

Temples, Territory, and Tensions: A Geopolitical Study of the Thai-Cambodian Border Dispute

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ongoing border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over historic Hindu temple sites, particularly Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom. It investigates how colonial-era maps, historical treaties, and rulings by the International Court of Justice have shaped the territorial claims of both countries. The article explores how these temples, rich in religious and cultural meaning, have become symbols of national identity and have fueled nationalist sentiment on both sides. The role of ASEAN in managing the conflict is analysed, highlighting its structural limitations in resolving sovereignty-based disputes. The research assesses the consequences of militarising sacred sites, including civilian displacement, cultural damage, and disrupted cross-border ties. Drawing from these findings, the paper offers recommendations for peaceful resolution through joint heritage protection, cultural diplomacy, and regional cooperation. The study underscores the need to view temple conflicts not just as territorial issues, but as complex intersections of history, identity, and geopolitics.

KEYWORDS: *Thai–Cambodian Border Dispute, Preah Vihear Temple, Prasat Ta Muen Thom, Colonial-Era Maps, ICJ Ruling; Nationalism, Cultural Heritage, ASEAN, Militarisation, Hindu Temples, Territorial Conflict, Geopolitics, Shared Heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

The Thai–Cambodian border dispute over historic Hindu temples, Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom, reflects a deep and complex struggle over land, memory, and identity. While these ancient temples stand as reminders of shared cultural and religious heritage, they have also become points of sharp political contention. Located near the disputed borderlands, these sacred sites have been drawn into modern statecraft, nationalism, and international legal debates. The roots of the conflict can be traced back to colonial times, when boundary lines were arbitrarily drawn by the French, who governed Cambodia, and the Siamese kingdom, now Thailand. The 1904 and 1907 boundary agreements, based on French surveys, laid the foundation for later disputes. The 1962 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) awarded Preah Vihear to Cambodia, but tensions resurfaced when it was nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. Clashes between the two nations followed, leading to casualties and military build-ups near the site.

The paper “*Temples, Territory, and Tensions: A Geopolitical Study of the Thai–Cambodian Border Dispute*” explores how historical treaties, colonial maps, and international rulings have influenced both countries’ claims to temple territories. It also investigates how temples have become symbols of national identity and pride, fueling public sentiment and political narratives in both Thailand and Cambodia. Further, the paper examines the role of ASEAN as a regional actor, and the effects of militarisation on cultural heritage and border communities. By analysing these layers legal, cultural, geopolitical, and humanitarian. The study aims to offer a clearer understanding of how heritage and territory intersect in Southeast Asia’s modern conflicts.

Literature Review:

Several studies have examined the Thai–Cambodian border dispute, particularly in relation to the temple sites of Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom.

How to cite this paper: Dr. Vishnu Prakash Mangu "Temples, Territory, and Tensions: A Geopolitical Study of the Thai-Cambodian Border Dispute" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-9 | Issue-4, August 2025, pp.787-794, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd97336.pdf



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Scholars highlight how colonial-era treaties, especially the 1904 and 1907 Franco-Siamese agreements, and the resulting French-drawn maps created enduring territorial ambiguities that continue to fuel tensions today (Murphy D, Chandler D). Legal experts emphasize the significance of the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling awarding Preah Vihear to Cambodia, and the 2013 clarification regarding the surrounding land, both of which remain politically sensitive in Thailand due to rising nationalism (Pongsudhirak T, Tonsakulrungruang K., ICJ Judgement). Cultural studies reveal that temples have been transformed into symbols of national pride and identity, with governments in both countries using heritage sites to legitimize political agendas (Edwards P., Askew M.). At the same time, scholars critique the limited role of ASEAN in resolving such sovereignty disputes, citing its adherence to norms of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making (Emmers R., Caballero-Anthony M.). Finally, the impact of militarization on heritage and local communities is also addressed, with researchers calling for integrated approaches that combine heritage protection with conflict resolution (Winter T., Bevan R.). Overall, the existing literature provides a strong foundation on historical, legal, and cultural aspects of the dispute, but leaves room for further research on the humanitarian consequences and shared heritage dimensions.

