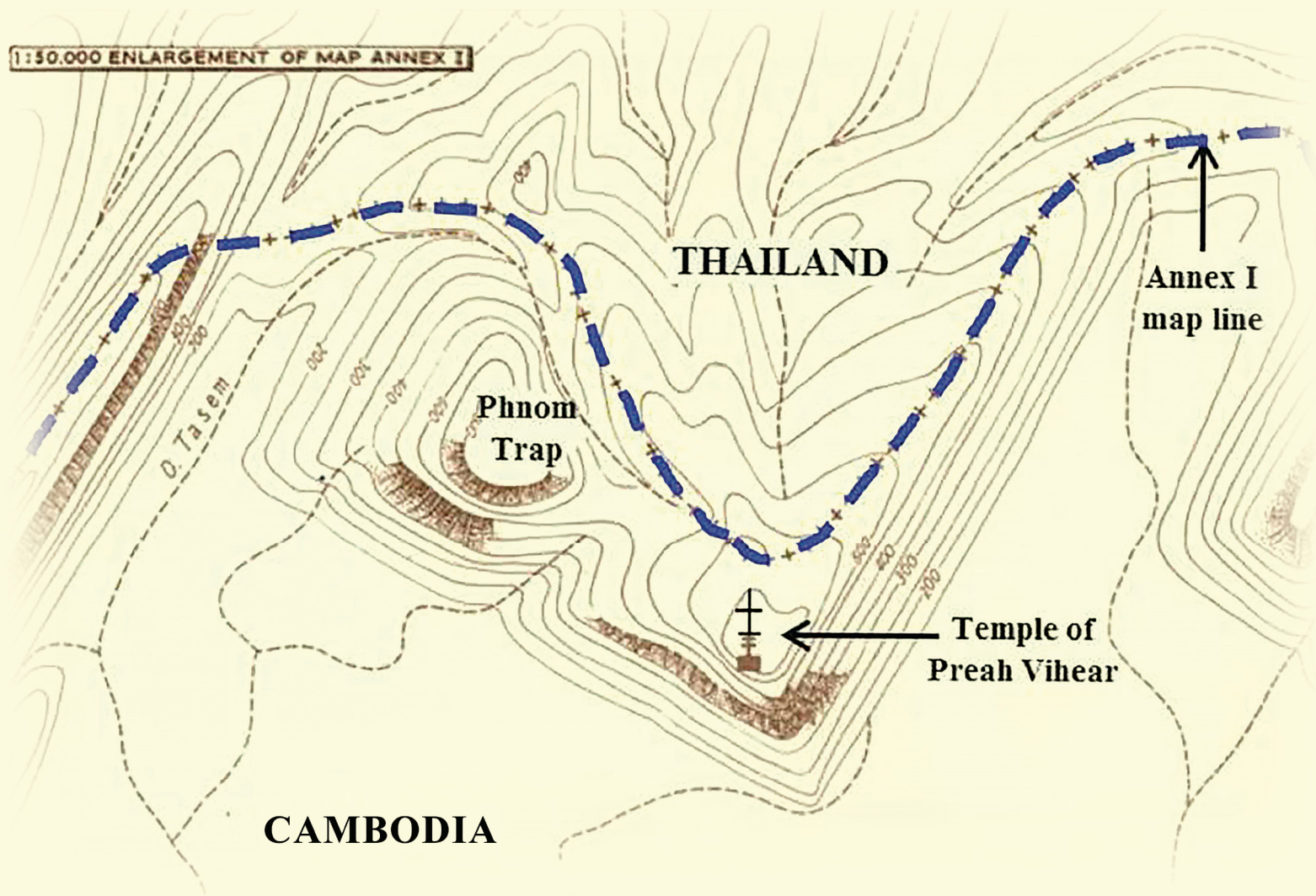


The Transnational Geo-Body of the Cambodian–Thai Border Conflicts

Symbolic Geopolitics, Nationalism
and Externalisation of Domestic Securities



Mak Sithirith and Khath Bunthorn

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Table of contents

List of figures and tables	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of acronyms and abbreviations	vi
Executive summary.....	vii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Conceptual Framework: From geo-body to transnational geo-body	1
3. Methods and materials	3
4. Results	5
4.1. Mapping, borders, and territory: The extended imagined geo-body	5
4.2. Transnational geo-body: From colonial maps and treaties to unilateral maps	6
4.3. Transnational scam economies	8
4.4. Constructed and reconstructed geo-body of the nation through maps, border, and territory.....	9
4.4.1. <i>Pushing Cambodian migrant workers out of Thailand</i>	10
4.4.2. <i>Closure of border gates and constructions of new border lines</i>	11
4.4.3. <i>Transnational economic disruptions</i>	12
4.5. The internationalisation of the transnational geo-body	14
5. Discussion and conclusion.....	16
References.....	18
CDRI Working paper series.....	24

List of figures and tables

Figure 1: The map of the study sites	4
Table 1: The casinos and ownerships along the Cambodia-Thai border	8
Table 2: Cambodia's exports to Thailand in 2024	12

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
JBC	Joint Boundary Commission
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NBC	National Bank of Cambodia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIB	National Institute of Business
NIS	National Institute of Statistics
NPIC	National Polytechnic Institute of Cambodia
NSSF	National Social Security Fund
NTTI	National Technical Training Institute
OCA	Overlapping Claim Area
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
UDD	United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States Dollar
THB	Thai Baht
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Executive summary

This study analyses the recurring Cambodian–Thai border conflicts through the concept of the transnational geo-body, extending the geo-body concept to capture how territorial identity, sovereignty, and political claims are continuously produced across borders. The conflict originates in colonial cartography and treaties, particularly the 1904–1907 Franco–Siamese agreements, which transformed historically fluid frontiers into fixed borders. Although these boundaries have been reaffirmed through international legal rulings, they remain disputed due to competing national imaginaries, symbolic territorial claims, and political interests. The renewed escalation of conflict in 2025 demonstrates that these tensions are ongoing and politically reproduced rather than historically resolved.

The study addresses the question of why and how colonial boundaries and symbolic sites have been transnationalised to generate recurring conflicts. It argues that territorial claims are not static but are continually reconstructed through unilateral mapping, historical narratives, and cross-border interactions. These processes create overlapping territorial claims that extend beyond formal state boundaries and sustain enduring contestation.

Using a qualitative, multi-method approach, the research combines literature review with fieldwork in four Cambodian border locations: Poipet, Daung, Malai, and Phsar Prom. Data were collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and secondary sources (2000–2025). Due to security constraints, fieldwork was limited to the Cambodian side, the study integrates secondary data on Thailand to provide a comprehensive analysis of the conflict dynamics and their impacts.

The findings show that border conflicts are driven by the cyclical co-production of territorial claims through maps, political narratives, and nationalism. Competing cartographic systems—colonial treaty maps and unilateral national maps—produce overlapping claim areas that form a transnational geo-body, a shared but contested space claimed by both states. Political elites instrumentalise these tensions to externalise domestic political challenges and mobilise nationalist support, making border conflict closely linked to internal political dynamics.

The study also identifies significant socio-economic impacts, including displacement, disruption of labour migration, and declines in trade and local livelihoods following the 2025 conflict. At the same time, the border operates as a transnational economic zone, characterised by interconnected activities such as trade, migration, and casino-based economies, which blur the distinction between national territories and highlight cross-border interdependence.

The study concludes that Cambodian–Thai border conflicts are not merely territorial disputes but ongoing processes of territorial reconstruction shaped by historical legacies, political strategies, and transnational interactions. Given the limitations of bilateral mechanisms, the study argues that internationalisation—through legal adjudication, ASEAN engagement, and third-party facilitation—offers the most effective pathway to sustainable conflict resolution. A durable solution requires moving beyond rigid territorial frameworks towards cooperative approaches that recognise the inherently transnational nature of the border.

