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.



- 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.

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