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Security Council (SC)

Research Report

Topic 1: Addressing cross-border tensions between Thailand and Cambodia, and its implications for regional security.



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Introduction

This research paper will introduce the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, a dispute that dates back to the early 20th century and have flared up many times since then, latest in July 2025 where heavy fighting has taken place along the border.

Definition of Key Terms

Cross-border tensions: Persistent friction, whether political or military, along an international border; often involving patrols on both sides, smaller or larger military skirmishes. Especially complicated when a detailed border has not been agreed-upon by both countries as is the case here.

Disputed area: Part of the border where the border line is not fully established/agreed-upon; for example, the Temple of Preah Vihear.

Sovereignty: A state's supreme authority over their territory; a central concept in "who owns what" disputes.

Ceasefire: A usually temporary agreement to stop fighting, often used while a more permanent solution is being negotiated.

Background Information

For more than a century, Thailand and Cambodia have disputed their 817 km (508 miles) land border, which was first mapped by France in 1907 when Cambodia was a French colony. That 1907 map, Thailand later contested, was based on an agreement that the border be demarcated along the natural watershed line between the two countries.

A long-standing cycle of legal and military disputes have followed, often with civilian loss of life (latest in 2025). Over many decades many countries and organisations have tried to mediate, including the UN Security Council, ASEAN, and others.

A key point of dispute is the 11th century Hindu temple, Preah Vihear, a place of pilgrimage and worship for Cambodians, with both countries claiming historical ownership. The International Court of Justice ruled in 1962 that the temple was in Cambodia, but Thailand does not recognise the authority of ICJ in the matter¹ and so fighting around the temple has continued.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodia-asks-world-court-settle-border-disputes-with-thailand-2025-06-15/>

Recently, Thailand conservatives questioned a 2024 government plan to negotiate with Cambodia to jointly explore offshore energy resources, warning that collaboration could risk Thailand losing island territory. This led to renewed tensions eventually leading to the removal of Thai premier Paetongtarn Shinawatra by a court in August 2024 after her attempt to de-escalate the situation directly with influential former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

And in July 2025, armed conflict broke out between the two countries, resulting in the US, China, and Malaysia stepping in to help broker a ceasefire.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Major organisations

United Nations (UN)

The UN is an international organisation founded in 1945 after World War II to prevent future wars, promote peace, human rights, and international cooperation. It currently has 193 member states². Both Thailand and Cambodia are member states of the UN and have been since 1946 and 1955, respectively. For this conflict, two parts of the UN have been particularly involved, the UNSC and the ICJ (see below).

United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

The UNSC³ is one of the main bodies of the UN. It has 15 members, each with one vote, and is responsible for maintaining international peace and security. In some cases, it can impose sanctions or authorise the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security.

International Court of Justice (ICJ)

The ICJ is the top court of the United Nations. The relevant parts of its purpose⁴ are:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace... (full text at footnote 4).
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us>

³ [Homepage | Security Council](#)

⁴ [Charter of the United Nations | INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE](#)

For disputes like the Thailand–Cambodia dispute, it can decide sovereignty/border questions, interpret earlier rulings, and order urgent “provisional measures” to prevent escalation while a case is ongoing.

The ICJ can only issue judgements, not enforce them, so it relies on member states to comply. If they do not, member states can ask the UN Security Council to help enforce any judgement per the UN Charter Article 94⁵.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

UNESCO is a “specialised agency dedicated to strengthening our shared humanity through the promotion of education, science, culture, and communication.”. They “set standards, produce tools and develop knowledge to create solutions to some of the greatest challenges of our time, and foster a world of greater equality and peace.”. ⁶

One of their perhaps most known projects is the World Heritage, a series of cultural and natural heritage sites around the world they consider to be “of outstanding value to humanity”⁷. Today the list of World Heritage sites consists of 1250 places, including number 1224⁸, the Temple of Preah Vihear which was inscribed in 2008 and is recognised by UNESCO to be in Cambodia (which Thailand disputes).

