



Examining Thailand's Renewed Military Escalation During Domestic Instability

Sovitou Long



The recent deployment of [Thai F-16 fighter jets](#) against Cambodia on December 8, 2025, raises significant questions regarding state conduct and regional stability. The scope of these airstrikes and artillery shells, which reportedly extend beyond military installations and [affect civilians](#), poses a challenge to established international humanitarian law. To understand the implications of this escalation, one must analyze Thailand's current military posture with the timing of its mounting domestic issues.

The timing of this escalation is unlikely to be coincidental. Thailand's economy, projected to grow at merely [2%](#) this year, underperforms regional peers. At 86.8% of GDP, Thailand's [household debt](#) is one of Asia's highest, posing a significant risk to

the nation's financial stability. This economic underperformance creates acute political vulnerability for the government.

Administrative incompetence has compounded economic woes. The 33rd Southeast Asian Games execution faced significant [public criticism](#) and administrative challenges: budget mismanagement, AI-generated promotional materials mocked on social media, and sound systems failing during national anthems. These failures, while individually minor, collectively undermined public confidence in governmental competence.

Severe flooding in southern Thailand, both [underestimated and poorly managed](#), further exposed governmental inadequacy. The catastrophic flooding, described as the worst in decades, has claimed [267 lives](#) and disrupted the livelihoods of over [3.6 million people](#) across 12 southern provinces. Severe inundation paralyzed major economic hubs like Hat Yai and caused extensive damage to critical infrastructure, submerging thousands of homes and cutting off essential transportation networks. When regimes face such comprehensive domestic failures, manufacturing external crises becomes a tempting diversionary strategy. This pattern is not new to observers of Thailand's domestic politics, where external conflicts have historically served regime legitimization during internal vulnerability.

As Thailand's domestic crises mount, the government's pivot to military action has been accompanied by a corresponding shift in public discourse, with state-aligned media emphasizing national security threats while downplaying legal and humanitarian concerns. This rhetorical strategy, however, cannot obscure fundamental questions of legal compliance. On what international legal grounds does Thailand justify military action impacting areas with close proximity to civilian populations?

The Thai military claims it responded to Cambodian [provocations](#) of opening fire on Thai troops deployed to protect engineers working on a road improvement project, the allegations that Phnom Penh [categorically denies](#) and for which Thailand has provided no credible independent verification. Even accepting Thailand's narrative, the principle of distinction and the principle of proportionality under international humanitarian law remains unambiguous: military responses must distinguish between military objectives and civilian populations, and force must be proportionate to the military advantage sought. Under the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the direct targeting of civilians constitutes a war crime. These [hostilities](#) can be classified as indiscriminate attacks; attacks carried out recklessly without regard for civilian life.

Deploying F-16 fighter jets equipped with Mark 82 aerial bombs and other artillery shells against border areas containing civilian villages and schools cannot meet this threshold. Thailand's invocation of sovereignty does not withstand legal scrutiny. Sovereignty grants no license for disproportionate force, nor does it exempt states from obligations under the Geneva Conventions and to protect civilian populations.

Thailand's actions also directly violate the [ceasefire agreement](#) brokered by President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on 28th October, 2025. Thailand officially [suspended implementation](#) in November, citing alleged Cambodian landmine placement. Cambodia disputes these claims, noting these are [remnants of past conflicts](#). Most alarmingly, Prime Minister Anutin announced on 8 December afternoon the [closure of negotiation channels with Cambodia](#), stating that he no longer considers the involvement of Trump or Anwar. He emphasized that this is strictly a matter

between Thailand and "its adversary," dismissing concerns about potential impacts on U.S. tariffs, and declared that the joint declaration is now null. This statement reveals the Thai government's complete abandonment of diplomacy, peaceful mechanisms, and the very peace deal it signed merely two months prior.

Cambodia's response to this aggression was distinctly asymmetric, notably avoiding reciprocal military escalation. In the past 24 hours since the escalation reignited, Cambodian forces had not retaliated, and the border communities were still seen evacuating to safe areas. Cambodia's Ministry of National Defense has called for ASEAN observer missions to [investigate](#), demonstrating confidence in the facts and commitment to multilateral mechanisms. This restraint contrasts sharply with Thailand's substantially more aggressive posture. While Cambodia's measured response and calls for independent observation suggest confidence in its position, Thailand's escalatory rhetoric and rejection of mediation reveal a government more concerned with domestic political optics than international legal standing. The question must be asked: cui bono?

The success of such diversionary tactics depends substantially on controlling the information environment. This means emphasizing certain facts while suppressing others and framing complex situations in reductive nationalist terms. The contention that Thailand was merely defending its sovereignty against Cambodian aggression is refuted by several pieces of evidence: the precise timing of the escalation, the disproportionate application of force, the deliberate targeting of civilian areas, and Cambodia's sustained requests for diplomatic dialogue and independent observation. Thailand must accept ASEAN independent observers, for they are crucial actors in establishing facts and holding both parties accountable for their actions.

To understand how such crises gain traction despite resembling a pattern consistent with diversionary war theory, one must examine the media ecosystem that amplifies official narratives while marginalizing contradictory evidence. Thai state-aligned media coverage has emphasized security threats and sovereignty violations, while international outlets and social media platforms have increasingly questioned the proportionality and timing of Thailand's military response. This information asymmetry shapes not only public opinion but also the political space available for diplomatic resolution.

Thailand's renewed military escalation against Cambodia presents a compelling case for the diversionary war hypothesis, with temporal convergence between domestic crisis (2% GDP growth, 86.8% household debt-to-GDP ratio, administrative failures) and external conflict initiation. The disproportionate use of force, the targeting of civilian objects, combined with Thailand's rejection of diplomatic channels and unilateral ceasefire termination, appears inconsistent with defensive sovereignty claims. Cambodia's sustained restraint and acceptance of ASEAN observers create an asymmetric dynamic that challenges Thailand's narrative, as willingness to permit independent verification may indicate confidence in its conduct.

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