

From Ceasefire to Cooperation: Policy Options for Thailand-Cambodia Conflict Resolutions

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Executive Summary

The 2025 Thai–Cambodian border conflict was not a relapse into colonial-era grievances but a contemporary crisis born of domestic political weaknesses and external militarization. While ambiguous French-era maps and unresolved boundary and Hindu temple claims provided the historical frame, they do not explain the intensity or timing of the clashes. The decisive drivers lay in Thailand’s unresolved civil–military imbalance, Cambodia’s patrimonial governance, and the inflow of foreign weapons that magnified localized disputes into broader regional instability. A leaked phone call between Hun Sen and Paetongtarn Shinawatra revealed the fragility of civilian authority in Bangkok, while Phnom Penh’s assertiveness—bolstered by new Chinese armaments—demonstrated how sovereignty politics had become a tool of regime consolidation rather than conflict resolution.

The human and economic toll was severe. Nearly one million civilians on both sides were displaced, dozens were killed, and livelihoods were disrupted as border closures and insecurity paralysed trade, labour mobility, and tourism. Thailand’s manufacturing and tourism sectors contracted amid labour shortages and rising anti-Cambodian sentiment, while Cambodia faced inflationary pressure, food insecurity, and the loss of remittances following the large-scale return of migrant workers. What began as a border skirmish evolved into a sustained economic shock, underscoring how deeply interdependent the two economies—and societies—have become, and how quickly that interdependence can turn into vulnerability when securitized.

At the political level, the crisis exposed structural weaknesses in both states. In Thailand, military institutions dominated crisis management, sidelining civilian ministries and exploiting nationalist mobilisation to preserve institutional prerogatives. In Cambodia, dynastic patrimonialism transformed border tension into a mechanism for elite consolidation and diversion from economic malaise. These mutually reinforcing political logics ensured that escalation remained domestically advantageous even as it eroded long-term national interests on both sides.

The conflict also highlighted the fragility of regional security architecture. ASEAN's mediation, led by Malaysia, produced a 13-point ceasefire agreement and facilitated agreement on the Terms of Reference of an ASEAN Observer Team (AOT). While the AOT marked a step toward institutionalised monitoring, its mandate remained deliberately narrow—focused on observation and reporting without enforcement authority—reflecting consensus politics and sovereignty sensitivities. ASEAN succeeded in facilitating restraint and preserving dialogue, but its role remained confined to confidence management rather than conflict resolution. External powers filled parts of this gap: the United States applied pressure through trade leverage, China was accused—credibly or otherwise—of fuelling escalation through arms transfers, and the United Nations remained largely symbolic. The episode underscored that sustainable peace cannot rest on external coercion alone, but must be anchored in regional mechanisms grounded in transparency and civilian diplomacy.

Despite the damage, credible pathways toward stability remain.

- **Bilaterally**, the General Border Committee (GBC), Regional Border Committees (RBCs), and Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) remain viable instruments if depoliticised and insulated from military monopolisation.
- **Regionally**, sustaining the ASEAN Observer Team as a standing monitoring mechanism would strengthen transparency and reduce risks of miscalculation, even within its limited mandate.
- **Internationally**, the International Court of Justice and the Ottawa Convention offer legal and humanitarian avenues to reinforce credibility and restraint when used selectively and strategically.

Equally critical are economic and social linkages. The twelve memoranda of understanding signed between 2024 and 2025 on trade, labour, tourism, energy, health, and infrastructure demonstrate the depth of mutual dependence between Thailand and Cambodia. Effective implementation of these agreements can convert interdependence into leverage for peace by raising the cost of renewed conflict and creating cross-border constituencies with a direct stake in stability.

The most neglected dimension remains the information domain. Disinformation and nationalist rhetoric repeatedly undermined diplomacy and fuelled xenophobia throughout 2025. Yet emerging professional initiatives—Thai media ethical guidelines, cross-border journalist exchanges, and joint academic research—demonstrate that alternative narratives are possible. If scaled up and embedded within ASEAN-supported public-diplomacy frameworks, these efforts could gradually shift discourse away from zero-sum nationalism toward recognition of shared vulnerability and interest.

Three plausible trajectories define the post-ceasefire outlook.

- The best case envisions cooperative coexistence sustained by joint demining, revived trade, and ASEAN-backed monitoring.
- The most likely scenario is a managed stalemate, characterised by fragile peace, partial economic recovery, and recurring political tension.
- The worst case points to renewed militarisation and economic disruption should nationalist politics and external arms competition again overwhelm civilian diplomacy.

This study concludes that Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN already possess the tools necessary for durable peace: institutional mechanisms, economic interdependence, professionalised media networks, and emerging norms of regional monitoring and arms transparency. What remains in deficit is political will and civilian leadership. If Bangkok can reassert civilian authority over border policy, if Phnom Penh channels legal leverage into pragmatic cooperation, and if ASEAN consolidates its monitoring role beyond symbolic facilitation, the Thai–Cambodian border can evolve from a recurrent flashpoint into a model of cooperative security and shared development for Southeast Asia.

List of Acronyms

ACMECS: Ayeyawaddy-Chao Praya-Mekong Cooperation Strategy

AOT: ASEAN Observer Team

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CMAC: Cambodia Mine Action Center

CPP: Cambodian People's Party

GBC: General Border Committee

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GMS: Greater Mekong Sub-region

JBC: Joint Boundary Commission

ICJ: International Court of Justice

IOT: Interim Observer Team

LiDAR: Light Detection and Ranging

MoU: Memorandum of Understanding

RBC: Regional Border Committee

RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

SEZ: Special Economic Zone

TMAC: Thailand Mine Action Center

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Introduction

Unresolved territorial disputes, entrenched nationalist narratives, and the outsized influence of military institutions have long shaped relations between Thailand and Cambodia. These structural factors sustain a volatile environment where the past continually intrudes upon the present, obstructing pathways toward stability and cooperation.

The latest flare-up, beginning with May 28, 2025, brief clash near Chong Bok and escalating into intense fighting from July 24 to 28, inflicted a heavy human and economic cost. By August 20, Thai authorities recorded 53 civilian casualties (14 dead, 39 injured) and 286 military casualties (17 dead, 269 wounded). Cambodia, less transparent, admitted to at least 50 fatalities. Beyond the battlefield, the conflict displaced more than 300,000 people, shuttered border trade valued at 16–17 billion baht per month, disrupted agricultural and manufactural productions, and deepened social distrust in frontier communities. The war of attrition not only devastated livelihoods but also inflamed nationalist sentiment, threatening to embed hostility for another generation.

Conventional diplomacy between foreign ministries has proven inadequate in this context. In both countries, military dominance and nationalist politics turn border disputes into tools of domestic legitimacy, constraining pragmatic compromise. For Thailand, civil–military imbalance enables generals to dictate border narratives, marginalizing elected leaders. In Cambodia, patrimonial politics and crony capitalism incentivize the ruling elite to instrumentalize sovereignty disputes for regime consolidation. These dynamics illustrate why conflict persists despite available legal and diplomatic frameworks.