A Historical Perspective:

The territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over ancient temple sites like Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom is rooted in colonial-era agreements and differing interpretations of historical

documents. During the French colonial rule of Indochina in the early 20th century, maps were drawn to mark the borders between French-controlled Cambodia and Siam (now Thailand). One such map, known as the “*Annex I map*,” was prepared by French officials in 1907 and showed Preah Vihear temple on the Cambodian side of the border.¹ Thailand initially accepted these maps without protest, which later became a key point in legal arguments. However, in later years, Thailand argued that the temple actually lies within its territory based on watershed principles traditionally used in demarcating borders in mountainous regions.² This created a fundamental conflict between historical practice and colonial documentation, leading to competing claims over temple ownership.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) addressed this issue in 1962. In its landmark judgment, the ICJ ruled that Preah Vihear temple belongs to Cambodia, citing Thailand’s failure to object to the *Annex I map* for more than 50 years as evidence of tacit acceptance.³ This ruling was a significant victory for Cambodia, but it did not clearly define ownership of the surrounding land, especially the 4.6 square km area adjacent to the temple. The issue resurfaced in 2008 when Cambodia applied to UNESCO to list Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site. Thailand objected, claiming the listing encroached on disputed territory. This reignited tensions and led to a series of military clashes along the border, including at nearby sites like Prasat Ta Muen Thom and Ta Muen Toch, which Thailand still controls.⁴ These temples lie along an ancient Khmer highway and hold strategic as well as cultural significance.



In 2011, Cambodia again approached the ICJ, requesting a clarification of the 1962 ruling. In 2013, the ICJ reaffirmed Cambodia's sovereignty over the temple and ruled that Thailand must withdraw military forces from the area. However, it did not address other contested temples like Prasat Ta Muen Thom, which continue to be flashpoints of national pride and geopolitical rivalry.⁵ Both countries continue to use different documents to justify their positions. Cambodia relies heavily on the 1907 French maps and ICJ rulings, while Thailand emphasises older Siamese records and physical geography to assert its claims. This ongoing difference in interpretation reveals how colonial legacies, legal frameworks, and national narratives influence modern geopolitics in Southeast Asia.⁶

Nationalist sentiments and identity politics

Religious monuments such as the Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom temples are not only sacred sites but also powerful symbols of national identity in both Cambodia and Thailand. These temples, originally constructed during the Khmer Empire between the 9th and 12th centuries, are seen by Cambodians as part of their ancestral and cultural legacy. In contrast, many Thais view them as belonging to the broader cultural landscape of historical Siam. This overlapping cultural ownership has fueled a nationalist rivalry between the two countries.⁷ The listing of Preah Vihear as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 became a flashpoint. While Cambodia celebrated the listing as international recognition of its cultural heritage, many in Thailand viewed it as a political and cultural provocation. Nationalist protests erupted in Thailand, with slogans like "Our Temple" appearing in public rallies, fueling anti-Cambodian sentiment.⁸ The emotional weight of the temple symbolised more than territorial control. It became a matter of national pride and cultural survival.

In Cambodia, the temple is closely linked to national memory and political legitimacy. Leaders like Hun Sen have used it as a unifying symbol to strengthen state narratives, especially during elections or periods of political instability.⁹ Similarly, in Thailand, right-wing and nationalist parties have used the temple dispute to appeal to patriotic feelings, often accusing the government of being weak in defending the nation's heritage.¹⁰ The construction of nationalist narratives around these temples has had a direct impact on diplomacy and peace efforts. It has made compromise difficult, as any concession is seen as a betrayal of national identity. The emotional connection to these sites also encourages public pressure on governments to take a hard stance, limiting the scope for negotiation.¹¹ In this way,

culture becomes weaponised in the service of territorial politics. Ultimately, the temples have become symbols of much larger historical and emotional struggles. They embody not only religious significance but also the postcolonial contest for identity, legitimacy, and historical justice between two neighboring nations.¹²

Mediation and conflict resolution

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long promoted peace, stability, and regional integration. However, its response to the Thai–Cambodian border dispute, over temple sites like Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom, reveals its diplomatic limits and structural weaknesses. ASEAN's principle of non-interference in member states' internal affairs often hampers its ability to act decisively in conflicts involving sovereignty.¹³ When violence broke out near Preah Vihear in 2008 and again in 2011, ASEAN offered to mediate and proposed the deployment of Indonesian observers to monitor the ceasefire. Cambodia supported this move, but Thailand opposed third-party involvement, insisting the matter be resolved bilaterally.¹⁴ This disagreement reflected deeper mistrust and differing political calculations by both countries, which further complicated regional efforts at conflict resolution.