1. Introduction

The nation-state theory defines state as a fixed boundary, sovereign authority and state function within self-contained territorial spaces (Weber 1919; Skocpol 1979; Anderson 1983; Migdal 1988; Krasner, 1999). The state is made visible through maps, borders, spatial technologies, and treaties (Winichakul 1994). Cambodia is made visible as state by the 1094-1907 Franco-Siamese Treaties, the 1941 Tokyo Convention, the 1946 Franco-Siamese Treaty, and the rules of the International Court of Justice in 1962 and 2013 (ICJ 1962, 2011). Despite these, Thailand does not respect international frameworks and treaties, and Cambodian–Thai border conflicts continue (Deth 2020). This study questions why colonial boundaries and symbolic sites along the Cambodian–Thai borders have been transnationalised to shape recurring border conflicts. To answer this question, the study reviews the existing literature and conducts empirical research in four border provinces of Cambodia. It documents the dynamics of transnational geo-body politics, the nature of border conflicts, their effects on local communities, and the internationalisation of settlements.

The French colonised Cambodia in 1863 under a protectorate regime and employed colonial cartographic technology (Harley 1987) to divide the territories of the former Khmer Kingdom (ICJ 1962). In 1904-1907, the French signed treaties with the Siamese government to demarcate boundaries and shape Cambodian territory. Cambodia became independent in 1954. For about 100 years, the French protected Cambodia against the influences of Siam, current Thailand. The paper examines the Cambodian–Thai border conflict by first reviewing conceptual frameworks of the nation-state; second, presenting the study’s results and discussing the findings; and lastly, the conclusion.

2. Conceptual Framework: From geo-body to transnational geo-body

The concept of the state has evolved from classical territorially bounded models toward more relational and multi-scalar interpretations. Weber (1919) defined the state as a human community claiming the legitimate monopoly within a given territory, emphasising coercion, legitimacy, and legal-rational bureaucracy. Historical institutionalists extended this framework. Tilly (1992) linked state formation to war-making and taxation, while Skocpol (1979) highlighted bureaucratic autonomy. However, international relations theory has long assumed that states are fixed territorial containers, separating domestic and international spheres and acting as unified actors (Waltz 1979; Mann 1984; Brenner 2004; Sassen 2006), assumptions later critically challenged.

Political geography further deepened this perspective by interrogating how territory itself is produced. Winichakul (1994), in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, demonstrates that national space is not natural but constructed through cartographic practices and colonial power. Maps shape the nation’s spatial imagination, transforming fluid frontiers into fixed borders and embedding territorial integrity in popular consciousness. According to Winichakul (1994), as a nation-state, Thailand was not discovered but rather constructed through the annexations of various chiefdoms, influenced by regional power, colonial regime, and treaties. Indeed, Thailand is constructed and reconstructed through mapping, border delineation, colonial cartographic politics, disputes, territorial negotiations, and treaties (Winichakul 1994; Murashima 2005). Citizens came to recognise the mapped outline of the nation as a natural homeland, producing emotional attachments to territorial integrity. Nevertheless, this approach can verge on cartographic determinism. Its strong emphasis on mapping technologies and colonial boundary-making risks overstating the role of formal state practices while underplaying everyday social and economic processes that also shape

territoriality, such as migration, trade networks, and informal mobility. Furthermore, the geo-body framework is historically oriented, explaining how borders were formed rather than how they are continually renegotiated in the context of globalisation and transnational flows. As a result, it may insufficiently capture contemporary forms of porous sovereignty and cross-border interdependence.

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) fundamentally reshaped theories of nation-state formation by arguing that nations are socially constructed rather than primordial entities. He defines the nation as an "imagined community," not because it is fictitious, but because members will never know most fellow citizens, yet perceive a shared horizontal comradeship. This collective identity is mediated symbolically rather than grounded in face-to-face relations. Central to this process is "print capitalism," through which mass printing, vernacular languages, newspapers, and novels enabled geographically dispersed populations to consume shared texts simultaneously. Such practices generated what Anderson calls "homogeneous, empty time," synchronising national consciousness and aligning cultural identity with territorial political units, thereby reinforcing modern state legitimacy (Anderson 1983). In this connection, Strate (2015) imagines that the current geo-body of Cambodia was Thailand, particularly Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon, and that the Franco-Siamese Treaties caused "territorial losses" to Cambodia, stoking shame and anger among Thai nationals, which fuel nationalism among Thai people. Also, according to history, Cambodians still imagine that Thailand was part of the Khmer territories, but it was taken by Siam after the collapse of the Angkor Empire. There are still Khmer-speaking communities on both sides of the border (Chandler 2008).

By the 1990s, scholars increasingly challenged the view of states as territorially sealed containers. Agnew (1994) introduced the concept of the "territorial trap," criticising international relations theory for portraying states as fixed, homogeneous units separated from an external realm. He argued that political authority is shaped by transnational flows, cross-border networks, and multi-level governance, including economic exchange, migration, environmental systems, and international institutions that routinely transcend borders. This critique unsettles Weberian notions of neatly bounded sovereignty by emphasising the porous and relational character of state power. Building on this, Sassen (2006) shows how globalisation "denationalises" state functions through global markets and legal regimes, while Brenner (2004) highlights the rescaling of governance across local, regional, and global levels. Mann (1984) similarly conceptualises state power as embedded in overlapping territorial and networked relations, advocating a more flexible understanding of sovereignty.

Classical state theory, most notably articulated by Weber (1919), conceives the state as exercising legitimate authority within clearly demarcated territorial borders, reinforcing a binary distinction between domestic governance ("inside") and international anarchy ("outside"). Contemporary theorists, however, argue that this territorial and institutional framing obscures the hybrid, relational, and multi-scalar arenas through which governance actually operates. The concept of the "third space" emerges from these critiques, referring to political domains that blur boundaries between state and society, domestic and global, and public and private authority. Its intellectual foundations lie in Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial notion of hybridity, where fixed identities and binary oppositions are destabilised. Adapted to political analysis, the third space highlights negotiated and overlapping forms of rule beyond formal institutions. Sassen (2006) demonstrates how globalisation denationalises sovereign functions through transnational assemblages, while Ong (2006) describes "graduated sovereignty," in which states selectively share authority with corporations and special zones, thereby fragmenting territorial sovereignty.

Wisaijorn (2025) employs the concept of the ‘third space’ to analyse border conflicts between Cambodia and Thailand, in which the governments of the two countries are interdependent in economic and cross-border activities. There are various transnational economic and livelihood activities in which labour, trade, and welfare practices circulate through relational networks that transcend formal sovereignty. Cross-border healthcare mobility exemplifies this configuration, in which many Cambodians annually travel to Thai hospitals to access specialised services unavailable locally, illustrating how social reproduction and well-being depend on transnational access to resources. Similarly, circular labour migration and petty trade structure everyday economic life, as Cambodian workers and small traders move routinely into Thailand for short-term employment and commerce while Thai entrepreneurs simultaneously penetrate Cambodian markets. These flows are facilitated through both official checkpoints and quasi-state crossings that function less as barriers than as nodes of exchange within a shared border economy (Wisaijorn 2025).

Wisaijorn’s (2025) “third space” framework conceptualises the Cambodian–Thai border as a hybrid arena where state and non-state actors, formal and informal economies, and domestic and international processes intersect. Rather than fixed barriers, borders operate as corridors of exchange and negotiation. Khmer communities on both sides share language, Theravada Buddhism, and cultural practices predating modern boundaries (Thongchai 1994; Keyes 1995). Temples such as Preah Vihear, Ta Moan Thom, and Ta Krabei symbolise Khmer heritage while simultaneously serving Thai narratives linking them to Siamese administration (ICJ 1962, 2013; Winter 2007; Anderson 1991). Through maps, court rulings, media, and textbooks, these artefacts circulate differently yet co-produce a transnational geo-body (Meskell 2018; Mitzen 2006). Cambodian discourse often imagines Khmer-speaking provinces in northeastern Thailand as part of an extended Angkorian sphere (Chandler 2008; Thompson 2007), while Thai historiography incorporates former Cambodian provinces into its national geo-body (Strate 2015). These competing imaginaries sustain spillover nationalism and recurrent mobilisation (Boonkob 2023).

