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Chinese Studies.
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The Cambodia–Thailand Border Conflict: A Reflection on Sovereignty, International Law, and Regional Stability

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Introduction

Border disputes remain a persistent challenge in Southeast Asia, often igniting long-standing nationalist sentiments, complicating regional diplomacy, and testing the effectiveness of international legal institutions. The Cambodia–Thailand conflict over the Preah Vihear and other temples is emblematic of this trend. Rooted in colonial-era cartography and modern political interests, the dispute has triggered multiple military confrontations—most notably between 2008–2011 and again in 2025 ([Sokhuon, 2025](#)).

This article offers a reflection on the conflict's implications for regional stability, the enforcement of international law, and the shifting landscape of diplomatic mediation. It highlights how Cambodia and Thailand's reliance on external actors—such as the United States, China, and ASEAN—reflects the complex interplay between local sovereignty and global geopolitics in a multipolar Asia.

Historical and Legal Context

The Preah Vihear Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, sits atop a cliff in the Dangrek Mountains on the Cambodia–Thailand border. The sovereignty over the temple was adjudicated by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1962, which ruled that the temple lay within Cambodian territory based on a French-drawn map accepted by both nations earlier in the 20th century ([ICJ, 1962](#)). Despite this ruling, tensions persisted—particularly over a surrounding 4.6 square kilometre area that remained undefined in practical border terms ([Chachavalpongpun, 2013](#)).

Between 2008 and 2011, nationalist movements and political instability in both countries led to intermittent armed clashes. Artillery fire damaged the temple, and thousands of civilians

were displaced along both sides of the border ([Reuters, 2011](#)). The ICJ issued a clarifying judgment in 2013, reaffirming Cambodian sovereignty over the entire promontory and calling for military withdrawal ([ICJ, 2013](#)).

In early 2025, military outposts near the disputed zone again reported exchanges of artillery fire. Cambodian and Thai forces clashed over alleged military encroachments, causing renewed civilian displacement and damage to infrastructure. My observations, as well as reporting in Cambodian media, point to a violation of international law and military agreements signed after the 2013 ruling ([Sokhuon, 2025](#)).

International Law and ASEAN's Constraints

From Cambodia's standpoint, international legal rulings have long formed the backbone of its foreign policy toward this conflict. By bringing the case to the ICJ in both 1962 and again in 2011 for clarification, Cambodia reinforced its commitment to a peaceful and legal route for dispute resolution. Yet Thailand's differing interpretations of the ICJ judgments—especially regarding demilitarization of the surrounding zone—have contributed to repeated tension.

While the ICJ reaffirmed Cambodia's sovereign rights, the enforcement of its rulings was hindered by a lack of concrete implementation mechanisms. ASEAN, too, has often been constrained by its principles of non-interference and decision-making by consensus. During the 2011 crisis, ASEAN's response was largely symbolic and lacked enforceable action ([Acharya, 2009](#)).

However, ASEAN's role evolved under Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship, which introduced a more hands-on approach to addressing the conflict. Malaysia issued direct appeals to both parties and offered to mediate under ASEAN's Political-Security Community framework ([ASEAN Secretariat, 2025](#)).

Ceasefire Mediation: USA, Malaysia, and China's Witness Role

The 2025 ceasefire agreement was made possible through a trilateral diplomatic effort:

- **United States:** As a security ally of Thailand and a development partner of Cambodia, the United States acted swiftly through its Indo-Pacific diplomatic apparatus. A special envoy was dispatched to both capitals to initiate indirect talks. Backed by its defense
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diplomacy in the region, Washington helped both sides agree on preliminary disengagement and joint monitoring arrangements ([U.S. State Department, 2025](#)).

- **Malaysia (ASEAN Chair):** In its capacity as ASEAN Chair, Malaysia convened emergency discussions under the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and proposed a neutral observer mechanism to verify compliance with the ICJ ruling. This was a marked shift from the passive roles of prior ASEAN chairs and positioned Malaysia as a credible regional peacemaker ([ASEAN Secretariat, 2025](#)).
- **China:** Perhaps the most diplomatically symbolic gesture was the **invitation of China as a witness** to the ceasefire agreement. Cambodia, with its close diplomatic and economic ties to Beijing, and Thailand, which has balanced relations with both China and the West, jointly accepted China's observer role. By witnessing the ceasefire, China demonstrated its growing influence not only as an economic partner but also as a stabilizing diplomatic actor in the region ([Xinhua, 2025](#)).

China's presence was not one of mediation, but of endorsement—signaling that regional peace aligns with China's long-term interests under its Belt and Road Initiative. It also illustrated Beijing's ability to support peaceful resolutions without imposing its will, contrasting its usually assertive postures in other territorial disputes.

Strategic Implications in a Multipolar Asia

The 2025 Cambodia–Thailand conflict reflects the realities of an increasingly **multipolar Asia**, where regional disputes are rarely isolated events. Instead, they intersect with larger geopolitical dynamics involving the U.S.–China rivalry, ASEAN centrality, and emerging norms of regional governance ([Quimba & Barral, 2024](#)).

Smaller states like Cambodia are increasingly navigating this terrain by leveraging international law while inviting constructive engagement from external powers. The participation of China as a witness, the U.S. as a mediator, and ASEAN as a facilitator offers a possible template for multilateral crisis management in Southeast Asia.

However, such reliance on external actors also underscores the weakness of existing regional security mechanisms. Without a standing peacekeeping capacity or binding enforcement procedures, ASEAN remains dependent on diplomatic goodwill and third-party pressure.

Conclusion: Toward Durable, Rules-Based Peace

The Cambodia–Thailand conflict continues to serve as a critical test of the durability of legal norms and the effectiveness of regional diplomacy. While international law provides a clear basis for Cambodia’s claim to sovereignty over Preah Vihear, sustained peace has required the engagement of major powers and the initiative of proactive regional leadership.

The 2025 ceasefire—enabled by U.S. diplomatic facilitation, ASEAN’s assertive chairmanship, and China’s symbolic witnessing—marks a new chapter in conflict mediation in Southeast Asia. It suggests that future peace-building efforts in the region will require an inclusive, rules-based, and multi-actor approach.

Institutions like the **Institute for Contemporary Chinese Studies (ICCS)** play a critical role in analyzing such dynamics. As scholars and practitioners, we must continue to examine how China’s rise, the evolution of ASEAN, and the behavior of small and medium states will shape the future of regional security and legal cooperation.

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