

## Inclusive Governance Under Fire: Assessing the Breakdown of Border Management Between Thailand and Cambodia in 2023-2025

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### ABSTRACT

A decades-long border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia resurfaced during the period from 2023 to 2025, revealing how fragile governance and the absence of inclusive mechanisms can escalate local tensions into regional instability. This study addresses three key questions: (1) What forms of governance failure are evident in this conflict? (2) Why did the failure occur? (3) What are the broader consequences of these governance breakdowns? Drawing on events such as unilateral military actions, failed bilateral negotiations, and politicized border management, the study identifies key indicators of governance failure, including fragmented institutional coordination, exclusionary decision-making, and disrupted political authority. These issues are rooted in nationalistic dominance, limited involvement of non-state actors, and poor bilateral communication. The conflict disrupted trade valued at over 170 billion baht annually, triggered reciprocal economic sanctions, and affected more than 12,000 border residents, impacting livelihoods, mobility, and public trust in governance. This paper argues that the crisis is not merely a diplomatic standoff, but a manifestation of structural governance failure, where mechanisms, authority, and responses failed to align. Without addressing these systemic mismatches, states risk perpetuating fragile border governance and recurring instability. Ultimately, inclusive and accountable governance is essential not only to resolve bilateral conflicts, but to fulfill global commitments to peace, justice, and strong institutions under SDG 16.

**Keywords:** *Thailand-Cambodia, Governance Failure, Border Conflict.*

### INTRODUCTION

Border governance in Southeast Asia presents a persistent and multifaceted challenge, deeply rooted in the colonial-era demarcations that continue to influence contemporary territorial disputes. Particularly, the Thailand–Cambodia border has remained a flashpoint, where historical claims borne from arbitrary French-Siamese treaties still reverberate in the present-day insecurity (Miranda, 2025). Concurrently, these frontier regions are not mere geopolitical margins but vital conduits for economic exchange: Thailand–Cambodia cross-border trade reached approximately 174–175 billion baht in 2024, with the Aranyaprathet checkpoint alone accounting for about 110 billion baht (circa 64%) of the total (The Nation, 2025). This economic interdependence directly sustains the livelihoods of more than 12,000 residents in adjacent provinces, whose daily mobility and welfare are highly dependent on the stability of border governance (Al Jazeera, 2025). Yet this very reliance also augments their vulnerability amid political volatility. The resurgence of hostilities between 2023 and 2025 underscores how fragile

governance infrastructures can escalate localized tensions into widespread regional instability.

This fragility becomes evident when contrasting normative expectations with the realities observed in the recent conflict. Ideally, border governance between Thailand and Cambodia should reflect the normative principles of cooperation, inclusivity, and accountability as emphasized in Sustainable Development Goal 16. In reality, however, the 2023–2025 border conflict demonstrates how fragile institutions and exclusionary decision-making processes have led to escalating tensions rather than stability (UNDP, 2025). Episodes such as the leak of a sensitive diplomatic phone call and the surge of nationalist rhetoric in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh illustrate how elite-driven politics undermined institutional trust and bilateral coordination (Ratcliffe, 2025). At the regional level, ASEAN’s reliance on consensus-based procedures further limited its capacity to provide effective mediation, revealing structural deficiencies in regional governance mechanisms. While prior scholarship has predominantly analyzed border disputes through the lenses of military confrontation or diplomatic negotiation, comparatively little attention has been directed toward the institutional and governance dimensions of such conflicts (Bong, 2025). This study addresses this gap by applying the governance failure framework to the Thailand–Cambodia case, offering a novel perspective that foregrounds institutional fragility, exclusionary processes, and the erosion of accountability. Notably, academic scrutiny of the Preah Vihear conflict demonstrates that ASEAN’s reliance on consensus and strict non-intervention norms has routinely impeded timely and effective mediation (Setyowati & Nurulita, 2023). This disjuncture between normative expectations and empirical realities underscores the necessity of adopting a governance failure framework to better understand the Thailand–Cambodia case.