3. Methods and materials

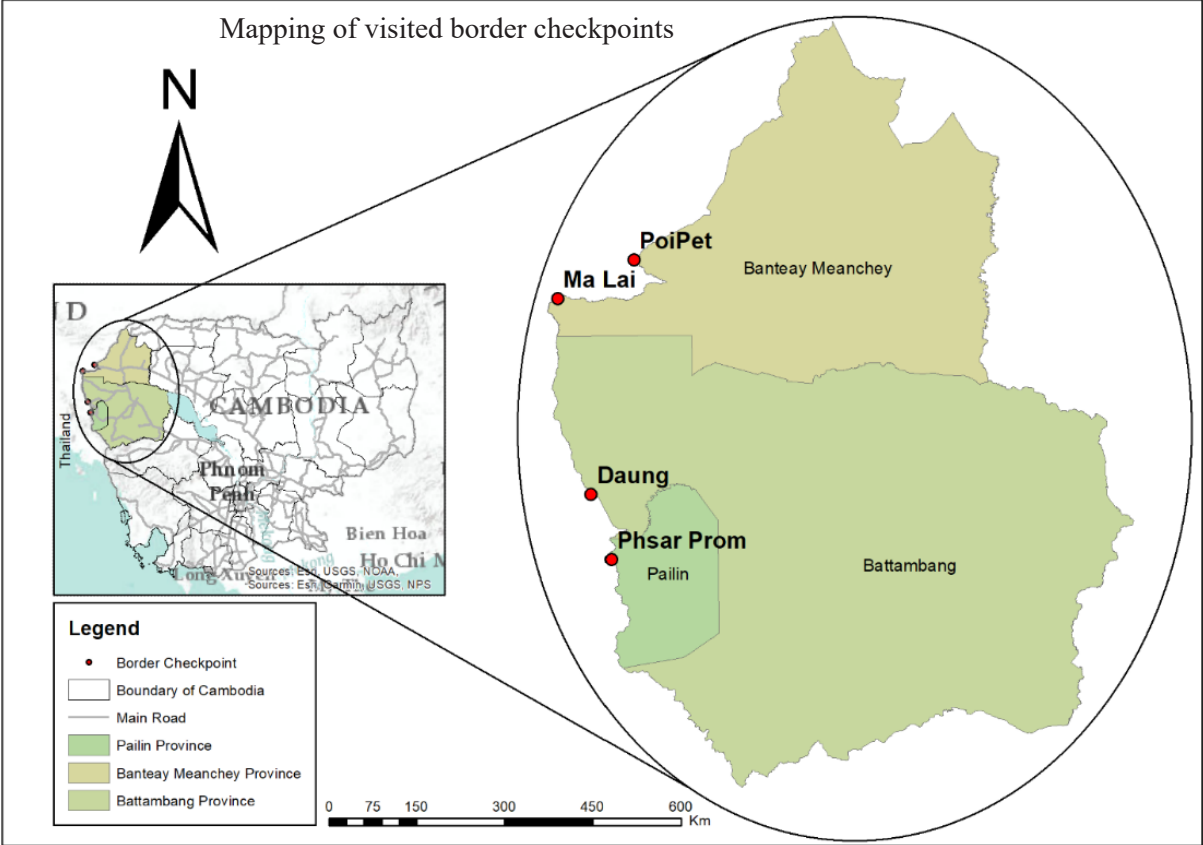
This study examines Cambodian–Thai border conflicts in Cambodia’s northwestern region. Given the conflicts and border closures between Thailand and Cambodia, four study sites were selected only in Cambodia for data collection: (1) Poipet, (2) Daung, (3) Ma Lai and (4) Psar Prom (Figure 1). These sites were selected for the study for security reasons, as routes for the mass return of Cambodian migrant workers, as important international border gates for cross-border trade with Thailand, and as pathways for daily migration for local people. The study cannot be conducted in Thailand due to cross-border tensions, which prevented the study team from collecting primary data; only secondary data were gathered in Thailand.

The study collected both primary and secondary data. Secondary data, spanning 2000 to 2026, were obtained from study sites, national archives and international sources, as well as in Thailand in relation to the border conflicts and its impacts on local people from both sides of the border areas. The study gathered secondary data on cross-border activities, trade, and socio-economic conditions following the border closure and armed confrontations in July and December 2025. The research focuses on the underlying causes of border conflicts, relevant historical events, and the transnational interactions among Cambodian and Thai elites.

Primary data were collected during fieldwork in early July 2025 in Poipet, Ma Lai, Daung, and Phsar Prom along the Cambodia-Thailand border. Methods for primary data collection included

key informant interviews (KIIs) with street vendors, monitoring of international checkpoints, the focus group discussion (FGD) and systematic observation. The KIIs were conducted with 11 people from villages, communes and district offices in Poipet, Ma Lai, Daung, and Prom. One FGD was conducted in Ma Lai District.

Figure 1: The map of the study sites



Source: Authors

Poipet covers 273 km² and is divided into three administrative quarters known as Sangkats. The population of Poipet increased from 43,366 in 1998 to 104,156 in 2018, making it the fourth most populous settlement in Cambodia and surpassing the provincial capital, Serei Saophoan (ADB 2022). This study focuses on Sangkat Ou Chrau, one of these quarters, which is home to 7,568 permanent households across seven villages. Sangkat Ou Chrau spans 931 hectares. An estimated 60 percent of residents are employed as market vendors in Cambodia’s markets, while about 40 percent of households participate in cross-border trade with the Thai market. Within Sangkat Ou Chrau, the study team selected Poipet Village, home to approximately 391 households and a population of 1,391, of whom 748 are female. Approximately 40 percent of residents are employed as labourers, including manual goods carriers and similar occupations. Between 60 and 70 percent of individuals over the age of 18 are employed in the casino industry. In Sangkat Ou Chrau, the study team conducted a KII with the Sangkat Chief of Ou Chrau Sangkat, Poipet Municipality, followed by a meeting with the Village Chief of Ou Chrau Village. Four KIIs were conducted with individuals engaged in beauty product sales, vegetable sales, grocery sales, and restaurant and guesthouse operations. Observational data at the checkpoint were collected.

In Daung, the study team examined the Daung International Border Gate within the geographic context of Kamrieng District and Beung Raing Commune. Both primary and secondary data

were gathered from the Kamrieng District Government and the Beung Raing Commune Administration. Population statistics for these areas were obtained. Due to time constraints, only limited secondary data was accessible from the district and commune administrations. Primary data were collected through KIIs with the Deputy District Governor of Kamrieng and the Deputy Chief of the Administrative Office, focused on the district's demographic profile, occupational patterns, and the consequences of border gate closure on administration and livelihoods. The KIIs with the Beung Raing Commune Administration examined local economic activities, livelihoods, and the effects of border closure on development and community well-being. The study team conducted KIIs with two market vendors and a wholesaler of consumer goods at Daung Market near the Daung International Checkpoint. Observations at the checkpoint, conducted from 9:00 to 9:30 am, focused on economic activity, business interactions, cross-border movement, and trade. The resulting data were analysed and synthesised for this report.

At the Ma Lai Checkpoint, the study team conducted the KIIs with the commune chief and the FGD with community members from Ou Sraloav commune, Malai district, Banteay Meanchey province. The participants included the Ou Sraloav commune chief, village heads, two trader owners, representatives of poor households, and households engaged in corn cultivation, totalling 15 individuals. The Prom checkpoint is located in Stung Kach Commune, Sala Krau district, Pailin Province. At this checkpoint, the study team conducted the KIIs and met with the Governor of Sala Krau District, the Deputy Chief of the Administrative Office, and the Head of the District's Agricultural Office. Secondary data were also collected from the Sala Krau District Office.

