

Background

For more than a century, Thailand and Cambodia have disputed sovereignty over several undemarcated points along their 817 km land border. Of these, the focus of the disputes has mainly been around the ancient Hindu temples of Ta Moan Thom and Preah Vihear, dating from the 11TH century, whose ownership is claimed by both countries.

The border between the two countries was established in 1904 through the signing of an agreement between the then Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) and France, which occupied the territory that is now Cambodia as a colonial power. This treaty stipulated that the border should follow the watershed between the Nam Sen and Mekong basins on one side and the Nam Moun basin on the other, this division being, by its nature, a fixed physical feature. The result was that the temple of Preah Vihear (Phra Viharn in Thai) was left on Thai territory¹.

The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 redrew the map, jeopardising Thai control over several religious and culturally significant sites, including the famous Preah Vihear temple. Thailand (then still Siam) signed the treaty, but resentment and controversy persisted. Since 1907, the Preah Vihear monument has been under the jurisdiction of a public body, the Cambodian Archaeological Services².

The temple and its surroundings became the symbolic and strategic epicentre of the territorial dispute. During the Second World War, when France was under Nazi occupation and Japan had gained control of most of Southeast Asia, Thailand seized the opportunity to occupy much of the disputed border by appropriating areas that belonged, according to the 1907 treaty, to Cambodia. After the war, Thailand was evicted from these areas, but the trauma of these losses has remained in the nationalist memory of Thai society.

Years later, the Thai authorities considered that the actual demarcation of the border deviated from the text of the 1904 treaty, including the territory around the Preah Vihear temple and other border points. Cambodia appealed to the International Court of Justice to defend its ownership of the Preah Vihear temple. The Court ruled that the temple

¹ See: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/45/9259.pdf>

*All links are active as of 12 October 2025

² See: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/45/9249.pdf>

belonged to Cambodia in 1962³, but Thailand did not agree with that resolution, although it accepted it. Society remained highly dissatisfied with the resolution, especially among nationalist factions in Thai politics, and for this reason Thailand's ownership claims did not end.

⁴In 2000, the two countries agreed to establish a Joint Boundary Commission to peacefully address the claims, but little progress has been made in resolving the disputes.

These claims over the ownership of historical sites have increased nationalist tension between the two countries, particularly in 2003, when a group of violent protesters set fire to the Thai embassy and several Thai businesses in Phnom Penh in response to an alleged comment by Thai soap opera star Suvanant Kongying questioning Cambodia's jurisdiction over the Angkor Wat temple⁵.

Tension on the border between the two countries increased in 2008 after Cambodia proposed to include the Preah Vihear temple on UNESCO's World Heritage List⁶. Over the following years, there were several altercations, notably in 2011, which resulted in more than a dozen casualties.

At that time, Cambodia again appealed to the ICJ and asked it to clarify a 1962 ruling in which the same court granted it sovereignty over the temple but did not specify anything about the surrounding territory, and to issue measures to prevent further military clashes. In 2013, the ICJ reaffirmed that the entire temple promontory was within Cambodian territory⁷.

After more than a decade without large-scale clashes since the 2011 confrontations, border tensions have seen a worrying resurgence since early 2025.

In February this year, a group of Cambodians escorted by troops sang their national anthem at Ta Moan Thom — another ancient Hindu temple claimed by both countries — before being detained by Thai soldiers⁸.

³ See: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/45>

⁴ The text of the agreement can be found at: <https://sokheounpang.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/mou-2000-eng.pdf>

⁵ See: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-feb-03-fg-cambo3-story.html>

⁶ See: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/kh/>

⁷ See: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2013/11/1287071>

⁸ See: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/13052025-are-thai-cambodian-military-tensions-at-the-ta-moan-thom-temple-rocking-asean-solidarity-oped/>

This situation of latent tension erupted again on 28 May, when a Cambodian soldier was killed near the 'Emerald Triangle' during a brief exchange of fire. Thailand described this incident as self-defence, while Cambodia called it a provocation due to military incursion⁹.

After the May 28th clash, both sides met in Phnom Penh on 14th June within the framework of the Joint Border Commission to begin talks that had been stalled for thirteen years. Although no significant progress was made, both sides quickly committed to easing tensions and avoiding further conflict¹⁰. It seemed that relations between Cambodia and Thailand were improving after the Commission meeting, but unfortunately, subsequent events soon dampened the prevailing optimistic spirit.

