings*, ahead of print, 6 September 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB246274>.

²¹ Agnes Chang and Hannah Beech, 'The Chinese Base That Isn't There', World, *The New York Times*, 14 July 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/07/14/world/asia/china-cambodia-military-warship-base.html>.

Compounding anxieties about shifting alignments, the United States has signaled renewed engagement exploring a resumption of joint military exercises like Angkor Sentinel amid evolving Cambodia-U.S. defense ties. Meanwhile, Thailand remains a key partner in U.S. strategic planning for Southeast Asia. Facilities such as U-Tapao airbase continue to underpin Pentagon logistical and humanitarian operations, illustrating the longstanding depth of U.S.-Thai military cooperation²².

This triangular dynamic – China deepening its footprint via Cambodia, the U.S. reasserting relations, and ASEAN caught in between – amplifies the complexity of resolving the border dispute. External powers can help stabilize tensions, but their influence also raises specters of proxy competition.

Human, Economic, and Institutional Costs of the Dispute

The persistence of the Thai-Cambodian border dispute carries profound human, economic, and institutional costs. On the ground, the communities straddling the frontier are the first to bear the brunt of renewed violence. Civilian deaths and injuries have been recorded in every major flare-up since 2008, alongside the repeated displacement of communities from Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey provinces.



Source: Displaced Cambodians receive water at the Battkhao Resettlement Camp in Oddar Meanchey Province, Cambodia, Saturday, July 26, 2025 as border clashes between Thailand and Cambodia entered its third day. (AP Photo/Anton L. Delgado)

The economic costs are likewise significant. Local cross-border markets, tourism linked to temple complexes, and small-scale trade are acutely sensitive to insecurity, while larger investors view the unresolved dispute as a risk factor that undermines regional connectivity plans in mainland Southeast Asia²³.

At a normative level, the apparent inability to enforce ICJ judgments or UNESCO conservation mandates erodes confidence in the authority of international legal and cultural institutions. This

²² Gregory Raymond and John Blaxland, *The US-Thai Alliance and Asian International Relations: History, Memory and Current Developments* (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429052880>.

²³ Puangthong R. Pawakapan, *State and Uncivil Society in Thailand at the Temple of Preah Vihear* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

weakening of deterrence reverberates beyond Southeast Asia, emboldening challenges to other fragile boundary settlements in Asia²⁴. Finally, the credibility of ASEAN as a conflict-management institution is directly implicated. Its capacity to mediate depends wholly on the consent of member states, limiting both scope and enforcement. The 2025 deployment of observers, alongside Thai and Cambodian commitments to extend the fragile 28 July truce brokered with Malaysian, US, and Chinese mediation, and to facilitate humanitarian aid and medical coordination along the border, marks a constructive step²⁵.



Source: Group photo at the Extraordinary General Border Committee, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Thursday, August 7, 2025. Hasnoor Hussain / AP

Yet these arrangements remain fragile, addressing only the immediate cessation of hostilities while leaving the deeper historical and political drivers of the conflict unresolved.

Toward Sustainable Resolution: Legal Clarity, Cultural Reconciliation, and Cross-Border Cooperation

Addressing the Thai-Cambodian border conflict requires measures that move beyond temporary ceasefires toward deeper engagement with its historical, cultural, and economic roots. One promising avenue lies in the realm of education. Comparative experiences from Europe (such as Franco-German textbook commissions²⁶) and in Northeast Asia (most notably joint history projects among Japan, South Korea, and China²⁷) show that joint history textbook projects can mitigate antagonistic narratives by fostering shared understandings of contested

²⁴ Barry Wain, 'LATENT DANGER: Boundary Disputes and Border Issues in Southeast Asia', in *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2012, ed. Daljit Singh and Pushpa Thambipillai (ISEAS Publishing, 2012), <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1355/9789814380256-005/html>.

²⁵ *Thailand and Cambodia Extend Shaky Ceasefire Deal*, 7 August 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/08/07/thailand-and-cambodia-extend-ceasefire-deal_6744156_4.html.

²⁶ Mona Siegel and Kirsten Harjes, 'Disarming Hatred: History Education, National Memories, and Franco-German Reconciliation from World War I to the Cold War', *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2012): 370–402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2012.00404.x>.

²⁷ Zheng Wang, 'Old Wounds, New Narratives: Joint History Textbook Writing and Peacebuilding in East Asia', *History & Memory* 21, no. 1 (2009): 101–26.

pasts. A similar initiative between Thai and Cambodian scholars, with ASEAN support, could gradually erode the nationalist myths that continue to fuel hostility.

At the technical level, greater transparency in map verification and public dissemination of agreed cartographic data could reduce rumor-driven escalations, while buffer regimes for the Preah Vihear temple – combining UNESCO heritage protection with demilitarization guarantees – would help insulate cultural landmarks from armed confrontation²⁸.

Regionally, institutionalizing an ASEAN observer mechanism would provide a standing capacity for impartial monitoring, moving beyond ad hoc deployments that expire once crises subside. Finally, the development of “peace economies” in the borderlands, through cross-border markets and joint infrastructure, can transform areas of contestation into shared zones of prosperity, aligning local livelihoods with incentives for stability²⁹.

These pathways, though ambitious, highlight that sustainable resolution must integrate cultural reconciliation, legal clarity, and socioeconomic interdependence.

Conclusion

The Thai-Cambodian border conflict demonstrates that borders are never merely lines on a map, but contested narratives that embed questions of identity, sovereignty, and memory. Legal rulings, from the ICJ’s 1962 and 2013 judgments to UNESCO’s conservation mandates, have provided moments of respite yet failed to eliminate the underlying drivers of confrontation. As the 2025 clashes remind us, ceasefires often amount to little more than tactical pauses, temporarily silencing guns while leaving the stories that animate the conflict intact. Unless these narratives are engaged directly, legal and diplomatic mechanisms will remain vulnerable to cycles of escalation.

A sustainable solution requires bridging law, culture, and diplomacy. Courts can narrow ambiguities, but history’s telling and use must also be addressed. Additionally, heritage protection regimes should insulate cultural sites like Preah Vihear from securitization, while regional institutions such as ASEAN must develop standing mechanisms for impartial monitoring rather than ad hoc crisis responses. By fostering cross-border markets and shared infrastructure, states can entrench economic interdependence within contested frontier zones, shifting their role from sites of rivalry to pathways of collaboration. Thus, enduring conflict resolution between Thailand and Cambodia depends on the interplay of legal precision, cultural reconciliation, and regional diplomacy.

²⁸ Jenne, ‘Preah Vihear’.

²⁹ Werner Distler et al., ‘Economies of Peace: Economy Formation Processes and Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Societies’, *Civil Wars* 20, no. 2 (2018): 139–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2018.1500164>.