

## Cambodia - Thailand Dispute

**Mains:** *GS II - International issues*

### Why in News?

*Recently, the longstanding border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia has erupted into one of the most serious episodes of violence in years, raising alarm in Southeast Asia and globally.*

### What is the historical context of the dispute?

- **Legacy of Western rule** - It largely stems from the legacy of colonial-era boundaries drawn in the early 20th century when both countries were under French and Western influence.
- **ICJ verdict** - The most symbolic flashpoint historically has been the area around the *Preah Vihear* temple — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — which was the subject of a 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling awarding the site to Cambodia but leaving surrounding terrain contentious.

## Reported fighting along the Thai-Cambodia border



- Tensions have periodically flared since the early 2000s, with deadly clashes reported in 2008 and 2011, often involving artillery exchanges and mutual accusations of violations.
- **Unsolved border issue** - While the ICJ ruling has helped clarify title to the ancient temple itself, broader border demarcation remains unresolved, leaving room for recurrent friction.
- **Recent clashes** - Hostilities reignited on 7 December 2025 when clashes broke out along the shared border, particularly in the *Preah Vihear region*.
- Both sides accuse the other of initiating attacks, with reports of rocket fire and artillery exchanges.
- **Claims of Thailand** - Cambodia used rocket launchers that hit civilian areas, leading to the first confirmed Thai civilian death in this round of violence.
- **Cambodia response** - Denies such allegations and asserts that its forces were responding to Thai aggression.
- Thai military responses have included airstrikes on what it describes as military targets inside Cambodian territory, while Cambodian forces reportedly used BM-21 rocket systems against Thai positions.
- The use of heavy weapons and air power represents a significant escalation compared to past incidents.

## What are the impacts of the conflict?

- **Casualties** - Both military personnel and civilians have been killed or injured.

Cambodia reported civilian deaths and injuries, while Thailand confirmed both soldier and civilian casualties.

- **Displacement** - The fighting has displaced hundreds of thousands of people on both sides of the border, forcing entire communities to flee areas of active combat.
- **Public Safety Warnings** - Foreign governments, including the U.S. Embassy, have issued travel alerts recommending that citizens avoid travel within 50 km of the border, highlighting the unpredictable and volatile security situation.
- In addition to immediate displacement and injury, education and economic activities have been disrupted in affected provinces, with schools closed and communities cut off from normal services.
- **Cultural Heritage at Risk** - The *Preah Vihear Temple*, a site of immense historical and cultural significance, is at risk due to its proximity to the conflict zones.
- Damage has been reported to infrastructure associated with the site, prompting concern from outside nations.
  - **For instance**, the Ministry of External Affairs of India has called for protection of the temple and restraint from both parties, emphasizing its status as a shared cultural treasure.

### What are the ceasefire efforts and diplomatic struggles?

- **Ceasefire agreement** - Both governments had engaged in ceasefire negotiations, including a *peace accord signed in October 2025* in Kuala Lumpur with the involvement of mediators.
- However, this tentative peace collapsed, with both sides providing conflicting narratives about its existence and terms.
- Thailand's leadership publicly denied any formal truce despite external claims that a ceasefire had been agreed.
- **International mediation** — China and the United States have pushed for renewed ceasefire commitments in advance of a *special ASEAN meeting*, with diplomatic representatives attempting to broker a new cessation of hostilities.
- Cambodia has been less responsive publicly to these overtures, although both nations are participating in regional discussions.
- **United Nation negotiation** - It has condemned the escalation and expressed concern for civilian safety, while ASEAN members including Indonesia and Malaysia — are mobilizing diplomatic engagement to prevent a full-scale war.

### What are the root causes beyond the battlefield?

- **Sovereignty and Nationalism** - National pride and sovereignty issues play a central role, with both governments tying territorial control to national legitimacy.
- **Border Demarcation** - Despite decades of dialogue, fully demarcating the nearly *817-km border* remains unfinished, making flare-ups more likely when incidents occur on the ground.
- **Diplomatic Tools vs. Military Might** - Cambodia has indicated willingness to pursue legal avenues including ICJ adjudication on broader boundary disputes.
- Thailand has favoured bilateral talks and resisted broader international judicial jurisdiction.

## What are the regional and global implications?

- **ASEAN's Unity and Credibility** - Persistent violence tests ASEAN's ability to manage intra-regional disputes without external intervention.
- **Tourism and Economy** - Both countries depend significantly on tourism, with border closures and security fears dampening visitor confidence.
- **Great Power Diplomacy** - The involvement of external powers such as the U.S. and China adds complexity to negotiations, as both seek influence in Southeast Asia.

## What lies ahead?

- The December 2025 escalation in the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict highlights the fragility of peace in the face of unresolved historical disputes and rising nationalist sentiment.
- Despite repeated ceasefire talks and diplomatic efforts, mistrust and contradictory narratives have kept hostility alive.
- The humanitarian toll underscores the urgent need for committed negotiation, third-party mediation, and safeguards for civilians and cultural heritage.
- Only sustained diplomacy, backed by regional institutions like ASEAN and the broader international community can hope to prevent a further slide into deeper conflict.

## References

1. [The Hindu| Cambodia-Thailand Dispute](#)
2. [BBC| Border Clashes between Cambodia and Thailand](#)
3. [The Hindu| Cambodia-Thailand clash](#)