In an effort to reduce the tension, Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra called Hun Sen on 15 June, confident that the good relations her father, Thankin, had with Hun Sen could end the hostilities. However, the move backfired, as the conversation was leaked and Shinawatra was heard criticising a Thai army commander for provoking the conflict. Although Shinawatra later argued that it was merely a negotiating tactic to promote a rapprochement with the Cambodian leader and thus achieve a peaceful resolution to the territorial dispute, the statement provoked public criticism and the withdrawal of her coalition partners in the government, who considered that it damaged Thailand's integrity, sovereignty and army.

After only ten months in power, on 1 July, Thailand's constitutional court suspended Shinawatra from her duties as prime minister, although she remained in the Cabinet as culture minister. On 3 July, former Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, 71, took office as Thailand's interim prime minister. Shinawatra was finally dismissed on 29 August by Thailand's Constitutional Court "for violating the ethical code" inherent in the office¹¹.

Plunged into this internal political crisis, Thailand had to deal with the worsening of border conflicts with Cambodia, which continued to escalate.

Between 22 and 24 June, both countries closed their border. Thailand cited security reasons and the fight against cross-border crime. The Cambodian government reiterated

⁹ See: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/los-ej%C3%A9rcitos-de-tailandia-y-camboya-intercambian-disparos-en-zona-fronteriza-en-disputa/89424232>

¹⁰ See: <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-40/hun-sen-burns-thaksin-shinawatra-to-the-ground/>

¹¹ See: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2025/08/29/mundo/primer-ministra-tailandia-destituida-trax>

that the closures were initiated solely by the Thai side and therefore did not justify bilateral negotiations¹². During July, military deployment intensified with the construction of infrastructure, fortifications and artillery movements in key areas such as Chong Bok (the border point between the Thai province of Ubon Ratchathani and the Cambodian province of Preah Vihear) and the Ta Muen Thom temple area.

On 16 July, a Thai Army patrol was conducting a patrol in the border areas of Ubon Ratchathani province, which borders Cambodia. Suddenly, an anti-personnel mine exploded under their feet, leaving three soldiers wounded. A week later, on 23 July, another Thai contingent suffered a new incident involving anti-personnel mines in an area adjacent to the first incident. In this context of growing tensions, a narrative surrounding the events prevailed in Bangkok: the mines had been recently laid and were not remnants of past conflicts¹³.