To respond to these shortcomings, this study offers an alternative approach that emphasizes governance failure as the key explanatory framework. This article contributes to the broader academic discussion on border governance by employing a governance failure framework as the analytical lens for the 2023–2025 Thailand–Cambodia conflict. Unlike existing analyses that privilege security dilemmas or diplomatic maneuvering, this study foregrounds the structural weaknesses of institutions, the exclusion of non-state stakeholders, and the erosion of accountability as central to understanding the dispute (Iannone, 2025). In doing so, the paper situates the case within the normative agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 16, highlighting inclusive governance as a critical foundation for building peaceful, just, and accountable institutions, and for preventing the recurrence of fragile border management (Cram, 2024). The novelty of this research lies in its focus on institutional fragility as both an explanatory factor and a policy concern, thereby bridging the gap between descriptive accounts of conflict and prescriptive approaches to governance reform. The central argument advanced here is that the Thailand–Cambodia dispute is not merely a bilateral standoff, but a manifestation of structural governance breakdown that transcends traditional notions of territorial rivalry. Accordingly, the study pursues three core objectives: to identify the forms of governance failure observable in the conflict, to

analyze their underlying causes, and to evaluate their implications for bilateral relations and borderland communities.

### **METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach to examine the governance failure in Thailand–Cambodia border management during the period of 2023–2025. The focus of this method is to understand the complexity of institutional breakdown, political exclusion, and disrupted authority not merely as isolated events, but as interconnected governance failures. Data for this research were collected exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, official reports, and reputable news coverage published between 2023-2025. These documents were selected based on their relevance to border governance, regional security, and the specific bilateral dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. In addition, reports from domestic ministries were consulted to provide a comprehensive view of the regional and international responses. Data collection was conducted through document analysis, allowing the researcher to trace key events, discourses, and institutional responses throughout the conflict timeline. To analyze the material, the study applied qualitative content analysis, guided by the governance failure framework. This framework was particularly useful for identifying fragmented institutional coordination, exclusionary decision-making, and disrupted political authority as observable patterns within the conflict. The analysis also sought to explain the root causes of these failures, including nationalist dominance, limited participation of non-state actors, and poor bilateral communication. Furthermore, the study examined the broader consequences of these governance failures, focusing on disrupted trade, reciprocal economic sanctions, and the social impact on borderland communities. The strength of this method lies in its ability to link structural governance weaknesses with practical consequences, bridging the gap between abstract theory and lived realities. By adopting this approach, the research ensures that the findings are not only descriptive but also analytical, highlighting both the systemic nature of governance breakdown and its implications for policy reform.

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The prolonged border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, which intensified from 2023 through the current period in 2025, offers a particularly illuminating and grave case analysis that clearly exemplifies Bob Jessop theoretical ideas concerning structural and metagovernance failure. According to Jessop, governance failure arises not simply from misguided policy decisions but from a more fundamental "failure to configure a satisfactory relationship between different governance mechanisms," along with the state inability to fulfill its meta-governance responsibility of coordinating these mechanisms effectively (Jessop, 2009). This confrontation serves as a paradigmatic illustration of such breakdown: a complex emergency wherein the disintegration of institutional frameworks, the ascendancy of exclusionary political tactics, and the lack of productive mediation have combined to produce a self-reinforcing loop of unrest. The origins of this recent escalation can be linked to a combination of elements, originating with minor military encounters around the disputed Preah Vihear temple

area in early 2023. Nevertheless, these commonplace tensions were dramatically intensified by a crucial breakdown in private discourse: the disclosure of a confidential diplomatic exchange in June 2023. This occurrence permanently damaged relations between the two nations, supplying powerful material for nationalist media outlets in Bangkok and Phnom Penh to portray the disagreement in dire, existential language, thus limiting opportunities for accommodation and cementing both administrations into inflexible, publicly confrontational stances.

Subsequent failures in governance became evident across three separate yet related domains—security, economics, and diplomacy—a situation Jessop would characterize as a disastrous deficiency in metagovernance, or what he calls the "governance of governance" (Jessop, 2009). Table 1 provides a structured overview of governance failures across the three domains, detailing the indicators and their subsequent impacts.