The participants who took part in the KIIs and the FGDs did so voluntarily and were informed that they had the right to decline to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable with. The information and data that were collected during the study were treated as confidential and kept private. The names and institutions of the participants were not made public, and their safety was the primary concern of the study team. The collected data were analysed using a qualitative approach. The percentage, diagram and table are used to analyse and present the data. The data were described to explain the facts and events. The discussion of the findings and the theory was also conducted and concluded.

4. Results

4.1. Mapping, borders, and territory: The extended imagined geo-body

The Cambodian–Thai border conflict must be understood through the historical production of territory via colonial cartography and treaties. Premodern Khmer–Siam frontiers were fluid rather than fixed (Edwards 2007). Colonial treaties in 1863, 1893, 1904, and 1907 stabilised boundaries from fluid to fixed. The 1904–1907 Franco-Siamese Treaties transferred the provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon from Siam to French Cambodia. The French maps at a 1:200,000 scale materialised Cambodia's geo-body, embedding territorial sovereignty in law and national consciousness. As a result, the Siamese considered Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon as imagined communities of Siam. Similarly, Surin, Buriram, Sisaket, Trat and other Khmer-speaking provinces in Thailand were imagined communities of Cambodia, which were annexed by the Siamese after the collapse of the Angkor Empire (Murashima 2005; Schoepfel 2016).

The imagined geo-body of Siam over Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon triggered the Siamese with a concerted effort to take it back. About 40 years later, during World War II (WWII), after France's defeat by Germany in 1940, Thailand, with support from Japan,

attacked French Indochina in January 1941 to take back the imagined geo-body of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon into Siamese control (Murashima 2005). The Tokyo Convention was signed in May 1941 between France and Thailand, with support from Japan, forcing France to cede Battambang, Siem Reap, Sisophon, and parts of Kampong Thom and Stung Treng to Thailand, which constituted one-third of Cambodia's territory and was home to about 500,000 people. This demonstrates that mapped sovereignty could be reshaped through military and geopolitical intervention (Namba 2019; Schoepfel 2016).

This Franco-Siamese territorial reconfiguration was reconfigured, following Japan's defeat in 1945. France reasserted colonial authority and negotiated the Franco-Siamese Settlement Treaty in 1946 in Washington DC, which restored the prewar boundaries established under the 1904–1907 agreements. Border lines were redrawn and people relationship to its geographies changed within five years (UN 1959). This sequence of territorial loss and restoration illustrates that geobodies of Cambodia are continuously constructed and reconstructed through political power, war, and legal recognition. National territory thus emerges not as a permanent spatial fact but as a historically contingent outcome of cartographic authority and geopolitical power. The change in border line resulted in changing people relations to geographies and areas and nationality. For Thailand, until now, Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon remain imagined and extended geobodies of Thailand; while for Cambodia; Surin, Buriram, Sisaket, Trat and other provinces are considered the imagined communities of the Khmer Empire (Deth 2020; Win 2025).

4.2. Transnational geo-body: From colonial maps and treaties to unilateral maps

Over a century—from the Franco-Siamese treaties of 1904–1907 through to the 2013 International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment—Thai efforts to reincorporate what may be termed an “extended imagined geo-body” of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon into the contemporary Thai territorial framework have not prevailed within international institutional regimes grounded in treaties, laws and colonial cartographies. The ICJ rulings of 1962 and 2013 reaffirmed the authority of the 1:200,000-scale maps annexed to the Franco-Siamese treaties, thereby privileging treaty-based cartographic evidence in the delimitation of sovereignty (ICJ 2011). Following the 1962 decision, however, Thailand produced unilateral 1:50,000-scale maps that led to alternative territorial interpretations. The coexistence of these cartographic regimes generated overlapping claim areas (OCAs) across both land and maritime frontiers (ICJ 2011). Each state regards these OCAs as integral to its national territory, thereby producing what may be conceptualised as a “transnational geo-body”—a relational and contested space that has repeatedly catalysed bilateral tensions. Under the Thaksin administration, the 2000 and 2001 Memoranda of Understanding between Cambodia and Thailand sought to reconceptualise these contested areas as cooperative zones. In effect, the MOUs framed the OCAs as a “third space” (Bhabha 1994), facilitating joint development and cross-border interaction rather than militarised confrontation (MOU 2000, 2001).

On the land boundaries, the unilateral map of 1:50,000 scale and the 1904-1907 Treaty maps of 1:200,000 scale generate the OCAs along 817 km borderlines between Cambodia and Thailand. The unilateral claims over OCAs by Thailand had enabled Thailand to carry out the cross-border resource extraction during Cambodia's civil war and post-conflict transition between the 1980s and the 1990s. Thailand's unilateral maps enabled extensive logging and mineral exploitation, with Cambodian timber exports reaching 1–1.5 million cubic meters annually between 1989 and 1995, peaking at 1.3 million cubic meters in 1993–1994 (Global Witness 1995, 2002). Timber generated USD10–20 million monthly for armed factions, including the Khmer Rouge, while Cambodia lost over 100,000 hectares of forest annually, especially in Battambang, Pailin, and

Koh Kong (Le Billon 2002). Similarly, gemstone extraction in Pailin became a major source of conflict financing. During the early 1990s, gemstone exports generated approximately USD10–20 million annually for Khmer Rouge authorities, with most stones transported into Thailand for cutting and export (Le Billon 2000).

Cambodia's maritime claims derive from the cartographic and treaty framework established by the 1904–1907 Franco–Siamese Treaties and their associated 1:200,000-scale maps, which form the legal basis of its coastal projection. Thailand, by contrast, has relied on unilateral cartographic interpretations, including 1:50,000-scale maps, to articulate alternative maritime claims (Jones 2012). These competing representations have generated overlapping claim areas (OCAs)—conceptualised here as a maritime “transnational geo-body”—across sections of the Gulf of Thailand. Since the early 1970s, competing continental shelf proclamations have produced an OCA of approximately 26,000 km², believed to contain up to 11 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, alongside fisheries that yield nearly 1 million metric tonnes annually (Jones 2012; Sanglee 2025). The 2001 MOU sought to reconceptualise these contested waters as a cooperative “third space” (Bhabha 1994), dividing the OCA into a 10,000 km² delimitation zone and a 16,000 km² Joint Development Area (JDA). The JDA was further subdivided into six proposed exploration blocks under a 50:50 revenue-sharing framework (Sanglee 2025). However, domestic political tensions, particularly in Thailand, have impeded implementation (Storey 2012).

In contrast to the maritime OCA, the overlapping land-based “transnational geo-body” encompassing highly symbolic sites—such as Preah Vihear, Prasat Ta Moan Thom, Prasat Ta Krabey, An Ses, Prey Chan Village, and Thmor Da—has proven resistant to joint management arrangements. These locations are embedded within Cambodia's historical consciousness and national identity, functioning as civilisational markers of Khmer sovereignty (Edwards 2007). For Cambodian constituencies, they are not merely territorial assets but emblematic landscapes of heritage and statehood. Conversely, Thai nationalist and conservative groups interpret these same sites as integral components of Thailand's territorial domain, grounded in unilateral cartographic representations. Within this context, bilateral MOUs have often been reframed in Thai domestic discourse as mechanisms that risk territorial concession and the erosion of national security. Opposition parties, frequently aligned with royalist and military elites, have mobilised border disputes with Cambodia as political instruments to galvanise electoral support and delegitimise rival governments (Strate 2015; Ferrara 2015). As a result, symbolic land-based OCAs remain politically securitised spaces rather than cooperative “third spaces.”

Thaksin Shinawatra's efforts in the early 2000s to transform Cambodian–Thai border tensions into a framework of intensified bilateral cooperation generated significant backlash from Thailand's royalist and military elites (Chachavalpongpun 2009; Chambers and Bunyavejchewin 2019). His cross-border diplomacy and personal ties with Cambodian leadership were portrayed by conservative actors as undermining national sovereignty and threatening the integrity of the Thai geo-body (Chachavalpongpun 2012; Montesano and Chachavalpongpun 2012). Although publicly justified on grounds of corruption and abuse of power, the 2006 military coup that removed Thaksin from office was closely intertwined with nationalist narratives that framed his foreign policy as compromising national interests (Chachavalpongpun 2010b; Huntington 2006; McCargo 2005). The persistence of Shinawatra political influence—through Yingluck Shinawatra's premiership in 2011 and Paetongtarn Shinawatra's rise in 2025—encountered similar resistance. Both were ultimately removed from office through combinations of judicial intervention and military pressure, reflecting the continued entanglement of border politics, elite contestation, and narratives of territorial sovereignty (Strangio 2020).

4.3. Transnational scam economies

The influx of Chinese investments in Cambodia has coincided with the rapid expansion of transnational cyber-scam operations. Southeast Asia’s cyber-scam industry generates an estimated USD7–12 billion annually, with Cambodia emerging as a major hub (UNODC 2023). By 2022, 100,000 individuals were employed in scam compounds in Cambodia, many trafficked from regional countries and coerced into online fraud (Amnesty International 2024; UNODC 2023). These operations clustered around 200 casinos and special economic areas, particularly in Sihanoukville, Poipet, and O’Smach (Table 1), exploiting regulatory gaps and politically protected business networks (US Department of State 2023; UNODC 2024).

Table 1: The casinos and ownerships along the Cambodia-Thai border

Location	No. of casinos	Ownership	No. of workers	Clients
Sihanoukville	135	Chinese, Indonesian	50,000	Chinese, Indonesian, Vietnamese
Poipet	32	Chinese, Thai and Cambodian	12,000	90-95% of gamblers are Thai
O'smach	4	Cambodians, and Cambodian–Thai	2,000	Thai and Chinese
Prum/Pailin	2	One is owned by Chinese and one by Thai	1,000	Chinese Casino is online, while Thai Casino is in person
Daung/Kamrieng	2	One is owned by Chinese and one by Thai	1,000	Chinese Casino is online, while Thai Casino is in person
Total	175	Chinese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesian	66,000	Chinese, Thai, Indonesian

Source: Compiled by authors, 2025

In Sihanoukville alone, the number of licensed casinos increased from fewer than 10 in 2010 to over 135 by 2021, driven largely by Chinese investment associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Strangio 2020; The Normatic Note Newsletter 2022; SihanoukVille 2025). Similarly, casino compounds along the Cambodian–Thai borders increasingly incorporated cyber-scam operations alongside traditional gambling activities, creating hybrid economic zones linking Chinese capitals, Cambodian territorial sovereignty, and Thai labour and clientele (UNODC 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023).

Poipet, opposite Aranyaprathet in Thailand’s Sa Kaeo Province, exemplifies the transnational political economy of the border. The city hosts about 32 casinos employing 8,000–12,000 workers and serving predominantly Thai customers, who comprise 90–95 percent of gamblers due to Thailand’s gambling ban (Manoj 2024). Some 2-4 casinos were owned by Thai nationals. The Grand Diamond City Casino was historically associated with a Thai politician, who relocated the capital to Cambodia following corruption convictions in Thailand (Strangio 2020). Similarly, Star Vegas Casino was originally developed by Thai gambling investor, before being acquired by Donaco International, illustrating the transnational movement of Thai gambling capital across the borders (Donaco International 2021). Some 3-6 casino operates as hybrid ownership of Thai and Cambodian. The Crown Casino in Poipet is owned by a Cambodian Tycoon with a Thai national. In addition, 10-15 casinos are operated by direct Thai capital influences (Table 1). The Syber-scams took place in Poipet and Cambodian authorities conducted multiple raids on Poipet casino compounds prior to 2025, arresting dozens of foreign

nationals suspected of operating and financial fraud schemes targeting victims globally (VOA 2016; Taing 2016).

Further east, the Daung International Checkpoint is the site of two casinos, one Thai-owned and one Chinese-owned, each employing approximately 500 workers. The closure of the Thai-owned casinos, prompted by cross-border tensions and scam allegations, resulted in the loss of employment for about 1,000 individuals, primarily aged 20 to 30. The subsequent border closure converted a previously active transnational labour circuit into a locus of economic displacement and heightened security concerns. In Phsar Prum, Pailin Province, two major casinos operate. Pailin Flamingo is owned by Thai investor. Diamond, or Grand Pailin, is reportedly owned by Cambodian businessman. These casinos employ Cambodians, Thais, and Chinese nationals. The casino economy creates transnational interdependence and complicates notions of sovereignty.

Similar dynamics characterise O'Smach in Oddar Meanchey, on the opposite side of Thailand's Chong Chom checkpoint. Prior to 2025, at least four casinos—including O'Smach Resort Casino and Royal Hill Resort—employed several hundred workers each, with staffing ranging from 330–450 at O'Smach Resort and up to 1,000 at Sangam Resort. Owned by a Cambodian senator, with a Thai National, these casinos served predominantly Thai clients and operated within transnational patronage networks (Cambodia Ministry of Tourism 2023). The US Department of the Treasury sanctions in September 2024 linked O'Smach Resort to forced labour and cyber-scam operations, which cost Americans over USD10 billion in 2024 (OFAC 2024), illustrating Donnan and Wilson's (2010) concept of border assemblages, where sovereignty is fragmented and negotiated among state authority, transnational capital, and international regulation.

Koh Kong Province further illustrates the extension of this casino political economy into maritime border zones. The Koh Kong Resort Casino, historically linked to Cambodian tycoon networks, with Thai business connections, employed up to 1,000 workers at its operational peak and served predominantly Thai customers crossing through the Cham Yeam checkpoint (OFAC 2024). These casino zones emerged alongside broader patterns of cross-border economic penetration, including logging, trade, and investment, reinforcing the border's function as an economic corridor rather than a territorial barrier.

4.4. Constructed and reconstructed geo-body of the nation through maps, border, and territory

The armed confrontations between Cambodia and Thailand broke out on 24 July 2025 for five days, causing a number of destructions. The second armed clash resumed on 7 December 2025 and lasted 21 days. The ceasefire on 27 December 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, facilitated by Malaysia as ASEAN Chair, and Donald Trump, the US President, ended actual fighting, but the ground hostilities remain volatile.

By late July 2025, the intensification of armed clashes along the Thai–Cambodian frontier had produced large-scale civilian displacement. Approximately 139,000 Thai civilians were evacuated from border areas, contributing to a cumulative displacement of more than 200,000 individuals across both countries (CNN 2025a). Reports indicate that residents fled multiple frontier districts as civilian infrastructure—including hospitals and fuel stations—was damaged or came under direct attack (Jain 2025; CNN 2025b). In Thailand, around 20 hospitals in border provinces sustained damage estimated at approximately USD8.78 million, with Phanom Dong Rak Hospital in Surin Province among the most severely affected. The renewed escalation in

December 2025 further intensified humanitarian impacts. An estimated 400,000 civilians were evacuated during the second phase of hostilities. By late December, nearly 119,000 displaced persons remained housed in 704 temporary shelters across affected provinces, including Surin and Sisaket (Newey 2025).

In Cambodia, the July 2025 hostilities generated substantial humanitarian and educational disruptions. Following five days of fighting, approximately 161,159 residents were displaced from conflict-affected areas and relocated to designated safe zones (CDRI 2025). The closure of more than 600 schools across impacted provinces disrupted education for an estimated 150,000 students and 6,500 teachers, underscoring the broader social costs of the confrontation. The conflict's cross-border ramifications extended into higher education, where 659 Cambodian scholarship students returned from Thailand, citing security concerns and heightened nationalist tensions; arrangements were subsequently made to allow them to continue their studies at domestic institutions. The renewed twenty-one-day clashes in December 2025 intensified displacement and territorial shifts. Thai military forces reportedly occupied 14 locations across Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, and Pursat provinces. Approximately 863,000 Cambodians were evacuated from border regions in these provinces (CDRI 2025). By January 2026, the Cambodian Red Cross and the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM) reported that more than 320,000 individuals remained in temporary camps or designated "safe zones."

4.4.1. Pushing Cambodian migrant workers out of Thailand

Approximately 1.2-1.5 million Cambodian migrants worked in Thailand prior to July 2025 (CSES 2023). Following the border conflicts, migration subsequently became a political issue, and Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand faced increased threats to their personal security due to rising nationalism. As a result, approximately 910,000 Cambodian migrant workers were forced to moving out of Thailand (Khmer Times 2025). Approximately 70 percent of these returnees originate from provinces bordering Thailand, including Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Preah Vihear, Oddar Meanchey, and Pailin (CDRI 2025).

In Poipet, about 63 percent of the population were internally migrated from other Cambodian provinces (Putnam 1988). About 5 percent of the population in Poipet migrated to work in Thailand and stayed there for an extended period. Furthermore, about 10,000 Poipet residents use the Cambodia–Thailand border pass daily to travel into Thailand, primarily for trade, work, and shopping (Sen 2024). The closure of border gates and border conflicts interrupt the flows of people and goods. It has affected the tourist services, including hotels, restaurants, and transportation. Ms Som Sereiroth, a resident of Poipet village, has 15 rooms for rent to migrant workers. Since the border's closure and the outbreak of the armed confrontation, no one has used her room rental services, and many people have moved out of Poipet. These have affected her income and livelihood. If this continues, her family will be left unsecured, as the government provides no support. The Commune Chief of O'Chrov in Poipet City, Mr Sear Sokhom, said that Poipet used to be crowded, but the border closure and fighting disrupted people's movements into Poipet, turning the area into a quiet zone.

At the Daung International Checkpoint in Kamrieng in Battambang Province, approximately 1,000 to 2,000 individuals crossed the border daily to work in Thailand. These workers typically earned around USD10 per day (THB350–400). Following the border closure, daily cross-border migration ceased. Individuals who previously commuted to Thailand for work in agriculture, construction, or market sales returned to their hometowns in Kampot, Kampong Speu, and Pailin Provinces. Rental property owners also experienced a loss of tenants, with

room occupancy rates declining sharply as migrant workers vacated their accommodations. Ms Nan Phat, aged 63 years old in Daung, observed that renters “do not stay all the time” because they are “unemployed and go to their hometowns.”

In Malai District, approximately 2,000 individuals migrated to Thailand for extended employment, while many others commuted daily across the border for work. Daily migrant workers earn around USD10, equivalent to USD3,600 annually. Around 1,000 households engaged in daily migration. Additionally, 180 individuals undertook domestic migration, and 695 individuals participated in international migration. At the time of the study, 100 migrant workers returned home. During the FGD with villagers in Malai, the daily cross-border trade ended, and their daily incomes did too.

4.4.2. Closure of border gates and constructions of new border lines

On 21 June 2025, Thailand shutdowns the borders with Cambodia, justified as necessary to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Agnew (1994) describes it as the “territorial trap,” in which the state treats territory as a fixed, bounded container that requires strict enforcement against perceived external encroachment. By physically sealing the border, Thailand attempted to materialise its territorial claims on the ground, transforming abstract cartographic disputes into enforceable geopolitical realities.

Following the ceasefire on 27 December 2025, Prime Minister Hun Manet said that “We still have Thai forces occupy(ing) deep into Cambodian territory in many areas. This is further beyond even Thailand’s own unilateral claim... border line” (Levis 2026). The Government of Cambodia reported that 14 locations in border areas were occupied by Thai military forces (CambogeMag 2026), while Thai sources claimed 41 locations covering an estimated 3,563 km², including Prey Chan, Chouk Chey, and Boeng Trakuon (Cambodia Daily 2026). According to Hun Manet, Prime Minister of Cambodia, “certain activities that have been conducted by Thai troops, such as laying of containers and barbed wires to block the roads, have caused hardship to our people. We have 80,000 people displaced, [who] cannot go home now because of the blockages” (Levis 2026). These are acts of invasion and control, using force, violating international law and treaties.

Reports concerning Thai military operations following the armed clashes indicate a process of unilateral territorial consolidation within areas internationally recognised as part of Cambodia. First, Thai forces reportedly installed barbed wire barriers inside Cambodian territory, obstructing access roads and restricting the return of displaced residents to their homes and villages. Second, shipping containers were positioned across roads and within residential zones under Thai occupation, functioning as fortified checkpoints. Third, trenches and defensive canals were excavated alongside these barriers to reinforce control and restrict mobility. These measures were accompanied by the deployment of surveillance systems and armed patrols, creating a securitised environment in which civilians attempting to re-enter occupied areas faced significant risk. In addition, civilian infrastructure—including houses, public offices, schools, and Buddhist temples—was reportedly demolished in areas under occupation, while military facilities such as bunkers and camps were constructed in their place. By early 2026, an estimated 45,000 homes, 112 schools, and 14 hospitals on the Cambodian side had been destroyed. Although approximately 540,000 civilians sought to return following the 28 December ceasefire, many encountered destroyed property or continued military presence in 14 disputed locations. Cambodian authorities subsequently restricted civilian return to these areas due to ongoing security concerns.

4.4.3. Transnational economic disruptions

Between 2015 and 2024, Cambodia’s annual exports to Thailand were valued at approximately USD400–500 million, reflecting Thailand’s position as one of Cambodia’s key regional trading partners (Yatt 2025a). In pursuit of deeper economic integration, both governments articulated a bilateral trade target of USD15 billion by 2025 (Yatt 2025a). However, total trade between the two countries reached approximately USD4.3 billion in 2024, indicating a substantial gap between projected ambitions and realised exchange. Of this total, Thailand’s exports to Cambodia amounted to roughly USD3.44 billion, while Cambodia’s exports to Thailand totalled approximately USD850 million (Nhean 2026). Cambodia’s export composition was dominated by agricultural products, which accounted for 43 percent of total export value, with non-agricultural goods comprising the remaining 57 percent (Table 2).

The 2025 Cambodian–Thai border conflict and subsequent closure of land crossings had measurable implications for bilateral trade flows. Total trade between the two countries declined to approximately USD3.6 billion in 2025, representing a contraction of less than 15 percent compared to the previous year. The disruption particularly affected Cambodia’s export sector. Annual losses in non-agricultural exports to Thailand were estimated at around USD500 million, including approximately USD173 million in electrical and electronic equipment, USD74 million in iron and steel articles, and USD71 million in machinery. Agricultural exports were similarly affected, with projected losses of roughly USD400 million. These included USD205 million in vegetables, roots, and tubers; USD200 million in cassava; and USD79 million in fruits, including citrus and melons, among other commodities (Table 2).

Cambodia’s exports to Thailand declined sharply following the 2025 border conflict. In January 2026, Cambodian exports to Thailand amounted to slightly more than USD58 million, representing a decrease of approximately 93 percent compared to the USD850 million recorded in 2024 (Khmer Times 2026). Over the preceding five years, Thailand’s exports to Cambodia had grown at an average annual rate of 5.51 percent, rising from USD6.94 billion in 2019 to USD9.08 billion in early 2024 (OEC 2025). However, these flows contracted significantly to USD3.44 billion by late 2024. By January 2026, Thai exports to Cambodia had further declined to approximately USD151 million, marking a 96 percent reduction attributed to armed conflict and border disruptions (Khmer Times 2026). These figures suggest potential annual losses for Thailand of roughly USD3.2 billion. Following the closure of land crossings on 24 June 2025, agricultural exports rerouted through waterways totalled only 1,728 tonnes, valued at about USD5.8 million between late June and 30 September 2025 (Yatt 2025b).