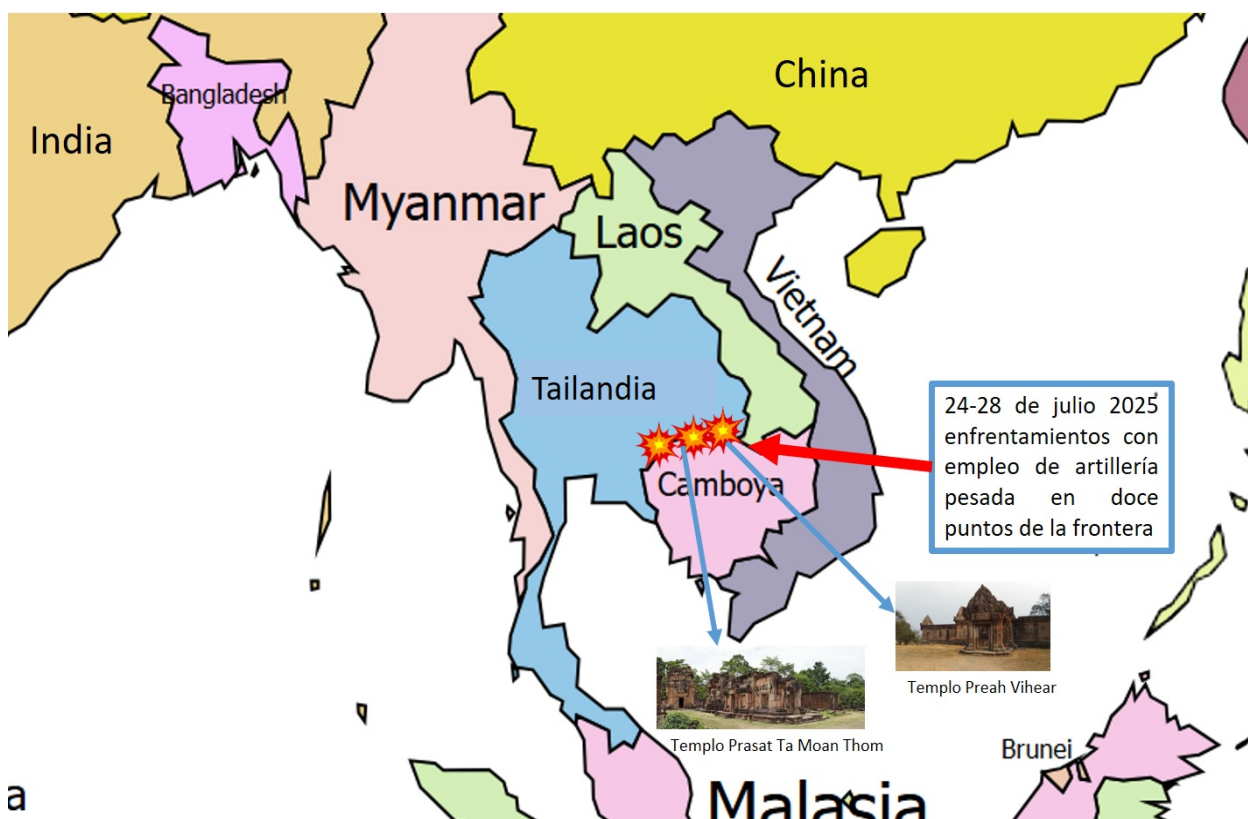


Figure 1. Border between Thailand and Cambodia. Location of the temples. Source: Author's own elaboration

¹² See: <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-confirms-thai-militarys-entire-border-closure>

¹³ See: <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/protest-against-the-use-of-anti-personnel-mines-en>

Thailand closed its border crossings, expelled the Cambodian ambassador from the country and withdrew its top representative from Phnom Penh. It accused Cambodia of violating the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines, known as the Ottawa Convention, which bans anti-personnel mines. For its part, Cambodia denied this, suggesting that Thai soldiers had deviated from mutually agreed patrol routes and that the mines were remnants of past conflicts¹⁴ and called for international investigations. In addition, the Cambodian Ministry of Defence urged Thailand to respect the patrol agreements set out in a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2000¹⁵.

Since then, relations between the two countries have deteriorated significantly. The situation escalated on 24 and 25 July, when the Royal Thai Army launched Operation Yuttana Bodin, a coordinated land and air operation aimed at defending Thai sovereignty following the intensification of cross-border attacks by Cambodian forces¹⁶.

Between 24 and 28 July, there were clashes at twelve critical points along the border, the worst in more than a decade, with heavy artillery fire exchanged. The clashes resulted in around forty fatalities and displaced almost three hundred thousand people, destroying houses and farms and collapsing infrastructure.

Both sides accused each other of initiating the firing. Thailand used F-16 aircraft and Thai artillery on areas around the Preah Vihear temple. Cambodia interpreted this as a cultural attack and an attempt at "historical erasure," in the words of rapper Vannda (a very popular and influential figure in the country). For its part, Cambodia had also deployed truck-mounted rocket launchers, which, according to Thailand, have been used to attack civilian areas.

After efforts by Malaysia—which holds the presidency of the ASEAN regional bloc in 2025—the United States and China to bring both sides to the table, the leaders of the two

¹⁴ See: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501720759/cambodia-rejects-thai-accusations-over-border-landmine-incident-cites-violation-of-agreed-patrol-routes/>

¹⁵ See: <https://pressocm.gov.kh/en/archives/113007>

¹⁶ See: <https://www.thaienquirer.com/55490/royal-thai-army-launches-operation-yuttha-bodin-amid-rising-border-clashes-with-cambodia/>

countries agreed to end hostilities, resume direct communications and create a mechanism to implement the ceasefire.

Current situation

The ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia, signed in Putrajaya on 28 July, has been widely praised as a diplomatic triumph. Negotiated by Malaysia and supported by strategic partners such as China, Japan, and the United States, this agreement offers a rare opportunity to reduce one of Southeast Asia's most sensitive conflicts. However, despite this progress, suspicions about its fragility have always been present. Since the truce was agreed, both sides have accused each other of violating it.

In early August, a controversial report circulated accusing Thailand of planning a GPS-guided missile attack targeting Senate President Hun Sen and his son, Cambodian Prime Minister¹⁷. These accusations were quickly rejected by the Thai authorities, and Cambodia called on the media and the public to act with caution and responsibility, warning that the dissemination of unverified narratives jeopardises the stability of a peace that remains very fragile.

On 4 August, during a patrol in a border area in Sisaket province (530 kilometres northeast of Bangkok), three Thai soldiers were killed by a mine explosion, apparently a remnant of past conflicts¹⁸. Following the incident, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Cambodia of violating its sovereignty and international law and of breaching the agreed ceasefire. However, Cambodia has rejected these accusations, arguing once again that the presence of mines is the result of previous conflicts.

