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Thailand’s Proposed Wall on Thai-Cambodian Border: Implications and Suggestions for Cambodia

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Following the return of 119 Thai nationals from Cambodian authorities at the border of Poipet in a scammer’s compound, Thailand contemplated a plan to construct a wall along the Cambodia-Thailand border. This strategy sought to reduce the influx of scam operators and associated criminal networks. This proposal, emerging amid an intensive crackdown on cyber-scam operations, carries significant implications for domestic security policy and the delicate balance of Cambodia-Thailand relations. This paper explores the rationale behind Thailand’s decision, analyzes the potential diplomatic and security repercussions for bilateral relations, and discusses strategic options available for Cambodia.

Rationale Behind Thailand’s Proposed Wall

The Thai government’s push for a physical barrier is rooted in a multifaceted security strategy. For the first trimester of 2025, Thailand has been contending with a surge in online fraud and human trafficking operations.¹ Initially concentrated along its border with Myanmar, these operations have increasingly shifted toward areas like Poipet on the Cambodian border after aggravated Thai crackdowns in eastern Myanmar. Scam operations in Poipet often involve human trafficking, where victims are lured with fake job offers and coerced into running fraudulent online schemes targeting individuals across the region. The proposal for a wall is a direct response to this evolving threat landscape.

¹ “Thailand to Set up International Coordination Center for Combating Transnational, Online Crimes,” Xinhua, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20250210/85ac30581ad64b9f93e8c81fc3196ce1/c.html>.

With commitment to contain transnational crime, Thai officials argue that a physical barrier can serve as an effective deterrent against illegal crossings. The government hopes to restrict the movement of “call-center gangsters” and other criminal elements that facilitate scams, drug trafficking, and smuggling across borders. This strategy is seen as a necessary complement to existing measures, such as suspending cellphone towers that scammers use to coordinate their activities. Moreover, regional pressure, the crackdown on scam operations has not been achieved in isolation. It follows high-profile incidents including the abduction and rescue of a well-known Chinese actor from a scam center in Myanmar², which has placed additional pressure on Thailand to act decisively.

The involvement of influential external actors, notably China, underscores the urgency to address transnational security challenges through tangible measures like border fortifications. In early February, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra visited China, where efforts to combat online scams were also discussed.³ While implementing these approaches, Thailand gained respect and a reputation for taking action to combat online scams.

Furthermore, Thailand has preemptive security measures. The Thai Ministry of Defense has previously suggested constructing a wall along a 55-kilometer natural crossing between Sa Kaeo and Cambodia’s Banteay Meanchey province.⁴ This proposal represents a logical escalation in response to a persistent security gap, aiming to physically block the migration of criminal elements into Thai territory. Yet, the feasibility of the wall construction and its objective are concerned. The wall is viewed as a preventive tool; however, online scams operate beyond borders. Rather than having a wall, both nations should strengthen and tighten border surveillance.

Cambodia-Thailand Relations: possible implications

² Tommy Walker, “Can Myanmar’s Scam Centers Be Shut down for Good? – DW – 03/03/2025,” dw.com, March 3, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-myanmars-scam-centers-be-shut-down-for-good/a-71813141>.

³ Ethan Wang, Shi Bu, and Ryan Woo, “Xi Calls for China, Thailand to Beef up Ties to Fight Global Uncertainties,” Reuters, February 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-xi-meets-thai-prime-minister-with-trade-online-scams-focus-2025-02-06/>.

⁴ “Thailand Mulls Wall on Cambodia Border as Scam Centre Crackdown Widens,” <https://www.bangkokpost.com>, March 3, 2025, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2971870/thailand-mulls-wall-on-cambodia-border-as-scam-centre-crackdown-widens>.

Thailand's proposal to construct a border wall sparks new complexity in Cambodia-Thailand relations. The potential consequences of such a unilateral measure include souring diplomatic ties, impacts on bilateral security cooperation, and socio-economic challenges.

Even though Thai authorities would formally discuss constructing the wall with Cambodian officials, Thailand's decision to build a physical barrier can be perceived as an implicit accusation regarding Cambodia's border management and especially Cambodia's approach to dealing with online scams. This led to Cambodia-Thailand strained diplomatic ties, which risks undermining mutual trust, particularly in a region where cross-border cooperation is vital for managing transnational crime.

This approach also impacts bilateral security cooperation. Cambodia and Thailand have cooperated in joint operations against illegal activities, such as the recent joint raid in Poipet, which rescued 215 victims.⁵ This signals the level of trust between Cambodia and Thailand, as a wall might muddle the bilateral cooperative frameworks by physically segmenting an area that, despite its threats, benefits from collaborative surveillance and sanction efforts. This could unwittingly impede the region's battle against cybercrime and human trafficking. Additionally, restricted access points may slow response times in emergency cases, potentially allowing criminal networks to exploit gaps in enforcement. Effective security cooperation requires fluid cross-border collaboration, which may be undermined by rigid physical barriers.

The development also leads to socioeconomic challenges at the Cambodia-Thai Poipet border, which is distinguished by a vigorous but more informal economy that mounts on both sides of the border. While trade goods typically pass through designated ports of entry, many local businesses and individuals rely on informal cross-border exchanges for their livelihoods. A wall would lessen the border market, affect livelihoods, and alter the socio-economic fabric of border communities. Moreover, Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Vechayachai told The Nation that Thailand is ready to cut off the power supply to Poipet if tackling online scams requires such a

⁵ Sebastian Strangio, "Thai, Cambodian Police Rescue 215 Trafficked Scam Workers," – The Diplomat, February 24, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/thai-cambodian-police-rescue-215-trafficked-scam-workers/>.

need.⁶ The unintended consequences of daily cross-border interactions might generate local grievances that further strain bilateral relations.

While Thailand's rationale is rooted in legitimate security concerns, such an approach carries many setbacks. It, realistically, may not only impede practical cross-border cooperation but also be a catalyst for broader diplomatic erosion.

How Cambodia Should Respond

Amid Thailand's current proposal, Cambodia is at a critical juncture. The response must be multifaceted, prioritizing the need to safeguard national sovereignty with the imperative of maintaining constructive regional partnerships. Although Cambodia has not received any formal notification from Thailand as of now, it may consider these approaches to deal with the wall construction issue and collaboratively combat online scams.

Diplomatic interaction and communication should come first for Cambodia. Open communication with Thailand about the official goal and wall-building strategy must first take the front stage in Cambodia. Instead of seeing the wall as an imposition, Cambodian officials may think about starting proactive discussions to investigate shared security issues. Cooperative talks could open the path for group projects aiming at the underlying reasons for cybercrime without depending on single physical barriers. Preserving confidence and mutual collaboration depends on keeping this communication open.

Another practical response is that Cambodia can enhance border security through technological and cooperative means. Cambodia shall call for modernized border security measures instead of, or in parallel with, a physical wall. Meanwhile, technologies such as surveillance drones, more modernized biometric checkpoints, and proactive real-time intelligence sharing are strengthening. These approaches are prominent in providing effective monitoring while navigating the permeability that advances cross-border trade and social interaction. Moreover, joint security

⁶ "Thailand Ready to Cut off Power Supply, Internet to Poipet If Required," nationthailand, February 14, 2025, <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/policy/40046292>.

frameworks in conjunction with ASEAN auspices shall offer a balanced solution that ensures national security and regional cooperation.

Fundamentally, Cambodia shall embed a rigorous internal approach. Cambodia recently established the Commission for Combating Online Scams on 25 February 2025.⁷ This is a significant move in which proactive measures shall be implemented and enforced. Meanwhile, Cambodia shall have a defined and strictly structured punishment for all online scam cases. To bolster its position, the Cambodian government should undertake comprehensive reforms to increase transparency and crack down on any elements that might be complicit in illicit cross-border activities. Cambodia's position in bilateral negotiations will improve by proving a dedication to reform and efficient law enforcement.

Conclusion

Thailand's proposal to erect a border wall on the Cambodia-Thailand frontier encapsulates the challenges of addressing modern transnational crime while preserving regional diplomatic harmony. While this decision's rationality is questioned, on the one hand, the move is a rigorous response to a rapidly evolving transnational crime, calling for the need for tangible security approaches. On the other hand, it risks straining bilateral relations, disrupting cooperative security frameworks, and impacting local communities.

For Cambodia, the objective is to actively participate in protecting its national interests. Through diplomatic channels, contemporary security technology investment, and internal reform commitment, Cambodia can address the immediate problems presented by cross-border crime and build a more resilient and cooperative regional security architecture. The road forward is ultimately striking a balance between the needs of national security and the virtues of openness and mutual trust supporting the regional order of Southeast Asia. Further, Thailand's plan is subject to Cambodia's closer monitoring through diplomatic channel.

⁷ Rinith Taing, "Cambodia Establishes Commission to Combat Online Scams, led by Prime Minister Hun Manet" Khmer Times, February 25, 2025, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501644649/cambodia-establishes-commission-to-combat-online-scams-led-by-prime-minister-hun-manet/>.

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