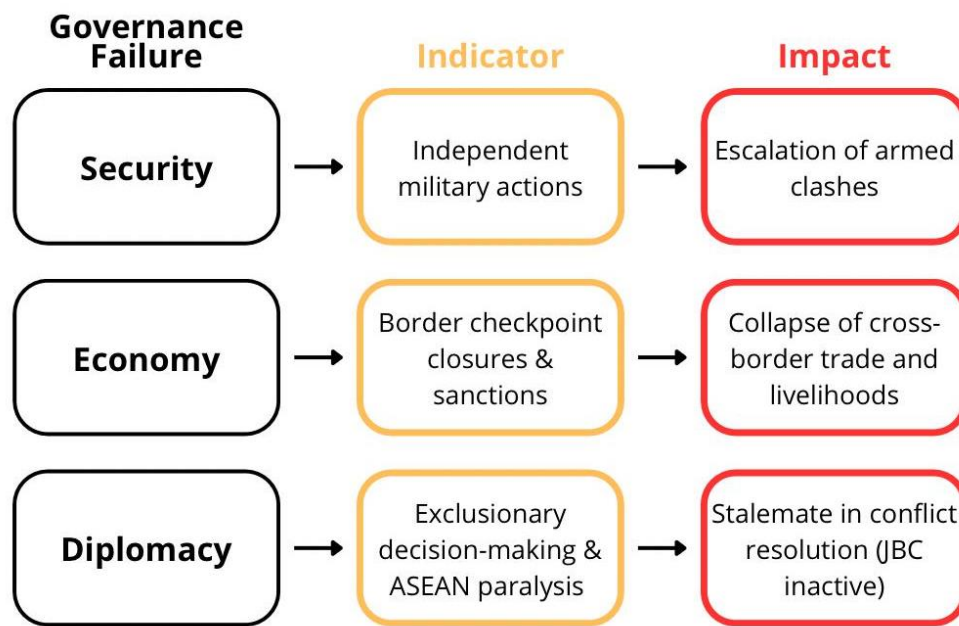
Domain	Governance Failure	Key Indicators	Main Impacts
Security	Institutional disorganization	Military acting independently, frequent clashes undermining diplomacy	Escalation of armed conflict, loss of central government control
Economy	Weaponization of interdependence	Closure of Aranyaprathet-Poipet checkpoint, reciprocal sanctions	Trade decline more than 60%, estimated losses of approximately 60 billion baht, collapse of local livelihoods
Diplomacy	Exclusionary and ineffective processes	Dominance of nationalist elites, lack of civil society/NGO involvement, ASEAN constrained by consensus	Stalemate in Joint Boundary Commission (JBC), public distrust, weak conflict resolution

**Table 1** Summary of Governance Failures in the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict (2023-2025)

As shown in Table 1, the governance failures across the security, economic, and diplomatic domains collectively demonstrate a systemic inability of state institutions to coordinate effectively. This reinforces the argument that the Thailand–Cambodia conflict is not only a diplomatic dispute, but a manifestation of structural governance breakdown. In the realm of security, the organizational disarray within and across the two states became unmistakably obvious. Instead of functioning as compliant tools of a unified international strategy, the armed forces of each country frequently acted with considerable independence, their tactical maneuvers and intermittent clashes repeatedly overtaking and subverting simultaneous diplomatic efforts. This misalignment represents a classic indicator of a state system that has forfeited its ability

to manage its own components authoritatively. On the economic front, the incapacity to handle the dispute set off a retaliatory sequence of mutual sanctions that turned previous mutual reliance into an instrument of confrontation. Thailand's independent halt on imports of crucial Cambodian farm goods and the ensuing shutdown of major border passages in June 2025 prompted Cambodia to impose countervailing duties and bureaucratic obstacles on Thai retail products (Strangio, 2025). This intentional interference with commercial pathways reveals a state opting for the heavy-handed approach of top-down command instead of the refined stewardship of economic networks, an unequivocal example of governance failure as per Jessop classification. The pivotal Aranyaprathet-Poipet checkpoint, which solely represented around 110.72 billion baht (63.4%) of the total 175.53-billion-baht two-way commerce for 2024, was reduced to a virtual halt (The Nation, 2025). The financial damage has been considerable, with forecasts indicating possible deficits of as much as 60 billion baht should limitations continue (Thai PBS World, 2025), ruining the incomes of numerous frontier inhabitants and business owners whose financial stability depends on uninterrupted cross-border activity (Feige, 2025).

Most significantly, the system for resolving conflicts malfunctioned at all tiers, illustrating what Jessop describes as an inability to establish a “requisite variety” of governance reactions appropriate to the intricate, multi-layered character of the issue (Jessop, 2009). On a national scale, the policy formulation process in both governments was distinctly non-inclusive, controlled by military circles and nationalist leaders while clearly overlooking nearby border populations, non-governmental groups, and scholarly specialists who might have contributed practical remedies. This narrow approach guaranteed that strategies were motivated by emblematic national pride instead of communal well-being or conflict awareness. At the international level, the utter ineffectiveness of ASEAN to facilitate productive negotiation highlights a serious shortcoming in supranational governance. Constrained by its inviolable doctrines of sovereignty and unanimous decision-making, the organization could only produce vague appeals for calm, its operational potential for engaged mediation completely crippled by the requirement for total agreement. The Joint Boundary Commission (JBC), the main two-sided technical agency responsible for border delineation, became inactive, its operations permanently halted as the political climate grew more hostile.