In addition, the issue of prisoners has exacerbated tensions. Thailand returned two wounded Cambodian soldiers but is holding eighteen others, whom it considers "prisoners of war". Cambodia is demanding their immediate release, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has confirmed that they are in good health¹⁹.

To prevent the conflict from escalating, on 7 August Cambodia and Thailand agreed on new measures to reinforce the border ceasefire. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment

¹⁷ See: <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/>

¹⁸ See: <https://www.dw.com/en/three-thai-soldiers-injured-by-landmine-on-cambodian-border/a-73585330>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40053555>

to the ceasefire signed on 28 July and agreed to allow ASEAN observers to monitor the situation. In addition, at the Extraordinary Session of the General Border Committee (GBC) between Thailand and Cambodia, a thirteen-point ceasefire implementation agreement between the two countries was signed.

The key points of the agreement are as follows:

- 1 Cease the use of all types of weapons, including attacks on civilians, civilian property and military targets in all cases and areas.
- 2 Maintain the current state of troop deployment, in force since 28 July 2015, with no troop movements or patrols towards the other party's position.
- 3 Refrain from increasing the number of troops along the entire border between Thailand and Cambodia. 4. Refrain from provocative actions that could intensify tensions, including military activity entering the other party's airspace, territory or positions since the ceasefire of 28 July 2025, and refrain from building military infrastructure beyond their own side.
- 4 Refrain from using force against civilians or civilian property in all circumstances.
- 5 Comply with the Geneva Conventions: treatment of captured soldiers and transfer of the wounded to the other party's medical centres, according to their capacity. Captured soldiers shall be released and repatriated immediately after the cessation of active hostilities. Facilitate the dignified and timely return of deceased persons.
- 6 In the event of armed conflict, both parties shall address issues at the local level through existing bilateral mechanisms to prevent the situation from escalating.
- 7 Maintain regular communications between all army zones, regions and military units along the border. 8.2 Convene a meeting of the Regional Coordination Committee (CRC) within two weeks of the Extraordinary Session of the Governance Committee of the People's Republic of China (GBC) on 7 August 2025.

Maintain regular and direct communication between ministers and heads of defence forces.

- 8 Refrain from spreading false information or fake news.

- 9 Both sides should implement the common understanding reached on 28 July 2025, which includes the ceasefire and the formation of an ASEAN observer team led by Malaysia.
- 10 It was agreed that the CRCs in each zone will implement the ceasefire agreement, coordinated and observed by the ASEAN observer team led by Malaysia. The CRCs will meet regularly and report to the GBC through their respective national chains of command. 12. Pending the establishment of the ASEAN observer team, led by Malaysia, a provisional observer team, composed of defence attachés from ASEAN member countries accredited to Thailand and Cambodia, will be used to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire on both sides.
- 11 A meeting of the High-Level Committee will be held one month after 7 August 2025 (at a location to be agreed). Otherwise, an extraordinary meeting of the Committee must be convened immediately to discuss the ceasefire.

The agreement requires forces to withdraw and reinforcements to be halted, but does not specify who will monitor this or who has the authority to intervene if the rules are broken. Without a neutral, trustworthy and well-resourced third party on the ground, the ceasefire could easily fail. Current monitors from Malaysia, China, Japan and the United States are present, but their coverage is limited given the vast and complex terrain.

Cambodia has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the ceasefire agreement reached on 28 July 2025 in Putrajaya, as well as to the thirteen-point outcome of the extraordinary meeting of the Cambodia-Thailand General Border Committee on 7 August 2025 in Kuala Lumpur. However, it continues to seek international justice to resolve unresolved and sensitive issues that could increase tensions. In fact, Cambodia has again appealed to the ICJ to request a ruling on four other border areas covering the Ta Muen Thom temple, two other temple sites Ta Muen Tauch and Ta Krabei, as well as Mom Bei.

However, Thailand has not recognised previous ICJ rulings on the dispute and wants to resolve it bilaterally. The army's agitation and assertiveness over the border dispute with Cambodia has once again turned the spotlight on Thailand's powerful army and its animosity towards the Shinawatra family, whose governments it overthrew in coups in

2006 and 2014²⁰ . Faced with the possibility of a new coup, the army has communicated its commitment to democratic principles, constitutional monarchy and the protection of national sovereignty through established legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms.

