

# Thai-Cambodian military clashes threaten to escalate

Peter Symonds  
25 July 2025

Military clashes between Thailand and Cambodia have taken place over the past two days in 12 locations along their disputed border. Thai authorities have reported that 14 civilians and a soldier have been killed, while Cambodia has acknowledged one death and provided no further casualty figures.

Mass evacuations have occurred from the border areas in both countries as clashes have continued. Thai officials announced yesterday that 138,000 people had been evacuated from four border provinces. About 20,000 people have evacuated from Cambodia's Preah Vihear province, according to the *Khmer Times*.

Speaking to reporters in Bangkok, acting Thai Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai said fighting was escalating and "could develop to the stage of war." At present, however, he said, there had been no declaration of war and the conflict was not spreading into more provinces.

Both governments blame each other for the clashes that followed two incidents on July 16 and 23 in which Thai soldiers were injured in land mine explosions. In response to the second incident, Thailand recalled its ambassador in Phnom Penh and closed all border crossings between the two countries. Cambodia responded in kind, recalling all embassy staff from Bangkok.

The Thai military has carried out airstrikes inside Cambodia, while its armed forces have hit inside Thailand using heavy artillery and rockets. The Thai military is far larger and better equipped than its Cambodian counterpart, whose air force consists of a handful of helicopters and transport planes but lacks any fighter aircraft.

Many countries have called for de-escalation, including the United States and China, with the UN Security Council being convened to discuss the

conflict. Malaysia, which currently chairs the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), has called for a ceasefire. Cambodia accepted the proposal but Thailand has placed conditions on any end to fighting.

Thailand's foreign ministry stated yesterday that it had agreed in principle to Malaysia's ceasefire plan, yet insisted that it be based on "appropriate on-the-ground conditions." It also lashed out at the Cambodian military for continuing "indiscriminate attacks on Thai territory."

The clashes reflect heightened political and social tensions in both countries, fuelled by slowing economies that will be further hit by the Trump administration's tariffs. Cambodia, which sent 40 percent of its total exports to the US in 2022, faces a huge across-the-board Trump tariff of 36 percent from August 1.

While not as dependent on exports to the US, Thailand is being hit by the same figure amid a sharp economic slowdown. The so-called Tiger economy had gross domestic product (GDP) growth of just 2.5 percent last year and the estimates for this year are less than 2 percent.

The longstanding border dispute, which derives from the region's colonial past, is an inflammatory issue that has been exploited by nationalist demagogues in both countries. An earlier clash in late May that resulted in the death of a Cambodian soldier became the pretext for the suspension of Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra from office on July 1.

Bitter opponents of her government seized on a leaked phone call between Paetongtarn and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, claiming she had been too deferential to the Cambodian strongman and had denigrated the Thai military. A large patriotic

protest by the so-called Yellow Shirts—supporters of the monarchy, the army and state bureaucracy—demanded her resignation.

Paetongtarn is the daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006. The current government is a highly unstable coalition between the Shinawatras' Pheu Thai party and parties closely aligned with the military and the country's traditional elites. Paetongtarn is the second Pheu Thai prime minister to be removed by the Constitutional Court on trumped-up charges in the past two years.

Thaksin himself faces charges of *lèse-majesté*—disrespecting the monarchy—that carry penalties of up to 15 years jail. On social media, Thaksin thanked countries for offering to mediate in the conflict with Cambodia but called for them to wait a bit. “We need to let the Thai military do their job, and teach Hun Sen a lesson,” he said. Thaksin was clearly bitter that Hun Sen had leaked the phone call to his daughter, but also did not want to provide ammunition to his political enemies.

Hun Sen responded on Facebook in kind, declaring that Thaksin's “warlike tone” underscored “Thailand's military aggression toward Cambodia.” Hun Sen's son—Hun Manet—took over as prime minister in 2023 after general elections in which Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party claimed a “landslide” victory after a crackdown on political opposition that continues.

Tensions between the two countries flared in February after a group of 25 Cambodians escorted by Cambodian soldiers visited the Prasat Ta Moan Thon Temple inside Thailand near the border. Reportedly the group provocatively sang the Cambodian national anthem at the site but were stopped by the Thai military officials, who said it violated mutual agreements about tourist protocols.

The present military clashes are the worst in more than a decade. In 2011, Thai and Cambodian troops clashed in an area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple, a central focus of the border disputes. Thousands of people on both sides were forced to flee and at least 20 people were killed.

The disputes have their origins in a 1907 map drawn by French officials in Indochina to demarcate France's colonial possessions from the Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand), which was nominally independent,

sandwiched between French Indochina and British colonial Burma. The map was the basis for Cambodia's claims to the areas around the Preah Vihear temple. Thailand has not accepted an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in Cambodia's favour in 1962.

The current clashes could become embroiled with the geo-political tensions roiling the entire region as US imperialism accelerates its economic war and preparations for military conflict against China. Cambodia is one of the ASEAN countries most closely aligned with China, even though it depends heavily on US markets. China is a significant supplier of arms to Cambodia and holds annual Golden Dragon joint military exercises.

The United States has a longstanding military alliance with Thailand. During the Vietnam War, it used the Thai air forces bases to bomb North Vietnam and other targets. Large annual Cobra Gold joint US-Thai war games have been running for over two decades. More than 60 other joint exercises are held annually as well as many visits by US military aircraft and warships. At the same time, Thailand depends on China economically and for military equipment and weaponry.

If the clashes continue to escalate, the US together with its allies could seek to exploit the conflict to strengthen its position in South East Asia as part of the build-up to war with China.



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