ASEAN's rotating chairmanship also plays a role in shaping responses. During Indonesia's chairmanship in 2011, strong diplomatic efforts were made to bring both countries to the table, including emergency meetings and statements calling for peace.¹⁵ However, in years when ASEAN was chaired by less assertive or neutral members, the issue received less attention. This inconsistency limits ASEAN's long-term conflict management capacity. In addition, ASEAN lacks a binding legal mechanism or enforcement power. Unlike the United Nations or International Court of Justice, ASEAN cannot compel its members to abide by decisions or accept mediation. It relies on consensus and soft diplomacy, which are often too slow or too weak in active disputes like this one.¹⁶ Even ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which encourages peaceful resolution, remains voluntary and non-binding.¹⁷ Despite these challenges, ASEAN remains an important forum for dialogue. It has helped reduce open hostilities and maintain channels of communication between Thailand and Cambodia. The organisation continues to encourage peaceful negotiation and has supported both parties' use of international law, including the ICJ.¹⁸ However, unless ASEAN reforms its approach and strengthens its conflict resolution mechanisms, its role in future border disputes will likely remain limited.

Militarisation of sacred sites:

The militarisation of ancient temple sites like Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom has deeply affected local populations, disrupted cross-border life, and endangered cultural heritage. These temples, once spaces of worship and pilgrimage, have turned into strategic military outposts. Armies from both Cambodia and Thailand have built bunkers and stationed troops near the sites, converting religious spaces into zones of tension and violence.¹⁹ This transformation has had serious effects on civilians living near the border. Armed clashes in 2008, 2011, and recently in 2025 have forced thousands to flee their homes in northern Cambodia and northeastern Thailand. Entire villages have been evacuated, schools closed, and farming activities disrupted due to the fear of landmines and artillery fire.²⁰ Refugee camps near the border have grown, creating humanitarian challenges for both governments and aid organisations.²¹

Cultural preservation efforts have also suffered. Artillery fire and explosives have caused visible damage to temple structures and inscriptions. The presence of troops and military equipment risks further degradation of these centuries-old monuments. UNESCO and other international bodies have repeatedly raised concerns about the long-term impact of conflict on cultural heritage.²² However, protection measures are limited due to ongoing military presence and restricted access to the sites. Militarisation has also strained cross-border relationships between local communities that once shared cultural and economic ties. Before the conflict, Cambodian and Thai villagers often interacted through shared markets, festivals, and religious practices. The temple routes were once part of a common heritage linked to the ancient Khmer empire. Today, nationalism, suspicion, and restricted movement have replaced this harmony.²³ Efforts to demilitarise the region have had little success. While international observers and peace proposals have been suggested, both nations view temple zones as sensitive security areas. As a result, the longer the militarisation continues, the greater the damage to cultural understanding, economic well-being, and shared heritage.²⁴

Broader implications:

The 2025 escalation around Preah Vihear and Ta Muen Thom has directly tested ASEAN's core principle of ensuring no armed conflict among its members. As clashes turned into full-scale military confrontations, including artillery and airstrikes, ASEAN's reluctance or inability to enforce peace has exposed its institutional fragility and could erode confidence in the bloc as a regional stabiliser.²⁵

Without a mechanism to compel action, ASEAN risks being sidelined in future crises involving member states.²⁶ Cambodia's repeated appeals to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) reinforce the value of international dispute resolution mechanisms. The ICJ's rulings in 1962 and 2013 underlined Cambodia's legal claim over Preah Vihear and its surroundings but Thailand's ongoing refusal to accept jurisdiction in subsequent temple disputes undermines international legal norms.²⁷ This juxtaposition between legal adjudication and political resistance signals potential weakening of the rule of law in balancing sovereignty and conflict resolution.²⁸

The armed conflict near ancient temples has raised urgent questions about heritage protection during wartime. Under The Hague Convention and the Rome Statute, deliberate damage to religious and cultural monuments can constitute war crimes. Although the Preah Vihear clashes involve civilian casualties and some damage, enforcement remains challenging. This case underscores the need for stronger application of international legal tools to protect heritage sites during armed conflict.²⁹ Border disputes have triggered large-scale displacement, over 140,000 to 300,000 civilians fled their homes in the 2025 crisis. Economic activity and cross-border trade came to a standstill, undermining the region's integrated economic frameworks.³⁰ Disruption to livelihoods calls for humanitarian coordination and underscores how unresolved cultural disputes can destabilize regional economies and exacerbate human suffering.