This commitment by the Thai army to protecting national sovereignty is supported by the rise in nationalist sentiment linked to sovereignty over culturally significant sites among the population. This rise in nationalism may also be motivated by concerns sparked by the Thai government's negotiations with Cambodia to jointly explore energy resources in undemarcated maritime areas, with warnings that such a move could put Thailand at risk of losing the island of Koh Kood in the Gulf of Thailand²¹ .

On 30 September, Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul said that the government wants to consult public opinion on the cancellation of two controversial memoranda of understanding (MOU) with Cambodia related to border demarcation and maritime claims²² . According to him, the two agreements signed more than twenty years ago did not prevent border clashes or resolve disputes²³ .

This decision was prompted by the incident on 27 September in which Thai soldiers suddenly fired mortars and rifles at a Cambodian army position in the An Ses area near the border²⁴ .

Thailand and Cambodia had a diplomatic confrontation at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly when Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Prak Sokhonn accused Thailand of imposing martial law with the consequent forced relocation of Thai nationals to the Thai-Cambodian border.session of the United Nations General Assembly when Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn accused Thailand of imposing martial law with the consequent forced relocation of Cambodian civilians as a form of racist violence and of using force instead of agreed mechanisms to resolve border disputes²⁵ .

²⁰ See: <https://www.emol.com/noticias/Internacional/2025/07/24/1173032/conflicto-camboya-tailandia-frontera-datos.html>

²¹ See: <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/could-koh-kood-become-a-dispute-between-thailand-and-cambodia>

²² The two documents include the MOU43 on border delimitation signed in 2000 and the MOU44 on overlapping claims on the continental shelf signed in 2001.

²³ See: <https://es.laodong.vn/the-gioi/thai-lan-xem-xet-huy-ban-ghi-nho-ve-bien-gioi-voi-campuchia-1584185.lido>

²⁴ See: <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40056014>

²⁵ See: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501767784/cambodia-slams-thailands-racist-violence-at-un/>

In his speech, Sokhonn criticised his neighbours for relying on unilateral maps rather than international maps established by binding treaties, actions he believes undermine efforts to build trust and peace²⁶.

For his part, Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow accused Cambodia of initiating the conflict "with the intention of expanding a border dispute into a national conflict and further internationalising it"²⁷.

Economic consequences

The border crisis has spread from the battlefield to the economy. Hun Sen has encouraged the population to boycott Thai products and currency, and to use Cambodian currency or US dollars instead. On the other hand, the border conflicts have led many Cambodian migrant workers to return home from Thailand, in many cases without even notifying their employers. Thailand was a key destination for labour migration from Cambodia, accounting for 93% of the country's migration flow, which amounts to around 1.2 million people. Through Poipet alone, 786,899 migrant workers returned to the country between 24 July and 31 August, according to Cambodian immigration authorities, and more are likely to have returned since then. As a result, Thailand has faced rising costs due to labour shortages, while Cambodia has experienced increased unemployment and a sharp decline in remittances, which totalled \$2.8 billion in 2024.²⁸

But perhaps the aspect that most influences the economic consequences of the border conflict is related to the lucrative casino business. Border casinos in Cambodia are an important source of revenue for the government, and several have been forced to close during this period. Cambodia is now home to approximately 100 casinos, making it the gambling capital of Southeast Asia, with most concentrated along the Thai border. The largest centre is Poipet, in Banteay Meanchey province, opposite the Thai district of Aranyaprathet in Sa Kaeo, where an estimated 80% of gamblers are Thai citizens²⁹.

²⁶ See: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501763788/cambodia-and-thailand-clash-at-un/>

²⁷ See: <https://www.anews.com.tr/world/2025/09/28/cambodian-thai-top-diplomats-take-border-conflict-to-un-general-assembly>

²⁸ See: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/cambodia-is-beginning-to-feel-the-economic-costs-of-the-border-conflict-with-thailand/>

²⁹ See: <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40051074>

In addition to the economic consequences of the shutdown, some analysts point out that among the possible sources of the current border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand is the latter's plan to open legalised casinos and entertainment centres to attract investment and curb illegal gambling near the border with Cambodia. This would be a loss of revenue for Cambodia, as well as a loss of lucrative money laundering operations³⁰.

Humanitarian consequences

Meanwhile, the humanitarian response has been slow to materialise. In the early days of the conflict, tens of thousands were displaced with little access to shelter, food or medical care. Local institutions, such as Buddhist temples and schools, acted as emergency shelters, but international aid was limited and largely reactive. To date, there are no binding plans for the recovery, compensation or reintegration of affected communities.

