

A Mini-Episode: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

Greetings, dear listeners! This is a special mini-episode, recorded on short notice to discuss the current unpleasant business between Thailand and Cambodia. This is not part of the general narrative I have done about Southeast Asian history; I finished that in 2021. Nor does it count as one of the “Loose Ends” episodes I have done since 2021. In 2023 I did a brief episode to express my views on the theories about ancient aliens, called “It Must Be the Mystery Factor.” You can put this episode in the same special category – an episode I suddenly recorded because I felt the urge to share something with all of you. For the record, I am not the only one to talk about the border crisis; I have already heard two other short episodes on this subject, from a podcast about Cambodia, and I have seen a YouTube video about it. Of course, events have continued to happen in Southeast Asia since 2021, and I have mentioned a few of them on this podcast’s Facebook page, like the terrible earthquake in Myanmar last March, and the announcement that Vietnam is going to build a high-speed railroad between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. One of these days I will probably record episodes about all that. Let the record show that current events wait for no one.

Now for a lot of you, this sudden round of shooting between Cambodian and Thai soldiers must have taken you by surprise, a “bolt from the blue,” so to speak. After all, the border between Cambodia and Thailand has been quiet for nearly thirty years, since the Khmer Rouge made their last stand near the border, at Anlong Veng in 1998. If you want to refresh your memory, I covered all this in Episode #114. Since then the border between the two countries has been mostly peaceful, except for the ongoing dispute over the nearly one-thousand-year-old Preah Vihear temple; I mentioned that in Episode #114 as well.

Just the other day, I saw a map of Thailand that was color-coded according to the amount of danger that different parts of the country pose for foreign visitors. The part of Thailand right on the border with Cambodia was colored red, with the words, “Do not travel.” In the far south, three provinces on the border with Malaysia were colored orange, and the map said, “Reconsider your need to travel.” Long-time listeners may remember that Bangkok has experienced unrest in this area, due to a large Malay population located here, that would like those provinces to become part of Malaysia. Finally, the rest of the country was colored yellow, and for that the map said, “Exercise a high degree of caution.” Of course I would exercise caution if I was there now; it’s only common sense that anyone should be careful when traveling abroad.

The first thing to keep in mind here is that exact borders are difficult to draw in this part of the world, because most of Southeast Asia’s terrain is a combination of jungles and mountains. Wherever you go in such an environment, you will have trouble determining where you’re at, even with today’s technology. My oldest listeners may remember that I was inspired to launch this podcast in 2016, when LIDAR, laser-based radar, was used to scan the Cambodian jungle, and it discovered a lost city that the Khmers built in the ninth century, before they got started on their national masterpiece, Angkor Wat. Well, the current round of fighting shows that even if you survey a territory with LIDAR, disputes and a shooting war are still possible.

For another example of a border dispute in the tropics, let me refer you to an incident that happened on the other side of the world from Southeast Asia, in Central America. Officially the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is supposed to follow the San Juan River, but the two countries disagree on exactly where that line is. One day in November 2010 a Nicaraguan army unit crossed the border, and

advanced almost two miles into Costa Rican territory; that's three kilometers if you prefer the metric system. Then the troops cut down a protected forest, took down a Costa Rican flag, replaced the flag with a Nicaraguan one, cleaned out the river, and dumped the sediment they dredged from the river on its Costa Rican side. I'm sure Costa Rica was upset at the cutting down of their forest, because that country makes some of its income from eco-tourism. And obviously the Nicaraguan troops did not think they were trespassing; the Costa Rican flag should have warned them they were off-course! Afterwards the Nicaraguan commander, Eden Pastora, blamed the mistake on Google Maps. Sure enough, the mighty search engine's map put the border 3,000 meters east of where it really is. Now if Pastora had used Microsoft's search engine, Bing.com, he would have been all right, because Bing has a correct map for that area. Or he could have used old-fashioned paper maps, which are also accurate, and this whole embarrassing incident probably wouldn't have happened.

Now let's go back to Southeast Asia. The other reason why the borders are unclear is because for most of history, they were subject to change without warning, and the local cultures encouraged this. This is because most of the region learned the basics of civilization from India, another place with vague borders between its states. The only places in Southeast Asia where Indian culture was not dominant were northern Vietnam, where China's influence was stronger than that of India, and the more distant parts of the Philippines and Indonesia. Where Indian culture was strongest, the states that arose were loosely organized. Six or seven cities had kings that were more powerful than the rest – you can call them “great kings” if you wish – and they tended to lord over the other cities and the farmland surrounding them. However, there was always the chance that one of the lesser cities would try to gain its independence, or switch its allegiance from one great king to another. This was especially likely when a great king died, and the lesser kings under him might think that the treaty or agreement that bound them to the greater king did not bind them to his successor. Because of all this, the borders of Southeast Asian states changed quite often, and were difficult to draw on a map in a way that was accurate.

