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**Effects of the Recent Thailand-
Cambodia Border Crisis**

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Executive Summary

The Roots of the Conflict

- ✦ In recent days, a war has erupted on the border of Cambodia and Thailand.
- ✦ War has been relatively rare between ASEAN countries, but these two have proven an exception to that trend.
- ✦ One issue has been the fact that Thailand has de-facto control of a religious site that was awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice.

The Beginnings of the Crisis

- ✦ While there is no consensus on who struck first, both countries have had casualties on their side while civilians have also been displaced.
- ✦ The flames of conflict have been fanned by Thai nationalism, particularly in the wake of a leaked call by the Thai PM to former Cambodian leader Hun Sen.
- ✦ Eventually, cooler heads prevailed as Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim succeeded in presiding over a tense ceasefire.

The Role of Domestic Actors in the Conflict

- ✦ Domestic actors, rather than external forces, were clearly the key players in the eventual outcome of kinetic conflict.
- ✦ The leaders of both countries were both eager to be seen as standing up to the other, despite the asymmetry of power in Thailand's favor.
- ✦ There may have been an element of political gamesmanship in play, as the Thai military has deftly used the crisis to gain a political upper hand on the Shinawatra family.

Conclusion

- ✦ While the ceasefire is currently tense, there is reason to believe it will hold.
- ✦ Despite this, the number of conflicts that have been sparked in various regions of the world indicate a somewhat fraying global order.
- ✦ Specifically for Thailand and Cambodia, this crisis shows that old issues can still spark at various times and bring countries to the brink of conflict and crisis.

KEY PICTURE: Thailand-Cambodia Border Clashes (2025)



Source: [The Economist](#)

1. The Roots of the Conflict

Generally, war between ASEAN member-states has been a rare occurrence. While war has undoubtedly played a role in shaping much of Southeast Asia, especially given the role of civil war, insurgency and anti-colonialism in shaping the contours of the various states, it is not often that war breaks out between the countries themselves. Not possessing natural resources comparable to that of the Middle East petrostates, nor having religious/ideological conflicts so serious that they could spark all-out war in the post-Cold war moment, peace has been kept well enough on the Southeast Asian mainland that diplomats such as [Kishore Mahbubani](#) have been driven to write about its secrets.

More geographically-minded analysts may also point to the fact that several key countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei are not on the Asian mainland, making power projection either for or against them relatively more costly and difficult. There are two countries in the Southeast Asian grouping, however, who have figured in much of the interstate warfare found in Asean's young history. Both countries are Buddhist kingdoms whose militaries play a prominent role in guiding the country. Geopolitically, however, they are on opposite sides of the coin with Thailand being a US ally in the region while Cambodia has hosted Chinese vessels at its Ream Naval base.

This is not the only time Thailand and Cambodia have come to blows over their borders. In 2008, [conflict](#) broke out as Cambodia prepared to nominate the Temple as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Over 50 total soldiers died on both sides, as well as a number of civilians.

Ostensibly, the conflict was about a shared land border, running as it did along the historically significant Preah Vihear temple. The temple had been built during the time of the Khmer Empire, and was the subject of heavy contestation between two countries. One issue that continues to cloud the possibility of a near-term resolution has roots that are colonial in nature: Cambodia eventually came to control the temple on through a [ruling](#) by the International Court of Justice partly on the strength of its claim to be the successor to the Khmer empire, and yet access to the religious site is only possible through the side of the border that is in Thailand's Sisaket province.

This afforded the Thai authorities the opportunity to make access to the site difficult, a tense situation not altogether different from occurrences in Jerusalem at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Other sites of significance are the Prasat Ta Muen Thom and Ta Krabey temples. In both of these cases, the Dangrek mountain range and its features favor the Thai side, giving its hawkish military leaders sufficient [options](#) to block off access to the religious sites.

Such an entangled state of affairs came to a somewhat surprising head when the conflict once again flared up this year. The first encounter occurred at Chang Bok in the Nam Yuen district, near to the border that both Thailand and Cambodia share with Laos, alternatively known as the Emerald Triangle. Each side blamed each other for the confrontation, forcing authorities in both countries to resort to stringent measures. Thai authorities [closed](#) border crossings in provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani, Surin, Buriram, Sri Sa Ket, Sa Kaeo, Chanthaburi and Trat, while Cambodia responded with bans on Thai produce and media exports.

2. The Beginnings of the Crisis

As this was ongoing, a leaked phone [call](#) between then Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (the father of current PM Hun Manet), inflamed further hawkish sentiment. Paetongtarn's tone during the call was seen as deferential to Hun Sen, enraging nationalists and strengthening the hand of the Thai military, which Paetongtarn was seen to be criticizing. Paetongtarn was [suspended](#) from office by Thailand's Constitutional court, and this phone call set the background for the events that would follow.

There is no consensus on who fired the first shot. That said, rocket fire from the Cambodians would eventually be met with F-16 airstrikes from the US-armed Royal Thai Army. Thai authorities then declared Martial Law and

announced [Operation Yuttha Bodin](#), a land and sea operation against Cambodia. At least 43 people have died while as many as 300,000 people living in communities along the border were displaced. This sequence of events also brought home a clear-cut reality, that the Thai side had the advantage in terms of sheer firepower against Cambodia.

Eventually, a ceasefire was negotiated before the conflict spiralled into a full-blown war between the two countries. Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim was seen to be heavily involved in negotiating the ceasefire, bringing the leaders of the two warring parties together in Putrajaya. In addition, both the US and China issued separate statements calling for a ceasefire. As of now, the ceasefire continues to hold, although there have been accusations from certain parties expressing doubts about the good-faith intentions of their counterparts.

