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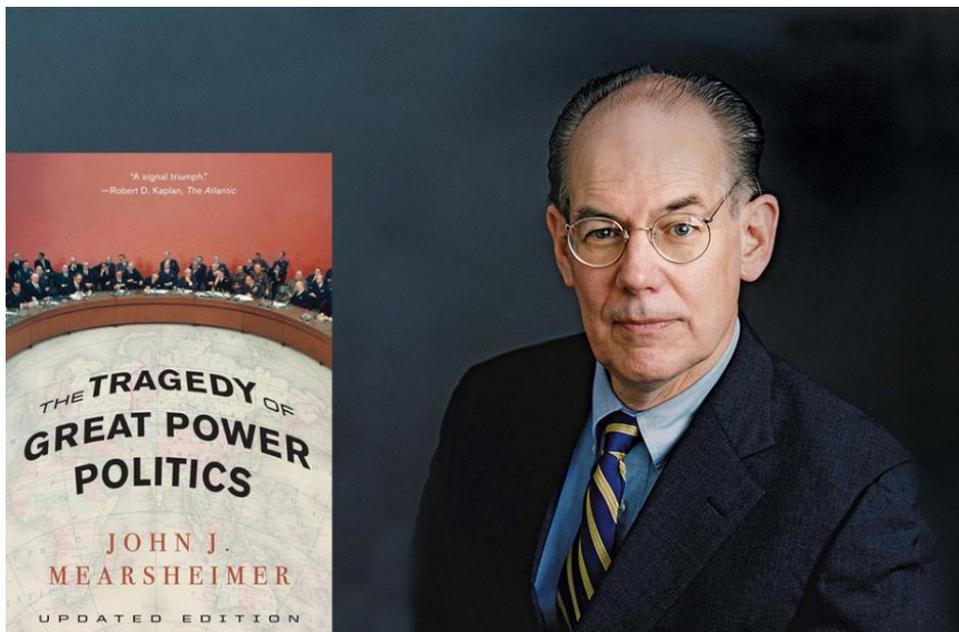


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CSEAS Analysis #24 | September 2025

## **Revisiting Offensive Realism: Thailand's Border Strategies in Its Relations with Cambodia**

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### **Introduction**

The ongoing border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand has deep historical roots, shaped by shifting colonial boundaries, nationalist mobilization, and divergent interpretations of international legal rulings. While the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment awarded the Preah Vihear temple and the surrounding areas to Cambodia<sup>1</sup>, existing disagreements over the adjacent territory have persisted.

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<sup>1</sup> "1962 Judgment in the Case Concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)," International Court of Justice, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/103120>.

The 2008 listing of the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site<sup>2</sup> and Thailand's prolonged internal political turmoil<sup>3</sup> led to military skirmishes and armed conflicts along the borders in 2008, 2011, and 2025.

Since the 1960s, Thailand has increasingly adopted unilateral strategies to shape the territorial status quo in its favor. Recent developments include the issuance of domestically drawn and circulated maps that contest established border demarcations, the dissemination of misinformation targeting Cambodia's credibility, and an apparent disregard for international norms and legal instruments including the existing ICJ judgements. This article applies John Mearsheimer's offensive realism<sup>4</sup> to explain the underlying strategic rationale for such behavior and posits it within the logic of international politics in an anarchic regional order.

## **An Overview of Offensive Realism**

Offensive realism of Mearsheimer, a prominent variant of structural realism, offers a pessimistic view of interstate relations under conditions of anarchy. Unlike defensive realists, such as Kenneth Waltz<sup>5</sup>, who argue that states primarily seek to preserve their security through balancing behavior and avoiding unnecessary risks, offensive realism asserts that the most reliable approach to security lies in maximizing power. In other words, states do not only aim to survive; they seek to dominate their strategic environment whenever feasible.

Mearsheimer grounds his theory in five interrelated assumptions. First, the international system operates without a supranational authority capable of enforcing rules or resolving disputes in an impartial and binding manner. Second, all states possess some degree of military capability that could be used to harm, coerce, or pressure other states. Third, no state can ever be fully certain about the future objectives of others, even when they currently appear peaceful. Fourth, the preservation of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence is the overriding objective of states. Lastly, states are strategic actors that weigh costs and benefits in pursuit of their core interests, particularly security and survival.

From these premises, Mearsheimer deduces that great powers are compelled by systemic pressure to pursue regional hegemony, a position in which they face no serious rivals within their own geopolitical sphere. Because intentions can never be verified and international legal norms lack coercive enforcement mechanisms, states

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, Sang Kook. "Siam mismapped: revisiting the territorial dispute over the Preah Vihear temple." *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2014): 39-55, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2014.0196>.

<sup>3</sup> Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. "Thai-Cambodian Conflict: The Failure of ASEANs Dispute Settlement Mechanisms." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2013): 65-86, <https://doi.org/10.18588/201305.000005>.

<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. *The tragedy of great power politics* (WW Norton & Company, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N. "Structural realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5-41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626772>.

often adopt proactive, even aggressive, policies to improve their relative position. This paradoxically creates a “tragedy” or “security dilemma”: the measures one state takes to feel secure often threaten others and prompt countermeasures that heighten mistrust, rivalry, and the risk of conflict.

In practical terms, offensive realism predicts behaviors such as territorial expansion, coercive diplomacy, military buildups, and the formation of exclusive security arrangements. Historical examples range from Imperial Germany’s naval arms race with Britain before World War I, to the United States’ post-Cold War quest to maintain unrivaled influence in the Western Hemisphere, to contemporary Chinese efforts to assert dominance in the South China Sea. In each case, the pursuit of power is framed not as reckless adventurism, but as a rational response to the logic of an increasingly anarchic international order.

### **Historical and Geopolitical Context**

The territorial disputes between Thailand and Cambodia cannot be fully understood without examining the complex interplay of historical legacies, colonial-era boundary demarcations, nationalist politics, and regional power asymmetries. These factors collectively shape the enduring tensions and strategic calculations that characterize their bilateral ties.

Much of the modern Cambodia-Thailand border was drawn during the French colonial period, when French Indochina authorities delineated boundaries largely through surveys and maps produced by colonial officers.<sup>6</sup> Although these maps have served as the legal basis for border claims, their accuracy and fairness have often been contested, even after the ICJ ruling that awarded sovereignty over the Preah Vihear temple and its vicinity to Cambodia.<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of the Cold War, both Cambodia and Thailand have witnessed the rise of nationalist discourses that draw heavily on historical grievances and territorial pride. These narratives have been mobilized by political elites seeking to consolidate domestic legitimacy or divert attention from internal challenges. In Cambodia, the Preah Vihear dispute has become a crucial symbol of national sovereignty and resistance to external encroachment, while in Thailand, assertions of territorial rights serve to bolster nationalist credentials and government authority.

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<sup>6</sup> "1962 Judgment in the Case Concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)," International Court of Justice, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/103120>. "Request for Interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the Case concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)," International Court of Justice, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/151>.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, Sang Kook. "Siam mismapped: revisiting the territorial dispute over the Preah Vihear temple." *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2014): 39-55, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2014.0196>.

Thailand has a larger economy and enjoys more advanced military capabilities, and its broader diplomatic reach positions it as the dominant actor in this bilateral relationship. This asymmetry grants Thailand greater strategic flexibility to press territorial claims and shape the dispute's dynamics to its advantage. Meanwhile, Cambodia, while diplomatically active and supported by external partners, remains comparatively constrained in its capacity to influence desired outcomes unilaterally.

These historical and structural conditions provide fertile ground for the application of John Mearsheimer's offensive realism framework. In an anarchic international system lacking a reliable arbiter, a relatively stronger state like Thailand may leverage its advantages to expand influence over the contested areas. This pursuit of power and security, underpinned by enduring uncertainty about the other side's intentions, fuels the recurrence of tension, mistrust, and conflict that defines Cambodia-Thailand border relations.

### **Thailand's Contemporary Border Strategies**

Thailand's recent approach toward its contentious border with Cambodia is characterized by a set of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing tactics. Each of them is designed to consolidate territorial claims and shape both domestic and international perceptions in its favor. These strategies reflect a strategic effort and hegemonic intentions to leverage Thailand's relative power advantage within an anarchic regional environment.