The stakes extend beyond bilateral relations. Prolonged tensions risk undermining ASEAN’s credibility in conflict management, destabilizing regional trade, and inviting external powers to exert coercive influence. Conversely, a forward-looking policy framework—reducing military dominance, reinforcing civilian diplomacy, and harnessing socio-economic interdependence—could transform contested spaces into cooperative ones.

This paper draws on field research in Si Sa Ket and Sa Kaeo provinces, documentation of policy frameworks, media reports, and meetings with security officials and residents. It situates the Thai–Cambodian conflict within its historical, political, and regional dimensions and develops policy options across three domains:

- 1) diplomatic frameworks and defense diplomacy
- 2) economic and development linkages
- 3) information and narrative management

By analyzing these domains and outlining plausible scenarios, it offers recommendations for Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN to shift from fragile ceasefires toward sustainable peace.

I Conflict Dynamics and Drivers

Background

Thai–Cambodian border disputes stem from colonial-era treaties signed between Siam and French Indochina in 1893, 1904, and 1907. Ambiguous maps and missing boundary pillars left behind contested zones that continue to generate nationalist grievances. The Preah Vihear case remains emblematic: although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) awarded sovereignty to Cambodia in 1962 and reaffirmed its decision in 2013, many Thais still see it as a humiliating loss of territory. These unresolved legacies continue to shape the conflict as much a matter of national dignity as geography.

Meanwhile, the maritime dispute deepened mistrust. Overlapping claims in the Gulf of Thailand, covering 26,000 square kilometers, believed to contain rich hydrocarbon reserves, have been on hold since the 2001 MoU on joint development. Although initially seen as a breakthrough, nationalist mobilization in Bangkok repeatedly hindered progress, viewing cooperation as a form of surrender. As a result, potential energy collaboration remains constrained by domestic politics.

The latest crisis started on May 28, 2025, with a clash near Chong Bok that resulted in the death of a Cambodian soldier. Thailand responded by tightening border restrictions, which hurt cross-border livelihoods, while Cambodia retaliated by banning Thai goods. Phnom Penh's frustration grew, culminating in a leaked phone call where Hun Sen urged Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to reopen the border. Paetongtarn's frank reply—that the Thai military acted as her government's opponent—highlighted the deep civil–military divide in Bangkok. For Hun Sen, this confirmed that negotiations with Bangkok's civilian leaders were ineffective, fueling the political tension in the crisis.

Starting in June, tensions grew. Landmine explosions injured Thai soldiers, diplomatic relations worsened, and local clashes increased. The turning point happened on July 24, when Thai troops sealed off the Ta Moan Thom temple and put up barbed-wire fences. Cambodian soldiers tried to remove the barriers and opened fire, leading to immediate fighting.¹ What started as a local conflict quickly expanded: artillery and rocket exchanges broke out in several areas along the border, bringing in reinforcements on both sides and causing civilian casualties.

In essence, the 2025 escalation was not the product of a single decision but of structural conditions: colonial-era ambiguities, nationalist narratives, and domestic political rivalries. The leaked phone call revealed Thailand's civilian weakness, while the Ta Moan Thom incident demonstrated how local actions—shaped by military assertiveness and nationalist sensitivities—could ignite wider conflict. The crisis highlighted how disputes persist not because

¹ “Chronology of Events Leading to the Thai–Cambodian Border Clashes” Thai PBS July 24, 2025 [https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/354596]

of technical complexity, but because they remain tools of political power in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

Political Structures

While historical ambiguities explain the persistence of disputes, domestic political structures in both countries shaped how the 2025 crisis unfolded.

In Thailand, the civil–military imbalance once again determined the trajectory of border policy. After the 2023 election, the Pheu Thai–led government restored civilian rule in form, but not in substance. Ministries nominally under civilian oversight, such as Defence, remained dominated by entrenched military elites who resisted reform. During the May–July 2025 flare-up, it was generals—not the cabinet—who set the tone. The Special Operations Center for the Thai–Cambodian Border Situations Management was placed firmly under military command, sidelining civilian ministries.

The leaked phone call between Hun Sen and Paetongtarn made this imbalance visible. Hun Sen pressed her repeatedly to reopen the border, which had strangled Cambodia’s economy and stoked public frustration. Paetongtarn’s candid reply—that the Thai military acted as her government’s opponent—captured her lack of control. For Phnom Penh, this was confirmation that negotiations with Bangkok’s civilian leadership were futile. For the Thai military, it was a justification to act unilaterally. Within weeks, landmine incidents and a reciprocal diplomatic downgrade provided the pretext for the July 24 operation, reinforcing the image of the armed forces as defenders of sovereignty. The current government under Anutin Charnvirakul of the Bhumjaithai Party, replacing Paetongtarn after the Constitutional Court’s ruling on August 29, has proven no stronger; the new prime minister has effectively granted the armed forces full autonomy over border security and management. To that extent, the crisis thus became not only an interstate conflict but also a reflection of Thailand’s enduring civil–military imbalance.

In Cambodia, patrimonial politics under the Hun family continued to shape responses. Although Hun Sen stepped aside as prime minister in 2023, real power remained concentrated in the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and its networks of loyalist tycoons. The fusion of political authority and crony capitalism meant that sovereignty disputes were readily instrumentalized. By portraying Thailand’s border restrictions as acts of aggression, Phnom Penh could rally domestic support, suppress criticism, and preserve the legitimacy of a dynastic regime facing economic headwinds.

These parallel structures—Thailand’s praetorian military dominance and Cambodia’s patrimonialism-cronyism order—created a combustible dynamic. For Thai generals, hardline posturing bolstered their domestic standing at the expense of civilian leaders. For Cambodia’s ruling elite, framing Thailand as the aggressor consolidated internal loyalty. Together, these dynamics ensured that compromise was politically costly, while escalation could be politically rewarding.

Regional and International Dimensions

The 2025 border clashes demonstrated how bilateral disputes can escalate into regional and international concerns.

ASEAN stepped in as a facilitator at a critical juncture, with Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim hosting emergency talks on July 28, 2025 that led to an Extraordinary General Border Committee (GBC) meeting on August 7 and a 13-point ceasefire arrangement. While Anwar advocated the deployment of ASEAN observers—an unprecedented step in a bilateral border conflict—Thailand initially resisted a formal ASEAN Observer Team (AOT), favouring a more limited interim arrangement involving defence attachés. The eventual agreement by Thailand and Cambodia on the Terms of Reference of the AOT reflected a negotiated compromise: the AOT was authorised only to observe, verify, and report, without enforcement powers, cross-border access, or any mandate that might impinge on sovereignty or territorial claims. This outcome encapsulated ASEAN's structural constraint: even when member states accept regional involvement, it is calibrated narrowly through consensus and non-interference, reinforcing ASEAN's role as a facilitator of restraint rather than an enforcer of compliance.

The United States took an unusually forceful role under President Donald Trump, directly linking trade to peace. Washington threatened tariffs of up to 36 percent on Thai and Cambodian exports unless a ceasefire was signed, later reducing them to 19 percent once compliance was achieved. For Cambodia, whose garment sector depends heavily on U.S. markets, the threat was existential. For Thailand, the measures jeopardized key industries such as electronics and agriculture. The coercive strategy proved effective in the short term—accelerating negotiations—but risked being perceived as heavy-handed interference, raising questions about its sustainability and long-term diplomatic cost.

