

When Soft Power is Weaponized: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

Written by Apipol Sae-Tung

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

When Soft Power is Weaponized: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/06/22/when-soft-power-is-weaponized-the-thai-cambodian-border-crisis/>

APIPOL SAE-TUNG, JUN 22 2025

The leaked 17-minute phone call between Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen on June 15, 2025, was no ordinary diplomatic misstep. It was a revelation of the brutal realities of modern statecraft, where personal relationships are weaponized, domestic vulnerabilities are exploited, and identity itself becomes politicized. In an era when a private conversation can be instantaneously transformed into a global spectacle through social media, the incident stands as a case study in how diplomacy can be co-opted into a theatre of national humiliation and political sabotage. It lays bare the volatile dynamics of Southeast Asian geopolitics, asymmetries of power, and the complex interplay of personality and politics on the international stage.

The 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border crisis began as a series of possible confrontations over long-disputed border territory, but it escalated on May 28, 2025, when a firefight between Cambodian and Thai soldiers led to the death of a Cambodian soldier. Both states accused the other of instigating the clash. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet announced his government would seek a ruling from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to resolve the dispute, a move Thailand has historically opposed, preferring bilateral negotiations. Despite military-level discussions taking place the following day, tensions remained high amid the most serious border dispute in over a decade, one that had already triggered military mobilization and raised fears of a broader confrontation.

Against the backdrop of rising nationalism and failed formal diplomacy, the conversation brought together two politicians from vastly different political worlds. On one end of the line was Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the 38-year-old heir to Thailand's most famous and divisive political dynasty. As the country's youngest-ever prime minister and only its second female leader, she is still finding her foot in navigating the notoriously fractious currents of Thai democracy. On the other end was Hun Sen, the 72-year-old Cambodian strongman, a veteran of nearly four decades of ruthless power politics. Despite formally handing the premiership to his son, he continues to wield immense and decisive influence.

Paetongtarn initiated the phone call on June 15 as an informal, off-the-record back-channel effort to de-escalate the crisis. Her self-described strategy was to employ a softer tone and offer sympathetic remarks as a means of opening a path to peace. However, the content of the call revealed a series of politically devastating concessions and statements. She repeatedly established familial language in addressing Hun Sen as "uncle," a common term of respect in Thai culture for an elder family friend, and referred to herself as his 'niece.' This immediately reframed the interaction not as a negotiation between two sovereign leaders, but as a deferential conversation between junior and senior figures, establishing a tone of power asymmetry from the outset.

In the most damaging portion of the call, she explicitly undermined Thailand's military and her party's political relationship with it. Referring to Lt. Gen. Boonsin Padklang, the commander of Thailand's Second Army Area responsible for the border, she told Hun Sen to disregard him, describing him as being on "the opposite side." Dismissing his hardline rhetoric, she added, "He just want to look cool and saying things that are not useful to the nation, but in truth what we want is peace." This statement confirmed a critical rift between the civilian government and the military to a foreign adversary.

When Soft Power is Weaponized: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

Written by Apipol Sae-Tung

She further admitted her political vulnerability at home, confessing she was under intense domestic pressure over the crisis and appealing to Hun Sen for personal sympathy. In a moment of unguarded candor, she laughed and said, "Please have sympathy for this niece, as almost all Thai people now want me to be a Prime Minister of Cambodia." The comment, meant to elicit empathy, nonetheless conveyed a damaging degree of personal and political fragility. Most alarmingly, however, was her sweeping offer to concede: "In fact, just tell me what you want, and I'll do it for you," she offered, adding that she would "take care of whatever" he needed. In a final display of deference, she asked for his advice on how to manage the crisis, complaining that she was being heavily criticized at home.

Hun Sen, in contrast, remained composed and tactical. He offered no concessions, reiterating that Cambodia would only reciprocate de-escalation after Thailand first unilaterally lifted its border restrictions. He also pressed his advantage, complaining that the Thai military had failed to honor previous commitments after Cambodian troops had already complied with requests to reposition. His most critical action, however, was invisible to Paetongtarn at the time: he secretly recorded the entire 17-minute, 6-second conversation.