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN⁹ is an association formed to promote regional peace, stability, economic growth, social progress and cultural development in Southeast Asia. It has 11 member states, including Cambodia (added 1999) and Thailand (original member from the establishment of ASEAN in 1967).

Countries

France

France’s role in the dispute is historical and foundational¹⁰. In the early 1900s, Cambodia was part of French Indochina, and France negotiated with Thailand (then Siam) about the 1904/1907

⁵ [Chapter XIV: Article 94 — Charter of the United Nations — Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs — Codification Division Publications](#)

⁶ [UNESCO in brief | UNESCO](#)

⁷ [World Heritage | UNESCO](#)

⁸ [Temple of Preah Vihear - UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#)

⁹ [About ASEAN - ASEAN Main Portal](#)

¹⁰ [A visual guide to the historical maps and temples at the heart of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict | Thailand | The Guardian](#)

Franco–Siamese treaty¹¹ which established the border and drew a map¹². This treaty and map have since been used in the legal dispute by the ICJ and others.

Malaysia

As Chair of ASEAN in 2025, Malaysia has led negotiations that resulted in a ceasefire after the July 2025 fighting, as well as hosting the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords in October¹³ and a special ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur in collaboration with the US to re-establish the truce from July¹⁴.

United States

The US got involved in 2025 and helped establish a truce in July¹⁵ as well as re-established the same truce in December.

Relevant UN Resolutions

While the UN has been involved for decades in several capacities, mainly through the ICJ and the UNSC, there are no formal UN resolutions for this dispute.

That said, both Cambodia and Thailand have used different bodies of the UN in this dispute. This includes:

ICJ judgements and orders:

- On June 15th, 1962, the ICJ issued a judgement in the case of the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand) finding that the temple is part of Cambodia and ordered Thailand to withdraw from the area¹⁶.
- On July 18th, 2011, they issued a ICJ Order / Provisional Measure to prevent new fighting while the case was pending¹⁷.
- On November 11th, 2013, they issued a judgement to clarify what the 1962 judgement meant in practice¹⁸.

UNSC

¹¹ [Historical Documents - Office of the Historian](#)

¹² [17436.pdf](#)

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuala_Lumpur_Peace_Accord

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/thai-cambodia-militaries-hold-talks-resuming-ceasefire-2025-12-24/>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/ceasefire-takes-effect-between-thailand-cambodia-after-five-day-border-battle-2025-07-28/>

¹⁶ <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/103120>

¹⁷ <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/151/provisional-measures>

¹⁸ <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/103182>

- On Feb 14th, 2011, the UNSC Press Statement (SC/10174) “expressed their grave concern about the recent armed clashes between Cambodia and Thailand.”¹⁹
- There are also a number of UNSC “Letters” that document what each of the government officially told the UNSC.

UNESCO

- Multiple decisions that led to the addition of the Temple of Preah Vihear to the World Heritage List as part of Cambodia²⁰.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Given that the dispute is over a century long, there have been many different attempts to solve it. Here is a timeline of the most important attempts:

- **1904/1907:** The Franco–Siamese treaty (with France acting for Cambodia) created a border framework (the so-called watershed) in 1904 with maps created in 1907 for clarification²¹. While a step in the right direction, it didn’t create a fully accepted final “line” for the border, and governments later disputed this treaty, especially for heritage sites.
- **1959-1962:** Cambodia took the issue of the Preah Vihear temple to ICJ who issued judgement in favour of Cambodia. But the judgement didn’t address all the surrounding areas and Thailand has not accepted the judgement nor ICJ’s role in the conflict.
- **1997-2000:** The two countries created the Thailand–Cambodia Memorandum of Understanding on the Survey and Demarcation of the Land Boundary, also known as the MoU 2000 as an agreed-upon legal framework for handling border issues and survey the entire border. They also created the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) to implement the MoU. But progress has been slow, despite the two countries agreeing on this in principle. The 6th JBC meeting only happened in 2025, after a 13-year pause²².
- **2008:** The temple of Preah Vihear was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in Cambodia.
- **2011:** Armed fighting started again, and the UNSC issued a press statement “expressing their grave concerns”¹⁹. ASEAN stepped in and brokered an agreement allowing

¹⁹ <https://press.un.org/en/2011/sc10174.doc.htm>

²⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1224/documents/>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/17/a-visual-guide-to-the-historical-maps-and-temples-at-the-heart-of-the-thailand-cambodia-conflict>

²² <https://mfa.go.th/en/content/the-6th-thailand-cambodia-jbc-en>

observers²³, and the ICJ issued a Provisional Measure to prevent new fighting while a case was pending¹⁷.