External actors

Although both the United States and China played a key role in promoting the ceasefire in July 2025, the reality is that their involvement is limited in reaching an agreement that would end border tensions. China's quiet diplomacy based on its strategic interests has helped to de-escalate the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia.

United States

For his part, President Trump did not invoke the defence treaty between the United States and Thailand or speak of regional stability. Instead, he resorted to his signature tool: economic coercion.³¹ He stated that he would not conclude trade agreements with them if the fighting continued. The United States imposed a 19% tariff on imports from Thailand and Cambodia after the ceasefire, down from the 36% originally faced³².

³⁰ See: <https://www.trtworld.com/article/ab3b547974fc>

³¹ See: <https://www.9dashline.com/article/five-days-that-shook-asean-how-the-cambodia-thailand-border-clash-became-a-superpower-showdown>

³² See: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3328362/thailand-snubs-trumps-mediation-tells-cambodia-remove-border-troops>

Trump's role in mediating the conflict is particularly significant, above all because of his conciliatory and peaceful approach. In fact, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet nominated the US president for a Nobel Peace Prize and credited him with "innovative diplomacy" that ended the military clashes³³. Trump has also pledged to provide Cambodia with approximately £675,000 in economic aid to remove mines left over from previous conflicts, which is an exception to Trump's policy of eliminating development aid³⁴.

This new diplomacy was also reflected in Trump's letter to Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, in which he expressed his willingness to help mediate the border situation between Thailand and Cambodia³⁵. The Thai government has stated that talks could begin to resolve the conflict definitively if Cambodia withdrew heavy weapons from the border areas, removed landmines, took strong action against internet fraudsters and relocated its citizens from the border lands that Thailand considers its own³⁶.

China

Since the beginning of the conflict, China has actively promoted peace talks³⁷. Its geostrategic and economic interests in Cambodia are at stake and may be affected if border disputes escalate. For this reason, China is encouraging Cambodia to resolve the dispute with Thailand through dialogue and negotiation as soon as possible³⁸.

One of China's main geostrategic interests in Cambodia is the Ream naval base in the far south of Cambodia. Chronological satellite images show the development of a large pier between December 2023 and October 2024 built by China, almost identical to the 363-metre-long pier at the Djibouti base, and long enough for China's largest aircraft carrier to dock³⁹.

The US suspects that the Ream base is being turned into a Chinese naval base to expand its military footprint, as it has already done on the three disputed islands in the South

³³ See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/08/07/world/cambodia-trump-nobel-prize-intl-hnk>

³⁴ See: <https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-us-land-mines-foreign-aid-c3e3b3e9a98bca75504ad8a3d8e723d2>

³⁵ See: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/trump-sends-letter-to-thai-pm-on-border-conflict-with-cambodia>

³⁶ See: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/trump-letter-anutin-thailand-cambodia-border-conflict-5391556>

³⁷ See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202509/t20250916_11708902.html

³⁸ See: <https://www.aseanall.com/news/11070.html>

³⁹ See: <https://www.naval-technology.com/features/chinas-secret-naval-base-in-cambodia-through-satellite-imagery/?cf-view>

China Sea. However, the Cambodian government has repeatedly denied such a possibility, citing its constitution which prohibits any permanent foreign military presence and stating that Ream is open for use by all friendly navies. So far, only Chinese warships have been allowed to dock at the new pier. Two Japanese destroyers that visited in February were told to dock in the nearby city of Sihanoukville⁴⁰.

Currently, China has only one overseas military base, in the African state of Djibouti, which it built in 2016. For the rapid rise of its maritime power, China also needs a global network of bases or civilian ports that it can use as a base. In this regard, the Ream base could become a vital strategic point for China, as it could form part of the "string of pearls" to establish itself as a maritime power capable of challenging the United States. The ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, both on the Indian Ocean, which are largely financed or controlled by Chinese state-owned companies, are examples of how China gains access to strategic maritime points.⁴¹

The paradox is that, until a few years ago, Ream was being upgraded with US assistance, but this assistance was cut after 2017, when Cambodia's main opposition party was banned and its leaders exiled or imprisoned⁴².

Increasingly dependent on Chinese aid and investment, the Cambodian government abruptly changed partners. It cancelled regular joint military exercises with the United States and switched to the so-called Golden Dragon exercises it now conducts with China.

Cambodia claims that the Chinese ships present at the Ream base are there for training and to prepare for this year's Golden Dragon exercises. It also says that China is building two new 056A corvettes for the Cambodian navy itself and insists that the Chinese presence in Ream is not permanent, so it does not count as a base.