China's role in the 2025 crisis extended beyond diplomatic facilitation. The New York Times² reported that six Chinese Y-20 transport planes delivered forty-two containers of rockets, artillery shells, and mortars to Cambodia's Ream Naval Base in late June 2025 and later moved north to contested provinces. The Thai authorities initially said they were aware of the shipment.³ However, a subsequent Thai military intelligence report contradicted this account, finding no verified record of such flights and concluding that the NYT narrative aligned with broader U.S. strategic framing. Regardless of verification, the allegation itself shaped perceptions: it reinforced Thai suspicions of Chinese favoritism toward Phnom Penh, emboldened Cambodian confidence in external backing, and complicated ASEAN's mediation efforts. Beijing thus faced

² Sui Lee Wee. "How Chinese Weapons Transformed a War Between Two Neighbors" New York Times. September 29, 2025.

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/29/world/asia/thailand-cambodia-china-weapons.html>]

³ Eric Parpart "Thailand says it was aware of Chinese weapons shipments to Cambodia before July clash" Thai Enquirer, October 2, 2025

[<https://www.thaienquirer.com/60732/thailand-says-it-was-aware-of-chinese-weapons-shipments-to-cambodia-before-july-clash/>]

a dual challenge—projecting itself as a neutral mediator while managing the reputational cost of perceived partisanship.

The United Nations, at Cambodia’s request, convened an urgent Security Council session in July. As expected, no resolution emerged. The meeting underscored the gravity of the crisis but also highlighted the UN’s limited capacity to address Southeast Asian security disputes, where regional mechanisms remain primary.

Together, these dynamics reveal the complex interplay of ASEAN’s facilitation, U.S. economic coercion, China’s perceived asymmetrical influence, and the UN’s symbolic engagement. Each actor contributed to temporary de-escalation, but none could secure lasting stability. The episode reaffirmed that durable peace must ultimately be built on domestic reform, institutional trust, and bilateral commitments rather than external pressure alone.

II Cost of Conflict Escalation

The escalation of the Thai–Cambodian border conflict since May 2025 has imposed costs far beyond immediate clashes. Security risks remain acute along the frontier, while the economic and social repercussions ripple deeply through both countries. Although both sides suffer, the burden is distributed unevenly: Cambodia, with its smaller economy, absorbs proportionally heavier shocks, while Thailand faces deeper risks of recession given its reliance on border trade and Cambodian labor.

Security Risks

The 2025 fighting also marked a qualitative shift in firepower. Cambodian forces deployed Chinese-made multiple launch rocket systems such as BM-21, Type 90B and PHL-03, artillery shells for SH-1 self-propelled howitzers⁴, and Chinese-origin rockets against Thai provinces. These systems inflicted heavier civilian damage, including the shelling of gas stations, hospitals, and homes that killed at least 13 civilians on the first day of fighting.⁵ Compared with previous skirmishes in 2011, Cambodia’s ability to sustain artillery duels for five days reflected years of Chinese military aid and recent resupply.

The most visible costs are measured in lives lost and communities endangered. By late August, Thailand reported 53 civilian casualties (14 killed, 39 injured) and 286 military casualties (17 killed, 269 injured). Cambodia initially acknowledged at least 13 fatalities, though the true figure is likely higher. Thailand returned the bodies of 20 Cambodian soldiers as a humanitarian gesture

⁴ “Cambodia Purchases Three Types of MLRSs from China’s Norinco” DTurDef Global Defense News. May 31, 2022 [<https://turdef.com/article/cambodia-purchases-three-types-of-mlrss-from-chinas-norinco>]

⁵ “Summary of Thai–Cambodian Losses One Week After the Border Clashes” BBC Thai July 31, 2025 [<https://www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cwy58xwdygp0>]

once fighting subsided. With all figures combined, a media report indicated that Cambodia lost at least 50 soldiers in the skirmish.⁶

Symbolic incidents amplified the conflict's resonance. On July 24, the bombardment of Wat Ta Moan Sen Chey in Oddar Meanchey killed a monk and damaged a sacred site, reinforcing Cambodian narratives of Thai "ruthless aggression."⁷ A rural health clinic was also destroyed. In Thailand, Cambodian rockets struck a local hospital in Surin, villages, and a convenience shop in Si Sa Ket, killing civilians and hardening public anger. These cultural and civilian losses gave the conflict a moral dimension that extended beyond battlefield casualties.

Landmines added another layer of insecurity. At least 15 Thai soldiers were maimed by blasts in July alone, while Cambodia continues to grapple with over 700 square kilometers of contaminated land in Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, and Preah Vihear. Renewed clashes delayed clearance operations, leaving villagers at risk and eroding hard-won progress in humanitarian demining.

Militarization further destabilized the frontier. Thai F-16 and Gripen fighter jets as well as drone surveillance, highlighted the asymmetry in capabilities, while Cambodian forces fortified temples and symbolic sites. Border protests, such as villagers opposing Thai barbed-wire fencing, ended violently; dozens of Cambodians, including monks, were injured by Thai crowd-control weapons in the disputed areas of Prey Chan-Ban Nong Ya Kaeo⁸. Each such incident threatened to unravel ASEAN-brokered ceasefires, sustaining a cycle of mistrust.

Economic Cost

The 2025 border conflict inflicted substantial economic losses on both Thailand and Cambodia. Although the active fighting lasted fewer than five days, the economic consequences persisted for months as border closures, labour disruptions, and weakened investor confidence continued to undermine growth and regional stability.

Thailand

On the Thai side, the economic shock was broad yet uneven across sectors. The Institute for Strategic Policy's Economic and Social Externalities of Interstate Conflict report estimates that Thailand incurred approximately THB 24.06 billion (USD 740.31 million) in monthly economic losses, equivalent to around 1.5–2 percent of monthly GDP. These losses reflect the combined

⁶ Ananth Baliga and Phoung Vantha. "Cambodian military families mourn as nation's Thai conflict toll exceeds 50" Nikkei Asia. September 16, 2025
[<https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/thailand-cambodia-conflict/cambodian-military-families-mourn-as-nation-s-thai-conflict-toll-exceeds-50>]

⁷ "Thai aggressors destroy Cambodian monastery, kill Abbot" Khmer Times July 26, 2025
[<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501725330/thai-aggressors-destroy-cambodian-monastery-kill-abbot/>]

⁸ "Clashes erupt at Ban Nong Ya Kaeo as Cambodians fire slingshots, Thai officers injured" The Nation September 17, 2025 [<https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40055552>]

effects of disrupted trade, reduced tourism activity, labour shortages, and supply-chain dislocation.

Of the total, direct economic impacts account for roughly THB 16.26 billion per month, arising from collapsed cross-border trade, reduced output due to labour repatriation, unplanned government expenditures on security and relief, and declining tourism revenues. Indirect and induced impacts contribute a further THB 7.8 billion per month, driven by supply-chain interruptions, contractions in local business activity, and reduced household consumption.

