Cambodia and Thailand Border Disputes: The Road Toward Peace*

Policy Recommendation Paper

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The current border disputes between Cambodia and Thailand, which erupted two times, from 24-28 July and from 7-27 December 2025, into violent armed clashes between the two countries have resulted in the loss of human lives and forced tens of thousands of civilians to displace from their homes and villages. The conflict has imposed economic hardship, inflicted severe damage on the bilateral relations between the two countries, and eroded harmfully societal trust between the two nations.

There has been a detrimental effect on the well-being and livelihoods of the residents of the border zones, on members of the military and their families, and on displaced Cambodian populations more generally due to repeated military clashes as well as psychological and economic costs of the conflict.

Prior to the eruptions of the border dispute, Cambodia had close interdependent economic relations with Thailand, particularly in trade, investment, labor, and tourism. The unresolved border dispute has implicated severely the Cambodia's economy, which is closely connected with Thailand through mutually beneficial processes of trade, investment, labor mobility, and tourism.

The impacts of the economic shock and disruption of supply change include:

1) A substantial decrease in trade between the two countries due to all border checkpoints closure in late June 2025.

2) A significant change in consumption patterns within Cambodia resulting from a boycott movement against Thai businesses, which puts at risk tens of thousands of jobs for Cambodians as well as investor confidence in the country;

3) Socio-economic costs of a massive influx of labor, fomenting untenable levels of unemployment, as a result of a mass exodus of Cambodian workers from Thailand;

4) The cost of a sharp decline of Thai investment and tourism to Cambodia.

Without effective resolution to open up the border between the two countries, economic hardship and severe damage on the bilateral relations will entail between the two countries.
Despites third party mediations, especially by ASEAN, the US and China, ongoing tensions remain a profound concern, primarily impacting both nations economically, politically, and socially.

As immediate neighbors, Cambodia and Thailand should always aspire to be permanent friends and not foes. Cambodia and Thailand should co-exist peacefully with one another for the sake of the principle of good neighborliness as well as peace and stability in whole region of Southeast Asia.

In line with this spirit, the following considerations are developed to offer practical pathways for both countries to settle their differences peacefully by providing relevant suggestions to achieve reconciliation, restore normalization, and promote peaceful coexistence between the two Kingdoms.

1. Pathways toward Reconciliation

Context: Following the eruption of a border crisis in late May 2025, Cambodia and Thailand engaged in two major military conflicts, involving heavy artillery and air

strikes. A breakthrough occurred when both sides secured a ceasefire agreement during the 3rd Special General Border Committee (GBC) at Prum-Ban Pak Kard International Checkpoint on 27 December 2025. The ceasefire agreement was reinforced with the China-mediated Fuxian Meeting on 28-29 December 2025, which established a trilateral ceasefire framework. Despite these efforts, tensions and deadlocks between Cambodia and Thailand remain.

This border crisis has severely damaged trust not only at the government-to-government but also people-to-people level between Cambodia and Thailand. To heal the shattered trust, reconciliation between the two sides should be forthcoming to prevent military escalations, and to ensure no armed hostilities to be re-occurred unnecessarily again.

Risks: Without commitment to exhaust peaceful and diplomatic channels, both countries will encounter severe risks, ranging from violating international law and uncontrolled escalation which contradict the ASEAN and the UN Charters which call for the non-use and the threat of use force. The following dangers are real if pathway to conciliation cannot be found:

- **Fragility of Ceasefire:** The border areas have been heavily militarized, with proximity of military positions created a high risk of misunderstanding, which can provoke "accidental" clashes easily.

- **Uncontrolled Escalation and War:** Without conciliation, military actions can easily escalate into another hostile armed conflict – Third War. Immediate and unprovoked use of force leaves little room for de-escalation, turning border disputes into no Win-Win solutions for both sides.

- **Nationalistic Sentiment:** Deep-seated historical animosity and ultra-nationalism, fueled by internal politics from both sides, threaten to derail diplomatic negotiations. For example, Thailand's attempted withdrawal from the MOU on the Survey and Demarcation of Land Boundary (MOU2000), and the cancelation of the MOU on The Area of their Overlapping Maritime Claims to the Continental Shelf (MOU2001) pose risks of further undermining good relations between the two countries. Cambodia and Thailand have already been pursuing UNCLOS' Compulsory Conciliation proceedings.

Without comprise and conciliation, a legal battle between the two countries may provoke military hostility in the maritime domain between Cambodia and Thailand.

- **Humanitarian Crisis:** The use of force to settle border dispute can only deprive peaceful settlement of dispute with well-intended peaceful and political goals and instead creates instability, occupation, and significant civilian casualties. Over 34,000 people in Cambodia remain displaced as of May 2026 who are unable to return to their home safely, facing threats from landmines, lack of basic services such as food and healthcare, and face with economic difficulties.

- **Undermined International Law Frameworks:** Post WW II global security principle calls for the prohibition on the use of force. Erosion of this principle threatens to dismantle the international order, undermine international laws, and return to a state of perpetual military conflict between nations.

Recommendations:

- **Consolidation of the Ceasefire Agreements:** Implement an immediate and unconditional existing ceasefire agreements monitored by the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) and supported by relevant stakeholders, like ASEAN, China, the US, and others to:

1- Establish a demilitarized zone where military positions shift back to prevent unintended contact which can provoke misunderstanding between the two armed forces on the ground.

2- Readjustment of troop positions in disputed zones at least 5 kilometers away from each other. In the event of an incident, both sides should ensure it is handled discreetly, kept out of the press, and resolved quietly by the relevant authorities. Both sides should refrain from politicizing, sensationalizing, and nationalizing the situation on the ground.

3- Establish a ‘hot-line communication’ among top level military and civilian leaders to ensure open, frank, reliable, and official communication and avoid reacting to fake news or provoking hostile rhetoric.

4- No Troop Reinforcements and no new troop movement. If this is done properly, it can stabilize the border area and decrease the likelihood of uncontrolled attacks.

5- Ensure that the joint demining begun under the coordinating task force of the ASEAN Observer Team.

6- Reconvene as soon as possible the JBC which is responsible for the joint survey and demarcation of the land boundary between the two nations, reopen all border crossings gradually and promote two-way trade, tourism and labor movement, as well as restore trust and understanding based on mutual respects between the two countries.

7- Ensure that the delivery of the promised humanitarian assistance to the affected populations as soon as possible as well as ascertain the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of displaced persons. Prioritize joint demining via a Joint Coordinating Task Force to clear returnee routes.

8- Make use of the "Good Offices and Mediations" of ASEAN and other stakeholders, especially the US, China, and Japan to provide a neutral platform for dialogue, separating sensitive territorial demarcations from the immediate need for peace to be restored without the use of force.

9- Both countries top civilian and military leadership must work together to rebuilding mutual understanding and Trust.

10- At the top levels: The two countries' prime ministers should hold a regular online meeting or face-to-face meeting as often as possible to create more conducive environment for both countries to return back to normally. Ideally, they should see to it that frequent meetings between the two foreign ministers would take place following their pledge during the ASEAN Summit in Cebu from 7-8 May 2026 to promote peaceful talk and work out concrete plan of actions that can lead to de-escalation and diplomatic re-engagement between the two countries.

11- At the working levels:

- Verify that the Regional Border Committee (RBC) can serves effectively as a critical bilateral military mechanism on the ground between Cambodia and Thailand,
- Facilitates the high-level General Border Committee (GBC) meetings between defense ministers to resolve border disputes,
- Restarting the Joint Border Committee (JBC) process by emphasizing the settlement of border disputes through negotiation rather than force and to resume the established measures to demarcate the border peacefully under the spirit of the MOU 2000.

- **Establishing De-escalation Strategies:** Cambodia and Thailand should prepare their de-escalation strategy along the Cambodia-Thailand border frontlines. The strategy should include key components such as establishing layers of security zones that correspond to levels of troop adjustments, and confidentiality in communications between command centers and frontline officers.

- **Establishing Protocols in Events of Escalation Incidents:** Cambodia and Thailand should establish their respective internal protocol to systemically engage in events of escalation incidents. Key components should include specific scenarios of escalating incidents, and how to step-by-step respond by command centers, regional commanders, local commanders and field officers to such incidents on a case-by-case basis. Should the incidents be shootings with hostile intent, calmness should be the key principle, and communications should be confidentially made in an appropriate channel from the frontline officers, local commanders, regional commanders, and command centers to the high level of top government levels to formulate swift and appropriate responses based on well calculated risks of the scopes and motivations of such intents of the incidents. As much as possible, de-escalations should be a fundamental principle for officers at the local level from both the Cambodian and Thai side.

- **Confidence-Building Measures:** Cambodia and Thailand should consider exploring possibilities of establishing discreet high-level channels of communication. These channels are vital for top leaders of both countries to frankly exchange views to explore compromises to end the ongoing border conflict. Discreet dialogues are important avenues to discuss real issues heart-to-heart, and clear out misunderstanding

without fearing of public repercussions from both sides. Discreet dialogues also help rebuild trust and confidence between both sides.

Cambodia and Thailand should be open with possibilities of restoring top official diplomatic channels. This is one of the crucial steps of confidence building and establish a more credible and official channel of communication between the two countries. There are many outstanding issues such as sovereignty concerns, reopening international border checkpoints gradually, demarcation works, and resumptions of the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) between both sides that are better conveyed, exchanged views, protested, and discussed through appropriate diplomatic channels. Therefore, it is important that both Cambodia and Thailand should compromise and jointly explore possibilities to resend Ambassadors to each other's capitals to provide these much-needed official diplomatic channels.

Another strategic avenue for both Cambodia and Thailand to hold talks to build trust and confidence with one another is through the conciliation proceedings under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Both should approach the conciliation process as a way to try to forge amicable solutions to resolve their maritime disputes within the framework of UNCLOS. Given the conciliation process is not an adjudicatory proceeding, it is designed to be non-adversarial in nature and allows the parties and the conciliation commission to explore issues and interests beyond purely legal rights. The ultimate goal of this process is to strive for an outcome that is deemed acceptable by both sides regarding their maritime disputes, based on a spirit of compromise with legal and diplomatic means used as the foundation. Since there have been two rounds of compulsory conciliation already took place – the first meeting took place in Singapore from 14-16 September, and the second one in The Hague from 14-18 October – both sides should proceed with good faith and constructively as this process provides another important space of dialogues and build better understanding between both countries.

- **Welcoming External Engagements to Support Reconciliation between Cambodia and Thailand:** Cambodia and Thailand should welcome external partners to support mediation process.

With ASEAN, Cambodia and Thailand should continue to actively engage with the bloc to play roles, when possible, through mechanisms such as dialogues and the ASEAN Observer Team. ASEAN is a platform that provides additional spaces for dialogues and confidence building measures for both Cambodia and Thailand to pursue peace and normalization.

With major powers, Cambodia and Thailand should welcome all mediation efforts of major powers such as the US, China and Japan to help foster solutions in some shapes and forms in the ongoing conflict between Cambodia and Thailand.

2. Roadmap to Normalization

Context: Cambodia and Thailand need to return to their normal bilateral relations pre-28 May 2025 in order to stabilize not only regional security but also border security as well as promote economic prosperity, and the safety of border communities. Normalization of relations can shift the confrontational to cooperative narratives, by stopping recurring border clashes (like the two wars of the past), stabilize territorial disputes through legal frameworks, and boost trade and development in border provinces. This process will restore the much-needed normalcy and reinstate the 75 years of excellent relations between the two Kingdom.

Risks: Bilateral relations were severely disrupted since June 2025 decision to close all land border crossings and the eruption of military clashes. This led to a deadlock. Thailand demands security preconditions such as withdrawal of heavy weapons, demining, and scam suppression, while Cambodia insists on a simultaneous, unconditional reopening of all border checkpoints to the pre-conflict status. Diplomatic missions between the two countries are currently at the lowest level ever, downgrading to the level of Second Secretary. The normalization process must take place as soon as possible to all allow both countries to stop the outbreak of war and maintain peace. Normalization of relations requires overcoming the followings shortcomings:

- Border disputes between the two countries are amplified by internal political dynamics. Nationalism and historical grievances are frequently used by elites to strengthen domestic legitimacy, making it difficult for governments to make compromises for peace, especially during times of political uncertainty.

- There are deadlock and preconditional risks borne out of stiff government positions based on ultra-nationalistic sentiment and the "blame game" based on fake news and provocative rhetoric that prevent normalcy from resuming.

- Since the conflict erupted form July last year, economic devastations reign in as border closures halted trade, tourism, and labor migration, leading to boycotts of Thai products in Cambodia and discrimination against Cambodian workers in Thailand.

- Neither government wants to appear “weak” to their domestic nationalistic constituencies by conceding first, particularly on the call to open up the border gradually. This is considered as face-saving barriers to normalization.

- There remains a fragile border stability, and the possibility of recurring conflicts still exist between Cambodia and Thailand. The border crisis, particularly around disputed, un-demarcated areas of their joint borders, has led to intense military confrontations, including loss of life and the use of heavy artillery. Despite ceasefires, the situation remains precarious, with a high risk of renewed conflict due to unaddressed territorial disputes.

Recommendations:

- Security and Stability must be maintained: Regular, frank and open communication between the Cambodian and Thai armies to promote misunderstanding, mutual trust, prevent the escalation of violence, and manages disputes through peaceful dialogue so as to ensure the safety for the border communities.

- Preventing Escalation: Both sides must aim to move away from militarized nationalism and recurring conflicts, particularly in disputed zones by using bilateral mechanisms in place and by allowing the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) to undertake its intended mission effectively. Both countries must respect the mediation efforts by the ASEAN, the US and China.

- Diplomatic Restoration: Upgrade diplomatic missions from Second Secretary to Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) level, at least, to restore routine government communication, and to the eventual Ambassadorial level.

- Sectoral and Functional Cooperation Resumption: Depoliticizing, restarting, and resuming bilateral talks in all sectoral and functional areas of cooperation such as healthcare, education, the environment, and people to people exchanges.

- Phased Border Reopening of Land Border Checkpoints: The land border closure and heightened tensions between Cambodia and Thailand have led to severe economic disruptions, particularly for the local border populations. These closures disproportionately impact border-area residents whose livelihoods depend on cross-border trade and the integrated border market.

Both countries should compromise and consider gradually reopening the border. The logic here is to stop relying on force and instead rely on open borders for the free movement of people and unrestrained economic activity to restore normalcy. If the border can be reopened, economic activities, people's well-being, and livelihoods can resume. This initiative can create momentum to ease tensions and promote dialogue between the two sides to settle differences through peaceful diplomatic engagement. Moreover, land border reopening should be treated separately from ongoing border demarcation efforts between the two countries.

Recognized the current sensitive political environment in both countries regarding the border reopening, a phased and gradual face-saving border-crossing roadmap should be developed.

An influential third-party mediator, such as China or the United States or Japan or Australia, should serve as a catalyst and proactively pursue shuttle discreet diplomacy to encourage Cambodia and Thailand to gradually reopen border checkpoints. They could do this by witnessing a joint public announcement at a mutually agreed location regarding the simultaneous reopening of border checkpoints.

Followed the reopening of border crossings, both sides should discuss earliest possibilities of resumption of border trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges including labor flow to foster momentums of normalization between the two countries.

3. Promote Peaceful Co-existence between Cambodia and Thailand

Context: The peaceful co-existence between Cambodia and Thailand is based on a premised that uphold the two Kingdoms' commitment to diplomacy over conflict, grounded in shared socio-cultural heritage and economic interdependency, despite historical territorial disputes and deep seeded animosity base on ultra-nationalistic sentiment. There is a renewed hope after the ASEAN Summit in Cebu in May 2026 that the two countries would seek to rebuild their relationship base on the principle of good neighborliness, using ASEAN-led dialogue and legal frameworks to manage border tensions and promote mutual prosperity and understanding.

Risks: The relationship between Cambodia and Thailand spans over 75 years but is now marred with territorial disputes, both land and maritime, that are easily politicized. The 2025 conflict has heightened antagonistic public opinion, particularly on social media, leading to deep-seated mistrust and "anti-sentiment" rhetoric not only at the government-to-government but also people-to-people level. If these risks are not contained, unintended consequences can affect their peaceful co-existences in the following ways:

- Border disputes are often fueled by domestic nationalist politics, historical grievances, particularly regarding maps that define their international border and the choice they make to resolve their differences – by the use of force or peaceful means.

- Despite existing peace and ceasefire agreements, chance of derailment still remains high probability if both sides do not adhere to these important frameworks. If these agreements are derailed haphazardly, let alone allow conflict to be reignited, tens and thousands of displaced people on both sides of the border will be deprived from the opportunity to return safely to the safety of their home villages.

- Online platforms serve as hotspots for inflammatory rhetoric and fake news that trigger nationalistic anger.

- Territorial issues are often exploited for domestic political gain, leading to a cycle of escalation of tensions that can lead to full blown wars.

- The suspension of key components of bilateral ties, along with labor flows, and investment during this crisis pose risks for the breach of trust and confidence of the two countries on one another that can lock them up with perpetual conflicts.

Recommendations:

- Both sides must commit to peaceful resolution over the use of force to settle their border disputes. By using force to resolve their border disagreements, both countries will lose. Only by resorting to peaceful resolution – through the recourse of international laws or more effective bilateral mechanism such as the existing Joint Boundary Commissions (JBC), they can peacefully co-exist as good neighboring countries.

- Cambodia and Thailand must be sincere, open, and honest to express consistent commitment to the peace process, rather than sporadic, temporary halts to their conflicts. They need to trust the mediation efforts offered by sincere friends to both countries such as ASEAN, the US, China or Japan.

- They need the "Whole-of-Society" Approach to bring back peace that requires not just government action but also restraint from the media and the public to avoid misinformation and foster mutual understanding between the people on both sides of their border. They need to reinvigorate the Cambodia – Thailand Friendship Association to allow healing process to take place between the people of the two countries.

- Top leaders should reach a confidential agreement to separate overall bilateral relations (ie. High level exchanges, trade, investment, business, culture, education, and people-to-people ties) from sensitive territorial disputes. All negotiations and discussions on sensitive territorial disputes should be handled at the technical level and kept out of the media and prevent misinformation in the public domain.

- Establish a high-level "Hotline" as a matter of "Communication Guardrails" between military and civilian leaders to clarify misunderstandings and avoid reacting to fake news and misinformation. The best way to do this is to restore ambassadorial posts to both countries, once again.

- Enhance comprehensive relations and promote mutual trust beyond government and business ties, Cambodia and Thailand should establish and nurture dialogue and cooperation mechanisms that could foster comprehensive relations among key security

institutions of both countries, such as the army, navy, air force, and police, at both national and sub-regional levels.

- Public Sentiment Management: Encourage Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), particularly from reputable think tanks, academia and media platform to move from "anti-sentiment" to "reconciliation discourse". Governments should promote reconciliatory compromise and tolerance instead of spurring hatred and nationalistic sentiments.

- In the long term, both sides should explore the possibility of promoting the designating disputed areas as Joint Development Zones or Joint Cultural Sites (ie. the Ta Moan Temple Complex) to transform points of contention into points of cooperation.

- Maintain and sustained Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue in order to institutionalize exchanges between think tanks, academics, and business leaders (like the Track 2 Dialogue coordinated by the China Foreign Affairs University and International House of Japan) to foster mutual understanding and provide policy suggestions to both governments to navigate their official stands peacefully and constructively.

- In the long run, both Cambodia and Thailand should consider jointly forming a history textbook commission between Cambodia and Thailand. The commission, comprising of renowned historians and scholars from the two countries, should be encourage to discuss, exchange views, and conduct joint research based on the principle of peaceful co-existent objectives, by minimizing the negative differences of how history is taught in both countries with a vision of having history textbooks that promote harmony and peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect and understanding of shared civilization and common cultural roots between Cambodia and Thailand.

- There should be more joint efforts from civil societies of both Cambodia and Thailand to promote peaceful bilateral relations beyond the government-to-government and business-to-business frameworks. Some of those joint efforts should be joint associations of Cambodia-Thailand youths, students, teachers, scholars and researchers, tourists, media, humanitarian foundations, religious groups, and grassroot groups that symbolize sustained people-to-people connections between the two countries. Relevant experiences from civil society collaborations between Japan and South Korea, Germany and Poland, Germany and France, and Germany and Czech Republic all can be drawn from civil societies in both Cambodia and Thailand.

- Cambodia and Thailand should consider formulating joint holistic plans to develop their border areas, particularly areas that directly bordered with one another, to

transform them to be key components of their national economy. Due to uniqueness and comparative advantages of each border are, there should be unique development plan for each of them. Key considerations should include how to transform the border areas to be viable economies corridors that serve to uplift the border population wellbeing, promote community developments in rural villages on both sides of the borders.

**This paper was written independently under collaboration between the Cambodian Center for Regional Studies (CCRS), Cambodia and the Institute for Strategic Policy (ISP), Thailand*

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