However, that has not stopped the US from expressing concern about the expansion of the base, which, as satellite photographs show, has, in addition to the new pier, a new dry dock, warehouses and what appear to be administrative offices and housing with four

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501443167/two-japanese-destroyers-to-dock-in-sihanoukville/>

⁴¹ See: <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/cambodia-ream-naval-base-chinese-trojan-horse>

⁴² See: <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/world/cambodia-pm-accuses-united-states-of-lying-over-aid-cut-3717950.html>

basketball courts. One way to circumvent the constitutional ban is not to call it a foreign base, but to allow continuous access to foreign forces on a rotational basis⁴³.

In addition to maritime projection, the base can provide other functions to China, such as intelligence gathering, satellite tracking, and long-range target detection or monitoring⁴⁴.

Other actors: United Nations and ASEAN

This positive approach to ending disputes shown by both China and the US has allowed ASEAN to show its leadership in ending hostilities. However, it remains to be seen whether ASEAN is capable of achieving this goal, given the little progress that has been made in ending other conflicts in Southeast Asia, such as the one taking place in Myanmar.

Neither China nor the US has offered concrete guarantees or resources to ensure the durability of the ceasefire. The lack of sustained external support for reconstruction or reconciliation has left the peace process without a long-term foundation.

Meanwhile, Cambodia has written to the United Nations Security Council urging the body to convene a meeting to stop what it describes as "unprovoked and premeditated military aggression" by Thailand, which doubts Cambodia's sincerity and points out that Phnom Penh continues to incite violence and attempts to "internationalise" the issue instead of using the bilateral mechanisms already agreed upon⁴⁵.

Future developments

The ceasefire signed in July between Thailand and Cambodia has been a response to the crisis rather than a lasting solution. Without enforcement mechanisms, long-term aid commitments or structural reforms, the underlying tensions remain unresolved and the risk of renewed conflict persists. Peace is not a slogan, it is a structured system of cooperation that must be tested and verified⁴⁶.

⁴³ Kirsten Gunness, senior policy researcher at Rand Corporation, based in California.

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2k42n54kvo>

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/world/40056669>

⁴⁶ See: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2025/08/07/beyond-ceasefire-asean-must-anchor-peace-between-thailand-and-cambodia.html>

Without progress towards the creation of a demilitarised border zone between Cambodia and Thailand, equipped with a mechanism to verify troop withdrawals and investigate ceasefire violations, there is a risk of recurring disputes with cyclical clashes and the consequent danger of escalation that could affect and destabilise the whole of Southeast Asia.

The Cambodian government has said it will continue with the ICJ proceedings on the disputed areas, regardless of Thailand's cooperation in the process, which could take several years. For its part, the Thai government does not recognise the court's jurisdiction and will insist that the dispute be resolved through bilateral means.

The border struggle between Thailand and Cambodia is far from over. Relations remain unstable and may tend to worsen as anger simmers among the populations of both countries due to a mixture of misinformation, threats and nationalism.

An important aspect to note in both nations is the role being played by state-aligned or nationalist media outlets. The use of emotional and inflammatory language, often blaming the "other" side for land grabs and historical injustices, may contribute to a possible resurgence of clashes.

At the heart of the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia lies a significant asymmetry in military power. Thailand has one of the most capable armed forces in Southeast Asia, with a defence budget exceeding £4.5 billion, more than 360,000 active personnel, a fleet of F-16 multi-role fighter jets, an aircraft carrier and thousands of armoured vehicles and artillery systems. Cambodia, by contrast, has a much more limited military capability: a budget of \$1.3 billion supporting approximately 124,000 soldiers, a small number of tanks and no combat aircraft, with air and naval forces focused primarily on transport and patrol duties⁴⁷.

This disparity reduces the likelihood of a large-scale war. Any attempt by Cambodia to dislodge entrenched Thai positions along the disputed border would almost certainly fail in conventional military terms.

The international community is watching closely as these events unfold, which could have broader implications in Southeast Asia that external powers may exploit. China's inability

⁴⁷ <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/thailand-cambodia-border-conflict-whats-behind-the-clashes/>

to end the conflict in Myanmar calls into question its ability to stabilise conflicts in its vicinity that affect its geostrategic interests. The same may happen with the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. China's efforts to reach an agreement between Thailand and Cambodia have been less effective than those of Trump, who has shown his willingness to use economic coercion, demonstrating a more persuasive position.

Finally, Trump may be trying to regain ground in Southeast Asia and throughout the Indo-Pacific region, to the detriment of China, by applying a new active diplomacy in the area.

