

Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute: Causes, Recent Clashes and Implications

Introduction

Thailand and Cambodia have witnessed **renewed military clashes along their shared border**, marking one of the most serious escalations in recent years. The violence has resulted in **casualties on both sides**, displacement of civilians, and the collapse of a fragile ceasefire brokered earlier in 2025 with international involvement. The dispute is **long-standing**, rooted in colonial-era border demarcation, and periodically resurfaces due to territorial claims, nationalism, and political instability.

Background of the Border Dispute

Colonial Legacy

- The dispute dates back to the **early 20th century**, when borders were drawn during the **French colonial rule of Cambodia**.
- Maps prepared by French authorities left certain areas **ambiguously demarcated**, leading to overlapping claims.
- Thailand disputes some of these colonial-era boundaries, especially in areas surrounding historical monuments.

Preah Vihear Temple Dispute

- A major flashpoint is the **11th-century Preah Vihear Temple**, located near the Thailand-Cambodia border.
- In **2008**, Cambodia's attempt to register the temple as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** triggered strong protests in Thailand.
- Although the **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** ruled largely in Cambodia's favour, Thailand disputes surrounding territory claims.
- This episode intensified **nationalist sentiments** and led to periodic military standoffs.

Recent Escalations (2025)

May 2025 Incident

- Tensions escalated after a **Cambodian soldier was killed** during a border clash.
- Diplomatic relations deteriorated to their **lowest point in over a decade**.

July 2025 Clashes

- Both sides exchanged heavy gunfire, rockets, and air strikes.
- **At least 48 people were killed, and thousands were displaced.**
- Thailand accused Cambodia of firing rockets, while Cambodia blamed Thai aggression.
- The violence prompted **international concern**, leading to external mediation.

December 2025 Clashes

- Fighting resumed in **December**, despite an existing ceasefire.
- **Thailand's claim:**
 - Cambodian forces fired first in Ubon Ratchathani province.
 - Thailand responded with air strikes on military targets.
- **Cambodia's claim:**
 - Thai forces initiated attacks in Preah Vihear province.
 - Cambodia initially refrained from retaliation to respect the ceasefire.
- Accusations include:
 - Use of **rockets, drones, and air strikes**
 - Attacks affecting **civilian areas** on both sides
- Casualties include **Thai soldiers and Cambodian civilians**.

Areas Affected

- **Thailand:** Ubon Ratchathani, Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, Sa Kaeo, Trat
- **Cambodia:** Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Pursat, Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear

Economic and Diplomatic Measures

- Cambodia imposed **border restrictions**, including:
 - Ban on imports from Thailand (fruits, vegetables)
 - Suspension of power and internet supplies
- Both countries **reinforced troop deployments** along the border.

Role of International Mediation

US and Regional Mediation

- US President **Donald Trump**, with support from **Malaysia**, mediated a ceasefire after the July clashes.
- The agreement included:
 - Withdrawal of heavy weapons
 - Deployment of interim observers
 - Release of detained Cambodian soldiers
- Thailand later **paused the agreement**, citing unresolved security threats.
- Cambodia claimed continued commitment to the ceasefire.

Why Has the Ceasefire Failed?

1. **Mutual distrust** between armed forces
2. **Ambiguous borders** and unresolved territorial claims
3. **Domestic political instability** in both countries
4. **Nationalist pressures** limiting leadership flexibility
5. Lack of a **robust enforcement and monitoring mechanism**

Current Situation and Future Outlook

- Both sides accuse each other of violating the ceasefire.

- International actors have urged restraint, but escalation risks remain.
 - Analysts warn of:
 - Absence of strong political leadership
 - Possibility of repeated cycles of violence and de-escalation
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Travel Advisory

- Foreign governments advise against **non-essential travel within 50 km of the border** on both sides due to security risks.
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Implications for the Region (UPSC Mains Value Addition)

Regional Stability

- Threatens **ASEAN unity** and regional peace.
- Undermines confidence in **regional conflict-resolution mechanisms**.

Humanitarian Impact

- Civilian displacement
- Damage to livelihoods in border regions

Lessons for International Relations

- Importance of:
 - Clear border demarcation
 - Confidence-building measures
 - Neutral third-party monitoring
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Way Forward

- Revival of **bilateral dialogue mechanisms**
- Acceptance of **international arbitration** or ICJ rulings
- Strengthening **ASEAN's role** in preventive diplomacy

- Demilitarisation of sensitive zones
- Community-level cross-border cooperation

UPSC Prelims Pointers

- Dispute origin: **French colonial-era border demarcation**
- Key site: **Preah Vihear Temple**
- International body involved earlier: **ICJ**
- Nature of conflict: **Territorial dispute + nationalism**
- Region: **Mainland Southeast Asia**

Conclusion

The Thailand-Cambodia border conflict highlights how **historical disputes, unresolved boundaries, and domestic politics** can destabilise regional peace even in the presence of ceasefire agreements. Sustainable resolution requires **political will, trust-building, and effective international mediation**, making it a significant case study for UPSC aspirants in **International Relations and conflict management**.

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