



UPSC &amp; STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · UJIYARI.COM

**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Preah Vihear Temple – ICJ, Sovereignty, and the Limits of Colonial Cartography

INDIAN EXPRESS

14 March 2026

**SUBJECTS COVERED**

IR HISTORY &amp; CULTURE

**GS PAPERS**

GS2 GS1

**CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

Free UPSC &amp; State PCS Resources

[ujiyari.com](http://ujiyari.com)

# Preah Vihear Temple — ICJ, Sovereignty, and the Limits of Colonial Cartography

 The Indian Express

14 March 2026

GS2

GS1



The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 1



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"How did the ICJ's 1962 Preah Vihear judgment set a precedent for resolving bilateral territorial disputes through international law, and what are its implications for India's own border disputes?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

A renewed Cambodia–Thailand bilateral dialogue on the Preah Vihear Temple area has drawn attention to one of Asia's most enduring territorial disputes, underscoring the continuing relevance of the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling — a landmark in international law that upheld colonial-era cartographic evidence over post-colonial claims.

## BACKGROUND

### The Preah Vihear Temple

The Preah Vihear Temple is a Hindu temple of Khmer architectural tradition, built primarily between the 9th and 12th centuries CE during the Khmer Empire. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and sits atop a 525-metre cliff in the Dangrek Mountains, straddling the modern border between Cambodia and Thailand.

The temple was designated a **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008** — a decision that paradoxically reignited the territorial conflict it was meant to honour.

### KEY STRUCTURAL FEATURES

**Construction era:** 9th–12th century CE; expanded under rulers Yasovarman I, Suryavarman I, and Suryavarman II

**Orientation:** faces north (toward Thailand), while the cliff drops south into Cambodia

**Religious significance:** considered a sacred gateway to Mount Meru (the cosmic mountain in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology)

**Modern legal status:** confirmed under Cambodian sovereignty by the ICJ (1962 and 2013)

## THE TERRITORIAL DISPUTE — ORIGINS

### Colonial Cartography as the Crux

The entire dispute hinges on a **French-Siamese Mixed Boundary Commission** formed in 1904–1907 to demarcate the border between French Indochina (Cambodia) and Siam (Thailand). Under the 1904 Treaty, the watershed line of the Dangrek Mountains was to serve as the boundary.

French cartographers, however, drew the map in a way that placed the temple within Cambodia — deviating slightly from the watershed. Thailand later argued that the watershed line (not the map) should govern, placing the temple in Thai territory.

**The core question:** Which should prevail — the watershed principle agreed in the treaty, or the actual map lines produced by the agreed commission?

## THE 1962 ICJ JUDGMENT

In a **9-3 ruling**, the ICJ held in favour of **Cambodia's sovereignty** over the temple. The Court reasoned:

**Map acceptance = legal acquiescence:** Thailand had received the French maps and acted on them for decades without formal objection, thereby implicitly accepting the boundary they depicted.

**Estoppel principle:** A state cannot later repudiate a boundary it has tacitly accepted through conduct.

**Effective occupation** is not itself determinative when treaty-based maps have been acquiesced to.

*This judgment is a foundational precedent in — it established that prolonged acquiescence to a cartographic claim can be legally binding even if the map technically deviates from the agreed delimitation principle.*

Thailand withdrew its forces from the temple in compliance, but the underlying territorial tension never fully resolved.

## THE 2008–2011 ARMED CONFRONTATION

When UNESCO listed Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site in 2008 (on Cambodia’s nomination), Thailand – under domestic political pressure – objected that the listing implicitly endorsed Cambodian territorial claims.

**Armed clashes** occurred along the border in 2008, 2009, and most severely in **February–May 2011**, resulting in deaths of soldiers on both sides and displacement of tens of thousands of civilians.

The UN Security Council and ASEAN were called upon to mediate. Thailand requested the ICJ to interpret or revise its 1962 ruling.

## THE 2013 ICJ CLARIFICATION

The ICJ revisited the dispute and issued a **clarification judgment in November 2013**, ruling unanimously that:

Cambodia’s sovereignty **extends to the entire promontory** on which the temple stands – not just the temple building itself

Thailand must withdraw all personnel from the promontory area

This interpretation was **consistent with** – not a revision of – the 1962 ruling

The 2013 ruling effectively ended the military standoff, though bilateral relations took years to normalise.

## INDIA’S PERSPECTIVE — WHY THIS MATTERS

### UPSC Angle: International Law and India’s Disputes

India has several bilateral boundary cases that involve **similar cartographic ambiguities** from the colonial era:

Context	Relevance
McMahon Line (India-China)	British India drew the line in 1914 Simla Convention; China never formally accepted it
Durand Line (India-Pakistan-Afghanistan)	Colonial-era British boundary; Afghanistan disputes its validity
India’s approach at ICJ	India is a party to the UN Charter Article 33 – peaceful dispute resolution

## ASEAN and India's Foreign Policy

---

India's Act East Policy prioritizes relations with ASEAN members including Cambodia. Stable Cambodia–Thailand relations strengthen the ASEAN bloc, which India sees as a **critical strategic partner** in the Indo-Pacific.

India co-chairs several ASEAN dialogue mechanisms and participates in the East Asia Summit (EAS).

---

### UPSC RELEVANCE

**Prelims:** ICJ seat (The Hague), year of Preah Vihear judgment (1962), UNESCO World Heritage nomination dispute (2008), Khmer Empire.

**Mains GS-2:** “Discuss how the ICJ’s Preah Vihear judgment illustrates the principle of acquiescence in international boundary disputes. What lessons does it hold for resolving boundary disputes in South and Southeast Asia?”

**Mains GS-1:** Temple architecture traditions of Southeast Asia; India’s cultural connections with the Khmer Empire.

---

**★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA**
**PREAH VIHEAR TEMPLE:**

Location: Dangrek Mountains, Cambodia–Thailand border; altitude ~525 m

Built: 9th–12th century CE (Khmer Empire)

Dedicated to: Lord Shiva

UNESCO World Heritage: listed 2008 (Cambodia's nomination)

ICJ case: Cambodia v. Thailand

**ICJ 1962 JUDGMENT:**

Ruling: 9-3 in favour of Cambodia

Principle applied: Acquiescence / estoppel (Thailand accepted French maps)

Basis: 1904 French-Siamese Mixed Boundary Commission maps

**2013 ICJ CLARIFICATION:**

Ruled unanimously: Cambodian sovereignty extends to the entire promontory

Triggered by: 2008 UNESCO listing → 2011 armed clashes

Armed clashes: 2008, 2009, and February–May 2011 (most severe)

**INTERNATIONAL LAW PRINCIPLES:**

Acquiescence: tacit acceptance of a claim through prolonged inaction

Estoppel: a state cannot contradict its own past conduct or representations

Uti Possidetis juris: colonial-era boundaries should be respected (applied in Africa and Latin America)

ICJ headquarters: Peace Palace, The Hague, Netherlands

**OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

ICJ established: 1945 under UN Charter; succeeded PCIJ (Permanent Court of International Justice)

ICJ has 15 judges, elected for 9-year terms

India at ICJ: Dalveer Bhandari served as ICJ judge (re-elected 2017)

ASEAN: 10 members; India is a Dialogue Partner, not a full member

Khmer Empire: dominated Southeast Asia ~9th–15th century; capital was Angkor

Angkor Wat: built in 12th century by Suryavarman II; world's largest religious monument

Sources: The Hindu, ICJ Official Reports, UNESCO

---

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

# Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

---

Published on [ujjari.com](http://ujjari.com) · Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs