



## Reassessing Thailand's Strategic Culture: Military Force and Ultranationalism in the Cambodia-Thailand Border Conflict

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Thailand is often viewed in the strategic literature as a Southeast Asian state guided by “bamboo” diplomacy<sup>1</sup> and strategic hedging<sup>2</sup>. These strategies reflect a historical strategic approach to security and survival within a volatile regional and global order. Grounded in narratives of Ayutthaya-era unity<sup>3</sup> and Chulalongkorn-era diplomacy<sup>4</sup>, Thailand’s strategic culture traditionally emphasizes strategic restraint, balancing, and reliance on international institutions. However, the recent border conflict with

<sup>1</sup> Poonkham, Jittipat. 2022. *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China*. ANU Press. Also see, Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. 2012. "Thailand: the enigma of bamboo diplomacy." In *Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, pp. 204-214. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Feng, Yongping, and Chanattaporn Netkhunakorn. "Thailand's Hedging Strategy under the Strategic Competition between China and the United States." *International Journal of Social, Politics, and Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2024): 39-51.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond, Gregory V. 2020. "Strategic Culture and Thailand's Response to Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia, 1979–1989: A Cold War Epilogue." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 1: 4-45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Also see, Ashley, Ryan, and Apichai W. Shipper. 2022. "The art of Thai diplomacy: Parables of alliance." *Pacific Affairs* 95, no. 2: 227-263.

Cambodia challenges this conventional approach. During this period, Thai military and political elites increasingly relied on coercive force and ultranationalist mobilization. This reflects Thailand's shifting strategic culture in an asymmetrical power relationship. This article offers a counter-argument to the dominant traditional narrative and argues that Thailand's strategic culture has evolved to accommodate a higher priority on military force in specific domestic and regional contexts.

## Strategic Culture and the Potential for Change

Strategic culture is often regarded as "path-dependent," shaped by historical norms, narratives, and institutional legacies that constrain contemporary policy.<sup>5</sup> In Thailand's case, the Ayutthaya narrative emphasizes internal unity to protect sovereignty, while the Chulalongkorn legacy centers on diplomacy and strategic engagement. The ongoing Cambodia-Thailand border conflict, however, reveals a shifting strategic culture.

Several factors demonstrate why conservative Thai elites, particularly the military, were incentivized to depart from traditional diplomatic approaches. The politicization of nationalism following the 2006 coup heightened domestic polarization and encouraged military and political factions to use nationalist rhetoric to legitimize authority and portray themselves as defenders of the nation<sup>6</sup>. In tandem, ASEAN's multilateral framework and traditional diplomatic channels are deemed insufficient to manage Cambodia's internationalization of the dispute through the UN, especially the ICJ<sup>7</sup>, and other great powers<sup>8</sup>. The post-coup political realignments also increased military power by enabling forceful interventions with declined or weakened civilian oversight. These pressures highlight the dynamic nature of Thailand's strategic culture, which can evolve in response to shifts in domestic legitimacy, political factionalism, and regional security.

## Primacy of Military Force in the Recent Border Conflict

Thailand's ongoing strategic behavior in its border dispute with Cambodia shows the elevation of coercive military force as a strategic instrument. Unlike earlier crises, the Thai military engaged in the use of F-16 fighter jets and cluster munitions<sup>9</sup>, artillery exchanges, infantry mobilizations, construction of new outposts, and forward deployment in the disputed areas. Heavy weapons, including multiple-launch rocket systems and long-range artillery, were deployed in the "five-day war."<sup>10</sup> These

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<sup>5</sup> Lantis, J. S. (2002). "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy." *International Studies Review*, 4(3), 87–113.  
Snyder, J. (1977). *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*. RAND Corporation.

<sup>6</sup> Chachavalpongpan, Pavin. "From Marketplace Back to Battlefield: Thai-Cambodian Relations in the Age of a Militarized Politics." *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Developments since Thaksin's Downfall*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies edited by Chachavalpongpan P (2014): 253-282.

<sup>7</sup> Chachavalpongpan, 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>8</sup> Chansok, Lak. 2025. "Hegemonic Stability Theory: Trump's Transactional Hegemony and the Cambodia-Thailand Border Dispute." *e-International Relations*.

<sup>9</sup> "Thailand and Cambodia Exchange Heavy Artillery Fire as Border Battle Expands," Reuter, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-cambodia-exchange-heavy-artillery-fire-border-battle-expands-2025-07-25/>. Also see, "Cambodia Condemns Thai Use of Cluster Bombs," *Cambodianess*, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-condemns-thai-use-of-cluster-bombs>.

<sup>10</sup> "Five-Day War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy and Lessons Learnt," *Phnom Penh Post*, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/-five-day-war-politics-diplomacy-legacy-and-lessons-learnt>.

military operations demonstrate a fundamental shift in Thailand's strategic culture: force was no longer a last resort but a preferred instrument for coercion and intimidation to resolve the tension, assert territorial claims, and satisfy domestic political constituencies. The power centralization of military decision-making in these operations reflects a hierarchy of strategic tools, in which coercion outweighs diplomacy as a credible instrument at the expense of its global reputation.