**Figure 1** Governance Failure Pathways in the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict  
(2023-2025)

The societal and economic effects of this layered governance breakdown are profound and wide-ranging. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnections among governance failure domains, indicators, and cascading impacts, mapping the pathways of systemic breakdown.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the interplay between domains, indicators, and impacts highlights how governance failures produced cascading consequences for border communities, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This visualization underscores the urgent need for inclusive and accountable governance mechanisms to prevent similar crises in the future. In addition to the approximated 12,000 to 20,000 non-combatants allegedly forced into temporary shelters like those in Koh Ker (Sreypich & Carruthers, 2025), the strife has caused a ruinous financial downturn in official cross-border commerce, with specific periods experiencing a drop exceeding 60% (Khmer Times, 2025). This has permanently weakened citizen confidence in state bodies, generated a widespread feeling of uncertainty among peripheral populations, and halted regional economic progress. Equally important, the governance breakdown has eroded the resilience of civil society actors along the border. Local NGOs and community networks, which could have mitigated humanitarian distress, found themselves excluded from decision-making processes and overwhelmed by resource shortages. This exclusion reinforced the cycle of vulnerability among peripheral populations, underscoring that governance failure was not only institutional but also deeply societal. This investigation ultimately rises above the particularities of the Thai-Cambodian disagreement. It acts as a stern warning that in the lack of resilient, participatory, and responsible governance systems—distinguished by consistent organizational cooperation, clear decision procedures, and efficient international safeguards—isolated



events can swiftly expand into persistent human and financial disasters. The situation represents a clear opposition to the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), revealing that absent a basic dedication to restructuring these governance frameworks, the pattern of vulnerability and repeated turmoil in border regions will persist unfortunately inescapable.

In conclusion, the protracted Thailand-Cambodia border conflict from 2023 to 2025 stands as a stark empirical testament to the catastrophic consequences of structural and metagovernance failure. The collapse was not merely diplomatic but systemic, rooted in the fundamental inability of the state apparatuses to perform their essential coordinating role. This failure manifested in the unchecked autonomy of military institutions, whose unilateral actions consistently undermined diplomatic overtures, and in the subsequent descent into politicized border management, where economic interdependence was weaponized through reciprocal sanctions that crippled cross-border trade and devastated local livelihoods. The broader consequences of this breakdown are severe and multidimensional, extending beyond immediate humanitarian distress to include the erosion of public trust in governmental institutions, the exposure of ASEAN's institutional paralysis, and a direct contravention of the principles of sustainable development. Ultimately, this case demonstrates that without a foundational commitment to building inclusive, accountable, and coherent governance structures capable of managing complex transnational interests, rather than retreating into exclusionary nationalism, the cycle of fragility and recurrent instability in borderlands will remain tragically inevitable.

## **CONCLUSION**

The protracted Thailand–Cambodia border conflict between 2023 and 2025 highlights the systemic consequences of governance failure. Rather than being a temporary diplomatic standoff, the dispute reveals the structural incapacity of both states to coordinate their security, economic, and diplomatic institutions. This incapacity was exacerbated by exclusionary decision-making, nationalist dominance, and ASEAN's institutional paralysis, resulting in cascading humanitarian and economic disruptions that undermined public trust and regional stability. The findings reaffirm that inclusive, accountable, and coherent governance mechanisms are indispensable for preventing fragile border management and for fulfilling the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16.

From a critical perspective, the application of Jessop's governance failure framework has proven effective in illuminating the structural weaknesses underlying the conflict. However, the framework also demonstrates limitations, particularly in capturing the agency of non-state actors and the dynamic role of transnational networks, which require further analytical refinement. Future research could extend this study by conducting comparative analyses with other ASEAN border conflicts, or by integrating perspectives from human security and regionalism to enrich the explanatory power of governance failure theory. Such efforts would not only deepen scholarly understanding of border disputes but also contribute to more practical strategies for sustainable conflict resolution in Southeast Asia.

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