3. The Role of Domestic Actors in the Conflict

While there are some who may be tempted to see the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia through the lens of their great power allies, the circumstances surrounding the conflict appear to make it sufficiently evident that it was domestic actors, specifically the countries' respective militaries and top politicians, that were actually in the drivers' seat with regards to the conflict. In particular, the issue of Paetongtarn's deferential tone to Hun Sen (even referring to him as "Uncle") occurred against the backdrop of the Shinawatra family's political [jostling](#) with the Thai Monarchy backed by the Royal Army.

While Paetongtarn was heard criticizing one Thai army leader in the call with Hun Sen, the army for its part has brought lese-majeste charges against Thaksin Shinawatra, the family patriarch who was deposed in a much-publicised military coup in 2006. Shinawatra's term saw the uniting of the frustrations of rural, working class, and left-wing dissidents into a united movement, one that the monarchy and army saw as a threat to their rule. Eight years later, a coup would also depose the caretaker government of another member of the dynasty in Yingluck Shinawatra. It was likely clear both to Paetongtarn and acting Thai Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai that it was essential to do all they could to avoid being seen as being weak on the border issue, allowing the monarchy and army more ammunition and reason to weaken their political position.

As it stands, the military-friendly Bhumjaithai party is already preparing a vote of no-confidence against Paetongtarn Shinawatra and her cabinet, thus showing that the true significance of the border war may ultimately be for its domestic, as opposed to external, repercussions.

Following this logic, the emotions unleashed by the conflict may have created advantages for a powerful domestic actor on the side of the border as well. The recent fighting has allowed Cambodia's former Prime Minister Hun Sen to make a triumphant re-entry into the forefront of Cambodian politics. While his son Hun Manet is the official Prime Minister of Cambodia, there has been a general consensus that it is Hun Sen who continues to call the shots from behind the scenes. Historically speaking, Hun Sen is no stranger to the use of Preah Vihear and the border conflicts with Thailand as an effective tool for shoring up his regime's legitimacy. It has also been a central talking point during [election campaigns](#), winning many undecided voters over Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

It should not escape the attention of analysts' that Hun Sen's credentials are primarily based on his being a military officer. Thus, the border war creates a vacuum needing to be filled by a leader with exactly his credentials, thereby cementing his ongoing leadership in the eyes of the Cambodian populace. Recently, Cambodia has [activated](#) a military conscription law that it passed in 2006, indicating that the country intends to strengthen its military posture for the long run. There is every reason to believe that a more militarized Cambodia constantly watchful of its larger neighbour will only play into Hun Sen's hands.

4. What is the Significance of this Conflict?

The border war between Thailand and Cambodia is hardly the only war to break out in recent times. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, the recent kinetic warfare between in the Middle East involving Israel and Iran,

as well as India's recently concluded fighting with Pakistan culminating in [Operation Sindoor](#) leave the door open the possibility that the global order is fraying and that interstate warfare is back on the table as a legitimate concern for leaders across the globe. This recent string of events may have multiple reasons, including rising incentives for world leaders to appeal to nationalism in a time of economic disruption, as well as the shrinking of a Pax Americana that had long buttressed a regime of global peace and security. In the context of all these simultaneous concerns, it is worth asking: are Thailand and Cambodia destined to become a permanent symptom of this ongoing disruption?

At the moment, it is expected that while there may be initial difficulties in implementing the ceasefire, it is likely to continue to hold. Neither country seems interested in extending the scope of the war past its defined limits, and peripheral interests including both great powers (USA, China) and fellow ASEAN members (particularly Vietnam, which is wary of conflict spillover) have strongly been advocating for a cessation to the fighting. Secondly, the current asymmetry in the country's military capabilities makes any extended warfare heavily disadvantageous to Cambodia, a reality likely understood by its top negotiators.

Thailand's air force, in a small amount of time, was able to impose its [air superiority](#) while the conflict was ongoing. This type of advantage is something that former military officers like Hun Sen would be the first to understand. This does not mean that Thailand would also be especially incentivised to continue abusing its military advantages. For one, its lucrative tourism sector would be heavily affected by a prolonged conflict, particularly with a UNESCO world heritage site as a key conflict point. Secondly, the Royal Thai Army is a political power base in its own right, and its generals are likely to be weary of being embroiled in unnecessary warfare that would not enhance its legitimacy in the country. A theoretical ground invasion of Cambodia would be costly, useless, and politically dangerous. Finally, Thailand would likely be wary of inviting responses from a country with comparable military power in Vietnam, or even being the recipient of stringent diplomatic responses from erstwhile allies such as the US.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it is likely that this conflict will be similar to the crisis that occurred in 2008, which culminated in an eventual ceasefire without finding a real resolution. While Thailand's strategic and locational advantage over the temples and Cambodia's claims based on international law make the problem a devilish one, the issue is likely to be shelved in the meantime as all parties involved regroup to take care of domestic concerns. There is no reason, however, for complacency. It will take days to ensure a verified troop withdrawal on both sides. Meanwhile, thousands remain displaced following the clashes, a concern that may become a political issue in and of itself.

Finally, the perverse incentive structure that lets political leaders utilize sites such as Preah Vihear to burnish their nationalist credentials continues to exist. As long as this is not fixed, there remains the chance that the conflict will flare up again. However, the implications of the conflict for the global economy and world order are likely to remain relatively limited. The final lesson from this conflict and indeed, many of the interstate conflicts that have flared up just in the past year is this: the wounds stemming from colonial history have not quite healed. Wars over borders, contested sites and various territories can still be used by enterprising political actors looking to cement their reputation. Old disputes may still surface at unpredictable times, to the detriment of global and regional peace.

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