### **Ultrationalism and Threat Perception as Drivers of Strategic Shift**

Nationalism played a critical role in reshaping strategic approaches during the border disputes.<sup>11</sup> Domestic political and military actors mobilized ultranationalist sentiment to enhance political legitimacy. Street movements, such as recent civilian protests framed "legal" recognition of Cambodia's lands as a threat to Thai sovereignty, while Thai military elites portrayed Cambodia as an assertive and provocative neighbor.<sup>12</sup> This shift in threat perception realigns Thailand's strategic culture: coercive military force becomes a more credible and political instrument than negotiation and diplomacy. The traditional narrative that links internal unity to external security is reinterpreted to validate assertive military action as a demonstration of national unity and cohesion.

### **A Break from Chulalongkorn-Style Diplomacy**

If Thailand's strategic culture remained grounded in Chulalongkorn-era diplomacy, the state would have prioritized multilateral mediation, strategic patience with international legal processes, and avoidance of costly military escalation. In contrast, Thailand has increasingly and unilaterally resisted Cambodia's ICJ appeal and other international legal mechanisms<sup>13</sup>, criticized the US and ASEAN mediation efforts,<sup>14</sup> and threatened ASEAN Observers Team (AOT)<sup>15</sup> in the contested zones. The Thai government has escalated militarily even when diplomatic channels remain available. These behaviors indicate a departure from the traditional approach and reflect a reorientation toward military coercion over strategic diplomacy.

### **Dimensions of Strategic-Cultural Change**

The ongoing border conflict demonstrates several overlapping dimensions of Thailand's evolving strategic culture. First, there is a shift from diplomacy toward assertive ultrationalism, in which military force gains legitimacy as a tool to

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<sup>11</sup> Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. "From Marketplace Back to Battlefield: Thai-Cambodian Relations in the Age of a Militarized Politics." *"Good Coup" Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Developments since Thaksin's Downfall*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies edited by Chachavalpongpun P (2014): 253-282.

<sup>12</sup> "Thailand Accuses Cambodia of Second Ceasefire Violation in Two Days," the Korea Times, accessed on 10 November 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/world/20250730/thailand-accuses-cambodia-of-second-ceasefire-violation-in-two-days>.

<sup>13</sup> "Thailand's Position in Response to Cambodia's Submission on 15 June 2025 of a Letter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) Related to the Emerald Triangle (Mom Bei), Ta Moan Thom, Ta Moan Tauch and Ta Krabei temples," Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed on 25 July 2025, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/thai-position-response-to-cambodia-icj-en?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683c>.

<sup>14</sup> "Thailand 'Halts' Peace Agreement with Cambodia Hailed by Trump after Landmine Explosion Injures Troops," CNN, accessed on 10 November 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/11/10/asia/thailand-suspends-peace-accord-cambodia-intl-hnk>.

<sup>15</sup> "ASEAN Observers Team Forced to Withdraw after 'Weapon Explosions on the Thai Side'," Khmer Times, accessed on 19 November 2025, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501792744/asean-observers-team-forced-to-withdraw-after-weapon-explosions-on-the-thai-side/>.

express sovereignty and satisfy domestic political establishments. Second, limited military activities have evolved into assertive militarization. Ongoing Thai military operations along the border reflect growing military coercion. Third, there is a gradual shift toward stronger monarchy-backed and military-led nationalism, as the conservative establishments increasingly harness ultranationalist sentiments to assert excessive authority and legitimacy. These shifts do not undermine Thailand's historical predispositions but overlay the traditional culture with a militarized nationalist layer that fundamentally changes Thailand's security behavior.

### **Implications of Changing Strategic Culture**

The ongoing Cambodia-Thailand border conflict demonstrates that strategic culture is neither fixed nor uniform. It is contested among domestic actors, as competing political and military factions leverage nationalism and military capacity. Moreover, it is responsive to political crises and legitimacy struggles that adjust to evolving domestic pressures and factional intra-elite competition. Finally, strategic culture may tilt toward greater militarization when incentives for forceful action converge with domestic interests and territorial concerns. Therefore, Thailand's strategic culture should be understood as a dynamic and evolving field rather than a static diplomacy-first tradition.

### **Conclusion**

The current Cambodia-Thailand border conflict provides evidence that Thailand's strategic culture has shifted toward military coercion and assertiveness. Domestic political polarization, ultranationalist mobilization, post-coup military empowerment, and a stronger monarchy-military relationship have reshaped strategic priorities and elevate military coercion over diplomacy. This evolution does not entirely replace the historical Ayutthaya or Chulalongkorn legacies but shows that strategic culture is contested and responsive to changing domestic and regional pressures in an asymmetrical power relationship. The border tension illustrates how Thailand can prioritize military force to assert sovereignty and maintain political legitimacy within its shifting and evolving strategic culture.

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