First, Thailand has engaged in producing and disseminating alternative maps of the Cambodia-Thailand border.<sup>8</sup> These unilateral maps have been used as a means to justify and assert claims and shape the narrative of territorial sovereignty. By circulating these maps, Bangkok seeks to influence domestic public opinion, legitimize its claims in international platforms, and create a de facto status quo favorable to its interests. This approach complicates potential negotiations by pre-emptively establishing Thailand's preferred evidentiary baseline.

Second, Thailand has deployed disinformation tactics aimed at delegitimizing Cambodia's position. For example, the Thai army and mainstream media repeatedly accused Cambodia of planting landmines to escalate the conflict, despite knowing that 700 kilometers of the frontier remain uncleared.<sup>9</sup> These politically motivated accusations fueled tensions and contributed to the recent "Five-Day War" between both countries. These narratives often portray Cambodia, despite the existing power asymmetry, as historically unfounded in its territorial claims, a violator of international

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<sup>8</sup> Sothirak, Pou. "Cambodia's border conflict with Thailand." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, no.1 (2013), pp.87-100, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23471138>.

<sup>9</sup> "Cambodia Dismisses Thai Landmine Allegations as Baseless, Warning of Uncleared Border Minefields," Kiripost, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://kiripost.com/stories/cambodia-dismisses-thai-landmine-allegations-baseless-warning-uncleared-minefields>.

law, an invader of Thailand, or overly dependent on foreign powers. Internally, such framing helps mobilize nationalist sentiment and consolidate domestic support for assertive policies. Externally, it seeks to undermine Cambodia's diplomatic credibility and forestall unified regional responses to the dispute. By controlling the narrative, Thailand attempts to weaken Cambodia's bargaining position and shape international perceptions in its favor.

Third, Thailand's selective disregard for the ICJ rulings and the normative frameworks promoted by ASEAN's peaceful dispute settlement mechanisms reflects a rational and strategic calculation. Given the weak enforcement capacities of these institutions, and the limited material consequences for noncompliance, Thailand appears willing to incur reputational costs in exchange for the tangible benefits of establishing de facto control over the contested border areas. This approach reflects a pragmatic exploitation of international legal and diplomatic loopholes and reinforces Mearsheimer's assertion that states under anarchy prioritize survival and power over adherence to norms when the balance of interests favors defiance.

Together, these three strategies constitute a coherent approach by Thailand to maximize leverage in the border dispute and highlight the enduring dynamics of power politics in Southeast Asia.

### **Offensive Realism and Strategic Logic**

Viewed through Mearsheimer's offensive realism, Thailand's conduct in the Cambodia border dispute is more than mere bilateral tensions or domestic political pressure. Instead, it highlights a rational strategy aimed at maximizing Thailand's structural advantage within an anarchic regional order. This strategic logic unfolds along several key dimensions.

First, Thailand's continued efforts to assert territorial control, both physically and symbolically through its unilateral maps and narratives, serve to enhance its bargaining leverage in any future negotiations. By shaping public perceptions, Thailand enhances its relative position by making it harder for Cambodia to reclaim the disputed areas without significant cost.

Second, as the preeminent power in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand seeks not only to expand its borders but also to constrain strategic autonomy of its smaller and weaker neighbours including Cambodia. This pursuit of regional hegemony involves preventing Cambodia from external partnerships to challenge Thailand's influence.

Third, Thailand wishes to strategically manage the dispute through bilateral channels and avoid multilateral mechanisms that can dilute its influence. By avoiding responsibility and steering the conflict into arenas where its asymmetry over Cambodia

is most pronounced, Thailand preserves greater strategic maneuverability and reduces external interference.

### **The “Tragedy” in the Context of Southeast Asia**

Mearsheimer’s concept of the tragedy of great power politics shows the structural inevitability of competition in an anarchic international system. Even when cooperation could yield mutually beneficial outcomes including economic cooperation and conflict de-escalation, deep-seated mistrust and security concerns drive states toward competitive behaviors and defensive aggression.

In the Cambodia-Thailand border dispute, this tragic logic manifests in several ways. First, diplomatic and legal initiatives by Cambodia are often perceived by Thailand through a lens of suspicion, interpreted as strategic attempts to solidify claims at Thailand’s expense. Conversely, Thailand’s unilateral assertions and military maneuvers are viewed by Cambodia as revisionist encroachments that threaten its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This reciprocal mistrust entrenches a zero-sum mindset that impedes peaceful dialogue and compromise.

Second, ASEAN relies heavily on consensus-based decision-making and non-interference principles to manage intra-regional disputes.<sup>10</sup> While this approach fosters unity, it also delays substantive conflict resolution, allowing border tensions to fester unresolved. The reluctance or inability of ASEAN to impose binding solutions means that the ongoing disputes can escalate into flashpoints without effective mediation or enforcement.

Third, both Cambodia and Thailand navigate their rivalry against a backdrop of broader regional power competition, including the growing presence of external actors like the US and China.<sup>11</sup> This complicates trust-building efforts, as each side remains wary of the other’s external partnerships that potentially alter the strategic balance.

### **Implications for Cambodia and ASEAN**

The Cambodia-Thailand border dispute, viewed through the prism of offensive realism and regional dynamics, carries several significant implications both for Cambodia and ASEAN. For Cambodia, given Thailand’s relative power advantage and assertive strategies, Cambodia’s diversifying and deepening of diplomatic, economic, and

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<sup>10</sup> Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. "Thai-Cambodian conflict: The failure of ASEAN’s dispute settlement mechanisms." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2013): 65-86, <https://doi.org/10.18588/201305.000005>.

<sup>11</sup> Khoo, Nicholas. "Great power rivalry and Southeast Asian agency: Southeast Asia in an era of US-China strategic competition." *Political Science* 74, no. 2-3 (2022): 141-154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323187.2023.2186251>. Ciorciari, J. D. (2009). The balance of great-power influence in contemporary Southeast Asia. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 9(1), 157-19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26159461>.

security ties with external powers including the US, Japan, Vietnam, and China serves as a crucial deterrent against unilateral aggression. These partnerships offer Cambodia more leverage and alternative avenues for conflict resolution and thus enhance its position in the regional power dynamics.

Besides, Cambodia's consistent invocation of the ICJ rulings and international law and norms reinforces its claims and sustains a degree of legitimacy in the global arena. This legal strategy, while insufficient alone to resolve the dispute, functions as an essential tool for shaping international opinion and pressuring Thailand to conform to recognized standards.

Additionally, to counter Thailand's disinformation campaigns, Cambodia must invest in robust domestic education and information dissemination efforts. Promoting a resilient national narrative rooted in historical fact and legal legitimacy can blunt the impact of misinformation, bolster public support, and maintain national unity in the face of growing external challenges.

For ASEAN, the protracted Cambodia-Thailand border dispute exposes fundamental limitations within ASEAN's consensus-based and non-interference principles. The bloc's inability to enforce binding dispute-resolution mechanisms undermines its effectiveness in managing bilateral conflicts and highlights the need for institutional reforms or complementary frameworks to address such disputes decisively in the future.

Moreover, repeated violations of international law and ASEAN protocols, often without meaningful consequences, risk eroding the bloc's credibility as a forum for peaceful conflict management. This normative erosion risks weakening ASEAN's unity and its capacity to maintain regional stability, as external powers increasingly assert influence in Southeast Asia.

## **Conclusion**

Thailand's unilateral mapping, disinformation campaigns, and selective disregard for international law and norms align closely with the core assumptions of Mearsheimer's offensive realism. Within the anarchic regional order, even middle powers like Thailand pursue power-maximizing strategies to consolidate their power and security. These actions are not only expressions of bilateral discord or nationalism but reflect rational calculations driven by systemic imperatives to secure advantage amid uncertainty and competition.

For Cambodia, the challenge lies in navigating these structural constraints by leveraging partnership-building, sustaining legal advocacy through international institutions and international law, and developing robust informational strategies to counter disinformation and preserve domestic cohesion. Such a multifaceted

approach is essential for offsetting Cambodia's relative asymmetry and safeguarding its sovereignty in a fraught geopolitical landscape.

For ASEAN, the dispute highlights the vulnerabilities inherent in its consensus-driven and non-interference principles. The bloc's norms and institutional mechanisms, while valuable, remain susceptible to being undermined by power politics and the strategic interests of member states. This reality calls for a critical reassessment of ASEAN's capacity to effectively mediate and resolve interstate conflicts in a region.

The Cambodia-Thailand border dispute reflects the "tragedy" of great power politics at a regional level, where structural imperatives compel states to prioritize power and security over cooperation and perpetuate cycles of mistrust and contestation. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for developing a pragmatic approach for peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

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