In the early episodes of the podcast, we called this political arrangement the Mandala system, because it resembled a mandala, a symbol used in eastern religions that can be interpreted in more than one way. During ancient and medieval times, only the Vietnamese kingdom did not follow the Mandala system, because it copied the Chinese bureaucracy instead, and thus its government could keep close track of everything happening within the realm. After 1500, when Europeans made contact with Southeast Asia, the Mandala system faded from all Southeast Asian states, as their governments learned new techniques of administration and became more efficient.

We also saw in the earliest episodes that most of the peoples in present-day Southeast Asia migrated from south China, and the Khmers arrived in their present-day location around 500 B.C. Until other ethnic groups arrived, the Khmers ruled over quite a bit more land than they have today. Besides present-day Cambodia, they owned the Mekong delta region, the southern third of present-day Vietnam. They also ruled Laos during the days of Chenla and the early days of the Angkor empire, and part of present-day Thailand. To sum it up, the whole lower Mekong valley was theirs. And we noted that the Mekong valley was the best place to grow rice in Southeast Asia, especially around the lake called the Tonle Sap. This promised prosperity to the people living there.

Now the reason why there's a border dispute is because the Khmers did not remain the dominant ethnic group on the Southeast Asian mainland. During the first millennium A.D., the Thais also moved out of south China, following in the footsteps of the Khmers. This was not a grand migration; they came in

small groups, so the ruling Khmers probably did not give them much attention. And not all of them made the move; the Zhuang, the largest minority group in present-day China, live in China's Guangxi Province; they are the descendants of those Thais who stayed behind. Anyway, after they settled in Laos, or in the Menam River valley of present-day Thailand, the Thais found employment as mercenaries for the Khmers. Still other Thais moved into eastern Burma and the Indian state of Assam, becoming the Shans and the Ahom or Assamese respectively, but we won't mention them again in this episode, because they are not involved in the current dispute.

While the Thais were in the minority, they seem to have gotten along with the Khmers all right. But then by 1220, there were enough of them along the Menam River to break away and form states of their own. At first there were probably several Thai city-states, but only two of them lasted long enough to matter. Both of them were based in the northern part of the Menam valley: Lan Na, with its capital at Chiangmai, and Siam, with its capital at Sukhothai. While Lan Na kept to itself and never grew very large, Siam began expanding in the late thirteenth century, under its first great king, Ramkhamhaeng. By this time the Khmer empire was exhausted and low on money, after all its activities in previous centuries, so the Khmers did not do much to resist their land going to the Thais; it seems that most of the time the Khmer kings were willing to make deals with the Thais, to keep these newcomers friendly. Then in 1350 a new royal family took over in Siam, and they moved the capital from Sukhothai to a location hundreds of miles to the south, at Ayutthaya. The Siamese capital has always been on the lower Menam River since then; in fact, Bangkok is there now. Meanwhile to the north of Cambodia, the first Laotian state gained its independence. Again, the Khmer kings made allies of the Lao, rather than fight them. As a result, the Cambodian state shrank, until it was the size of present-day Cambodia, plus the Mekong delta region.

The end of Cambodia's glorious time came in 1431, when the Thais sent a raid that captured and sacked Angkor Wat. The Thais did not keep the city; they were only there for loot, and they went home with all the valuables they could carry. Still, the raid gave the Thais the idea that the part of Cambodia containing Angkor Wat now belonged to them, and they would come back to claim it later. As for the Khmers, they did not stay either, and abandoned their ruined capital to the jungle. They moved to the neighborhood where the Mekong meets the river flowing out of the Tonle Sap; since then the Khmer capital has always been here, including the present-day capital, Phnom Penh.

The next four hundred years are considered the "dark age of Cambodian history." For most of this period Cambodia was a puppet state, paying tribute to Siam. Then the Vietnamese state began expanding to the south and west, and the Vietnamese took an interest in Cambodian territory, as a place to resettle their surplus population. The Vietnamese seized the Khmer fishing village of Prey Nokor in 1697; this would become the city of Saigon, and when the Second Indochina War ended in 1975, it got the name it holds now, Ho Chi Minh City. Over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Vietnam took the rest of the Mekong delta region. Thus, Cambodia found itself oppressed by two larger countries, Siam and Vietnam, and often it had to pay tribute to both, when it wasn't a battleground between them. Meanwhile on the other side of Cambodia, a Siamese king, Taksin, conquered the two northwestern provinces, Battambang and Siam Reap, in 1769. A Cambodian prince was installed as governor of those provinces. Then in 1795, the next Siamese king, Rama I, made another Cambodian prince, Ang Eng, king of Cambodia; in return Ang Eng agreed to let Siam keep the northwestern provinces. Thus, the Cambodians were in danger of getting absorbed into Siam or Vietnam, when the French showed up on the scene in the mid-nineteenth century.