Cross-border trade was the most immediately affected sector. Prior to the conflict, Thailand–Cambodia border trade averaged approximately THB 16.1 billion per month. Following the complete closure of all border checkpoints on June 23, 2025, trade volumes collapsed by nearly 100 percent, falling to only THB 376 million in July, depriving border provinces of a critical economic lifeline.

Tourism losses compounded the downturn. In the seven Thai provinces bordering Cambodia—Ubon Ratchathani, Surin, Si Sa Ket, Buri Ram, Sa Kaeo, Trat, and Chanthaburi—visitor arrivals declined by 14 percent year-on-year, while tourism receipts fell by 15 percent. At the national level, heightened security concerns contributed to an 18 percent year-on-year decline in international tourist arrivals in July, with weaker forward bookings extending the impact into subsequent months.

Labour shortages further deepened the contraction. Cambodian workers, who are heavily concentrated in construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and services, accounted for a critical share of Thailand’s migrant workforce. Their large-scale repatriation reduced production capacity across labor-intensive sectors and contributed significantly to monthly productivity losses.

Local economies along the frontier were disproportionately affected. Border-dependent small businesses—including markets such as Rong Kluea in Sa Kaeo and commercial clusters near Chong Sangam in Si Sa Ket—experienced sharp declines in revenue as cross-border commerce and passenger flows came to a halt. These losses reverberated through local supply chains and service sectors, intensifying the broader economic slowdown.

Logistics networks were also disrupted as exporters rerouted shipments through Laos and Vietnam, increasing transportation costs and lengthening delivery times. These adjustments eroded competitiveness and added further pressure on firms already facing declining demand and higher operating costs.

While Thailand’s overall macroeconomic stability remained intact, the conflict underscored the vulnerability of border-reliant sectors and the high economic cost of prolonged border closure in an economy deeply integrated with regional trade, labour, and production networks.

Cambodia

Cambodia's economy, smaller and far more dependent on cross-border trade and remittances, absorbed a heavier shock. According to the Cambodian Center for Regional Studies (CCRS) and ISP, bilateral trade valued at US \$ 4.2 billion in 2024 collapsed after Thailand sealed all crossings in late June 2025. Thai products had supplied 45 percent of Cambodia's essential imports and 27 percent of its food supply, producing immediate shortages and inflation in frontier provinces. Retailers were forced to liquidate Thai inventories amid consumer boycotts, while Vietnamese suppliers filled the gap at higher logistical cost and lower quality.

Agriculture—employing one-third of Cambodia's workforce—was hit hardest. With Thai buyers absent, farm-gate prices for roots and vegetables fell 20–30 percent, depressing incomes in Oddar Meanchey, Banteay Meanchey, and Preah Vihear. Fertilizer and fuel prices surged as Thai inputs vanished, while detours through Vietnam and Laos extended delivery times by about 40 percent.

The human toll compounded the economic one. Over 920,000 Cambodian migrant workers returned home, overwhelming domestic labour markets. Only about 220,000 had found new employment by September, leaving more than 700,000 idle. Lost remittances—once worth US \$ 2.8 billion annually—reduced household income by roughly US \$ 375 million per month ($\approx$ THB 12 billion). Household debt among returnees averaged US \$ 5,000, fuelling a rise in microfinance defaults across border provinces. Rural consumption collapsed as remittance-driven spending evaporated; markets along National Road 5 saw sales fall by up to 40 percent.

The boycott movement against Thai businesses—spreading rapidly through social media—emptied 7-Eleven stores, Café Amazon outlets, and Makro supermarkets. The contraction cost thousands of Cambodian service-sector jobs and shook broader investor confidence. Meanwhile, Cambodia's tourism industry suffered a freefall: Thai visitor arrivals plunged 90 percent, from 182,000 in May to fewer than 20,000 in July, effectively erasing the country's largest tourist segment. Angkor Wat, once hosting 2,000 Thai visitors monthly, sold barely two dozen tickets to Thais in August.

Macroeconomic indicators deteriorated sharply. GDP growth projections fell from 5.8 percent to around 4.2 percent, inflation climbed to a two-year high, and external reserves weakened amid rising import costs. Analysts warned that continued stalemate could cut another full percentage point from growth and jeopardize Cambodia's fiscal stability.

Regional Implications

Together, Thailand and Cambodia lost an estimated US\$1.2–1.3 billion per month at the peak of disruption between July and August 2025—equivalent to around 1.5–2 percent of their combined monthly GDP. The episode demonstrated how interdependence amplifies vulnerability: a localized border skirmish quickly evolved into an economic shock rippling across trade, labour

markets, tourism, and supply chains. Re-opening trade corridors, restoring labour mobility, and rebuilding tourism and investor confidence are therefore not merely economic objectives but essential steps toward de-escalation and sustainable peace.

Social and Humanitarian Impacts

By late July, around 188,734 Thais⁹ and 172,000 Cambodians¹⁰ were displaced. On the Thai side, evacuees were spread across 770 shelters in border provinces, from Si Sa Ket (82,021 people in 435 centers) to Chanthaburi (224 in 4). Thai authorities promised safe returns only when security was assured, while ensuring food and supplies through coordinated relief.

In Cambodia, families fled Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, and Banteay Meanchey, often sheltering in schools or pagodas with little more than oxcarts and mats. Humanitarian groups reported shortages of food and medicine and overcrowded conditions. Many returning villagers found homes damaged, livestock lost, and farms mined.

The conflict also damaged cultural and religious sites. The destruction of Wat Ta Moan Sen Chey and collateral harm to the Preah Vihear visitor center shocked Cambodian society, while Cambodian rockets striking Thai civilian residents embedded resentment across the border. For many families, trauma was not only physical but cultural.

Nationalist fervor compounded the humanitarian strain. In Thailand, ultra-right groups spread anti-Khmer narratives, while Cambodian workers reported harassment and assaults. In Cambodia, boycotts of Thai goods spread, and fuel stations were rebranded as “Peace Petroleum,”¹¹ and social media glorified “resistance to Thai aggression.” Cambodian leaders had to intervene to prevent mob violence against Thai interests.¹² These attitudes risk embedding hostility in both societies for a generation.

The Paradox

The costs of the 2025 conflict underscore a paradox: measures justified as defending sovereignty—troop buildups, border closures, consumer boycotts—have undermined the real foundations of sovereignty itself: citizens’ welfare, economic stability, and social cohesion. Thailand risks recession and social polarization; Cambodia faces falling incomes, inflation, and

⁹ “Interior Ministry Permanent Secretary Reports 188,000 Displaced Persons Across Seven Thai–Cambodian Border Provinces” The Government Public Relations Department July 29, 2025 [<https://www.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/33/iid/409935>]

¹⁰ Sonny Inbaraj Krishnan “World Vision: Over 172,000 Cambodians Remain Displaced Along Border” Camness August 4, 2025 [<https://cambodianess.com/article/world-vision-over-172000-cambodians-remain-displaced-along-border>]

¹¹ “Former owner of 35 PTT gas stations officially unveils new business brand, Peace Petroleum Cambodia (PPC) Khmer Times August 11, 2025 [<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501735515/former-owner-of-35-ptt-gas-stations-officially-unveils-new-business-brand-peace-petroleum-cambodia-ppc/>]

¹² “Hun Manet Urges Calm: Protect Thai Interests Amidst Border Tensions” The Nation July 25, 2025 [<https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40053022>]

deepening dependency. Without reframing the border as a space for cooperation rather than confrontation, both sides risk locking themselves into cycles of mutual impoverishment and mistrust.

