Path toward Peaceful Coexistence between Thailand and Cambodia: A Practical Strategy for Normalization*

Policy Recommendation Paper

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Executive Summary

The armed conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia in 2025 damaged bilateral relations, disputed border economies, and inflicted severe losses on soldiers, civilians, and border communities. Ceasefire arrangements supported by ASEAN, China, and the United States reduced immediate hostilities but have yet to establish peaceful coexistence. Existing bilateral and international mechanisms provide avenues for cooperation and dispute settlement. The central obstacle is the limited political willingness to use them consistently and authorize adjustments that would restore civilian life while negotiations continue.

The impasse reflects several connected problems. Military authority over border governance allows operational assessments to shape decisions concerning civilian movement, land access, and diplomatic engagement. Unilateral physical and administrative changes in contested areas can entrench control and raise the political costs of accommodation. Nationalist mobilization, institutional prestige and leadership credibility can reward firmness, while adjusting the approach is politically dangerous. These incentives differ between the two countries and require separate assessments.

Civilian leadership also bears responsibility. Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's statement on October 31, 2026 linked continued border closure to unsolved territorial disputes, transnational crimes, and security concerns, demonstrating that restrictions are endorsed at the political level, aligning with military-dominant border governance. Linking several issues risks making normalization dependent on their collective resolution. Meanwhile, economic losses do not automatically generate effective pressure for reopening. The ISP border survey indicates that hardship coexists with security concerns, mistrust, and differing local preferences. National economic indicators cannot establish whether affected communities have recovered or whether closure produces benefits exceeding its costs.

Thailand and Cambodia employ different approaches to the disputes. Bangkok resorts to military might, territorial control, and border restrictions, while Phnom Penh prefers international mechanisms and international law, both profess respect for international law and seek external support. They do not need to adopt identical strategies to cooperate. Normalization, peaceful coexistence, and boundary settlement require connected but distinct decisions. Diplomatic restoration, civilian recovery, and carefully managed border reopening can proceed while territorial claims remain unresolved. Five practical recommendations follow.

1. Establish political direction through quiet diplomacy. Each government should designate a trusted envoy with direct access to its leadership and accepted by the other side. Serving or retired military officers with diplomatic judgment could help secure armed forces' cooperation, given their central role in the conflicts. The envoys must report directly to civilian leadership and operate under explicit government mandates. Their task is to explore policy adjustments, identify reciprocal measures, and obtain authorization for implementation. In Thailand, a prime minister-led interagency committee should coordinate decisions, resolve institutional objections, and assign responsibilities. Cambodia should designate an equivalent arrangement suited to its institutions.

2. Prevent renewed armed conflict and unilateral changes in contested areas. The civilian government should instruct defense ministries to suspend unilateral activities altering the physical conditions or administrative use of contested areas. The General Border Committee (GBC) and Regional Border Committee (RBC) should implement practices of restraint, hotlines, and incident response procedures. Military leaders should avoid escalatory rhetoric and unverified public allegations. Temporary security arrangements must preserve legal claims. ASEAN observation can support verification where access and reporting arrangements permit, but must not become a publicity exercise or an instrument for validating competing accusations.

3. Restore civilian life and undertake phased border reopening. Recovery must reflect differing local conditions. Thai communities require attention to outstanding repairs, lost incomes and restricted access; displaced Cambodian communities require assistance and conditions supporting safe, voluntary and dignified return. Humanitarian access and essential healthcare should be provided according to need, without implying territorial recognition. Thai public and private healthcare providers should communicate clearly about humanitarian services. Phased reopening should begin with paired crossings in lower-tension areas, with announced operating hours, eligible movements, safeguards, and review criteria developed through local consultation.

4. Restore diplomatic relations and protect negotiations from political disruption. Effective senior diplomatic representation is necessary for routine communication, consular assistance, scam victim rescue, and regional cooperation. Governments should maintain scheduled Joint Boundary Commission (JBC), GBC and RBC meetings, with the JBC reconvened within three months of adopting the strategy. Safety and mine-clearance requirements for surveys should be addressed operationally. Land-boundary negotiation, maritime conciliation and law enforcement cooperation should continue through their respective channels, without disagreement in one field immobilizing the others.

5. Build local support and connect Track II proposals to official decisions. Track II dialogues and community consultations serve distinct purposes. Expert forums should submit feasible proposals through designated official channels and receive substantive responses. Local dialogue through public hearings or other means should identify need, acceptable safeguards, and unresolved grievances. The Prime Minister's Office should serve as Thailand's focal point because implementation involves multiple agencies and private sectors. Participation should extend beyond like-minded experts, and progress should be measured through decisions and community interests.

Implementation periods should run from the adoption of this strategic proposal:

Within three months:

- Appoint 'trusted' envoys and civilian coordinators
- Establish interagency oversight
- Initial consultations
- Activate hotlines
- Convene the JBC; schedule GBC and continue regular RBC meetings
- Assess civilian needs
- Prepare reopening pilots for border crossing and diplomatic restoration

Three to six months:

- Implement approved restraint and reopening arrangement
- Return of senior diplomatic representatives
- Sustain recovery assistance
- Maintain negotiation
- Assess progress and report to respective governments

Six to twelve months:

- Evaluate and expand successful arrangements
- Address excluded communities
- Review agency performance and resources

- Sustain official response to Track II and local proposals

After twelve months:

- Embed effective procedures in routine bilateral relations and maintain negotiations toward accepted boundary outcomes

Every measure should identify its authorizing institution, implementing agencies, resources, verification arrangement, and expected output. Setbacks, if any, should trigger rapid communication, factual assessment, and proportionate responses, preserving humanitarian access and unaffected cooperation. External partners can assist, but domestic leadership must authorize and sustain the decisions required for peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

Two rounds of armed conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2025 severely damaged bilateral relations, disrupted trade, supply chains, and livelihoods, and inflicted heavy losses on soldiers, civilians, and border communities. Their consequences raised concerns about regional stability and ASEAN's credibility in managing conflict among its members.

Ceasefire agreements reached in October and December 2025, with support from ASEAN, the United States, and China, have yet to establish peaceful coexistence. Military dominance over border governance, nationalist mobilization, and domestic political interests continue to obstruct diplomatic progress.

The two governments have placed different emphasis on their strategies. Thailand has relied on military superiority, territorial control, and border restrictions while favoring bilateral negotiation. Cambodia has sought to offset that asymmetry through international diplomacy and legal mechanisms while continuing to call for bilateral talks to settle land boundary disputes. Both sides, however, invoke international law, seek external support, and profess commitment to peaceful settlement. The shared positions provide a basis for cooperation, even without agreement on an overall strategy.

The opportunity is to translate those positions into practical commitments. Diplomatic restoration, civilian assistance, and phased border reopening are not necessary to wait for a comprehensive territorial settlement. Bilateral negotiation and international procedures can proceed concurrently, with arrangements that preserve legal claims while restoring communication and cooperation.

This paper assesses the obstacles to strategic adjustment and proposes five practical recommendations, supported by a phased action plan. It prioritizes quiet diplomacy, restraint in contested areas, civilian recovery, and functioning diplomatic mechanisms. It also proposes ways to connect Track II recommendations with official decision-

making and involve border communities through local dialogue and consultation. Clear responsibilities, review dates, and procedures for managing setbacks can translate these measures into a sustainable peace process.

1 Strategic assessment: What prevents peaceful coexistence?

Thailand and Cambodia face a political impasse in which the cessation of fighting has preserved confrontation rather than opened a sustainable process of normalization. Territorial disputes remain unresolved, diplomatic communication is limited, and border communities continue to bear the consequences of disrupted movement and economic exchange. The immediate strategic challenge is to prevent these conditions from becoming accepted features of the relationship. This requires examining who determines policy, why confrontation remains politically useful, and how cooperation can proceed while boundary negotiations continue.

1.1 Military dominance and consolidation on the ground.

The predominance of military authority over Thai border governance extends beyond troop deployment and battlefield operations. It encompasses decisions on access and movement, infrastructure development, symbolic activities, and increasing the organization of civilian communities. Upon his resumption of the position in September 2025, Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul granted the military autonomy to govern the areas of the Thailand-Cambodia border, with special authority for commanders on the ground to exercise martial law. The government also links the reopening of the crossing and the commencement of dialogue to the removal of threats identified on the Cambodian side.[1]

Construction and development activities illustrate how this authority operates on the ground. Thai media reported in August 2026 that a concrete access road to Ta Kwai temple has been completed, a connecting route to Hill 350 has been improved, and a 147-step steel staircase has been constructed. The Fine Art Department was preparing a restoration programme for the sandstone ruin temple. Meanwhile, the Second Army Region and local authorities had jointly opened a trial tourism route incorporating the temple, Hill 350, a Buddha image, and memorials to fallen soldiers.[2] These activities connect military control with civilian administration, heritage management and public commemoration.

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1 Government Public Relations Department, "Military Authorized to Make Decisions on Thai-Cambodian Border Tensions," September 26, 2025, [https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/3243/iid/426934.]

2 Thai PBS, "ผอ. JIC ตรวจแนวรบชายแดน 'ปราสาทตาควาย-เนิน 350'" [JIC Director Inspects the Ta Kwai Temple–Hill 350 Frontline], August 20, 2026, https://www.thaipbs.th/news/content/509675; Surin Provincial Public Relations Office, "ทภ. 2 และจังหวัดสุรินทร์ ทดลองเปิดเส้นทางท่องเที่ยว 'ปราสาทตาควาย–เนิน 350' ชวนสัมผัสประวัติศาสตร์ ธรรมชาติ และวีรกรรมผู้กล้าแห่งแผ่นดินไทย" [Second Army Area and Surin Province Launch a Trial Ta Kwai Temple–Hill 350 Tourism Route], June 6, 2026, [https://surin.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/171/iid/509888.]

Religious installations add a symbolic dimension. In January 2026, local TV reported that monks, soldiers, and residents participated in road construction and preparations for a Buddha statue at Phu Makuea (known in Khmer as Phnom Trap), describing the planned statue as a symbol of Thai sovereignty as well as a source of military morale. In September, Cambodia protested the installation of another Buddha statue at Phnom Beng in Anglong Veng, between boundary pillars 2 and 3, alleging that Thai forces and monks had created it on Cambodian territory.[3] The territorial allegation requires attribution, but the incident demonstrates how religious activities can become part of competing claims over the border.

The proposed Ban Mankong Border programme (Border Village Security Project) extends civilian-military cooperation into housing and community development. Announced on September 19, 2026, the five-year plan envisaged pilots in 21 communities across five provinces—Ubon Ratchathani, Si Sa Ket, Surin, Buriram and Sa Kaeo- - in 2027. It proposed using land administered by security agencies, with the Community Organization Development Institute helping with planning and military units providing labour for housing and infrastructure. Its broader ambition covers 752 communities in 26 border provinces across the country. The government still needed to finalize detailed land arrangements, budgets, and pilot locations before submitting the plan to the cabinet.[4] The announcement does not establish that housing would be built in disputed territory; it does, however, show how civilian settlement and welfare are being incorporated into a security-led approach to border development.

These activities differ in purpose and territorial circumstances and should not be treated as legally equivalent. Housing assistance and infrastructure improvements can meet legitimate civilian needs. The strategic concerns arise when military authorities determine their locations, access, and political meaning, particularly in contested areas. Roads, monuments, and civilian activities can normalize existing control and draw additional institutions and public expectation into its preservation.[5]

Military predominance becomes an obstacle to peaceful coexistence when civilian diplomacy is subordinated to retaining those advantages. A ceasefire that temporarily fixes troops' positions cannot provide an accepted boundary settlement. When existing control is presented as proof of sovereignty and reinforced through permanent facilities and

3 Chhorn Norn. "Cambodia protests Thai installation of Buddha statue in Anlong Veng" Phnom Penh Post September 22, 2026 [https://phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-protests-thai-installation-of-buddha-statue-in-anlong-veng/]

4 Royal Thai Government, "รัฐบาลดันโครงการ 'บ้านมั่นคงชายแดน' ดีเดย์ปี 70 นำร่อง 5 จังหวัด ปรับที่ดินความมั่นคงสร้างบ้าน-เยียวยาทหารบาดเจ็บครบวงจร" [Government Advances Border Housing Programme with Five-Province Pilots in 2027], September 19, 2026, [https://www.thaigov.go.th/th/news/169060] See also Daily News, "รัฐบาลดันโครงการ 'บ้านมั่นคงชายแดน' นำร่อง 5 จังหวัด เยียวยาทหารบาดเจ็บ," September 19, 2026,[https://www.dailynews.co.th/news/6202361/.]

5 สุภลักษณ์ กาญจนขุนดี เสนาภิวัตรชายแดนไทย-กัมพูชา [Supalak Ganjanakhundee. "Militarization of Thailand-Cambodia Border] The 101 World November 2, 2026. [https://www.the101.world/militarization-of-thailand-cambodia-border/]

public commemoration, subsequent adjustment risks being portrayed as surrender. Demilitarization therefore requires restoring civilian responsibility for border policy, ensuring that development does not prejudice negotiation, and establishing practical arrangements to prevent renewed confrontation.

1.2 Political incentives and the unequal costs of conflict.

Nationalism constrains both governments, but their incentive and circumstances differ. Thailand's military advantages and control of contested locations can reduce the perceived urgency of negotiation.[6] Cambodian leaders face pressure to challenge those conditions while avoiding further military setbacks. Public commitments to defend sovereignty are politically hazardous, even when leaders recognize the benefits of improved relations.[7]

These constraints extend beyond electoral competition. Professor Surachart Bamrungsuk of Chulalongkorn University challenged the assumption that the ruling Bhumjaithai Party's electoral victory was driven by anti-Cambodian nationalist sentiment alone, arguing that powerful local political networks are the decisive factors. He nevertheless suggested that nationalist sentiment continues to sustain the government politically, while confrontational diplomatic rhetoric appeals to domestic supporters without advancing conflict resolution.[8] His assessment points to a distinction between the factors that secure electoral victory and those that subsequently sustain a hardline foreign policy. Such policy may protect institutional prestige, reinforce government alliances, or divert attention from domestic controversies, although these motivations require evidence in each instance. The strategic question is whether decision-makers regard continued confrontation as politically more advantageous than the adjustments needed for peaceful coexistence.[9]

Personalized leadership presents an additional obstacle to policy adjustment. When relations between political leaders deteriorate, disagreement can become associated with personal credibility, loyalty, and national honor.[10] This raises the domestic cost of compromise and makes institutional channels more important. The strategic task is to prevent political estrangement from determining the entire bilateral relationship.

For Cambodia, defending its territorial claims must be considered alongside immediate needs; preventing renewed armed conflict enables

6 "Thai Army urges Cambodia to de-escalate and clear mines before JBC talks" The Nation, February 9, 2026 [https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/asean/40062322?utm_source=chatgpt.com]

7 International Crisis Group. 2026. Toward a Thaw in the Cambodia–Thailand Border Conflict. Asia Report No. 359, October 9, 2026, pp.29-31

8 "ศ.สุรชาติ บำรุงสุข กางโจทย์ที่แก้ไม่ได้ ข้ามไม่พ้น รัฐบาลอนุทินต้องผจญปีนี้และปีหน้า" [Surachart Bamrungsuk Outlines Unresolved Challenges Facing the Anutin Government This Year and Next], Matichon Weekly, October 2, 2026, [https://www.matichon.co.th/weekly/vdo/article_913668]

9 International Crisis Group, Toward a Thaw in the Cambodia–Thailand Border Conflict, Asia Report no. 359 (October 9, 2026), pp. 29–30

10 Susannah Patton. "A border skirmish and leaked phone call sees the Thailand-Cambodia dispute surge back to life." Lowy Institute: The Interpreter. June 20, 2025 [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/border-skirmish-leaked-phone-call-sees-thailand-cambodia-dispute-surge-back-life]

displaced persons to return to their places of origin safely and restore access to home, farmland and markets. Strong public statements can reaffirm those claims, but they do not secure the practical outcomes. Cambodian leaders therefore need balancing arrangements that improve conditions for their citizens while preserving their legal position on the boundary.

Thailand faces a different problem due to its complex political structure: military advantage can foster expectations that pressure will eliminate future threats to Cambodia. Yet complete security cannot be achieved through indefinite restrictions or unilateral consolidation alone. Such measures require ongoing enforcement and can generate grievances that undermine their intended purpose. A realistic policy should set achievable objectives: preventing armed incidents, protecting civilians, addressing specific unlawful activities, and sustaining negotiations.

The distribution of costs helps explain why economic damage has not compelled normalization. Residents, displaced families, workers, and small businesses experience losses directly, while national leaders and security institutions may retain political benefit from confrontation. Businesses can sometimes redirect trade, and the government can absorb or redistribute parts of the economic burden. Communities with fewer alternatives remain exposed.[11]

Economic interdependence thus creates potential support for peace without guaranteeing policy adjustment. Those who benefit from renewed exchange need effective channels through which their interests influence decisions. Otherwise, calls for cooperation remain politically easier than organized demands to preserve a hard line. This assessment develops the earlier argument that economic linkages require political commitment if they are to support conflict resolution.

1.3 Diplomatic paralysis and the misuse of preconditions

The availability of bilateral, regional and international mechanisms has not prevented diplomatic paralysis. Their effectiveness depends on authorization, commitment, and willingness to address differences. Repeated declarations of support for dialogue achieved little when the resumption of meetings remains contingent on political conditions without clear benchmarks. Thai officials have reaffirmed their commitment to bilateral negotiation while linking progress to sincerity, mutual trust, the absence of provocations, and a conducive atmosphere of bilateral relations.[12]

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11 Tatporn Tanawarit, Pana Janviroj, and Darmp Sukontasap, Assessing the Socio-Economic and Political Impact of Cross-Border Trade Disruptions: A Study of the Thailand-Cambodia Border Regions (Institute for Strategic Policy, September 2026) [https://www.ispadvisory.com/assessing-the-socio-economic-and-political-impact-of-cross-border-trade-disruptions-a-study-of-the-thailand-cambodia-border-regions/]

12 Jittraporn Senwong, "Sihasak Warns Hun Manet's Maritime Move Could Shut Door on Wider Thai-Cambodian Talks," The Nation, June 3, 2026 [https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40066985.] and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, "Thailand Reaffirms Its Commitment to the Joint Statement between Thailand and Cambodia, and the Importance of Building Trust and Confidence toward a Peaceful and Sustainable Resolution between the Two Countries," October 7, 2026, [https://mfa.go.th/en/content/thai-reaffirms-commitment-joint-statement-en.]

The Thai government's position on border reopening illustrates how linking separate issues including the land boundary, maritime dispute, scam operations, and public safety can prolong the impasse. This approach makes normalization dependent on progress across several fields whose resolutions require different institutional and timeframes. If reopening must wait for their conflict resolution, restrictions on civilian movement and trade could persist indefinitely. The statement also demonstrates that continued closure is a policy endorsed by civilian leadership, aligned with an operational decision imposed by military commanders earlier. Strategic adjustment therefore requires both clear civilian responsibility and change in the government's approach: specific risks should be addressed through appropriate safeguards, while diplomacy, boundary negotiations, and phased reopening proceed in parallel.

The land boundary process illustrates this problem. In its response to Cambodia's latest call for a Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) meeting on October 7, 2026, the Thai Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its commitment to peaceful dialogue but stated that JBC work required a conducive atmosphere of bilateral relations, offering no timetable for convening the commission.[13] Convening the JBC does not alter territorial control or compel either country to abandon its claims. It provides a forum to agree on technical tasks, examine disagreements, and organize subsequent work. Safety arrangements and mine clearance may be necessary for surveys in particular locations, but these operational requirements should be distinguished from the decision to meet. Making the commission's work dependent on a broader improvement in relations risks indefinitely postponing the very decisions needed to achieve that improvement.

The same statement also linked effective JBC work to security from transnational criminal networks. Cooperation against such networks is important and should proceed through appropriate law enforcement channels, but it should not become a prerequisite for boundary negotiations. Making the process of boundary demarcation conditional on crime suppression creates additional grounds for delaying talks and allows disagreement in one field to obstruct progress in another.

Cambodia's initiative to enter compulsory conciliation proceedings to settle the maritime disputes has become an additional source of diplomatic friction. In July 2026, Thailand argued that the move had undermined bilateral trust and effectively closed the door to land boundary discussions.[14] Once the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)'s Compulsory Conciliation proceedings are underway, however, neither government should use them as a reason to suspend bilateral dialogue or obstruct cooperation on other issues. Maritime conciliation, land-boundary negotiations, and diplomatic normalization should proceed concurrently through their respective channels.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, "Thailand Reaffirms Its Commitment to the Joint Statement between Thailand and Cambodia, and the Importance of Building Trust and Confidence toward a Peaceful and Sustainable Resolution between the Two Countries," October 7, 2026, [https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/thai-reaffirms-commitment-joint-statement-en?page=5d5bd3da15e39c306002aaf9&menu=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9b0.]

14 Khaosod English, "Cambodia's UNCLOS Move Closes Door to Land Border Talks, Thai FM Says," July 20, 2026, [https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2026/07/20/cambodias-unclos-move-closes-door-to-land-border-talks-thai-fm-says/.]

Conciliations provide an additional opportunity to seek accommodation and should support continued engagement between the two countries.

1.4 Border communities and the limits of economic argument

The gap between national policy and local economic interests became explicit on October 31, 2026, when Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul reaffirmed his position to maintain border closure, citing unresolved territorial disputes and cross-border criminal and security concerns. He also defended the decision by pointing to improved macroeconomic indicators and asserting public satisfaction with the situation.[15] His remarks suggest the government does not view the economic cost of the closure as sufficient grounds to adjust policy. However, national economic performance cannot show whether border communities have recovered, whether closure produced wider gains, or whether less restrictive arrangements could address specific security risks.

Economic interdependence provides strong reasons to restore cross-border relations, but hardship alone does not guarantee public support for reopening. Supalak Ganjanakhundee's earlier analysis identifies trade, labour mobility and everyday social connections as potential foundations for peace, while emphasizing that nationalist mobilization and disinformation can undermine those relationships. Similarly, Pou Sothirak argues that prolonged closures damage livelihoods and societal trust, making normalization a matter of rebuilding relationships as well as restoring economic activity.[16]

The recent Institute for Strategic Policy (ISP)'s survey demonstrates the tension between economic necessity and public apprehension. Among 102 respondents across four Thai border locations, 61 percent supported reopening, yet 57 percent preferred continued closure until bilateral negotiations were concluded or permanent closure. These responses suggest that support for reopening in principle does not necessarily translate into willingness to reopen under present conditions. Furthermore, 43 percent favoured additional safeguards, including screening procedures and restrictions on opening hours. Among the 81 respondents asked about pilot arrangements, 83 percent prioritized trade and goods movement.[17] Reopening therefore needs to address locally perceived risks alongside economic recovery.

Social media is an important part of the environment in which those risks are understood. The survey identifies it as the leading information source on the bilateral situation, accounting for 42 percent of responses, ahead of television at 25 percent and community leaders at 16 percent. Among respondents using social media for news, 93 percent used

15 "Border with Cambodia to remain shut amid concerns" Bangkok Post. October 31, 2026 [https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/3346169/border-with-cambodia-to-remain-shut-amid-concerns]

16 Supalak Ganjanakhundee, From Ceasefire to Cooperation: Policy Options for Thailand–Cambodia Conflict Resolutions (unpublished manuscript prepared for the Institute for Strategic Policy), sections on economic linkages and information and narrative management; Pou Sothirak, Cambodia and Thailand Border Disputes: The Road Toward Peace, September 17, 2026, sections 2–3. (also unpublished manuscript)

17 Tatporn Tanawarit, Pana Janviroj, and Darmp Sukontasap, Assessing the Socio-Economic and Political Impact of Cross-Border Trade Disruptions: A Study of the Thailand-Cambodia Border Regions (Institute for Strategic Policy, September 2026), 7–11.

Facebook. Approximately one-third relied primarily on algorithm-driven news feeds, while only 13 percent obtained information directly from government or authority accounts. These findings suggest that perceptions of border conditions are formed through a mixture of personal experience, community discussion and digitally selected content, rather than through official explanations alone.

This matters because information about military incidents, territorial claims and alleged threats can shape expectations about the consequences of renewed contact. Supalak's analysis emphasizes how disinformation and nationalist rhetoric narrow the space for diplomacy and encourage hostility toward neighbouring communities. Pou Sothirak likewise identifies inflammatory online narratives and collective blame as obstacles to reconciliation, recommending sustained exchanges involving journalists, scholars, young people and civil society. Read alongside the survey, the two arguments suggest that reopening requires credible public communication and opportunities to rebuild cross-border relationships.

The survey does not, however, establish that social media necessarily produces hostility. Its statistical analysis reports positive associations between exposure to algorithm-driven feeds and confidence in peaceful coexistence, as well as between cross-border personal connections and such confidence. These associations should be interpreted cautiously, given the small, quota-based sample and the limits of causal inference. Nevertheless, they caution against treating digital platforms solely as sources of antagonism: their effects depend on the content encountered and the relationships through which people interpret it.

A further difficulty is the limited public visibility of peaceful settlement mechanisms. Fifty-four percent of respondents were unaware of existing land-boundary negotiation mechanisms. When people encounter extensive reporting of threats but know little about the institutions available to manage disagreements, assurances that reopening will be safe may carry limited weight. Governments should explain what negotiations are intended to achieve, how incidents will be handled and what safeguards will accompany renewed movement. Community participation, independent journalism and cross-border exchanges can make these explanations credible. Economic recovery can then reinforce confidence in coexistence, while that confidence helps sustain support for cooperation.

1.5 The room for strategic adjustment

Despite the present impasse—military dominance over border governance, political incentives that favour confrontation, diplomatic paralysis, and the limited influence of border economic losses on national decision-making—Thailand and Cambodia retain considerable room for strategic adjustment. These obstacles make cooperation difficult, but they do not eliminate the choices available to either

government. Restoring diplomatic representation, convening border talks and enabling essential civilian movement do not require either side to abandon its territorial claims. Normalization, which depends on comprehensive settlement, unnecessarily narrows those choices and prolongs the confrontation.

Adjustment requires political leaders to exercise authority over border policy and give implementing institutions clear instructions. Quiet diplomacy can help identify measures that leaders can defend domestically, while regular diplomatic engagement can prevent disagreement from closing every channel. Border communities and businesses also need meaningful opportunities to influence decisions, so that the cost of prolonged separation receives attention alongside security concerns and nationalist demands.

A practical starting point is a set of reciprocal measures serving identifiable national interests. Reliable communication reduces the risk of escalation; humanitarian access protects affected communities; and predictable border arrangements support livelihoods and lawful commerce. Clear responsibilities and credible verification make these steps politically manageable while preserving each government's negotiating position.

The immediate objective should be a verifiable programme of restraint, civilian recovery and continued negotiations. Cooperation can begin where agreement is possible and expand as results become visible. Its durability will depend on keeping functioning arrangements intact when disputes arise elsewhere. Governments can build trust through practical cooperation rather than waiting for improved relations before taking the first step.

2 Practical recommendations

2.1 Establish political direction through quiet diplomacy

Thailand and Cambodia should establish a confidential diplomatic channel through trusted representatives designated by their respective governments. With direct access to their own leaderships and accepted by the other side, these envoys could conduct discreet consultations and shuttle between the two capitals to explore policy adjustments and prepare an agreed agenda for normalization. Their main objectives would be to secure political authorization for practical operations and translate understandings into decisions that existing bilateral mechanisms can implement.

Quiet diplomacy must begin by examining the policies sustaining the impasse. Civilian leaders need to determine whether continued restrictions advance achievable national objectives, what costs they impose, and what alternatives could provide adequate protection. Where governments themselves endorse prolonged closure or attach

broad conditions to engagement, improved coordination alone will not produce normalization. The envoy therefore needs authority to explore change in policy, rather than merely communicate established positions.

Given the armed forces' central roles in the armed conflict and their ongoing influence over border conditions, both governments should consider appointing serving or retired military officers with diplomatic judgment and credibility within their respective military institutions. Familiarity with military decision-making could help them clarify operational concerns, explain proposed adjustments, and secure commanders' cooperation. Military experience alone would be insufficient: each representative must also demonstrate discretion, understand the broader bilateral relationship, and command the confidence of both governments.

The envoys must operate under explicit government mandates and report directly to their civilian leadership rather than military commanders. Civilian leaders should retain authority over negotiating objectives, policy adjustments and commitments. The representatives' military credibility should support implementation and bring operational knowledge into political deliberation, while responsibility for the direction of negotiations remains with the governments.

On the Thai side, the Prime Minister should chair a civilian-led interagency committee responsible for authorizing and overseeing the normalization programme. Its membership should include the foreign affairs, defense, and interior ministries, relevant security agencies such as police, immigration, and civilian security volunteers, and departments responsible for civilian recovery, trade, and labor. A senior coordinator should manage follow-up, working with provincial authorities and consulting affected communities and businesses.

Cambodia should designate an equivalent arrangement suited to its institutions. These bodies would make domestic decisions and handle implementation, while the JBC, GBC, and RBC retain their respective bilateral functions.

The committee should assess proposed restrictions against specific objectives, their effects on civilians, and the availability of less disruptive alternatives. Security objectives must be realistic: preventing renewed armed confrontation, protecting civilians, and addressing identifiable unlawful activities. An open-ended requirement to eliminate every possible threat that would offer no workable basis for reviewing restrictions or deciding when the operation could resume.

Initial envoy consultations should distinguish essential interests from positions that can be modified. Restoring diplomatic representations, convening bilateral mechanisms, and permitting carefully managed civilian movement can benefit both countries while preserving their

territorial claims. The envoys should also explore how leaders can explain reciprocal adjustments domestically as responsible protection of national interest. Personal estrangement and public accusations should not be allowed to determine whether institutions can perform their work.

The first agenda should concentrate on achievable measures: restoring effective diplomatic representation; convening the JBC meeting within three months (of adopting this strategy) and fixing a schedule for subsequent meetings; scheduling the resumption of GBC and RBC; restraining unilateral changes in contested areas; facilitating humanitarian access; and preparing phased border reopening. Relevant agencies should assess proposals before approval, identifying operational requirements, resources, and responsibilities. Reciprocal steps may make adjustment politically feasible, but progress should not depend on resolving land and maritime disputes, transnational crime, and every security concern together. Humanitarian assistance should proceed according to need, and negotiating channels should remain available throughout.

Confidentiality should allow options to be tested without turning tentative discussion into public commitments. The envoys should maintain mutually confirmed records, distinguish exploratory proposals from authorized decisions, and clarify differences before reporting to their leaderships. No government should selectively disclose discussions or portray an exploratory suggestion as the other side's concession.

Once leaders approve a measure, implementing agencies should receive written instructions specifying their scope, timetable, resources, and review arrangements. The envoys should remain available to clarify intentions and help resolve difficulties, while established institutions undertake the substantive work. Decisions affecting civilian access, livelihoods or land use should receive clear public explanation.

Both governments should review the initial consultations within three months of adopting the strategy. Progress should be assessed through decisions implemented: diplomatic representation strengthened, bilateral mechanisms reconvened, civilian access improved and restraint observed. Quiet diplomacy can make adjustment politically manageable, but its effectiveness depends on leaders accepting responsibility for policy choices and ensuring that their institutions carry them out.

2.2 Prevent renewed military clashes and unilateral changes in contested areas

Thailand and Cambodia should translate their ceasefire commitments into practical arrangements that could prevent renewed confrontation and preserve the possibility of a negotiated boundary settlement. The

immediate objective is to reduce the risk of contact between opposing forces, restrain actions that alter contested areas, and establish reliable procedures for handling incidents. These measures should proceed alongside diplomatic engagement and civilian recovery, under clear direction from both governments.

The GBC and RBC should develop site-specific arrangements where proximity, overlapping patrol routes or routine activities create a risk of confrontation. These could include agreed disengagement, restrictions on reinforcement and heavy weapons, designated patrol limits and advance notification of activities near opposing positions. Where immediate withdrawal is difficult, the two sides should first agree on conduct that prevents encounters and then negotiate further adjustments. Temporary deployment arrangements must preserve legal positions and remain subject to review; they should not become a permanent substitute for boundary negotiations.

Both governments should suspend unilateral activities that change the physical conditions or administrative use of contested areas. This restraint should cover new military facilities, roads, barriers, land clearance and other construction, as well as religious installations or civilian activities that could consolidate territorial claims. Repair work necessary for immediate safety should be distinguished from expansion or permanent development through prior notification and consultation. Disagreement over whether a proposed activity falls within a contested area should be referred to the relevant bilateral mechanism before work proceeds.

Existing structures require separate consideration. The two sides should compile an inventory of installations and changes that have generated objections, recording their locations, purposes and effects on civilian access. This would provide a basis for discussing removal, modification or temporary retention without treating a structure's presence as evidence of sovereignty. Areas established to lie within the other country's territory should be addressed through withdrawal and restoration of civilian access. Locations whose status remains disputed should be managed through temporary arrangements while joint technical work continues.

Military leaders should also refrain from rhetoric[18] that presents another round of fighting as expected or inevitable. Public warnings that the next conflict will be different, accompanied by assertions that the threat persists, can reinforce expectations of confrontation and narrow the political space for accommodation. Military assessments

18 Rhetoric is always made by Thai military leaders, such as "Army intelligence chief warns of third round of clashes with Cambodia," Thai BPS World, March 24, 2026 [Army intelligence chief warns of third round of clashes with Cambodia] or "ผบ.ทอ.» ชี้รบ «กัมพูชา» ครั้งต่อไปไม่เหมือนเดิม ลั่น «ไซเบอร์-อวกาศ-คลื่นแม่เหล็กไฟฟ้า» มาครบ การันตีใช้งบคุ้มค่า เตรียมพร้อมรบ หมดเวลาลองผิด-ถูก" [Air Force Chief Says Next Conflict with Cambodia Will Be Different: Cyber, Space and Electromagnetic Capabilities Fully Integrated; Pledges Value for Money and Combat Readiness, Declares 'No More Time for Trial and Error.] Nation TV October 19, 2026 [https://www.nationtv.tv/news/current-issue/378984712] could be easily interpreted and mislead public perception.

should inform government decisions through authorized channels, while public communication should emphasize ceasefire compliance, civilian safety and peaceful dispute settlement. Allegations of violations should be supported by evidence and addressed through agreed verification and consultation procedures. Military spokespersons must operate within the policy framework established by their governments.

ASEAN observers should have a limited supporting role in documenting ceasefire compliance. Both governments should permit them to examine reported incidents, distinguish verified findings from allegations and communicate their assessments to both sides. Neither government should use observer visits as publicity events or portray the observers' presence as endorsement of its territorial claims or accusations. Findings should be presented accurately, with their limitations acknowledged. Responsibility for restraint, verification and resolving incidents must remain with the two governments and their bilateral mechanisms.

Hotlines should connect political authorities, regional commanders and designated local officers, with regular checks to ensure they function. An incident protocol should require immediate notification, measures to prevent further contact, preservation of evidence and referral for verification. Commanders should receive clear instructions defining their authority to protect personnel and civilians and identifying decisions requiring higher authorization.

Humanitarian access, safe movement and emergency assistance should continue during incident investigations wherever practicable. Temporary restrictions should have a stated purpose, limited geographical scope and review date. A problem at one location should not automatically suspend every crossing, negotiating body or cooperative activity. A stronger ceasefire should enable both countries to contain incidents and resolve their consequences without returning to wider hostilities.

2.3 Restore civilian life and phased border reopening

Thailand and Cambodia should adopt a differentiated approach to civilian recovery, reflecting uneven consequences of the conflict. For Thai communities that have already returned home and received government assistance, priorities include completing outstanding housing repairs, addressing unmet compensation needs, and restoring livelihoods affected by prolonged border closure. For Cambodian communities who remain displaced, the immediate concerns are adequate assistance, essential services, and arrangements enabling safe, voluntary, and dignified return. A common commitment to civilian well-being does not require identical programmes on both sides.

Compensation and livelihood recovery serve different purposes. Financial assistance can alleviate immediate losses, but it cannot by

itself restore access to customers, farmland, employment or cross-border services. Civilian agencies should identify those who remain unable to resume their livelihoods, including people whose homes are intact, but whose economic activities depend on movement across the border. Recovery plans should specify whether the appropriate response is negotiated access, phased reopening, temporary income support or assistance in finding alternative work.

Economic hardship should nevertheless not be treated as evidence of unconditional support for reopening. Residents may simultaneously seek renewed economic activity and demand stronger safeguards. Local consultation must therefore establish the conditions under which people consider movement safe and workable, while ensuring that those most dependent on cross-border livelihoods have a voice in decisions.

Humanitarian needs should be assessed independently of competing territorial narratives. Disagreements over the status of particular areas or residents should be addressed through the appropriate boundary process. They should not prevent assistance to people deprived of shelter, healthcare, education or income. Providing relief should carry no implication that either government accepts the other's territorial claims.

Assistance and return require distinct decisions. Relief can proceed while access to particular homes or villages remains under discussion. Where return is obstructed, both governments should identify the specific impediments—explosive hazards, damaged housing, military restrictions or disagreement over territorial control—and address them through the relevant bilateral mechanisms. Temporary arrangements for civilian access should preserve legal positions without determining the boundary. Families should be consulted, and acceptance of temporary shelter should not be treated as relinquishment of claims to homes or property.

Practical measures could include access for humanitarian personnel, retrieval of personal belongings, clearance of explosive hazards and restoration of essential facilities. Agencies should document damage and unmet needs, preserve available property records and establish complaint channels. Temporary accommodation should provide adequate living conditions while durable solutions are pursued. New housing or relocation programmes should not substitute for examining whether displaced residents can return.

Medical access deserves explicit protection. Thai public and private healthcare providers should continue treating Cambodian patients, particularly those requiring emergency treatment and essential care on humanitarian grounds. Both governments should facilitate passage for patients, accompanying relatives and medical referrals, even while ordinary movement remains restricted. Changes to signage or

administrative practices should be accompanied by clear explanation and information about continued services. Providers should maintain language assistance so patients can understand treatment, consent and payment requirements. Unpaid bills should be addressed through administrative arrangements without delaying urgent treatment, supported where necessary by agreed referral and reimbursement procedures.

Phased reopening[19] should begin at crossings in areas where tensions are lower, alongside continuing civilian recovery. Both governments should identify paired crossings based on local conditions, operational readiness and consultation with residents, traders and workers. Initial arrangements could permit specified goods, commercial vehicles and essential travel, with agreed hours, documentation and customs procedures. Reopening should expand progressively to other crossings as arrangements demonstrate that movement can be managed safely and predictably. Humanitarian passage, including medical referrals, should proceed according to need throughout this process.

Local authorities, customs and immigration agencies should administer these arrangements under clear civilian direction, with security agencies supporting agreed safety measures. Users should receive advance information about eligibility, procedures and complaint channels. Targeted screening and law-enforcement cooperation should address identifiable risks without making lawful movement impracticable. Small traders and households dependent on daily exchange should receive attention alongside larger commercial operators.

Each phase should have a review date and transparent criteria for expansion, adjustment or temporary restriction. Evaluations should examine safety, processing times, costs, livelihood benefits and community experiences. An incident at one crossing should prompt a proportionate response rather than automatically closing the entire border. Territorial negotiations should continue while lawful economic activity resumes. The objective is to protect civilians and restore predictable daily life through arrangements that preserve legal positions and give both countries practical reasons to sustain cooperation.