Of course, we have already covered in previous episodes how the French got involved in Southeast Asia. When they went for colonies on the mainland, first they took the Mekong delta from the Vietnamese; then in 1863 they established a protectorate over Cambodia. The French justified this action by pointing out that Cambodia had been a satellite state of Vietnam; now that the French ruled over the southern part of Vietnam, they reasoned, Cambodia should belong to them, too. In 1867 France signed a treaty with Siam in which Siam acknowledged Cambodia now belonged to France, except for the two Cambodian provinces held by Siam. But all things considered, it's probably just as well that the French took over. Cambodia suffered exploitation while the French were in charge, and French missionaries were eager to convert the Khmers to Christianity, but unlike Siam and Vietnam, the French were not likely to take away Cambodia's language and culture. In that sense, the French saved the Cambodian people from losing their identity.

Nevertheless, the French were lording over an incomplete country. The two provinces in Siamese hands were critical from a Cambodian perspective. Battambang was a major rice-producing area, while Siem Reap contained Angkor Wat, the Khmers' most outstanding achievement and the nation's capital during its most glorious years. Imagine the United States without Washington DC and New York City, maybe also the states surrounding those cities, and you'll have an idea what this must have been like for Cambodia. The French realized that, put pressure on Siam for the two disputed provinces, and got them in 1907. So far it sounds like France was restoring Cambodia, but it couldn't last, because France was devastated by two world wars in the early twentieth century. And by the time France took the provinces, they had been under Siamese rule for more than a century, so naturally the Siamese thought the provinces belonged to them. They got their chance to take them back during World War II, after Nazi Germany had conquered the French homeland. We covered this conflict, the brief Franco-Thai War, in Episode 34, in which Siam, now renamed Thailand, took back Battambang and Siem Reap Provinces in 1941. Thus the provinces were in Thai hands for the rest of the war, and after the war the provinces changed hands yet another time, because Thailand gave them back, as a condition for joining the new United Nations.

In the eighty years since World War II, the French were forced to leave Southeast Asia, Cambodia regained its independence, and it has kept the two provinces in question -- but the border dispute has continued on a smaller scale. What caused it? Well, the Thais resented how the French had bullied them into giving up the disputed land. After the French and the Thais had signed a treaty, establishing the Thai-Cambodian border where it is now, the French drew an official map of Cambodia in 1907. Because the border went through jungles, its vagueness led to conflicting interpretations, and Thailand contested this interpretation of the border. This shows that maps won't settle a dispute if they are drawn to favor one side. Here's what Thongchai Winichakul, a Thai historian, said about the current border conflict. **Quote: "In such a situation, maps cannot help because they are part of the problem."**
End Quote.

The biggest dispute was over the rugged area where the Khmers built Preah Vihear, a Hindu temple, nearly a thousand years ago. Personally I'm amazed that both sides want the temple, inasmuch as both the Khmers and the Thais converted to Theravada Buddhism in the thirteenth century. Anyway, when Cambodia and Thailand could not resolve the dispute diplomatically, the case went to the International Court of Justice, and it ruled in 1962 that the old temple belonged to Cambodia. That should have been the end of the matter, but the dispute only quieted down because the two countries now had other things

to worry about, with the war in Vietnam and Laos heating up. During the Cambodian Civil War, Preah Vihear was the last part of Cambodia to be captured by the Khmer Rouge; it held out until May 22, 1975. In other words, the Khmer Rouge didn't take it until five weeks after Phnom Penh fell to them. I told you in Episode 96 about some of the Khmer Republic's soldiers making their last stand in the temple, and how at the beginning of May 1975, one of them said, **quote, "This is the Khmer Republic. It is very small now." Unquote.**

Now fast-forward through the years of the Pol Pot Terror, the 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and all the hardship the Cambodians have suffered since then. From 2008 to 2011 there was on-and-off fighting between Thai and Cambodian troops, in the border area around Preah Vihear. Each side blamed the other for starting and prolonging the fighting. The worst incident was a round of fighting that lasted for seven days in 2011; fifteen were killed and tens of thousands of civilians had to flee the area. Both sides agreed to a cease-fire, and later in the same year, a United Nations court ordered the establishment of a demilitarized zone between the troops. However, clashes continued on other parts of the border for some time to come.

