

# Sovereignty Without Safety at the Thailand-Cambodia Frontier

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*As nationalism hardens borders, a historic territorial dispute on the Cambodia-Thailand border has become a humanitarian crisis.*



Prasat Preah Vihear; the Preah Vihear temple complex. Photo: PsamatheM, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs **recently responded** to reports of the demolition of a statue of a Hindu religious deity in an “area affected by the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute”, in the An Ses area of the Preah Vihear province in Cambodia. It stated that the act hurt the sentiments of Hindu and Buddhist believers everywhere and should not take place. The statue’s toppling occurred amid a long-running territorial dispute between the sovereign governments of Cambodia and Thailand, which have since escalated into a military conflict.

The ongoing dispute over the Preah Vihear temple captures the enduring logic of unresolved borders. In the early twentieth century, the temple, built during the height of the Khmer civilisation, was mapped into Cambodia by French surveyors and, in 1962, it was legally awarded to Phnom Penh by the **International Court of Justice**. What remained unresolved was the surrounding frontier – an omission that transformed a settled legal judgement into a permanent political fault line.

Since then, Preah Vihear has resurfaced whenever domestic pressures rise in Thailand. **Military clashes** that followed the temple’s **UNESCO inscription in 2008** have turned the site into a nationalist signal rather than a heritage monument.

The fighting has damaged Preah Vihear itself. A July 2025 open letter documents artillery-related structural harm and suspended conservation work at the site, while UNESCO has acknowledged that continued hostilities place the World Heritage site at serious risk of irreversible loss. Yet the dispute endures – not because history is contested, but because invoking history offers governments a familiar language of resolve, sacrifice and territorial defence.

The border between Cambodia and Thailand was originally defined by the Franco-Siamese Treaties of 1904 and 1907. However, a significant cartographical deviation occurred with the production of the 1908 Annex I map, which featured as an attachment to the treaties, and which later became central evidence in an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling awarding the temple to Cambodia.

Although French cartographers had been commissioned to reflect the treaties' watershed principle – the border was supposed to follow the natural watershed line of the Dangrek Mountains – their map placed the Preah Vihear temple within Cambodian territory. Geographically, the temple sits on the Thai side of the physical watershed, creating a discrepancy between the map and the land that has fuelled more than a century of geopolitical tensions. Both states remain imprisoned by historical errors, ignoring the third space: the possibility of hybrid border communities.

The present crisis, however, marks a decisive shift from historical recurrence to contemporary survivalist politics. After months of escalating tensions along the border since mid-2025, the situation crossed a threshold on December 7, when sustained fighting resumed. Since assuming office in September last year, Thailand's prime minister Anutin Charnvirakul has governed amid parliamentary dissolution and looming elections, conditions under which nationalist mobilisation has, once again, transformed a legacy dispute into an instrument of political consolidation.

The 2025 escalation was catalysed less by battlefield dynamics than by a crisis of civilian authority in Bangkok. On June 18, a leaked phone call between then prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and former Cambodian leader Hun Sen exposed a fundamental weakness in Thailand's civil-military equilibrium at a moment of heightened border tension.

The Shinawatra family's long history of confrontation with the military rendered any perceived softness toward Cambodia politically toxic. Nationalist actors recast the leak as proof that the government was undermining the army during an active territorial dispute. Coalition discipline collapsed when Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai Party withdrew support from Shinawatra's government, stripping it of its parliamentary majority. Legal petitions alleging ethical misconduct and threats to national security followed, enabling judicial intervention. Within weeks, the prime minister's authority eroded beyond repair, culminating in her removal by parliament.

This rupture created a political vacuum that **Charnvirakul filled**, assuming office in September on a platform explicitly centered on restoring sovereign resolve. As fighting resumed in December, he dissolved parliament on the 12th, amid active air operations near Poipet. By synchronising parliamentary dissolution with military escalation, his government converted a territorial confrontation into an electoral asset ahead of the February 2026 polls, even as Charnvirakul's public support fell from **48 to 23%**.

### **Territorial trap in global order**

The scale of instability is now reflected in how external actors perceive the frontier. **The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office** of the United Kingdom has advised against all travel within 50 kilometres of the Thailand-Cambodia border, citing sustained fighting since July. Renewed airstrikes and artillery fire in December suspended land crossings and led to the closure of key heritage sites, including Preah Vihear, Ta Krabey and Ta Muen Thom.

**United States President Donald Trump** claimed on November 14 that the conflict was resolved following calls with leaders in Bangkok and Phnom Penh. However, despite the public claim that a ceasefire had been brokered, **fighting resumed** across multiple points along the border, underscoring how declaratory peacemaking and transactional diplomacy have little bearing on conditions on the ground.



Prasat (temple) Preah Vihear, 2019. Photo: PsamatheM, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

According to the [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), fighting since December 7 has involved airstrikes, drones and artillery striking villages and cultural sites. Cambodia has reported 18 civilian deaths and Thailand one, while an estimated 7,50,000 people have been displaced from border areas. What is unfolding is no longer a dispute over territory alone, but a failure of regional and global mechanisms to restrain sovereign escalation when domestic political survival is at stake.

The renewed Thailand-Cambodia escalation reflects what political geographer [Thanachate Wisajorn](#) describes as the persistence of the “[territorial trap](#)” in border conflicts: a state-centric way of seeing territory as a sealed, self-contained space monopolised by political and military elites, while ignoring the lived realities of borderlands. In this framing, borders are reduced to lines of sovereignty to be defended rather than socially embedded spaces shaped by everyday mobility, trade, kinship and shared livelihoods.

Small nation-states in lawless zones face structural disadvantages when regional stability collapses, as evidenced by Cambodia’s deteriorating economic indicators. The 2025 GDP growth forecast for the kingdom was revised [downward from 5.2% to 4.9%](#) as border hostilities disrupted key industrial and service channels.

The labour mobility crisis further exacerbates this decline, with [approximately 0.9 million Cambodian migrant workers returning home by June](#). This mass exodus severed the vital remittance flows that constitute the backbone of the rural economy, which typically inject nearly [US \\$2 billion](#) into Cambodia. The resulting vacuum leaves millions of households without a primary income source, while the domestic market remains unable to absorb the sudden influx of labour.

Energy insecurity completes this trifecta of vulnerability, with Cambodia relying on Thailand for [30% of its total petroleum supply](#). Border closures have effectively weaponised this dependency, turning energy access into a tool of economic warfare. These closures force Phnom Penh to secure costly alternatives from more distant markets, demonstrating how unresolved territorial lines are leveraged as instruments of coercion against smaller states.

The 2025 escalation reveals a profound erosion of international legal respect, where raw power politics supersedes established diplomatic norms. Thailand’s rejection of ceasefire appeals until Cambodia acts first signifies a retreat from multilateral cooperation toward transactional survivalism.

This conflict demonstrates that without a robust legal framework to protect the third space, where economic interdependence and community life flourish, the border remains vulnerable to event-driven violence. Ultimately, the failure of international institutions to enforce durable peace ensures that small nation states remain trapped in a cycle of geopolitical instability and economic degradation.

## Limits of multilateral governance

The territorial trap is reinforced by a weak multilateral order. ASEAN's emphasis on non-interference and consensus has constrained its ability to act preventively, turning mediation into a reactive exercise once hostilities are already underway.

**Legal rulings and diplomatic statements** clarify positions but do little to alter the incentives driving escalation. As a result, regional norms are easily sidelined when domestic political survival and nationalist mobilisation take precedence, allowing territorial disputes to recur as humanitarian crises rather than being managed through cooperative governance.

In reality, this reactive multilateralism has translated into procedural motion without strategic leverage. **ASEAN's deployment of observer teams** has occurred only after large-scale displacement and sustained fighting were already underway, signalling that monitoring has substituted for prevention rather than complemented it. The observer mandate neither constrains military behaviour nor raises the political costs of defection, leaving escalation dynamics fundamentally unchanged. At the global level, **the United Nations continues to reiterate ceasefire appeals**, dialogue frameworks and confidence-building offers without enforcement capacity.

As ASEAN chair, **Malaysia has stepped into this leadership vacuum** by convening talks and facilitating observer deployments under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. However, its role remains structurally constrained by consensus rules and a government-to-government mandate, allowing mediation to manage escalation temporarily without altering the domestic political incentives driving renewed hostilities.

