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Cambodia-Thailand diplomatic relations at 75: Pragmatism over Political Sensitivity

Long Sovitou and Ly Nory

Turning 75, Cambodia-Thailand diplomatic relations prioritize joint practical efforts to harmonize peace for human and state security. Yet, amidst warm diplomatic and ceremonial fanfare, it questions whether the deepening tie thrives while sidestepping unresolved issues. Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's visit built upon the momentum generated by elevating bilateral ties to a "Strategic Partnership" in February 2024.¹ While this visit championed mutual prosperity and signaled a 'new, historic page', it conspicuously avoided addressing the sensitive Overlapping Claims Area (OCA), leaving observers' concerns unanswered.

Commitment to Shared Prosperity and Stronger Bonds

A defining characteristic of this visit was its deliberate and practical focus on tangible areas of cooperation, while strategically sidestepping the most contentious issue in the bilateral relationship—the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA) in the Gulf of Thailand. Discussions and formal agreements centered on practical cross-border matters, including managing PM2.5 pollution, combating cyber scam operations and transnational crime, regulating labour mobility and worker permits, enhancing infrastructure connectivity, and boosting bilateral trade and investment.²

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand. 8 February 2024. "Thailand and Cambodia announced Strategic Partnership to foster closer cooperation for common peace and development".

<https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/postpr070224-2?page=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9ac&menu=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9ad>

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand. 24 April 2025. "Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand makes her first official visit to the Kingdom of Cambodia". <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/official-visit-to-cambodia-2025-en>

A central outcome of the visit was the signing of seven key cooperation documents, witnessed by both Prime Ministers, to strengthen the bilateral partnership across multiple sectors.³ These include revising the Skill Development Centre MoU to enhance vocational training, a Labour Employment Agreement to ensure the rights and welfare of Cambodian workers in Thailand, an Infrastructure Development MoU for technical assistance on National Road No. 57, and an agreement for the construction of a new border bridge at Ban Pak Kard.⁴ These agreements prove the commitment to advance cooperation under the Strategic Partnership framework and mark the 75th anniversary with tangible results.

Beyond the signed documents, the leaders discussed and reaffirmed several key commitments. The primary goal remains to achieve a bilateral trade volume of USD 15 billion by 2027.⁵ Thailand expressed gratitude for Cambodia's support of Thai investors, who represent Cambodia's 9th largest FDI source, and requested ongoing assistance. Prime Ministers committed to enhancing ASEAN coordination to strengthen regional economic integration and Mekong subregional cooperation, particularly in response to global economic volatility. PM Manet also expressed his strong support for Thailand's 'Two Kingdom, One Destination' initiative, which will attract tourists from both nations.⁶

These results represent a comprehensive, albeit familiar, agenda focused on practical, manageable areas of cooperation designed to deliver tangible benefits and foster goodwill, fitting the narrative of strengthening the Strategic Partnership and celebrating the 75th anniversary. The leadership of both Kingdoms appears to have prioritized immediate stability, tangible cooperation, and the positive symbolism of the 75th anniversary over the high-risk, high-reward prospect of tackling the OCA. It serves the immediate political interests of both governments by showcasing cooperation while carefully navigating the treacherous political waters surrounding maritime sovereignty and historical grievances.

³ Fresh News. 23 April 2025. "Cambodia and Thailand Sign Seven Key Cooperation Agreements during Official Visit". <https://en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/59455-2025-04-23-05-46-27.html>

⁴ The Nation. 23 April 2025. "Thailand, Cambodia sign 7 cooperation deals, witnessed by PMs". <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40049136>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nation Thailand. April 25 2025. "Cambodia Backs Thai Tourism, Promotes 'Two Kingdoms, One Destination' Plan,". <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/asean/40049210>.

Crucially, this pragmatic approach seems enabled and underpinned by the enduring close personal ties between the Shinawatra and Hun families.⁷ The inherited legacy of the Thaksin-Hun Sen relationship provides a foundation of trust and familiarity for the current generation of leaders, Paetongtarn and Hun Manet. This personal connection was explicitly referenced during the visit.⁸ It likely facilitates the ability to defer the most difficult issue while confidently pursuing cooperation elsewhere. This exemplifies a key trait of Southeast Asian political culture, where elite relationships significantly shape interstate dynamics.⁹

The Missing Update on the OCA

While observers eyed the updates of OCA, the visit did not publicly touch upon the issue. This indicates that the two governments maintain friendly diplomatic ties while considering OCA a technical issue. In a positive light, there remain other challenges to providing the update on OCA, as it requires more serious legal and technical study.

The decision to sideline the OCA during this high-profile visit, despite its significant economic potential and the previous administration's stated intent to resume talks.¹⁰ It can be interpreted as more than simple avoidance of a difficult topic. The OCA is known to be exceptionally politically sensitive, particularly in Thailand, due to entrenched nationalist sentiments, sovereignty concerns focused on Koh Kut island, and the lingering doubt surrounding the substance of the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed during the Thaksin premiership.¹¹

Engaging directly with the OCA at this juncture, especially given the political climate in Thailand, where the issue is often used as a tool by opposition groups¹², could risk destabilizing the bilateral

⁷ Chhay Lim & Long Sovitou. 27 March 2024. "The past, present and future of Cambodia–Thailand relations". East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/27/the-past-present-and-future-of-cambodia-thailand-relations/>

⁸ Khmer Times. 24 April 2025. "Cambodia, Thailand encouraged to upgrade ties to comprehensive strategic partnership (VIDEO)". <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501674125/cambodia-thailand-encouraged-to-upgrade-ties-to-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

⁹ Kenneth Christie. 1998. "Political culture and democratic change in Southeast Asia". Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 30:1, 66-72, DOI: 10.1080/14672715.1998.10411035

¹⁰ Bangkok Post. 7 December 2024. "No progress made' by Joint Technical Committee on Cambodia". <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2915420/no-progress-made-by-joint-technical-committee-on-cambodia>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Nation Thailand. 30 October 2024. "Drop MoU44 before gas exploration talks with Cambodia, demands PPRP". <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/politics/40042813>

relationship and potentially undermining the domestic standing of both Prime Ministers. The potential political costs of tackling the OCA appear to have outweighed the immediate benefits of pursuing its resolution. Therefore, the pragmatic focus on less contentious areas, enabled by the confidence derived from decades of close elite relationships, allows both governments to demonstrate progress, celebrate the 75th anniversary with tangible outcomes, and maintain positive momentum. The high-risk OCA issue can be deferred until political conditions are potentially more favourable, with the personal connection between the leaders acting as a buffer against criticism for inaction on this front.

The current relationship between the two Kingdoms focuses on pragmatism when faced with politically intractable issues. The leaders chose stability and functional progress, leveraging strong personal ties to manage sensitivities. While this approach successfully fosters cooperation on many fronts and avoids immediate conflict, it leaves the core challenge of the OCA unresolved, postponing potentially significant economic benefits and relying heavily on the continuity of favourable elite relations. The visit reinforced the current positive trajectory, but the long-term sustainability of this harmony may depend on eventually finding a way to address, rather than merely avoid, the most contentious element in their shared maritime space.

Long Sovitou is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

Ly Nory is a Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh

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