- **2013:** The ICJ issued a judgement to clarify what the 1962 judgement meant in practice.
- **2025:** In May a soldier from Cambodia was killed which reignited the dispute on both sides. In late July heavy fighting erupted, prompting ASEAN/Malaysia, the US and China to put diplomatic pressure on both sides resulting in a cease-fire. In December this collapsed and heavy fighting resumed, and ASEAN/Malaysia and the US got involved again to try and stop the fighting.

Possible Solutions

To date, the UN has limited their involvement to ICJ judgements, mainly in the 1962 temple case that Cambodia brought to the court, and press statements from the UNSC.

That's in line with the UN default stance which is to prioritise peaceful mechanisms owned by the member states in question as well as regional mechanisms like ASEAN. Specifically, Article 33 says that "The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice."²⁴

That said, Article 36.1 does allow the UNSC to "recommend appropriate procedures or methods of adjustment" and Article 36.3 requires them to "take into consideration that legal disputes should as a general rule be referred by the parties to the International Court of Justice."

Given article 36 and the long-running nature of the dispute where it could be argued that article 33 mechanisms have not worked, the UNSC could decide to take a stronger stance in the matter. The UN Secretary General could appoint an envoy to ensure the two parties are talking, or even formally put the issue on the council's radar per article 99.

The UNSC could issue another press statement, maybe repeat their support for ASEAN, or they could investigate the dispute to understand the risks for further escalations per Article 34 ("The Security Council may investigate any dispute, or any situation which might lead to international friction or give rise to a dispute, in order to determine whether the continuance of the dispute or situation is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security."²⁴).

They could also decide to issue their first formal UN resolution on the matter, recommending concrete steps and timelines, mechanisms to prevent future armed escalations, a timeline for

²³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-asean-cambodia-thailand/thailand-cambodia-agree-to-indonesian-observers-at-idUKTRE71L1AC20110222/>

²⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-6>

talks, etc. A stronger step would be to gain consent from the two states and add observers, or even a peacekeeping mission.

Most of these solutions go beyond what the UN has chosen to do to date, despite the long-running nature of the conflict. As mentioned above, the UN Charter focuses on letting member states work out conflicts through peaceful mechanisms like the 2000 MoU and/or regional mechanisms like ASEAN. This is especially true when the conflict doesn't seem to be escalating into a broader regional conflict.

Debating how to interpret and apply the relevant articles in the UN Charter with different viewpoints would be very interesting. One viewpoint could be that the UN ought to take a stronger stance given the long-standing nature of the conflict with seemingly no end in sight. On the other hand, that could, and likely would be seen by Thailand as the UN overstepping their Charter and risk igniting a dispute between Thailand, their allies, and the UN. Similarly, it could be argued that while a long dispute, it is and has been pretty limited in scope, so the UN should focus their resources on larger topics that impact more of their member states

Another option is for other countries to step in and apply diplomatic and trade pressure, much like the US, China, and Malaysia/ASEAN started doing in 2025. Different viewpoints can be discussed here as well. One or more countries applying pressure, even considering trade limitation, like Trump did in 2025²⁵, could very well create tensions between said countries and Thailand/Cambodia, turning the situation into a larger, international situation. On the other hand, if applying diplomatic or trade pressure could speed up, for example, the JBC process and finally establish a final, detailed, agreed-upon border that would create stability in the region that has not been there for many decades.

²⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/trump-says-thailand-cambodia-agree-hold-immediate-ceasefire-talks-2025-07-26/>

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