Table 1. Socioeconomic data for Thailand. Source: CIA Factbook and World Bank [Consulted on 29 September 2025]

Thailand's socio-economic data		
Population	69,920,998 (2024)	
Ethnic groups	Thai 97.5%, Burmese 1.3%, others 1.1%, unspecified <0.1% (2015)	
Religions	Buddhist 92.5%, Muslim 5.4%, Christian 1.2%, other 0.9% (2021)	
GINI index	44.4 (2015)	
GDP	\$1.558 trillion (2024)	
GDP per capita	\$21,700 (2024)	
Poverty incidence rate (% of population) *	5.4 (2022)	
GINI index*	33.5 (2023)	
Exports	369,191 billion (2024)	Machinery parts, integrated circuits, trucks, automobiles, broadcasting equipment (2023)
	US 18%, China 13%, Japan 7%, Australia 4%, Singapore 4% (2023)	
Imports	\$351.419 billion (2024 est.)	Crude oil, integrated circuits, natural gas, gold, vehicle parts and accessories (2023)
	China 26%, Japan 11%, USA 7%, UAE 6%, Taiwan 5% (2023)	

Table 2. Socioeconomic data for Cambodia. Source: CIA Factbook and World Bank [Consulted on 29 September 2025]

Socioeconomic data for Cambodia		
Population:	17,063,669 (2024 est.)	
Ethnic groups:	Khmer 95.4%, Cham 2.4%, Chinese 1.5%, others 0.7% (2019-2020 est.)	
Religions	Buddhist (official) 97.1%, Muslim 2%, Christian 0.3%, other 0.5% (2019 est.)	
GDP	123,676 billion (£87,000 million) (2024 est.)	
GDP per capita	\$7,000 (2024 est.)	
Poverty incidence rate (% of population) *	17.7 (2012)	
Exports	\$31,712 billion (2024 est.)	Clothing, semiconductors, footwear, gold (2023)
	USA 36%, Germany 6%, China 6%, Japan 6%, Thailand 5% (2023)	
Imports	\$34,329 billion (2024 est.)	Refined petroleum, fabrics, gold, plastic products, synthetic fabrics (2023)
	China 39%, Thailand 20%, Vietnam 12%, Singapore 6%, Indonesia 3% (2023)	

Chronology of the conflict	
1904	Establishment in 1904 of the border between the two countries through the signing of an agreement between the then Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) and France.
1907	The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 redrew the map.
1962	The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the Preah Vihear temple belonged to Cambodia in 1962.
2000	The two countries agreed to establish a Joint Border Commission to peacefully address claims, but little progress has been made in resolving disputes.
2003	A group of violent Cambodians set fire to the Thai embassy and several Thai businesses in Phnom Penh.
2008	Cambodia proposed to include the Preah Vihear temple on UNESCO's World Heritage List.
2011	Exchange of artillery fire around Cambodia's Ta Krabey temple, resulting in more than a dozen casualties.
2013	The ICJ reaffirmed that the entire promontory of the Preah Vihear temple was located within Cambodian territory.
2025	<p>13 February. A group of Cambodians escorted by troops sang their national anthem at Ta Moan Thom — another ancient Hindu temple claimed by both countries — before being detained by Thai soldiers.</p> <p>28 May. A Cambodian soldier was killed near the 'Emerald Triangle' during a brief exchange of fire.</p> <p>14 June. Meeting within the framework of the Joint Border Commission.</p>

<p>1 July. Thailand's constitutional court suspended Shinawatra from her duties as prime minister.</p> <p>22-24 June. Border closure.</p> <p>16 July. A Thai army patrol was conducting a patrol in the border areas of Ubon Ratchathani province, bordering Cambodia, when an anti-personnel mine exploded under their feet, leaving three soldiers wounded.</p> <p>23 July. Another Thai contingent suffered a new incident with anti-personnel mines in an area adjacent to the first incident.</p> <p>24–28 July. Clashes involving heavy artillery at twelve points along the border.</p> <p>28 July. Ceasefire signed.</p> <p>4 August. Three Thai soldiers were killed by a mine explosion.</p> <p>7 August. Cambodia and Thailand agreed on new measures to reinforce the border ceasefire.</p> <p>27 September. Thailand and Cambodia had a diplomatic confrontation at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly.</p> <p>30 September. The Thai Prime Minister proposes the cancellation of two memoranda of understanding (MOUs).</p>
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*María del Mar Hidalgo García**
Analista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos