

Thailand, Cambodia know peace begins when war of words ends

By **Phar Kim Beng, Luthfy Hamzah** December 8, 2025 @ 4:49pm



This handout photo taken and released by Agence Kampuchea Press (AKP) on Dec 8, 2025 shows local residents evacuating following clashes along the Cambodia-Thailand border in Preah Vihear province. AFP PIC / Agence Kampuchea Press (AKP)

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Summarise for me

THE renewed clash between Thailand and Cambodia — followed by Thai airstrikes after a deadly early-morning exchange of gunfire — shows how easily Southeast Asia's border tensions can flare into something far more dangerous.

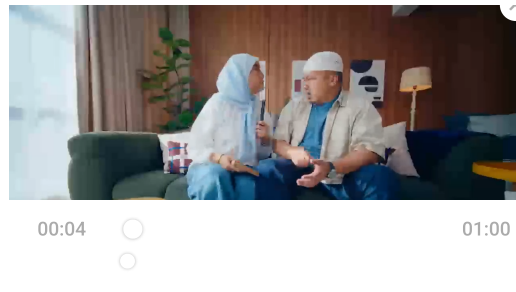
What could have remained a containable incident escalated rapidly because politics overtook prudence and accusations overshadowed verification.

Bangkok and Phnom Penh still have the ability to stop the drift toward deeper conflict. But they can only do so if both capitals pause the war of words and allow neutral fact-finding to begin. Escalation thrives in ambiguity. De-escalation begins with clarity.

The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord, endorsed by Asean, is not the source of the current breakdown. On the contrary, it remains one of the region's most practical and durable diplomatic instruments.

It provides communication channels, de-escalation procedures and, crucially, a verification regime designed for precisely the kind of tense, emotionally charged moment witnessed this week. The Accord was drafted to prevent misunderstandings from spiralling into military confrontation.

The real failure lies in the under-utilisation of the Accord's verification mechanisms. Without impartial investigators deployed swiftly to the scene, Thailand and Cambodia defaulted to their own internal military reports.



These reports hardened into competing narratives, each reinforcing the belief that the other side fired first.

This pattern is dangerous under normal circumstances. It is far riskier when Thailand is facing extraordinary domestic pressures. Just days before the clash, Southern Thailand was devastated by historic floods that left Hat Yai almost completely submerged.

Disaster-response agencies remain at breaking point, and the government faces intense scrutiny for its handling of the crisis. With a General Election expected in early 2026, political sensitivities in Bangkok are extremely high.

In such circumstances, even a small border incident becomes amplified. The deaths of Thai soldiers triggered strong demands for a forceful response, leaving little political space for restraint.

Cambodia, too, operates in a fragile security environment. Southeast Asia's borderlands are shaped by smugglers, criminal networks and non-traditional actors who may provoke incidents for personal or political gain.

Not all actions in these zones reflect the intent of central governments. Phnom Penh must therefore exercise caution and recognise the possibility of manipulation.

The mutual recriminations after the Dec 8 clash illustrate how ambiguity fuels escalation. Thailand insists it was attacked first; Cambodia says exactly the same.

Without a shared factual account, these claims become entrenched diplomatic positions. Each side sees itself as acting defensively, and compromise becomes politically costly. This is how short clashes harden into long-term disputes.



Smoke rises from the site, after Thailand launched air strikes along its disputed border with Cambodia, according to Thai army, in Choeteal Kong, Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, in this screengrab obtained from social media video released on Dec 8, 2025. Social media via REUTERS

This is why Asean's Observatory Team must now be strengthened. Composed of defence attachés with regional expertise, the Team is well-placed to conduct rapid, credible investigations.

But its mandate is too limited. It lacks the authority, speed and political weight necessary to influence decisions made in the immediate aftermath of violence.

Had the Observatory Team been quickly empowered to deploy within hours, it could have spoken to field commanders, inspected the terrain and cross-checked ballistic evidence. Its findings, shared simultaneously with both capitals, could have prevented suspicion and misinformation from shaping military decisions.

Neutral verification protects both sides. It offers Thailand a buffer from domestic political pressure. It gives Cambodia a credible platform to validate its explanations. Most importantly, it creates a face-saving path for both governments to step back from confrontation.

Asean does not need new treaties to achieve this. The framework already exists. What is required now is the political will to fully utilise and strengthen the tools embedded in the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord.

The Observatory Team should be backed by Asean's broader security architecture so that its findings carry real diplomatic weight.

The credibility of Asean is again under scrutiny. The organisation proves its value not by avoiding crises, but by managing them effectively. If it fails to act, Southeast Asia risks another entrenched border dispute at a time when the region already faces deep instability elsewhere.

The urgency is compounded by Thailand's domestic situation. Flood-stricken communities are struggling to recover, and national institutions are stretched. In such circumstances, even a minor provocation can trigger disproportionate reactions.

Cambodia must be mindful of this reality. With Thailand heading toward an election, the margin for error is dangerously small. Any misinterpretation – or any provocation by non-traditional actors – could ignite a wider confrontation.

Both nations share a clear interest in halting the cycle of blame. Only when accusations stop can verification begin. Only with verified facts can diplomacy resume. And only with diplomacy can this conflict be contained before it scars Asean's landscape.

The two countries are not destined for war. But without neutral facts, they risk drifting into one.

The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord offers a ready-made path toward peace. Its mechanisms must be trusted, strengthened and urgently activated.

Peace begins when the war of words ends.

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