

## Beyond the Fighting: Leadership and Scams in the Thailand–Cambodia Crisis

The renewed escalation in fighting between Thailand and Cambodia marks the most serious deterioration in their relations for decades. While attention has understandably focused on developments along the border, several features of the current crisis merit closer attention. In particular, questions of leadership and authority in Cambodia, as well as the growing prominence of scam operations in the conduct and justification of military action, shed light on why the conflict has unfolded as it has and what it may mean going forward.

### Where is Hun Manet?

When the conflict first reignited [in July](#) 2025, it became clear fairly quickly that Hun Sen was [directing](#) events. For those who follow Cambodian politics, it has long been apparent that Hun Sen [never](#) fully relinquished power to his son Hun Manet. Since taking over the prime ministership in 2023, Hun Manet has appeared to operate more as a day-to-day administrator of the state than as its primary political leader. In the run-up to, and during, the initial phase of the conflict, Hun Sen was highly visible – [directing action from his “war room”](#) and delivering public speeches – while Hun Manet played a more limited role, at best positioning himself as a conciliatory figure while his father took charge of the war effort.

This stands in stark contrast to the earlier flare-up of tensions during 2008-11, when Hun Manet was pushed prominently to the forefront, likely as part of a deliberate effort to [build his profile](#), authority, and popularity in anticipation of an eventual succession.

In the most recent escalation over the past few weeks, however, Hun Manet has been conspicuously absent. In my monitoring of Cambodian and regional media, he features only minimally. Whether this reflects doubts on Hun Sen’s part about his son’s capacity, or a broader reluctance to cede the spotlight, is impossible to determine at this stage. What is clear is that this absence can only weaken Hun Manet’s domestic and international legitimacy as the succession question looms.

Moreover, given the extent to which the power of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) rests on control over the coercive apparatus and the loyalty of the military – as I have argued [elsewhere](#) – the fact that Hun Manet appears secondary to other military figures during the most significant conflict in recent memory is potentially consequential. Should Hun Sen eventually step back, this dynamic could prove perilous during any future transition.

### The Scams Didn’t Cause the Conflict

As part of their incursions into Cambodia, Thai forces have been targeting scam compounds along the border, specifically in Oddar Meanchey and Pursat provinces. Most symbolically, these include compounds linked to Senator Ly Yong Phat ([O’Smach](#)) and the tycoon and former adviser to Hun Sen, Try Pheap ([Thmor Da](#)). This has had worrying humanitarian implications for those who live and work in these compounds, many under [dire](#) conditions, who have now been fled the compounds, adding to already significant levels of displacement among Cambodians fleeing areas of active fighting.

The conflict has caused extensive damage to several border scam sites. But as the excellent Cyber Scam Monitor has shown, it is far from breaking the industry. There are scam centers throughout the country, including in the towns of [Poipet](#) and Pailin, which also sit close to the

Thai border, and there is in fact a much greater concentration of operations in areas abutting Vietnam, where operations are [expanding rapidly](#). Thailand's recent strikes on scam compounds, while significant, will likely just result in the displacement of criminal activities to safer areas.

There are several reasons why Thai forces might be targeting these compounds, notwithstanding the humanitarian risks involved. First, they are large complexes located in very close proximity to the border that could plausibly be used to store weapons or house soldiers. Indeed, the Thai military has [justified](#) striking these compounds on the grounds that they were being used for military operations or weapons storage, although it has provided no evidence to support this accusation.

Second, the compounds are owned by figures closely connected to the CPP, which likely derives significant profits from the scamming industry. Therefore, in addition to the purported military objectives, targeting them simultaneously provides a means of economically pressuring the CPP government and its associated tycoons during the conflict. This follows months of escalating tensions over scam centers, during which Thailand has taken a number of measures against key figures, including Ly Yong Phat, that it claims are associated with scam operations in Cambodia.

What is not supported by the evidence available so far is the [claim](#) that scams were [causally](#) responsible for the conflict. It was only on December 18, already ten days into the renewed fighting, that Thailand's Second Army Area Command made an apparent attempt to [recast](#) its activities as a fight against online scams, stating: "The true adversary is the transnational criminal networks and power structures that sustain illegal interests through violence."

As such, there are far more convincing explanations, both for the recent flare-up and in the medium term. Most relate to domestic political dynamics in Thailand and Cambodia, where governments facing challenges to legitimacy at home may see benefits in external confrontation as a means of rallying domestic support. Both countries also have long-standing nationalist rivalries that have surfaced during earlier crises and have proven politically useful in the past. As Thailand moves toward an election and Hun Sen seeks to reinforce his authority, this broader context is worth keeping firmly in mind.

It is also not simply the case that Thailand is attacking scam centers to appease or [appeal](#) to the United States. Rather, there has been a substantial buildup of international pressure on governments across the region and beyond to address scam operations, including from [China](#), the [United States](#), the [United Kingdom](#), [South Korea](#), and many others, as well as significant and long term pressure coming from within [ASEAN](#), whose [citizens](#) are both trafficked into and targeted by these scams.

Among the more questionable interpretations circulating is the claim that "[China has taken steps to shut down scam centers in Cambodia and Myanmar – but only those targeting Chinese people](#)." This assertion sits uneasily with the available evidence. Chinese authorities have been targeting scam centers for several years, most notably in Myanmar. While there has undoubtedly been foot-dragging and reluctance to openly criticize bilateral partners that have allowed scam economies to flourish, the claim that China tolerates scam operations so long as non-Chinese victims are targeted is weak at best.

Indeed, the very [report](#) often cited in support of this argument notes that Chinese police have initiated public education campaigns explicitly stressing that “scamming foreigners is also a crime.” In reality, many of the scam centers shut down following [Chinese pressure](#) will have hosted operators targeting people all across the world, not only Chinese nationals

Finally, it is notable that the statement by Thailand’s Second Army Area Command noted above coincided with a visit by Liu Zhongyi, assistant minister of public security, who has been tasked with leading China’s fight against the regional scam industry. This demonstrates Thailand’s willingness to adjust the narrative to cater to different audiences and is perhaps also an attempt to pre-empt criticism of its operations as it becomes increasingly clear that its military capacities are vastly superior to that of its neighbor.

In short, scam operations form an important part of the broader context of the conflict, but they are not its cause. The current escalation is better explained by domestic political calculations, elite authority, and unresolved nationalist tensions, with significant implications for leadership legitimacy in Cambodia and for political mobilization on both sides of the border.