Table 2: Cambodia’s exports to Thailand in 2024

Products of animal origin	Total value (million)	Percentage
Edible vegetables and certain roots and tubers	\$205	24.1
Electrical, electronic equipment	\$173	20.4
Edible fruits, nuts, peel of citrus fruit, melons	\$79	9.3
Articles of iron or steel	\$74	8.7
Machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers	\$71	8.4
Cereals	\$57	6.7
Vehicles other than railway, tramway	\$36	4.2
Aluminum	\$32	3.8
Articles of apparel, knit or crocheted	\$25	2.9
Articles of apparel, not knit or crocheted	\$18	2.1
Vegetable, fruit, nut food preparations	\$15	1.8

Footwear, gaiters and the like,	\$10	1.2
Miscellaneous articles of base metal	\$9	1.1
Furniture, lighting signs, prefabricated buildings	\$6	0.7
Residues, wastes of food industry, animal fodder	\$4	0.5
Tobacco and manufactures tobacco substitutes	\$4	0.5
Oil seed, oleagic fruits, grain, seed, fruits	\$3	0.4
Knitted or crocheted fabric	\$3	0.4
Rubbers	\$3	0
Printed books, newspapers, pictures	\$3	0.4
Articles of leather, animal gut, harness, travel good	\$3	0.4
Coffee, tea, mate and spices	\$1.60	0.2
Salt, sulphur, earth, stone, plaster, lime and cement	\$1.28	0.2
Copper	\$0.80	0.1
Iron and steel	\$0.60	0.1
Wood and articles of wood, wood charcoal	\$0.50	0.1
Clocks and watches	\$0.46	0.1
Organic chemicals	\$0.45	0.1
Milling products, malt, starches, inlin, wheat gluten	\$0.44	0.1
Inorganic chemicals, precious metal compound, isotope	\$0.39	0
Other made textile articles, sets, worn clothing	\$0.38	0
Tools, implements, cutlery of base metal	\$0.37	0
Plastics	\$0.36	0
Impregnated, coated or laminated textile fabric	\$0.35	0
Wadding, felt, nonwovens, yarns, twine, cordage	\$0.31	0
Fish, crustaceans, molluscs, aquatics invertebrates	\$0.31	0
Sugars and sugar confectionery	\$0.29	0
Paper and paperboard, articles of pulp, paper and board	\$0.19	0
Pearls, precious stones, metals, coins	\$0.19	0
Miscellaneous manufactured articles	\$0.19	0
Tanning, dyeing extracts, tannins, derivatives, pigments	\$0.15	0
Optical, photo, technical, medical apparatus	\$0.15	0
Miscellaneous chemical products	\$0.15	0
Stone, plaster, cement, asbestos, mica or similar materials	\$0.13	0
Special woven or tufted fabric, lace, tapestry	\$0.12	0
Beverages, spirits and vinegar	\$0.91	0.1
Headgear and	\$0.90	0.1
Manmade filaments	\$0.73	0.1
Umbrellas, walking-sticks, seat-sticks, whips	\$0.59	0.1
Commodities not specified according to kind	\$0.53	0.1
Soaps, lubricants, waxes, candles, modelling pastes	\$0.48	0.1
Products of animal origin	\$0.04	0
Zinc	\$0.30	0
Raw hides and skins (other than furskins) and leather	\$0.28	0
Albuminoids, modified starches, glues, enzymes	\$0.28	0
Cereal, flour, starch, milk preparations and products	\$0.19	0
Miscellaneous edible preparations	\$0.11	0
Ceramic products	\$0.60	0.1
Manmade staple fibers	\$0.40	0
Wool, animal hair, horsehair yarn and fabric	\$0.15	0
Total	\$850	100

Source: Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/>

Cambodia's tourism sector experienced substantial contraction in the second half of 2025, with estimated revenue losses ranging between USD650 million and USD1.25 billion (Darc 2026). In major tourism centres, accommodation revenues declined by approximately 45–60 percent, while food and beverage revenues fell by 35–50 percent (Darc 2026). At Angkor, international ticket sales decreased by 18.1 percent in July and 25.7 percent in September 2025, contributing to broader downstream economic losses in Siem Reap estimated at USD200–350 million (Carruthers 2026). Thai tourism—particularly from border provinces such as Sa Kaeo, Chanthaburi, and Trat—collapsed, with hotel cancellations in Siem Reap reaching 80–100 percent during peak conflict periods. The continued closure of land borders into early 2026 effectively eliminated Thailand, previously accounting for 32 percent of Cambodia's visitors, as a major source market. While land arrivals sharply declined, air travel between Bangkok and Phnom Penh increased by 21 percent in certain periods. Of the 630,000 tourism jobs recorded in 2024, between 150,000 and 250,000 workers were furloughed or displaced by the end of 2025 (Darc 2026; Carruthers 2026).

In 2023, about 200,000–250,000 Cambodians travelled abroad for medical check-ups and treatment, many to Thailand. Specifically, about 17,000 Cambodians annually received medical treatment at private and public hospitals in Sisaket, Surin and Ubon Ratchathani Provinces in Thailand (Wisaijorn 2025). This accounts for only 1.5 percent of the total population seeking healthcare, as nearly 14 million people accessed services within Cambodia that same year (Khmer Times, 2024b). The 2025 border conflict significantly altered these medical travel patterns. Thai private hospitals were estimated to lose USD10–50 million annually due to disruptions in Cambodian patient arrivals. Beyond direct medical bills, these patients contributed to the broader economy through spending on accommodation (30 percent), transport (25 percent), and food/retail (20–25 percent). On average, a Cambodian outbound patient's journey costs USD1,500–3,000, not including follow-up visits or travel companions (The Nation Thailand 2025; Thai Newsroom 2025).

Poipet previously received 8,000–12,000 visitors daily. The majority were Thai casino tourists or travellers transiting to Siem Reap. This steady influx sustained local tuk-tuk services, guesthouses, restaurants, and shops. The casino catered primarily to Thai visitors, with signage in Thai and transactions conducted in baht. Thailand projected the losses exceeding USD1.7 billion in 2025 if restrictions at the Poipet crossing persist. Border trade through Poipet alone represents an estimated USD5–8 million in daily trade value. Approximately 300 trucks crossed into Cambodia daily via the Poipet checkpoint (Field note 2025).

At the Daung International Checkpoint, trade was dominated by Thai imports, particularly food, vegetables, and fish. The closure disrupted these supply chains. Cambodian vendors, reliant on Thai goods, depleted their stockpiles within three months after the border closures. The shortage of goods pushed prices up, particularly for food items, making it harder for households to maintain their consumption levels. The flow of Cambodian exports (e.g., salt) has also slowed. Imports and exports of agricultural products, such as corn, cassava, and vegetables, were disrupted. Usually, 100 trucks daily cross the border gates with containers, transporting agricultural products and consumer goods from Thailand to Cambodia and vice versa (Field note 2025).

4.5. The internationalisation of the transnational geo-body

Thailand's strategic preference over the Cambodian–Thai border conflicts in recent years has been to prioritise bilateral negotiation over judicialisation. This posture reflects negative memories of earlier litigation outcomes and a calculus that legal avenues carry uncertainty for

Thai claims. Cambodia, by contrast, has periodically turned to international adjudication and third-party frameworks to resolve the border conflicts—most recently by submitting specific temple-area disputes and adjacent sectors for international consideration. These divergent preferences between Cambodia and Thailand underscore international processes and systems, in which the effective settlement of these conflicts should be conceived as a sequenced process, not a singular diplomatic event. The sequence begins with a bilateral ceasefire and reactivation of the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) under the 2000 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to deliver concrete, technical outputs (agreed map sheets, shared GIS coordinates, synchronised field procedures). A second layer is ASEAN accompaniment to verify incidents and cushion de-escalation. A third layer is internationalisation as a bounded backstop—UN engagement for humanitarian resourcing and, where necessary, arbitration/ICJ mechanisms narrowly scoped to micro-sectors that stall in technical talks. A fourth, issue-specific layer involves great-power facilitation, presently the United States, providing technical guarantees and targeted pressure against spoilers without displacing regional ownership.

