

# A fragile truce: Can the Kuala Lumpur accord survive?

The peace accord signed in the Malaysian capital by Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, on 26 October 2025, witnessed by US President Donald Trump, who claimed it as one of his hallmark international peace achievements, has since then come under strain. It broke down completely in December as the neighbours engaged in renewed combat over their disputed border. Pravit Rojanaphruk considers whether the accord can last.

6-minute read



Thailand and Cambodia Clash Amid Rising Tensions Over Disputed Border Area.

**T**he ceasefire was restored following a meeting in late December in Thailand's Chanthaburi province. A week later a Thai soldier was injured by mortar fire from the Cambodian side. The Cambodian government expressed regret, calling the incident an accident caused by trash burning near the border. The territorial dispute behind the hostilities dates back more than a century in the view of Thailand and much earlier according to Cambodia.

So in the longer term will President Trump's ceasefire hold? The answer depends on both domestic and foreign factors working against this delicate peace.

## The Thai perspective

On the Thai side, there is a historical grievance stemming from the colonial era and disputed maps alongside a resurgence in the



Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Manet, Thailand's Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and US President Donald Trump during the ceremonial signing of a ceasefire agreement between Thailand and Cambodia in Kuala Lumpur on October 26, 2025. Photo: AFP

popularity of the Thai armed forces following a perceived military 'victory'. Additionally, this month's general election is heightening tensions.

The curriculum in Thailand's schools says that Imperial France and Great Britain seized lands under Siamese control, including much of modern-day Cambodia.

Maps recording this seizure remain central to collective Thai grievances and continue to fuel border disputes, most notably regarding the Preah Vihear Temple. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Cambodia in 1962 and reaffirmed Cambodia's sovereignty over the entire promontory in 2013, the ruling was a sore point among Thais. Many feel the Franco-Siamese maps drawn between 1893 and 1907 were fundamentally unfair.

The 1893 map followed the Paknam Incident, where French gunboats forced their way up the Chao Phraya River, compelling Siam to sign an unequal treaty and surrender territory on the left bank of the Mekong. Thai nationalists view recent border skirmishes as a justified move not just to reclaim the disputed lands and small temples but to go some way towards correcting historical injustice.

### **War for votes**

Another dimension of the conflict is a 'war for electoral votes.' With the dissolution of the Thai parliament and an election scheduled for 8 February, campaign rhetoric has become increasingly aggressive. Caretaker PM Anutin Charnvirakul has pledged to build walls and fences if returned to government.

Another candidate, Mongkolkit Suksintharanon of the New Alternative Party, declared himself ready for a "swift, decisive war" against Cambodia and even suggested Thailand acquire nuclear weapons. The leader of the progressive People's Party, Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, declared on 8 January that he supported the use of Gripen fighter jets to bomb targets in Cambodia.

On January 7, anonymous campaign boards urged Thai voters not to vote for the "Cambodian People's Party", taken to be a reference either to the main opposition People's Party of Mr Ruengpanyawut, or possibly to the populist Pheu Thai Party founded by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This appears to make the election a choice for Thai voters between anti-Cambodia political parties.

### **The Cambodian perspective**

For Cambodians the 'long memory' extends back a millennium to



**The Preah Vihear temple, a historic site at the heart of the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute. Photo: PsamatheM/CC BY-SA 4.0, Source: Wikipedia**

the Angkor Empire (802-1431) which once occupied much of today's Thailand. Maps of this empire serve as a bitter reminder of how Thailand and Vietnam have historically absorbed Cambodian or Khmer lands.

Modern Thailand is seen as the aggressor, the invader, with an insatiable appetite to absorb more Cambodian land. Along the Thai side of the border in the provinces of Surin and Buriram live many ethnic Khmers who speak a variant of the Khmer language but are Thai citizens loyal to the Thai state. The fact that the Thai army has seized control of a dozen spots, including disputed temples like Prasat Ta Kwai and Prasat Ta Muen Phom, means Cambodia will likely continue its protests on the international stage.



Displaced people queue for food at a temporary shelter amid deadly clashes between Thailand and Cambodia along a disputed border area, in Buriram province, Thailand, on December 9, 2025. Photo: Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters

### **International influences**

While the US remains involved, China has also taken an active role as has the regional group of nations, ASEAN, of which both nations are members. China may view the conflict as an opportunity to prove it can exert a stabilising influence in its own ‘backyard’. In late December, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a dialogue in Yunnan province for the foreign ministers of both nations, which contributed to the current pause in fighting.

Another positive factor is the crackdown in Cambodia on ‘scam centres’. In early January, Cambodia handed over the naturalised citizen and ‘scam lord’ Chen Zhi to Beijing. Cambodia was acquiring a reputation as a centre of financial scamming in the region and beyond. Reducing the influence of these criminal networks may lower tensions, as many Thais see the conflict as a proxy war against Cambodia-based scammers.

The Paris-based exiled Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy suggested on Facebook that Chen Zhi had close relations with the ruling Cambodian People’s Party of Hun Sen and his son, the current prime minister Hun Manet. Rainsy cited the Institute of Humanity Research Consultancy as claiming that “a majority of the leaders of the Cambodian People's Party are thugs [who] protect the cross-border crime network (Cybercrime) to collect money [for] the Hun Sen family.” He asked: “Is Hun Manet brave enough to arrest his family members who are criminals ... or will they remain beyond the reach of accountability?”

There is no proof of Rainsy’s assertion but Chen Zhi is assumed to have enjoyed ties with those high up in the Cambodian political echelon because the physical size of scam centres in Cambodia

rival that of large prison with high walls, CCTVs and barbed wire – something that can hardly have escaped the attention of the Cambodian authorities.

Cambodia's Deputy PM Sun Chanthol told Bloomberg in an exclusive interview that scam crimes should not be a reason for war, adding that there's a need to “lower the temperature” between Bangkok and Phnom Penh in order to allow displaced people to return home.

By late January approximately 400,000 Cambodians remained in government displacement sites or with host communities as they wait for security clearances to return to their villages. On the Thai side, most have returned but some of their properties were



**Displaced people take shelter at an evacuation centre in Thailand's Sa Kaeo province. Photo: AFP**

damaged, just like on the other side of the border. Originally over 700,000 people fled on the Cambodian side while the figure on the Thai side was around 400,000 people.

In early January, the United States announced a \$45 million aid package to support the truce. A top State Department official, Michael DeSombre, visited the region to discuss using these funds for de-mining, fighting scammers, and assisting the nearly one million people who were originally displaced by the conflict.

While Cambodia traditionally enjoys closer ties with China, the United States is making significant inroads through the peace accord to rival China. Last year the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet announced that a section of a major boulevard will be named after Donald Trump as an expression of gratitude. Hun Manet also wrote a letter to the Nobel Committee to nominate Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Other major powers like Japan and the EU have expressed a desire for peace. Japan has seen its supply of goods from Cambodia, such as clothing and shoes, furniture and office supplies, disrupted and urged the two countries to reopen their common border to allow trade to resume, leading to criticism by ultranationalist Thai netizens.

It seems that the survivability of the ceasefire – President Trump’s truce – remains in a state of incertitude, at the mercy of ultranationalists on both sides.

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