The leak itself was executed with deliberate precision. First, a nine-minute excerpt was released through a pro-Cambodian government news outlet, testing the waters and creating an initial firestorm. Once Paetongtarn held a press conference confirming the clip's authenticity, Hun Sen personally posted the full 17-minute recording on his own Facebook page, challenging the Thai public to listen to the entire exchange and doubling down on his narrative. This act was not only a violation of diplomatic convention but also of Cambodian law, which prohibits recording private conversations without consent. It was a calculated and politically damaging decision designed to humiliate Paetongtarn and destabilize her government.

Hun Sen later admitted to recording the call, justifying it under the guise of ensuring transparency and avoiding misrepresentation. He also confirmed that he had distributed the recording to approximately 80 senior Cambodian officials, including top figures in his party, the government, and the military, effectively priming his entire political establishment for the fallout. He further justified this unprecedented breach of diplomatic protocol not as a premeditated act, but as a retaliatory one. He claimed to have been angered by Paetongtarn's public criticism of Cambodian leaders for their unprofessional use of social media, which she made just hours after their supposedly private and conciliatory phone call.

Diplomacy is not a monolithic practice; it operates along a spectrum of power, most notably conceptualized through Joseph Nye's distinction between hard power and soft power. Hard power is *command power*, the ability to get others to do what one wants through coercive means, often using traditional resources like military force and economic strength. In contrast, soft power is *co-optive power*, which is the ability to achieve desired outcomes because other countries want to follow or have agreed to a situation that produces those effects. This form of power arises from intangible resources such as the attractiveness of a country's culture, its political ideology, and its ability to shape international institutions and norms in a way that aligns with its own interests. Essentially, while hard power orders others through coercion, soft power gets others to want what you want through attraction and persuasion.

Viewed through Nye's lens, Paetongtarn's strategy was a clear, if ultimately disastrous, attempt to wield soft power. Her choice of an informal, private channel, her softer tone, and her direct appeal to a long-standing personal and family relationship were all classic tools of persuasion and attraction, aimed at de-escalating the conflict rather than compelling a resolution through force. Hun Sen's response, however, was a textbook display of hard power. While he did not deploy troops, his actions were fundamentally coercive: issuing a public ultimatum with a 24-hour deadline, imposing retaliatory economic sanctions by banning Thai goods, and engaging in informational warfare by weaponizing the leaked recording. The leak itself can be understood as a form of coercive diplomacy: an act designed not to persuade, but to punish, humiliate, and force a political change within the target state.

Paetongtarn's soft power gambit represents a clear case of failed power, not because soft power is inherently weak, but because it was misapplied in a high-stakes context that demanded a reading of hard power realities and an understanding of her opponent's intentions. Her attempt at soft diplomacy was also gendered in its reception. Her so-called 'charm offensive' was framed less as strategic statecraft and more as an appeal rooted in emotion or seduction, carrying gendered connotations that undermined its perceived legitimacy. While countries like postwar

When Soft Power is Weaponized: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

Written by Apipol Sae-Tung

France have historically leveraged femininity as a deliberate soft power tool, in Paetongtarn's case, the term was largely deployed pejoratively. This perception is explained by the Role Congruity Theory, which holds that prejudice toward female leaders arises when there is a perceived mismatch between stereotypically feminine traits and stereotypically masculine traits, such as decisiveness and assertiveness, associated with leadership.

Paetongtarn's diplomatic style, appealing to personal relationships through the use of familial terms like "niece" and "uncle," and asking for sympathy, fit within feminine stereotypes, but clashed with the masculine expectations of leadership during a national security crisis involving border disputes and military posturing. Her actions were not interpreted as strategic de-escalation but as weakness, emotionality, and a lack of gravitas. The Thai opposition leader's critique that she should have spoken with the "dignity and maturity" expected of a prime minister, not as the "niece of a neighbouring country's leader," is a textbook manifestation of this bias.

Research consistently shows that female diplomats and leaders face systemic barriers. They are subjected to higher levels of scrutiny, are often stereotypically assigned to soft policy portfolios like social welfare or development, and must work significantly harder to be heard and taken seriously in hard security fields. Paetongtarn's attempt to use soft power in a hard power security crisis played directly into these pre-existing stereotypes, which were then ruthlessly weaponized by her political opponents both in Cambodia and, more damagingly, at home.