2.4 Restore diplomatic relations and protect negotiations from political disruption

Thailand and Cambodia should restore effective diplomatic representation and regular communication between their foreign

19 Joint Press Statement of Special General Border Committee (GBC) on September 10, 2025, in Koh Kong Cambodia, cites in paragraph 6 j. "Both sides agreed to consider the feasibility of reopening the border crossings between Chanthaburi and Trat Provinces in Thailand and Battambang Province in Cambodia, for the import and export of products or goods, except materiel intended for military purposes, to facilitate trade and economic activities necessary for the maintenance of critical regional supply chains. Further details are to be discussed among both sides at the RBC Meeting." The then Thai Defense Minister Natthaphon Nakphanich categorized Zone 1 as a high-tension zone covering Ubon Ratchathani, Si Sa Ket, Surin, and Buriram provinces; Zone 2 as moderate tension is Sa Keao and Zone 3 for low-tension covers Chantaburi and Trat provinces.

ministries. Although diplomatic relations have been downgraded during previous disputes, the depth and duration of the present disruption have weakened channels needed to manage a wide range of bilateral affairs. Restoring ambassadors would provide authoritative counterparts for communication, coordination and negotiation. It would not require either government to abandon territorial claims or endorse the other's conduct.

Diplomatic restoration should therefore be treated as a practical requirement for managing relations. If the immediate exchange of ambassadors remains politically difficult, both governments should first strengthen their missions with senior representatives who have clear mandates and direct access to their foreign ministries. They should agree on a timetable for returning to ambassadorial representation and maintain designated contacts throughout the transition. The confidential channel proposed earlier can help secure this understanding, while embassies resume routine diplomatic responsibilities.

These responsibilities extend well beyond boundary disputes. The rescue and repatriation of victims trapped in scam compounds require communication among diplomatic missions, police, immigration authorities and relevant agencies in both countries. Effective channels are also needed for consular protection, missing-person cases, medical referrals, labour matters and the verification of documents. Territorial disagreements should not prevent officials from coordinating assistance to people facing immediate danger. Both governments should designate operational procedures for urgent cases, with confidentiality sufficient to protect victims and rescue efforts.

Regular diplomacy also supports cooperation within ASEAN and other regional frameworks. Thailand and Cambodia share interests in transport connectivity, public health, environmental management and the suppression of transnational crime. Foreign ministries should identify activities that can continue or resume despite outstanding disputes and ensure that relevant agencies receive authorization to participate. An unresolved disagreement should not automatically become a reason to obstruct cooperation unrelated to it.

Boundary negotiations require similar continuity. Both governments should agree on a regular calendar for the JBC, GBC and RBC, with clear agendas and arrangements for following up decisions. Each mechanism should perform its respective function: the JBC addresses survey and demarcation of land boundary, while the GBC and RBC manage military and border-security matters. Security agencies should facilitate technical work under agreed arrangements rather than determine whether political conditions permit negotiations to begin.

Maritime conciliation should continue alongside these bilateral processes. Participation in international proceedings should not be

used to suspend land-boundary discussions, diplomatic contacts or functional cooperation. The governments can maintain their legal positions while using different channels to address distinct issues. Where a negotiation reaches a deadlock, the matter should move through agreed procedures for technical clarification, senior-level consultation or mutually acceptable facilitation, rather than bring the entire relationship to a halt.

Both sides should establish procedures to protect engagement from political disruption. Changes of government or personnel should be accompanied by documented handovers of commitments and outstanding tasks. Following a border incident, officials should maintain contact, seek verification and address the immediate consequences without automatically cancelling scheduled meetings. Where a temporary postponement is unavoidable, a replacement date should be agreed promptly.

Diplomatic channels are most valuable when relations are strained. Their restoration should enable both countries to communicate disagreement, coordinate urgent assistance and negotiate adjustments before problems escalate. The objective is a relationship in which political tension can be managed through functioning institutions rather than prolonged diplomatic disengagement.

Build local support and connect Track II proposals to official decisions

Public hearings should be held by civilian agencies or parliamentarians in affected border districts to gather residents' views on safety, access to farmland, livelihood, and phased border reopening. Participation should include small traders, workers, farmers, and affected or displaced families, with confidential submission available for those who are reluctant to speak publicly. Designated civilian agencies or parliamentarians should publish a summary of concerns raised and explain how the inputs inform decisions, including reasons for the proposal that could not be adopted.

Track II dialogues, whether sponsored and facilitated by any parties, should establish a practical route through which proposals reach officials authorized to consider and implement them. Forums supported by Chinese and Japanese institutions provide opportunities for Thai and Cambodian experts to maintain communications and explore cooperation. Their contribution should be assessed by the relevance of their proposals and their ability to inform officials' decisions. Further meetings will have limited policy value unless recommendations enter a process that provides consideration and response.

Both governments should designate civilian focal points to receive proposals from Track II networks, consult relevant agencies, and report, with access to officials responsible for security, humanitarian assistance, and border administration. The trusted envoy proposed

earlier could help bring politically sensitive ideas to senior leaders. Acceptance should remain a government decision, but proposals should receive consideration within an agreed period, with reasons given for approval, modification or deferral.

Track II networks should submit concise proposals addressing identifiable problems. Each should specify the intended benefit, participating institutions, resources, required authorization, and a realistic timetable. Humanitarian assistance, medical access, livelihood recovery and phased border reopening offer opportunities to defined initiatives. Projects can demonstrate feasibility and build support for wider cooperation.

Participation should extend beyond experts who already favour reconciliation. Border residents, displaced people, vendors, workers, healthcare service providers, and local authorities can identify needs that scholars' discussions may overlook. Consultations with officials, including security personnel responsible for implementation, would help participants understand operational constraints and institutional resistance. Such engagement should preserve the forums' independence while making the proposal more relevant to those expected to act.

Chinese and Japanese conveners should support these connections by facilitating confidential briefings with designated officials, helping refine proposals and funding agreed preparatory work. With participants' consent, networks should have an equal opportunity to submit recommendations through the same official channels, without sponsorship or international visibility being treated as evidence of government endorsement.

Finally, Track II networks should maintain a record of follow-up: proposal submitted, official response received, revision request, and activities implementation. Communities should be able to comment on whether approved projects meet their needs. Success should be assessed through decision influence and practical results achieved. This would give Track II a continuing role in testing options, informing policy, and sustaining cooperation when official relations remain difficult.

3 Implementation of the roadmap and management of setbacks

Implementation should begin with explicit political authorization of both countries. Each government should adopt its own mandate for strategy, identify responsible institutions and authorized officials to negotiate a common work programme. The period suggested below runs from adoption of the strategy; they are implementation targets, not predictions. Progress should be reviewed regularly, with delays explained and revised deadlines agreed. Humanitarian assistance and

urgent consular cooperation should proceed throughout, without waiting for completion of the wider programme.

Responsibilities and implementation arrangement

Quiet diplomacy: The premiers should authorize their respective trusted envoys, define their mandates and establish direct reporting arrangements to the civilian leadership. Foreign ministries should provide small secretariats (as a good office), secure communication, travel support and records of consultations. Relevant ministries should designate officials able to access proposals and prepare implementation decisions. Progress should be verified through mutually confirmed records distinguishing exploratory proposals from approved commitments. The expected output is an agreed initial agenda, followed by written instructions assigning tasks and deadlines to implementing agencies.