III. Opportunities for Conflict Resolution

The recurring cycles of Thai–Cambodian conflict demonstrate both the fragility of peace and the dense web of mechanisms already available to manage disputes. The challenge lies less in the absence of frameworks than in their underuse, politicization, or contradiction by domestic agendas. Opportunities for resolution can be grouped into three broad tiers: international legal and humanitarian mechanisms, bilateral defense diplomacy, and multilateral/ASEAN engagement.

1. International Legal and Humanitarian Mechanisms

The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

Cambodia’s June 2025 notification to the ICJ regarding Ta Kwai, two Ta Moan temples and the “Emerald Triangle” reprises its earlier strategy over Preah Vihear. Thailand, citing its 1960 withdrawal from compulsory jurisdiction, rejects adjudication. Even so, the ICJ option carries value for Cambodia: it internationalizes the issue, garners sympathy for a rules-based approach, and keeps pressure on Bangkok. Advisory opinions or provisional measures—though not enforceable—shape global perceptions.

For Thailand, outright refusal risks reputational damage. Selective engagement, such as joint technical submissions or clarifications, could demonstrate goodwill without surrendering sovereignty. Thus, the ICJ remains both an opportunity and a dilemma: leverage for Phnom Penh, but also a chance for Bangkok to show commitment to peaceful resolution if carefully managed.

Ottawa Convention on Landmines

Both states are parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction of 1997, known informally as the Ottawa Convention, yet landmines remain a lethal legacy. Thai soldiers continue to be maimed, while large swathes of Cambodian farmland remain unsafe. Renewed clashes raised allegations of new mine-laying, threatening compliance.

Article 8 of the Convention allows fact-finding missions to verify violations. Thailand could invoke this not as punishment but as a confidence-building measure. Joint CMAC–TMAC clearance operations, framed as humanitarian rather than territorial, would provide immediate

benefits to border communities and demonstrate adherence to international norms. Such cooperation can build trust while sidestepping sovereignty disputes.

2. Bilateral Defense Diplomacy

General Border Committee (GBC)

The GBC, co-chaired by defense ministers, is central to bilateral crisis management. Its August 2025 extraordinary session in Malaysia produced a 13-point ceasefire agreement covering troop movements, humanitarian obligations, and information control. The GBC's strength lies in:

- Direct military engagement, ensuring those controlling the weapons are also at the table.
- Flexibility, with extraordinary sessions convened rapidly.
- Broad scope, extending from security to humanitarian concerns.

Yet dependence on generals alone is also a weakness. Without civilian oversight, security-first logic dominates, leaving legal, political, and humanitarian dimensions underemphasized.

Regional Border Committees (RBCs)

RBCs empower frontline commanders to resolve incidents locally and prevent escalation. The 13-point ceasefire tasked them to convene within two weeks and liaise with ASEAN observers. By keeping communication open on the ground, RBCs serve as confidence-building platforms, reducing the risk of accidental clashes.

Joint Boundary Commission (JBC)

For long-term settlement, the JBC is indispensable. Established under the 2000 MoU, it oversees joint surveys and technical demarcation. Its 2025 Phnom Penh meeting, the first in over a decade, verified 45 out of 74 boundary pillars and adopted LiDAR mapping technique. By depoliticizing disputes into technical processes, the JBC demonstrates that incremental progress is possible even amid crises.

3. Multilateral and ASEAN Engagement

ASEAN as Facilitator

ASEAN's facilitation in 2025 showed that, despite constraints, the bloc can act when members face direct security threats. Malaysia's mediation produced a ceasefire that both sides could accept without losing face. While external pressure from Washington was decisive, ASEAN provided the regional legitimacy that made compromise possible.

ASEAN Observer Team (AOT)

The establishment of the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) following the July 2025 clashes served as a limited but stabilising confidence-building mechanism rather than a tool of conflict resolution. Mandated to observe, verify, and report on ceasefire implementation under the

authority of the Extraordinary General Border Committee, the AOT operated with the consent of both governments and within strict constraints on movement, mandate, and enforcement. Its narrow scope—separate teams in each country, no cross-border access, and no authority to adjudicate violations—reflected ASEAN’s emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, enabling monitoring without altering the underlying political dynamics. While the AOT helped reduce risks of miscalculation and escalation by providing a structured channel for verification and communication, its design also underscored the limits of regional mechanisms in addressing the deeper drivers of the conflict. In this sense, the AOT functioned primarily as a holding instrument, sustaining the ceasefire long enough for diplomatic engagement and economic normalisation to resume, rather than as a pathway toward durable conflict resolution.

Limits of ASEAN

ASEAN’s response is ultimately constrained by consensus politics and entrenched sovereignty sensitivities. Thailand resists monitoring arrangements perceived as intrusive, while Cambodia seeks stronger ASEAN involvement to internationalise the dispute; these opposing positions effectively cap what the organisation can do. As a result, ASEAN’s role remains confined to facilitation and episodic crisis management, rather than sustained conflict prevention or resolution. In the absence of consensus, ASEAN lacks both the authority and instruments to address the structural drivers of escalation. Even so, limited mechanisms—such as observer teams and carefully calibrated statements—retain residual value by buying time, reducing misperceptions, and keeping dialogue alive when bilateral channels are under strain.

4. Strategic Openings

Amid constraints, several opportunities for de-escalation and cooperation remain viable. The challenge is not to invent new institutions but to activate and coordinate those that already exist, while insulating them from nationalist pressures and military monopolization.

First, ASEAN mechanisms must be leveraged more fully. Fast-tracking the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) would provide credible monitoring and help reduce blame games. Humanitarian demining missions under ASEAN auspices could generate tangible benefits for border communities while reinforcing regional ownership of peacebuilding.

Second, the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) should be revitalized. Regular meetings, publicized achievements, and technical milestones—such as verification of boundary pillars and LiDAR technique—would showcase constructive progress. Depoliticizing demarcation into a technical process builds confidence and reassures both publics that cooperation is possible without sacrificing sovereignty.

Third, selective engagement with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) could demonstrate goodwill. While Thailand rejects compulsory jurisdiction, submitting technical clarifications or non-binding opinions would signal a commitment to legal frameworks without conceding sovereignty claims outright.

Fourth, Ottawa Convention cooperation offers a humanitarian entry point. Expanding CMAC–TMAC joint clearance operations under Article 8 provisions would protect civilians, rebuild trust, and prevent further landmine casualties. By framing this cooperation as humanitarian rather than territorial, both governments can demonstrate compliance with international norms while delivering immediate dividends to affected communities.

Fifth, civil–military alignment is critical. Defense diplomacy through the General Border Committee and Regional Border Committees has proven indispensable for de-escalation, but risks remain when generals dominate without civilian oversight. Ensuring that defense diplomacy complements, rather than overshadows, civilian ministries would rebalance negotiation strategies and expand space for compromise.

Finally, external arms dynamics highlight the need for greater transparency. Allegations of Chinese weapons shipments to Cambodia in June 2025—later disputed by Thai intelligence assessments—demonstrated how even unverified reports of external militarization can influence the conflict’s intensity and duration. Establishing an arms-transfer notification or transparency mechanism, possibly under ASEAN’s observer framework, would help deter covert buildups, reduce misperceptions, and strengthen mutual confidence.

Taken together, these openings suggest that the real opportunity lies in activating and coordinating existing frameworks, rather than building new ones from scratch. If consistently applied, depoliticized, and buffered from nationalist exploitation, these mechanisms could gradually shift the Thai–Cambodian border from a recurring flashpoint of confrontation into a testing ground for sustainable peace and cooperative security in Southeast Asia.

IV Economic and Development Linkages

Although Thai–Cambodian relations are often framed through the prism of border disputes, the deeper reality is one of dense socio-economic interdependence. Trade, investment, labor mobility, tourism, and cultural exchange create a fabric of connectivity that neither side can afford to unravel. These linkages, if effectively institutionalized, can be transformed from vulnerabilities into instruments of peace.

Building Institutional Bridges: The 2024 MoUs

During Prime Minister Hun Manet’s official visit to Bangkok in February 2024, the two governments signed five memorandums of understanding (MoUs) covering:

- Disaster risk reduction and emergency response (Thailand’s Interior Ministry and Cambodia’s disaster management committee).

- Academic, scientific, and technological cooperation (higher education and innovation ministries).
- Transit of goods (customs authorities).
- Trade and investment promotion (EXIM Bank of Thailand and Cambodian Chamber of Commerce).
- Coordination and cooperation (Thailand's Board of Trade and Cambodia's Chamber of Commerce).

These agreements expanded cooperation beyond security, embedding it in resilience, knowledge, and commerce. They created bridges not only between governments but also between businesses, universities, and professional communities. By diversifying connections, the 2024 MoUs generated constituencies for peace—actors who directly benefit from cooperation and lose from confrontation.

Elevating Strategic Partnership: The 2025 MoUs

In April 2025, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's visit to Phnom Penh deepened this trajectory. The two sides addressed several issues, including law enforcement agencies in fighting online scams, and committed to coordinate more closely in evidence sharing and preventing mobile and internet signals from being used by scam operations, as well as signed an additional seven pacts to forge cooperation in various sectors, as follows;

- Agreement on the Management, Maintenance, and Usage of the Thailand - Cambodia Friendship Bridge (Ban Nong Ian - Stung Bot)
- Memorandum of Understanding on Transboundary Environmental Pollution Cooperation
- Exchange of Notes on Revision of Agreement for the Establishment of the Cambodian - Thai Skill Development Center
- Memorandum of Understanding on Labor Cooperation
- Agreement on the Employment of Workers
- Record of Discussion for the Technical Assistance on the Detailed Design for the Improvement of the National Road No.57 (Section of Battambang-Prom International Border Checkpoint) Project
- Agreement on the Construction of the New Border Bridge at National Border Check Point Ban Pak Kard, Pong Nam Ron District, Chanthaburi Province

Together, the 2024 and 2025 MoUs created a twelve-agreement architecture systematically embedding cooperation into multiple layers of governance and society. They represent more than diplomatic rituals: they are structural commitments that make conflict increasingly costly and peace materially rewarding.

Interdependence as Leverage for Peace

The cumulative effect of these agreements is fourfold:

- Raising the cost of conflict: Border closures threaten not only trade but also customs reforms, tourism circuits, and energy projects tied to MoUs.
- Creating constituencies for peace: Business associations, chambers of commerce, universities, and migrant worker networks become stakeholders pressing for dialogue.
- Embedding diplomacy in daily life: Cooperation in health, education, and disaster management moves diplomacy beyond elites into communities.
- Regional synergies: Linking MoUs with ASEAN, ACMECS, GMS, and RCEP frameworks attracts external support and multilateral legitimacy.

Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities:

- Labor cooperation stabilizes both economies by securing remittance flows.
- Joint tourism packages can reframe contested temples as shared heritage.
- Energy interconnections embody “shared resources for shared prosperity.”
- Disaster and health cooperation deliver visible humanitarian dividends.

Challenges:

- Implementation gaps risk leaving MoUs as paper promises.
- Renewed clashes can derail projects overnight.
- Nationalist narratives in both countries frame cooperation as “selling sovereignty.”
- Economic asymmetry may deepen Cambodian dependency unless carefully managed.

Strategic Pathways

To turn linkages into leverage:

- Institutionalize monitoring: Create a joint body to track MoU implementation and resolve disputes.
- Tie projects to peace benchmarks: Expand trade, tourism, or energy cooperation in parallel with compliance with the ceasefire and GBC agreements.
- Empower border communities: Ensure special economic zones and infrastructure benefit locals, not just elites, to prevent resentment.
- Anchor in regional frameworks: Bring in ASEAN, ACMECS, and GMS to strengthen accountability and attract funding.
- Strategic communication: Publicize peace dividends to counter nationalist narratives and demonstrate that cooperation safeguards sovereignty.

The twelve MoUs signed in 2024 and 2025 show that Thailand and Cambodia already share a dense economic and social fabric that reaches far beyond state-to-state relations. Properly implemented, these linkages can raise the cost of conflict, create powerful constituencies for stability, and integrate diplomacy into everyday life. Development is not merely a reward for peace—it is the mechanism through which sustainable peace can be built.

V. Information and Narrative Management

The Thai–Cambodian border conflict is fought not only with weapons and diplomacy but also with words. Disinformation, fake news, and emotionally charged rhetoric have repeatedly aggravated tensions and undermined peacebuilding. Managing narratives is thus essential. Left unchecked, inflammatory media and distorted histories can derail ceasefire agreements, weaken ASEAN’s credibility, and harden nationalist attitudes on both sides.

Two dimensions are central: (1) professional media cooperation to limit disinformation and hate speech, and (2) academic and think tank engagement to reframe narratives more constructively.

1. Media Cooperation

The Disinformation Challenge

During the 2025 clashes, online rumors about troop movements, casualty figures, and recycled videos spread rapidly, creating panic. Thailand’s Ministry of Digital Economy and Society reported that in one week in August, eight of the ten most viral fake news stories concerned the border conflict.¹³ Such torrents of misinformation erode trust in ceasefire mechanisms: soldiers who believe they are demonized, or civilians who believe the other side is cheating, are less likely to support peace.

Media Associations Take Action

Recognizing the risks, Thai professional bodies—including the Thai Journalists Association and National Press Council—issued a joint statement on July 24, 2025. They urged fact-based reporting, avoidance of hate speech, responsible image use, and respect for humanitarian principles. Importantly, they also suspended cooperation with Cambodia’s Club of Journalists, signaling that accountability must extend across borders.

This was significant in two ways. First, it showed that journalists—not just governments—were willing to self-regulate in conflict-sensitive ways. Second, it raised the possibility of building professional peer pressure into a cross-border accountability system.

Opportunities Ahead

Moving forward, media cooperation could be institutionalized through:

- Joint fact-checking platforms producing bilingual reports.
- Cross-border journalist exchanges to improve accuracy and reduce reliance on rumor.

¹³ “Fake news on Thai-Cambodian border dominates list of false reports: DES” The Nation August 17, 2025 [<https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40054142>]

- Independent observatories monitoring disinformation trends and issuing real-time corrections.
- Shared ethical codes formally adopted by both Thai and Cambodian press councils.
- Integration with ASEAN observers so that verified information accompanies ceasefire monitoring.

Such initiatives would not eliminate disinformation, but they could reduce its impact and create professional networks that favor transparency over sensationalism.

2. Academic and Think Tank Cooperation

Current Role

Thai and Cambodian scholars already cooperate through joint research, workshops, and regional conferences. These initiatives provide valuable expertise on border security, economic development, and regional integration.

The Gap

However, most of this cooperation remains technical rather than narrative. While scholars produce quality studies, their outputs rarely shape public debate. Nationalist myths persist, historical claims go unchallenged, and misinformation dominates the media ecosystem.

Expanding the Mandate

To address this, academic and research networks could:

- Produce counter-narrative content—accessible bilingual briefs, explainer articles, or public booklets clarifying history, law, and demarcation.
- Partner with journalists to inject evidence-based analysis into daily reporting.
- Host “border narrative dialogues” involving historians, anthropologists, and local voices to highlight shared heritage.
- Promote youth media literacy by integrating fact-checking and digital literacy into educational programs.
- Monitor discourse trends on nationalism and hate speech, publishing regular reports to inform policymakers, ASEAN, and civil society.

By broadening their mandate, academic networks can move from background experts to active participants in narrative management.

3. Toward an Integrated Approach

Governments

- Include narrative management in ceasefire agreements, committing both sides to restraint in official rhetoric.
- Facilitate safe journalist access to border zones to improve reporting accuracy.

Media Associations

- Institutionalize cross-border fact-checking desks.
- Convene annual journalist summits to update ethical codes.
- Expand community media in border provinces to counter nationalist central narratives.

Academic and Think Tank Networks

- Produce bilingual counter-narrative content for wider public consumption.
- Partner with media councils to bridge research and journalism.
- Establish narrative monitoring units to track misinformation patterns.

ASEAN and International Partners

- Provide funding for journalist–academic collaborations.
- Support UNESCO and regional institutes in promoting shared heritage studies.
- Train journalists and researchers in conflict-sensitive reporting and narrative reframing.

The 2025 conflict demonstrated the destructive power of unchecked narratives. Media associations have begun to set professional standards, but cross-border cooperation remains fragile. Academic networks provide expertise but seldom engage in shaping public discourse. The real opportunity lies in linking the two: combining journalistic credibility with scholarly evidence and embedding both within regional monitoring frameworks. If Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN can strengthen these connections, the information space could shift from fueling hostility to sustaining peace.

VI. Scenarios for the Future

The post-ceasefire trajectory of Thai–Cambodian relations will depend less on unresolved territorial claims than on whether existing policy instruments are activated coherently and sustained over time. The scenarios below correspond to three distinct patterns of policy implementation: effective coordination, partial execution, and policy failure.

Scenario 1: Cooperative Stability through Policy Convergence

In the best scenario, the ceasefire is consolidated through consistent activation of agreed mechanisms, in line with policy recommendations calling for restraint, transparency, and economic normalization. The General Border Committee (GBC) and Regional Border Committees (RBCs) meet on a regular schedule and function as early-warning and incident-management platforms rather than crisis forums. The Joint Boundary Commission

(JBC) resumes technical work—pillar verification, mapping, and documentation—without politicisation or artificial deadlines.

Economic policy plays a stabilising role. Border crossings reopen fully and predictably, restoring trade and labour mobility as recommended. Targeted facilitation measures—customs coordination, labour registration, and transport normalization—allow border economies to recover, reinforcing the material incentives for restraint. Demining and humanitarian access progress in parallel, visibly linking security cooperation to livelihood recovery.

Information management aligns with policy guidance on narrative restraint. Media self-regulation, cross-border journalist exchanges, and academic outreach reduce the salience of nationalist framing. ASEAN's role is institutionalised through the continued operation of the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) within its agreed mandate, providing reassurance and transparency without challenging sovereignty. In this scenario, policy coherence transforms interdependence from a liability into a stabilising asset.

Scenario 2: Managed Stalemate under Partial Policy Implementation

The most plausible scenario emerges when policy recommendations are adopted selectively or inconsistently. The ceasefire holds, but mechanisms function defensively rather than proactively. GBC and RBC meetings take place but are convened mainly in response to incidents. The JBC continues to exist but advances incrementally, constrained by political caution.

Economic measures are uneven. Some border crossings reopen, but regulatory uncertainty, labour bottlenecks, and investor hesitation prevent a full rebound. Special Economic Zones and cross-border infrastructure projects remain stalled, limiting the peace dividend envisioned in policy proposals. Demining proceeds slowly, leaving large areas economically unusable.

Narrative management remains fragile. While overt incitement is avoided, nationalist discourse resurfaces periodically, especially during domestic political cycles. ASEAN's involvement remains bounded: the AOT continues to observe and report, but without sufficient political backing to influence behaviour beyond documentation.

This scenario reflects a policy gap rather than outright failure: enough implementation to avoid escalation, but insufficient commitment to shift the relationship toward durable cooperation.

Scenario 3: Policy Breakdown and Renewed Escalation

The worst-case scenario results from the abandonment or active reversal of recommended policy measures. Incident-management mechanisms are sidelined, civilian oversight weakens, and military postures harden. Minor clashes escalate rapidly in the absence of trusted communication channels.

Economic policy becomes securitised. Border closures are prolonged or reimposed, labour mobility is restricted, and trade collapses, re-creating the conditions of severe monthly economic

loss. Investor confidence deteriorates sharply, and border provinces bear the brunt of economic contraction.

The information environment becomes a vector of escalation rather than restraint. Media outlets amplify nationalist narratives, disinformation spreads unchecked, and academic and civil-society voices are marginalised. External arms acquisitions intensify, reinforcing mutual threat perceptions and accelerating an arms spiral.

ASEAN is effectively paralysed. Without consensus, the AOT's mandate cannot be expanded, and regional diplomacy is reduced to statements and shuttle mediation. External actors intervene selectively, further fragmenting regional autonomy. In this scenario, the failure to implement preventive policies converts a manageable dispute into a recurrent security and economic crisis.

Strategic Implication

Taken together, these scenarios reinforce a core conclusion of the policy recommendations section: the outcome is not structurally predetermined. The same institutional landscape can yield stability, stagnation, or escalation depending on whether policy tools are applied systematically, partially, or not at all. Sustainable peace will depend on sustained political commitment to civilian diplomacy, economic normalization, and narrative restraint—not on the ceasefire alone.

VII. Policy Recommendations

Preventing the worst case and moving toward the best case requires differentiated strategies for Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN. Each has unique responsibilities and leverage points.