This gendered asymmetry was compounded by the gap in age and political experience. Young leaders often face significant challenges in establishing credibility, can exhibit a risk-averse mindset, and must learn to navigate complex institutional and interpersonal dynamics on the job. Paetongtarn's deferential tone, her plea for sympathy, and her direct request for advice from Hun Sen on how to handle the crisis all reflect this junior-senior dynamic. In an 'equal' scenario, such admissions are a fatal signal of a lack of confidence and a readiness to concede. Her apparent belief that a private, personal conversation could resolve a deep-seated, structural conflict fueled by nationalism reflected a political naivety often associated with inexperience. This was not a failure of soft power failure per se, but rather a failure to recognize the hard power dynamics at play and misjudge the stakes of the moment, leading to a complete collapse of her diplomatic effort.

The most immediate and lasting consequence of the incident is a total collapse of trust at the highest levels of government. Paetongtarn has explicitly and publicly stated that she will no longer engage in private, informal conversations with Hun Sen, citing a fundamental breakdown in trust. This declaration effectively closes a crucial, albeit deeply flawed, back-channel for communication. The long-standing personal relationship between the Shinawatra and Hun Sen families, once seen as a potential asset for de-escalation, has been exposed as a liability and is now likely broken beyond repair. With this informal channel severed and formal bilateral mechanisms stalled, Thai-Cambodian relations are now defined by mutual suspicion and public antagonism. Nationalist sentiment, deliberately inflamed on both sides, will be difficult to contain. The risk of military miscalculation or unintended escalation along the disputed border remains dangerously high, as the two nations enter their most hostile standoff in over a decade with fewer diplomatic tools at their disposal.

Beyond the immediate regional fallout, this incident offers several lessons for the practice of international diplomacy in the modern era. It highlights the peril of back-channels in the digital age, a stark reminder that in an era of ubiquitous recording devices and global social media platforms, nothing is truly private or off-record, and any conversation can be recorded, decontextualized, and weaponized. Furthermore, the incident demonstrates the weaponization of "transparency." Hun Sen's justification of recording the call for transparency was used not to foster accountability, but as a tool of aggression.

The crisis also underscores the challenges of conducting diplomacy in an age of populist nationalism, where complex international disputes can be simplified and hijacked by leaders to fuel domestic nationalist sentiment. In such an environment, the public performance of strength often becomes more politically valuable than the quiet achievement of peace, creating a dangerous incentive structure that favors escalation over compromise and resolution.

The fallout from the June 15 phone call extends far beyond the immediate political careers of the individuals involved. It has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape between Thailand and Cambodia and created a severe domestic

When Soft Power is Weaponized: The Thai-Cambodian Border Crisis

Written by Apipol Sae-Tung

crisis in Thailand. The leaked phone call was a catastrophe in asymmetric political warfare, representing the two vastly different political actors, styles, and systems. On one side stood a young leader of a flawed democracy, attempting a soft, personalized approach that was deeply rooted in a legacy of family friendship. On the other hand was a seasoned strongman presiding over a consolidated one-party state, who executed a ruthless, hard-power strategy that leveraged modern information technology as a political weapon.

Paetongtarn's diplomatic approach was weak not because of its softness, but a profound strategic miscalculation of her opponent's character, motivations, and the domestic political imperatives. It was a failure to appreciate the depth of her own government's domestic vulnerabilities, interpreted through the biased and unforgiving lenses of gender and age to delegitimize her attempt at statecraft and amplify political damage.

The crisis was thus not simply a diplomatic misstep, but rather a calculated ambush. Hun Sen exploited Paetongtarn's vulnerabilities to advance his own domestic standing and political gain. He successfully transformed Paetongtarn's earnest attempt at diplomatic outreach into a devastating tool for her own political destruction, shattering bilateral trust, inflaming nationalist passions, and pushing a fragile Thai government to the very brink of collapse. The incident offers a sobering lesson in the brutal realities of modern diplomacy: in the unforgiving arena of international power politics, trust is a currency easily spent but almost impossible to reclaim, and naivety is a weakness that will be ruthlessly and publicly punished.

About the author:

Apipol Sae-Tung is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, Japan. His research interests are on foreign policy analysis, domestic politics, democratization, and comparative authoritarianism, and more recently on the role of Artificial Intelligence in these fields.