Security restraints. Both governments should instruct their defence ministries and military commands to suspend unilateral activities that alter the physical conditions or administrative use of contested areas, and to negotiate and implement restraint measures through the GBC and RBC. The JBC should address questions requiring boundary clarification, with meetings held according to a firm schedule agreed by both governments. Resources should cover liaison personnel, functioning hotlines, technical assessments and agreed field visits. Verification should combine incident records, bilateral examination of disputed accounts and limited supporting observation by ASEAN where agreed. Observer presence must not be presented as endorsement of either government's claims. Expected outputs include site-specific restraint arrangements, procedures for handling incidents and an inventory of unilateral changes requiring discussion.

Civilian recovery and phased border reopening. Each government should authorize relevant civilian ministries and provincial authorities to assess remaining needs and administer assistance. Command priorities should include support for displaced families and arrangements for safe return; Thai priority should include outstanding repairs, compensation and livelihood recovery. Customs, immigration, commerce, and health agencies should prepare paired crossings for phased reopening. Resources should include recovery budgets, clearance capacity, healthcare referral arrangements, and staffing for crossings. Verification should draw on assistance records, filed assessments, and community feedback. Expected outputs should include services restored, needs addressed, and predictable cross-border movement.

Diplomatic restoration. The governments should authorize their foreign ministries to restore effective representation and agree on the resumption of bilateral mechanisms. Embassies and designated agency contacts should coordinate consular assistance, rescue and

repatriation of scam victims, medical referrals and regional cooperation. Resources should cover appropriate diplomatic staffing, operational communication and meeting support. Agreed minutes and follow-up records should establish whether decisions are implemented. Expected outputs should include restored representation, functioning emergency contacts and a regular negotiating calendar.

Track II and local participation. Each government should encourage local people's participation by supporting or sponsoring public hearings in affected border districts to gather residents' views on safety, access to farmland, livelihood, and border reopening. Private-sector participation should be facilitated where relevant. The governments should designate their respective focal points in the Prime Minister's Office to receive Track II proposals, coordinate consideration across ministries and obtain responses from responsible agencies. The Foreign Ministry should support diplomatic coordination, while local authorities organize separate consultations with residents, workers, businesses, civil society and affected families. Resources should cover coordination staff and consultation costs; conveners may support research, translation, travel and preparation of defined projects, subject to agreement. A proposal register should record submissions, official responses and implementation decisions, respecting confidentiality. Expected outputs should include proposals acted upon, agencies assigned responsibility, and local concerns reflected in policy.

Within three months:

The initial priority is to establish mandates, appoint 'trusted' envoys and coordinators, and agree on a limited work programme. Both sides should suspend unilateral changes in contested areas, test hotlines, identify locations requiring immediate restraint and establish procedures for urgent humanitarian and medical access. Foreign ministries should agree on steps toward restoring diplomatic representation.

Both governments should reconvene the JBC and agree on a regular meeting schedule and technical work programme, with clear responsibilities and deadlines for follow-up. They should also schedule GBC and RBC meetings to implement security arrangements and support technical work.

Civilian agencies should assess outstanding recovery needs and identify paired crossings suitable for early reopening. They should establish baseline information on access restrictions, service, livelihoods, and processing capacity. Prime Minister's Office focal points should invite concise Track II proposals addressing these priorities, while local authorities begin community consultation.

Within three months of adopting this strategy, each government should designate the institution responsible for coordinating implementation.

On the Thai side, the Prime Minister-led interagency committee should approve agency responsibilities, an initial civilian-impact assessment and a timetable for reviewing border restrictions. Subsequent reviews should examine both security conditions and civilian outcomes, including access to farmland, employment, essential services and functioning crossings. Continuing a restriction should require an explanation of its purpose, effects, and next review date.

Three to six months:

The two governments should implement initial restraint measures and begin phased reopening at agreed crossings. Recovery assistance, housing repairs and medical referral arrangements should be advanced according to assessed needs. Safe-return arrangements should proceed where conditions permit and affected families have been consulted.

Bilateral mechanisms should meet on schedule, assign technical tasks and review compliance. Track II proposals ready for implementation should receive decisions, including reasons where authorization is withheld. Public updates should explain practical changes without disclosing confidential negotiations.

Six to twelve months and beyond

Review should determine where reopening can expand, which recovery needs remain unmet, and which security arrangements require adjustment. Effective procedures should become routine agency responsibilities, supported by identified budget and staff.

Beyond twelve months, the emphasis should be on sustaining cooperation through changes and political disagreements. Boundary negotiations should continue independently of the pace of normalization. Progress should be measured through civilian safety, restored access and livelihoods, predictable crossing and decision implemented, alongside meeting held.

Managing setbacks

An incident should trigger immediate communication, measures to prevent escalation, and an agreed process for establishing facts. Disputed findings should be referred to higher-level consultation. Any temporary restriction should have a stated purpose, limited geographical scope, and review date; humanitarian assistance and medical passage should continue wherever practicable.

Missed deadlines should prompt clarification and corrective action. Changes of local authorities or command should include documented handovers. Where implementation is obstructed, civilian coordinators and envoys should seek renewed political direction. The roadmap's credibility will depend on whether both governments can correct failures while keeping negotiations and functioning cooperation intact.

Conclusion

Thailand and Cambodia have the means to move toward peaceful coexistence while their territorial disputes remain unresolved. The obstacles include the political use of confrontation, military dominance over border governance, diplomatic paralysis and the limited influence of communities bearing the costs. Changing these conditions requires leaders to authorize practical adjustments and sustain them through disagreements.

The two governments do not need to adopt an identical strategy. Both invoke international law, seek external support and profess commitment to peaceful settlement. These shared positions provide grounds for restoring diplomatic relations, resuming bilateral mechanisms and allowing international proceedings to continue without obstructing cooperation elsewhere. Negotiation should be a continuing responsibility, rather than a reward for improved relations.

The recommendations offer a practical starting point. Trusted envoys can explore adjustments confidentially and secure political authorization. Government instructions can restrain unilateral changes in contested areas and prevent military rhetoric from undermining diplomacy. Civilian assistance, protected medical access, and phased reopening can address needs and rebuild livelihoods. Restored diplomatic channels can support negotiations and urgent coordination, while Track II proposals and local consultations can inform decisions through designated government focal points.

Implementation requires clear responsibilities, adequate resources, and observable results. Progress should be judged by safer communities, restored civilian access, border crossings operating under clear rules and regular hours, and commitments carried out. Changes to crossing arrangements should be communicated in advance, with sudden restrictions limited to genuine emergencies. Procedures for setbacks must prevent local incidents from suspending the entire relationship.

Two ceasefire arrangements provide space for these choices but cannot make them for either government. Lasting security requires accepted arrangements, functioning institutions and communities able to live without recurring disruption. Political leaders must turn restraint into sustained engagement, hold implementing agencies accountable and give both countries practical reasons to preserve cooperation while continuing to negotiate their differences.

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