For Thailand

1. Commit to Peaceful Settlement Mechanisms

- Publicly reaffirm the 2000, 2001 MoUs and JBC process, resisting calls to revoke them.
- While rejecting ICJ jurisdiction, consider selective engagements such as technical clarifications or advisory submissions to demonstrate good faith.

2. Strengthen Civilian Oversight of Defense Diplomacy

- Ensure that GBC and RBC negotiations include meaningful participation from foreign and civilian ministries.
- Prevent the military from monopolizing border narratives by creating a joint civil–military communication strategy.

3. Leverage Economic Interdependence

- Accelerate reopening of border checkpoints, trade corridors, and SEZ development tied explicitly to ceasefire compliance.
- Protect Cambodian migrant workers' rights in Thailand, turning labor cooperation into a stabilizing factor.

4. Support Narrative Management

- Provide resources for journalist fact-checking desks and cross-border reporting exchanges.
- Encourage universities and think tanks to produce bilingual counter-narrative materials accessible to the public.

For Cambodia

1. Balance Legal and Diplomatic Tools

- Use ICJ petitions and Ottawa Convention mechanisms as leverage, but pair them with bilateral engagement to avoid alienating Thailand.
- Frame legal strategies as tools for accountability, not as provocations.

2. Strengthen Border Governance

- Empower provincial governors and local administrations to coordinate with Thai counterparts on trade, health, and migration.
- Prioritize demining and infrastructure in border provinces to show tangible peace dividends.

3. Anchor Cooperation in National Interest

- Present joint projects with Thailand not as dependency but as sovereignty-enhancing development.
- Encourage Cambodian media associations to align with Thai counterparts on ethical codes and fact-checking.

4. Invest in Narrative and Heritage Management

- Support scholars, cultural institutions, and youth groups in producing narratives of shared heritage.
- Promote campaigns that highlight economic and cultural interdependence, reducing the dominance of hostile nationalism.

For ASEAN

1. Institutionalize the Observer Mechanism

- Establish the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) as a permanent border-monitoring body with clear terms of reference.
- Use the AOT as a precedent for other regional disputes, strengthening ASEAN's credibility as a security actor.

2. Facilitate Joint Development Projects

- Channel ASEAN funds, ACMECS, and GMS frameworks into Thai–Cambodian infrastructure, demining, and energy cooperation.

3. Support Narrative and Information Management

- Sponsor cross-border journalist exchanges and regional fact-checking hubs.
- Facilitate ASEAN academic networks to study border disputes and produce comparative case studies.
- Work with UNESCO to promote heritage as a shared regional asset rather than a contested symbol.

4. Ensure Inclusive Diplomacy

- Create space for civil society, media, and think tanks in ASEAN dialogues, preventing governments and militaries from monopolizing the process.

Sustainable peace on the Thai–Cambodian border requires simultaneous progress in three areas: credible diplomatic frameworks, resilient economic interdependence, and responsible narrative management. For Thailand, this means reining in military dominance and embracing economic–civilian diplomacy. For Cambodia, it means balancing legal strategies with cooperative engagement and showing citizens tangible benefits of peace. For ASEAN, it means institutionalizing observer mechanisms and anchoring cooperation in broader regional frameworks.

The tools already exist; what is needed is the consistent political will to use them. If Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN can act with courage and coordination, the border can shift from a symbol of conflict into a model of cooperative security for Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The Thai–Cambodian border conflict is not merely an anachronism inherited from colonial cartography or unresolved temple disputes. Those historical legacies created the ambiguities that continue to frame contested zones, but they do not, on their own, explain the intensity or timing of the 2025 clashes. The confrontation was driven above all by contemporary political dynamics: Thailand's unresolved civil–military imbalance, Cambodia's patrimonial political economy, and

the destabilising effects of global geopolitics that altered local threat perceptions and escalatory thresholds.

The crisis laid bare the profound human, economic, and social costs of escalation, while underscoring the fragility of peace when civilian diplomacy is overshadowed by military dominance, nationalist mobilisation, and covert militarisation. Civilians were displaced in the hundreds of thousands, cross-border trade collapsed, labour mobility was disrupted, and disinformation poisoned public discourse on both sides of the border. Although the skirmishes themselves lasted only days and weeks, their repercussions—economic dislocation, social mistrust, and hardened narratives—will endure far longer, potentially shaping bilateral relations for years or even decades.

Yet pathways toward resolution remain open. Bilateral mechanisms such as the General Border Committee (GBC), Regional Border Committees (RBCs), and the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) retain the capacity to manage disputes and prevent escalation, provided they are depoliticised, consistently applied, and insulated from domestic nationalist pressures. International instruments—the International Court of Justice and the Ottawa Convention on landmines—offer legal and humanitarian avenues to enhance credibility and restraint when used selectively and strategically, rather than as tools of political signalling.

At the regional level, ASEAN has begun—albeit cautiously—to evolve from a passive facilitator into a more engaged participant. The agreement on the Terms of Reference of the ASEAN Observer Team marked a modest but meaningful step toward institutionalised monitoring. While its mandate remains limited, the precedent matters: it signals an emerging recognition that regional stability requires more than ad hoc diplomacy, and that credible observation can help reduce misperceptions and manage risk in highly sensitive border environments.

Economic and development linkages provide another source of leverage. The twelve memoranda of understanding signed between 2024 and 2025 on trade, labour, energy, tourism, public health, and infrastructure development illustrate the depth of interdependence between the two societies. If implemented with political commitment, these agreements could convert contested borders from sites of confrontation into corridors of shared prosperity, anchoring peace in material incentives and everyday livelihoods rather than abstract diplomacy alone.

Information and narrative management remains the weakest and most volatile link. In 2025, disinformation campaigns and nationalist rhetoric repeatedly undermined diplomatic efforts and narrowed political space for compromise. Yet early initiatives—ethical guidelines issued by Thai media associations, joint academic research, and cross-border professional dialogue—demonstrate that alternative narratives are possible. If embedded within ASEAN-supported frameworks, such efforts could gradually shift public discourse away from zero-sum nationalism toward a recognition of mutual vulnerability and shared interest.

Looking ahead, three scenarios define the stakes: a best case of cooperative coexistence, a stalemate of fragile peace, and a worst case of renewed confrontation. The worst case would not simply reflect domestic political failure, but also the amplification of violence through continued external arms supplies and the erosion of regional restraint. Which trajectory prevails will depend on choices made now—whether civilian leaders in Bangkok can reassert authority over border policy, whether Phnom Penh balances legal leverage with pragmatic diplomacy, and whether ASEAN is willing to move beyond symbolic facilitation toward credible monitoring and greater transparency in security dynamics.

Ultimately, the Thai–Cambodian conflict is not frozen history but a mirror of contemporary Southeast Asian politics—where sovereignty anxieties collide with deepening interdependence, where narratives shape realities as much as treaties, and where external militarisation can magnify local disputes into regional risks. The tools for peace already exist: institutional frameworks, socio-economic linkages, professionalised information networks, and mechanisms for arms transparency. The decisive question is whether political leaders and societies will use them with consistency, restraint, and courage. If they do, the border could evolve from a perennial flashpoint into a model of cooperative security and shared development for the region.

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