Podcast footnote: When Cambodia and Thailand haven't been quarreling over where the border should be, tensions have remained high as they argue over who owns the features of their culture that they have in common. In particular, Cambodians accuse the Thais of cultural appropriation, claiming that much of Thai art and architecture came from the Khmers originally. To give one example, they claim that Muay Thai, a martial art practiced in Thailand, came from a Cambodian martial art, Kun Khmer. The Thais respond by saying that wherever their culture came from is irrelevant because it happened centuries ago and that their historical conquests justify claims to certain border areas. End footnote.

The next phase in the dispute began on May 28, 2025, when there was a skirmish between the troops of the two countries, and a Cambodian soldier was killed. This happened in an area called the Emerald Triangle, the part of the border where Thailand, Cambodia and Laos meet. Now the last time this podcast talked about Thailand, in Episode #119, the prime minister was a former general, Prayut Chan-o-cha. Well, Prayut had retired in 2023, and the person who was prime minister at this time was Paetongtarn Shinawatra. Paetongtarn is the daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire who served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006. On the other side, Hun Sen was prime minister from 1986 to 2023, and after he stepped down, his son, Hun Manet, succeeded him, while Hun Sen became the Senate president. So in both countries one family held most of the power, with the former leader still considered the strongest man in each.

Anyway, Paetongtarn tried to defuse the situation by making a phone call to Hun Sen, on June 15. Three days later, Hun Sen posted a recording of their conversation on his Facebook page, and that caused an outcry in Thailand. What upset the Thais was Ms. Paetongtarn's choice of words. She told Hun Sen to ignore the Thai military, calling it "the opposite side," and called him "uncle"; she also offered to "arrange" anything that he wanted. Thais saw this as undermining unity and making concessions to a rival leader, and they called on the prime minister to resign. On July 1, Thailand's Constitutional Court suspended Ms. Paetongtarn as prime minister. Then on August 29, the Constitutional Court accused her of violating ethics when she made the phone call, and formally removed her from office. At the time of this recording, the deputy prime minister, Phumtham Wechayachai, holds her job. (I hope I said his name right.)

Meanwhile, rounds of retaliation took place in the civilian populations of both countries. Cambodia banned Thai imports, including fruits and fuel, while Thailand closed border crossings and restricted Internet and power links to Cambodia. On July 23, five Thai soldiers were injured by a Cambodian landmine; the soldier who stepped on the mine lost his leg.

Now we're up to the latest round of fighting. It broke out on July 24 near Prasat Ta Muen Thom, another disputed temple on the border. For what it's worth, this temple's name is Cambodian for "Great Temple of Grandfather Chicken"; I wish I knew how it got that name. Over the next few days, there were clashes at twelve border locations. Gunfire, artillery and rockets were exchanged, and Thai air strikes hit Cambodian locations. Martial law was declared in the part of Thailand along the border, and each side accused the other of hitting civilian targets: hospitals and gas stations in Thailand and a school in Cambodia. More than 200,000 civilians on both sides were forced to evacuate the border area.

ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, called for an immediate ceasefire, and the United Nations Security Council held an emergency session on July 25. The next day, US President Donald Trump got involved, contacting both sides and ordering them to work out a ceasefire. On July 28, Thailand and Cambodia sent representatives to peace talks in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. The US State Department also sent delegates to observe the talks, but otherwise the United States did not get involved. Before the day was over, the Thais and Cambodians declared, **quote, "an immediate and unconditional ceasefire." Unquote.** They met in Kuala Lumpur because Malaysia is the host nation for ASEAN meetings this year.

At the time of this recording, the cease-fire has held, though each side has accused the other of various violations, like using flying drones to spy on the other side. The civilians who had to evacuate the border area started to return in August, since there hasn't been any fighting since July 28. All of the member nations of ASEAN have urged Cambodia and Thailand to use restraint, and to keep talking, to maintain the current peace.

Regarding the casualty count, at least 54 people were reported killed during the clashes. This includes 8 civilians and 18 soldiers in Cambodia, and 13 civilians and 15 soldiers in Thailand. In Cambodia, at least 50 civilians and more than 20 soldiers were injured, while in Thailand, 29 soldiers and 30 civilians were injured. Alas, the civilian casualties include children. On July 26, Cambodia announced Major General Duong Samneang, commander of the 7th Division, was killed by an artillery strike.

And that's the situation as I record this, in early September 2025. Knowing how crises like this one work in today's world, I believe we haven't heard the last word on the border dispute yet. That's all for now, and thank you for listening. Now, with the next episode, we will return to the regularly scheduled podcast.

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