Bilateral settlement has resulted in a ceasefire and revitalised the JBC under the 2000 and 2001 MOUs. The MOUs define the JBC's mandate to demarcate the land boundary and provide a legally recognised framework for technical work, even during periods of political tension. Bilateral negotiations over border issues commenced during the rule of Thaksin Shinawatra, although the relationship between Thaksin Shinawatra and Hun Sen was perceived as a security threat by Thailand. The Preah Vihear dispute and the ICJ decisions favouring Cambodia have fuelled nationalist sentiment, prolonging the resolution of border conflicts. The 2000 MOU was not fully implemented, but it has been used as leverage against Cambodia, particularly following the removal of the Shinawatra administration in 2012-2013. The dispute could have been resolved through the JBC mechanism, but progress has stalled. Thailand has since replaced the maps referenced in the 2000 MOU with a unilaterally produced 1:50,000 scale map to assert ownership over the Emerald Triangle areas, Ta Moan Touch, Ta Moan Thom and Ta Krabei Temples (Cambodianess 2025a). Following the ceasefire, Thailand has continued to escalate border tensions by deploying barbed wire and shipping containers along the border areas, conducting incursions into Cambodian territory, and expelling Cambodian villagers from their homes and villages (Khaosod 2025). Additionally, Thailand cancelled the 2001 MOU with Cambodia.

The externalisation of domestic politics in Thailand, combined with the use of the 2000/2001 MOUs and contested cartographic practices, has rendered the Thai position both conflictual and unreliable within the international legal system. In response to these challenges, Cambodia has pursued international adjudication of its border disputes with Thailand, as bilateral negotiations have proven ineffective. In February 2026, Hun Manet, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, talked to Reuters and Fox about Thailand invasions into Cambodian territories. On the contrary, the Thai Foreign Minister, Sihasak Phuangketkeow, cautioned Cambodia against using international platforms over the Cambodian–Thai border conflicts. Instead, Thailand urges Cambodia to use bilateral negotiations to maintain trust and stability in the context of power imbalances (The Nation Thailand 2026). Cambodia shall formally submit the cases of the border dispute involving the Ta Moan Thom, Ta Moan Tauch, and Ta Krabei Temple complexes, as well as the Mom Bei area, to the ICJ to request them to clarify the map of 1:200,000 scale under the 1904-1907 Franco-Siamese Treaties, whether the above-mentioned temples are located in Cambodian territories or in Thai territories.

Under ASEAN's chairmanship, Malaysia initiated efforts to resolve conflicts and engage in dialogue, while other members are slipping. Following five days of fighting, diplomatic

interventions by Malaysia, the United States, and China facilitated negotiations between the parties. The leaders of both countries subsequently agreed in Putrajaya to cease hostilities, restore direct communication, and establish a mechanism to implement the ceasefire reached on 28 July 2025. An agreement in principle was reached to deploy ASEAN-linked observer and monitoring teams, coordinated by Malaysia, to verify the truce while a long-term solution is developed (Setboonsarng, Azhar, and Naing 2025). On 31 July, Malaysia convened a Special Meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers, resulting in statements urging restraint and an immediate ceasefire. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement welcomed Malaysia's facilitation and outlined support for de-escalation and dialogue mechanisms. On 18 September 2025, the President of Cambodia's National Assembly, addressing the 46th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) in Malaysia, called on ASEAN parliamentarians to help resolve the conflict between the two ASEAN member states (Cambodianess 2025b).

Great-power involvement is most effective when it prioritises concrete guarantees over procedural coordination. In July and December 2025, President Donald Trump publicly urged both leaders to engage in immediate ceasefire talks. Subsequent reporting attributes the success of the truce to US engagement, in coordination with Malaysia as ASEAN Chair and China. Looking ahead, a time-limited US envoy could provide neutral overhead imagery to both parties through ASEAN channels, finance demining operations and cross-border service passes, and implement targeted sanctions against financiers of cross-border criminal networks that undermine the ceasefire. This approach increases leverage while maintaining regional ownership.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The Cambodian–Thai border conflicts invite a transnational re-examination of Winichakul's geo-body concept, demonstrating that territorial identity is co-produced through cross-border interaction, elite alliances, and symbolic contestation rather than confined within a single nation-state. Thailand's geo-body was historically constructed through the incorporation of peripheral chiefdoms and later stabilised by colonial cartography and treaties that transformed fluid mandala frontiers into fixed borders—an embodiment of Agnew's (1994) “territorial trap.” Under the 1904–1907 Franco–Siamese Treaties, Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap were territorialised as Cambodian provinces, yet remained embedded in Thailand's imagined geo-body, fuelling nationalist sentiment (Anderson 1983). The 1941 Tokyo Convention briefly re-territorialised these provinces under Thai control with Japanese support, only for the 1946 Franco–Thai settlement to restore them to Cambodia. This reversal deepened Thai perceptions of territorial loss and historical humiliation (Strate 2015), illustrating the continual reconstruction of geo-bodies through colonial treaties and geopolitical power.

The Cambodian–Thai border conflicts are often securitised, transforming legal and technical matters into perceived existential threats to the Thai geo-body. These actions are mediated through institutions such as the ICJ, heritage regimes including UNESCO, and media systems. This mediation converts cartographic disputes into symbolic geopolitics that mobilise national pride and humiliation. The process is cyclical, in which domestic crises trigger border actions, which then intensify nationalism and legitimise further elite intervention. As a result, Thai domestic instability not only correlates with border tension but also initiates a transnational process in which the geo-body is repeatedly enacted and contested.

Thailand's efforts to reclaim its extended imagined geo-body through international legal mechanisms proved unsuccessful, particularly in light of the authority accorded to the

1:200,000-scale maps annexed to the 1904–1907 Franco–Siamese Treaties. In response, Thailand advanced unilateral 1:50,000-scale maps to reinterpret territorial claims, generating overlapping claims in both maritime zones—approximately 26,000 km²—and contested land areas such as Ta Moan Thom, Ta Krabei, An Ses, and Preah Vihear. These overlapping claims produced a “transnational geo-body,” where cooperative arrangements briefly reflected a third-space logic of shared governance (Bhabha 1994). However, nationalist securitisation undermined this framework. Thai elites periodically framed temple disputes, transnational alliances, and cross-border economies as threats to the Thai geo-body, legitimising intervention (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Strate 2015), while Cambodian leaders instrumentalised Preah Vihear to consolidate authority (Hughes 2003). The unilateral 1:50,000 map thus became a political instrument for territorial assertion and conflict escalation.

The recent armed confrontations resulted in civilian casualties and the extension of Thai military control into areas internationally recognised as Cambodian territory. In doing so, Thai forces effectively transformed previously negotiated or overlapping spaces—often conceptualised as “third spaces” or OCAs—into zones of unilateral control. Through the installation of barbed wire, the deployment of shipping containers as fortifications, the excavation of defensive trenches, the demolition of civilian dwellings, and the construction of permanent military infrastructure, the contested frontier was materially reconfigured. Such practices not only consolidated de facto territorial control but also impeded the return of internally displaced Cambodian civilians to their homes. These acts constitute the production of new boundary practices—what Elden (2013) describes as the ongoing “making of territory” through spatial technologies and infrastructural inscription. Historically, these strategies echo earlier Siamese efforts between 1900 and 1950 to territorialise frontier zones through cartography, military occupation, and treaty reinterpretation (Strate 2015). The transnational geo-body thus emerges as a processual and relational construct rather than a fixed territorial container. It is continuously produced through cross-border narratives of humiliation, pride, and loss that circulate between states, sustaining conflict even where legal demarcations appear technically settled (Elden 2013; Strate 2015).

The study reveals that the geo-body of Cambodia and Thailand is fundamentally linked to colonial cartography. The treaties of 1904 and 1907, along with their associated maps, continue to play a central role in territorial disputes over a century later. The 1962 and 2013 International Court of Justice rulings demonstrate that cartography remains instrumental in structuring sovereignty, transforming cartographic boundaries into binding legal authority.’ Thus, Cambodia shall continue to use these pathways through the international system to end the century-old border conflicts with Thailand.

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