The temple dispute extends beyond the bilateral level, given both Thailand and Cambodia's ties to powerful allies. China's support for Cambodia and the U.S.'s involvement in mediation has turned this into a geopolitical flashpoint. If ASEAN continues to be bypassed, its credibility as a neutral regional actor will be weakened, encouraging foreign powers to assume peacemaking roles.³¹ Over time, this may shift Southeast Asia's balance from regional cooperation toward external alignment dynamics. This conflict marked by nationalism, military escalation, and contested cultural symbols sets a concerning precedent. If such disputes are not resolved through legal means or collaborative diplomacy, other heritage sites across Southeast Asia may become similarly instrumentalised. The case reinforces the urgency of combining historical understanding, legal clarity, and cultural sensitivity in managing territorial disputes.

Objectives:

The main objective of this research is to study the ongoing territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia by focusing on temple sites like Preah

Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom. It aims to understand how historical treaties, colonial-era maps, and international court decisions have shaped the legal claims of both countries. The study also seeks to examine how these temples have become strong symbols of national identity and how cultural heritage is used in political and diplomatic strategies. Another objective is to explore the role of regional organizations like ASEAN in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Finally, the research intends to highlight the human and cultural costs of militarisation and suggest peaceful solutions that respect both heritage and sovereignty.

Significance:

This research is important because it highlights how history, culture, and law influence modern territorial disputes. The Thai–Cambodian conflict over temples like Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom is not just about land, it also involves national pride, cultural identity, and regional peace. By studying treaties, maps, and court rulings, this research helps us understand why such disputes continue even after legal decisions. It shows how heritage sites can become political tools, and how people living near the border are affected by these tensions. The study also points to the need for ASEAN and other regional bodies to take a more active role in conflict resolution. Understanding this issue can help other countries facing similar disputes over historical or cultural sites. In this way, the research adds to both academic knowledge and practical efforts toward peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Methodology:

This research uses a qualitative, case study approach to understand the Thai–Cambodian temple dispute, focusing mainly on the Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom temples. The study relies on secondary sources such as historical treaties, legal rulings, academic books, journal articles, and news reports. Key legal documents include the 1904 and 1907 Franco–Siamese treaties, colonial maps, and judgments from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1962 and 2013. Scholarly works on nationalism, cultural identity, and Southeast Asian geopolitics are also reviewed to understand how temples are linked to nation-building and territorial claims. ASEAN's role is analysed using policy papers, regional charters, and expert commentary on its diplomacy. The impact of militarisation and heritage destruction is explored using case reports, photographs, and statements from UNESCO and NGOs. These methods help uncover how history, law, culture, and politics combine to shape the dispute.

Findings:

The study found that both Thailand and Cambodia rely heavily on colonial-era documents to justify their claims over the temple sites. The 1907 French map, accepted by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1962, remains central to Cambodia's claim over Preah Vihear. Thailand, however, disputes the legitimacy of that map and points to differing interpretations of earlier treaties like the 1904 Franco–Siamese treaty. The ICJ's 2013 ruling clarified Cambodia's sovereignty over the surrounding land of Preah Vihear, but tensions remain due to political sensitivities and nationalist narratives in Thailand. The temples have become more than historical monuments and now represent cultural pride and national identity for both nations. Political actors often use temple disputes to gain public support, especially during times of internal political instability. The role of ASEAN has been limited, as it prefers quiet diplomacy and avoids direct intervention. Local communities around the temple zones have suffered due to repeated military clashes, loss of access to heritage sites, and disrupted livelihoods. These findings suggest that while legal rulings exist, real peace requires political will, cultural understanding, and regional cooperation.

Results:

The research shows that historical treaties and colonial-era maps continue to influence the border claims of Thailand and Cambodia. The 1962 and 2013 rulings by the International Court of Justice confirmed Cambodia's right to Preah Vihear and its surrounding land, but Thailand still contests parts of the decision. Nationalist feelings in both countries have turned the temples into emotional and political symbols. This has led to repeated military tensions and public protests, especially near Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom. The results also reveal that ASEAN has played only a limited role in resolving the dispute, mainly due to its principle of non-interference. Meanwhile, border communities have faced hardship from displacement, restricted access to land, and damage to cultural sites. The study finds that lasting peace is not only a legal issue but also depends on building trust, respecting cultural heritage, and encouraging regional cooperation.