On October 26, the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord was signed during the 47th ASEAN Summit, **brokered by U.S. President Trump**. Witnessed by regional leaders, the deal was hailed as a diplomatic triumph of top-down patronage. However, this reliance on high-level personal intervention masked a failure to establish a sustainable framework for border demarcation or resolution of the underlying territorial dispute.



U.S. President Donald Trump, Malaysian Prime Minister Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Thailand's Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul before signing the Kuala Lumpur Accord, October 25, 2025, at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photo: [Daniel Torok](#), The White House, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The accord was fundamentally transactional, incentivised by promises of tariff reductions rather than a commitment to international law. By linking peace to economic concessions, the agreement prioritised immediate market stability over the structural settlement required to escape the territorial trap. This commodification of diplomacy meant that the ceasefire lacked the legal depth necessary to withstand the domestic political pressures driving the conflict.

Inevitably, when Trump's political pressure waned by December 7, **the truce was scuttled**. This rapid collapse proves that international witnessing without institutional enforcement is ineffective. The failure of the Kuala Lumpur accord demonstrates that regional security cannot be maintained through episodic patronage when it **lacks the teeth of enforceable international action and clear territorial demarcation**. The result is a regional order in which diplomacy follows violence, ceasefires are episodic and multilateralism functions as crisis response rather than conflict prevention.

### **The humanitarian cost**

The July 2025 border escalation and the recent developments on the Thailand-Cambodia border have ignited an alarming humanitarian crisis, displacing over **5,00,000 refugees** amid mounting fatalities from Thai military actions. This violence marks the “conceptual death” of the “Third Space”, a zone that previously facilitated negotiated coexistence and win-win mobility. Today, that hybrid reality has been violently dismantled, transformed instead into a landscape of kinetic warfare and absolute state surveillance.

Militarisation rendered surrounding districts uninhabitable, forcing rapid evacuations with little warning. Displacement quickly spread across Cambodia’s northwestern provinces. **Oddar Meanchey** absorbed civilians fleeing multiple flashpoints despite its fragile agrarian base. Banteay Meanchey, anchored by the Poipet International Gate and once Cambodia’s principal cross-border commercial artery, fell silent after Thailand closed the border on June 9.

**The province** now hosts hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, overwhelming food, water, health and education systems. **Battambang**, though spared direct fighting, became a secondary displacement zone whose dependence on electricity imports from Thailand proved catastrophic. The suspension of cross-border power on June 12 disrupted hospitals, water supply and agricultural storage, transforming infrastructure dependency into a humanitarian emergency.

Displacement has been bifurcated. Approximately **4,00,000 internally displaced persons**, including nearly 80,000 families, were uprooted directly by combat and relocated to temporary camps. Meeting their needs requires large-scale food provision, shelter, healthcare, trauma support and reconstruction assistance, stretching Cambodia’s limited state capacity.

Simultaneously, around **0.9 million Cambodian migrant workers** were forcibly repatriated from Thailand between June and October after visa stays were shortened and labour mobility restricted. The convergence of mass internal displacement and returning migrants overwhelmed reception centres and created administrative bottlenecks in which humanitarian assistance existed in principle but remained inaccessible in practice.

The socio-economic consequences have been severe. Remittances are projected to **fall by 37.5%**, undermining food security, healthcare access, education continuity and household debt sustainability. Cambodia’s temporary ban on Thai vegetable and fruit imports accelerated food inflation, disproportionately affecting displaced populations. Energy dependency compounded these pressures: Thailand supplies roughly **25% of Cambodia’s electricity** and border closures triggered power failures that disrupted hospitals and relief logistics. Framed as assertions of sovereignty, these measures effectively weaponised necessities.

The collapse has also destabilised tourism. Arrivals are projected to **fall by roughly 40%**, revenues by up to **USD 2 billion** and employment by as many as **250,000 jobs**.

The humanitarian toll thus reveals a deeper paradox: while territorial sovereignty is asserted through a militarised, state-engineered cartographic exercise, human security and regional integration are sacrificed amidst the failure of multilateral institutions and international law (failing to protect smaller nation states). Until the Third Space is restored as a site of protection rather than punishment, territorial claims will continue to generate displacement rather than stability.

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*Simar Kaur, Saksham Singh and Aditi Lazarus, Research Assistants with CNES and students at O.P. Jindal Global University, provided critical insights on the history and colonial politics of cartographic concerns associated with the Thai-Khmer border for this column.*