Discussion:

The Thai–Cambodian temple dispute reflects how deeply culture, law, and politics are linked in territorial conflicts. The temples, especially Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom, are not just old buildings. They are symbols of national identity, pride, and history. Even though the International Court of Justice ruled in favor of Cambodia twice, the

issue has not been fully settled. This is because both countries use different interpretations of treaties and maps created during colonial times. Thailand often questions the accuracy and fairness of these colonial-era maps, while Cambodia sees them as proof of its rightful ownership. The research also shows that legal solutions are not always enough. Political leaders in both countries have used the temple issue to gain local support, often during times of internal political unrest. Nationalist media, school textbooks, and public speeches have added to the emotional nature of the dispute. These actions have made it harder for both sides to compromise, even after clear legal judgments.

ASEAN's limited involvement shows the challenges regional organisations face when trying to solve sensitive conflicts. Its policy of non-interference prevents it from taking strong actions. Yet, without a trusted mediator, tensions may rise again. Military clashes and border skirmishes have already harmed local communities and caused damage to the temples, which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The study suggests that real peace can only be achieved if both countries agree to respect legal rulings, reduce nationalist messaging, and protect the temples as shared heritage. There is also a need for more people-to-people programs, cross-border cooperation, and regional support from ASEAN and UNESCO. In this way, temples can become bridges for peace, not causes of conflict.

Conclusion:

The Thai–Cambodian border dispute over temple sites like Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom is shaped by history, politics, and national identity. Although international legal rulings, such as those by the International Court of Justice, have clearly supported Cambodia's claim over Preah Vihear, the conflict continues because of deep-rooted nationalist sentiments and different interpretations of colonial-era documents. These ancient temples, instead of being shared cultural treasures, have become symbols of rivalry. This study shows that legal solutions alone cannot solve such disputes. Political leaders and media have often used the temple issue to stir national emotions, making peace harder to achieve. ASEAN's role has been minimal, and local communities continue to suffer due to border tensions and military clashes. To move forward, both countries must respect international rulings, reduce political use of cultural sites, and work together to protect shared heritage. Promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation can turn these temples from sources of tension into symbols of unity and peace.

Recommendations:

1. A Thai–Cambodian Joint Commission on Heritage Protection should be formed to manage conservation, tourism, and educational projects related to temple complexes. This commission should be inclusive of local community voices, religious leaders, and international experts.
2. Thailand and Cambodia should re-engage in formal diplomatic talks grounded in historical treaties and International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings. A shared interpretation of colonial-era maps, backed by third-party legal scholars, can help reduce ambiguity and build mutual trust.
3. Both governments should acknowledge the temples as symbols of shared cultural and religious heritage rooted in the ancient Khmer Empire. Public campaigns, school curricula, and media messaging should avoid nationalistic framing and instead promote regional cultural unity.
4. ASEAN must adopt stronger institutional mechanisms to intervene early in territorial disputes. It should develop a formal Cultural Heritage Conflict Resolution Framework to guide member states on resolving disputes involving sacred sites and borders.
5. Military presence at ancient temple sites should be removed to preserve their cultural, religious, and historical value. Joint patrolling and civilian-led peacekeeping initiatives, monitored by ASEAN or UNESCO, should replace armed deployments.
6. Emergency preparedness plans must be developed for villagers near temple zones. Governments should set up rapid response shelters, medical aid units, and compensation packages for those displaced by conflict or landmine threats.
7. Organize cross-border cultural exchanges, temple pilgrimages, and academic forums to reduce misunderstanding and revive traditional bonds between Thai and Cambodian communities.
8. Independent academic institutions or UNESCO should help create a joint digital archive of colonial maps, treaties, and legal documents to serve as a reliable reference for both countries and international observers.
9. Sacred temple sites should be placed under special protection through UNESCO World Heritage and The Hague Convention protocols, which can discourage their use in armed conflicts and ensure accountability if damaged.

10. Both countries should revise national school textbooks to reflect shared historical and cultural connections. This will reduce long-term prejudice and create an informed generation capable of peaceful coexistence.

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