

Intercultural Communication, Narrative Hegemony, and the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia Border Dispute: Lessons from Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

Territorial disputes are often interpreted through geopolitical or legal frameworks, yet they are equally shaped by cultural narratives, identity politics, and symbolic communication. This article examines the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border dispute through an intercultural communication lens, drawing conceptual insight from *Hegemonism in Thai Country Music: A Lesson-Learned Implication in Intercultural Communication* (Inkaew, 2018). By analyzing narrative dominance, cultural hegemony, and communicative framing in shaping national sentiment, the article demonstrates the significance of cultural narratives in interstate relations. Historical memory, media discourse, symbolic boundaries, and identity-based interpretations are explored to reveal how intercultural misunderstandings escalate conflict. Through theories such as social identity theory, narrative theory, and intercultural conflict frameworks, the article shows how cultural meaning operates beneath legal and political discourse. It concludes with communication-based pathways toward de-escalation, emphasizing narrative reframing, dialogic engagement, and multi-perspectival historical understanding.

Keywords: Thailand–Cambodia border dispute, intercultural communication, cultural hegemony, media discourse, national identity

บทคัดย่อ

ข้อพิพาทดินแดนมักถูกอธิบายผ่านกรอบภูมิรัฐศาสตร์และกฎหมายระหว่างประเทศ ทว่าปัจจัยด้านวัฒนธรรม อัตลักษณ์ และการสื่อสารเชิงสัญลักษณ์มีบทบาทสำคัญไม่ยิ่งหย่อนไปกว่ากัน บทความนี้วิเคราะห์ข้อพิพาทชายแดนไทย-กัมพูชา ปี 2025 ผ่านกรอบการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม โดยประยุกต์แนวคิดจากงานวิจัย *Hegemonism in Thai Country Music: A Lesson-Learned Implication in Intercultural Communication* (Inkaew, 2018) เพื่อทำความเข้าใจพลวัตของเรื่องเล่าที่ครอบงำ อำนาจนำทางวัฒนธรรม และกรอบการสื่อสารที่ส่งผลต่อความรู้สึกชาตินิยม การศึกษานี้พิจารณาบทบาทของความทรงจำทางประวัติศาสตร์ วาทกรรมสื่อ พรหมแดนเชิงสัญลักษณ์ และการตีความบนฐานอัตลักษณ์ ซึ่งล้วนมีส่วนทำให้ความขัดแย้งดำรงอยู่และปะทุขึ้น ภายใต้กรอบทฤษฎีอัตลักษณ์ทางสังคม ทฤษฎีเรื่องเล่า และกรอบการวิเคราะห์ความขัดแย้งระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งชี้ให้เห็นว่าความหมายทางวัฒนธรรมนั้นแฝงตัวอยู่เบื้องหลังการถกเถียงด้านกฎหมายและการทูตอย่างเป็นระบบ สุดท้าย บทความนี้เสนอแนวทางลดความตึงเครียดผ่านการสื่อสาร ได้แก่ การปรับกรอบเรื่องเล่า การเสริมสร้างการสื่อสารแบบสานเสวนา และการส่งเสริมความเข้าใจประวัติศาสตร์เชิงพหุมิติ

คำสำคัญ: ข้อพิพาทชายแดนไทย-กัมพูชา; การสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม; อำนาจนำทางวัฒนธรรม; วาทกรรมสื่อ; อัตลักษณ์ชาติ

Introduction

Territorial disputes are often interpreted through geopolitical or legal frameworks, yet they are also shaped by cultural narratives, historical memory, and symbolic communication. The renewed tensions between Thailand and Cambodia in 2025 demonstrate how national identity, media discourse, and collective interpretations influence interstate relations beyond formal territorial claims. Although Thailand and Cambodia share longstanding cultural and religious connections, competing historical narratives continue to shape perceptions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and national pride, particularly in culturally significant areas surrounding the Preah Vihear temple.

These tensions became especially visible following the May 2025 border skirmish near Chong Bok, Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani Province, which resulted in the death of a Cambodian soldier and renewed nationalist reactions in both countries. Subsequent border restrictions, military reinforcement, and increasingly confrontational political rhetoric further intensified public hostility and media polarization surrounding the dispute (Reuters, 2025).

The Thailand–Cambodia border dispute is rooted partly in colonial-era treaties and contested interpretations of territorial boundaries established during the French administration of

Indochina. While the International Court of Justice ruled in 1962 that the Preah Vihear temple belongs to Cambodia, surrounding areas have remained symbolically and politically contested. Over time, education systems, political discourse, and media representations in both countries have reinforced different historical memories and national narratives, contributing to recurring tensions and public polarization.

This article examines the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border dispute through an intercultural communication lens, drawing conceptual insight from Hegemonism in Thai Country Music: A Lesson-Learned Implication in Intercultural Communication (Inkaew, 2018). It argues that interstate conflict is shaped not only by legal or geopolitical factors but also by narrative dominance, cultural hegemony, identity-based interpretation, and communicative framing. By integrating social identity theory, narrative theory, intercultural conflict frameworks, and media framing perspectives, the article explores how symbolic meanings and hegemonic narratives contribute to misunderstanding, emotional escalation, and antagonistic public discourse.

The article further argues that intercultural communication provides important pathways toward de-escalation through narrative reframing, dialogic engagement, multiperspectival historical understanding, and symbolic reconciliation. Understanding how cultural meaning shapes interstate conflict offers broader implications for communication-centered approaches to conflict management in Southeast Asia.

Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Communication and Narrative Power

Understanding the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border dispute requires a multidisciplinary theoretical approach because the conflict involves not only territorial and political dimensions but also issues of identity, historical interpretation, symbolic communication, and public meaning-making. Since the dispute is shaped through national narratives, intercultural perceptions, media representations, and emotionally charged interpretations of sovereignty, this article draws upon theoretical frameworks commonly used in intercultural communication, media studies, and identity-based conflict analysis to examine how communication practices contribute to both escalation and de-escalation.

Accordingly, four interconnected frameworks are employed in this analysis: social identity theory, narrative and cultural hegemony theory, intercultural conflict theory, and media framing theory. Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual foundation for explaining

how identity formation, symbolic narratives, intercultural misunderstanding, and media discourse shape public sentiment and interstate relations during periods of geopolitical tension.

Social Identity and Intergroup Relations

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory posits that individuals derive self-esteem and belonging from membership in social groups. When national identity becomes salient—particularly in times of geopolitical tension—individuals categorize others into “ingroup” and “outgroup” categories, amplifying bias, ethnocentrism, and emotional responses to perceived threats (Brewer, 1999). Especially in border disputes, collective identity can intensify as national territory becomes symbolically linked to group continuity, dignity, and homeland belonging (Bachleitner, 2025; Capello, 2019). Intercultural communication research shows that heightened group identity often leads to selective perception, defensive communication patterns, and increased uncertainty about the outgroup's intentions (Gudykunst, 2004). Even legally technical disagreements over boundaries thus become emotionally charged, as citizens interpret territorial issues through identity-protective lenses rather than rational cost-benefit calculations.

Narrative Theory and Cultural Hegemony

Narrative theory argues that humans make sense of political conflict through culturally resonant stories, symbolic framing, and shared discursive scripts (Fisher, 1984; Somers, 1994). These narratives justify positions, create heroes and villains, and define what counts as legitimate action. Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony further explains how dominant institutions—political elites, state media, education systems—shape the interpretive frameworks through which societies understand national conflict. Inkaew (2018), in a study of hegemonism in Thai country music, illustrates how cultural products can normalize particular identities, emotional roles, and national sentiments through repeated symbolic messages. This insight extends to political communication: state actors use historical narratives, maps, and patriotic rhetoric to naturalize territorial claims and discursively position themselves as legitimate defenders of national sovereignty (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995). In Southeast Asia, where cultural memory and historical grievances are deeply embedded in national storytelling (Chachavalpongpun, 2013), hegemonic narrative structures significantly influence public reaction to border issues.

Intercultural Conflict Theory

Intercultural conflict emerges not only from material disparities but from incompatible identity needs, face concerns, and culturally grounded expectations (Ting-Toomey, 2005; **Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001**). Face-negotiation theory proposes that individuals and groups strive to maintain social dignity and relational respect; when these are threatened, conflict escalates. In the context of Thailand and Cambodia, both nations possess high-context communication traditions that emphasize indirectness, politeness, and saving face (Hall, 1976; Komin, 1997). However, when disputes involve sovereignty or heritage sites—symbols of national pride—cultural norms shift toward more assertive or defensive stances (**Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001**). Misaligned interpretations of diplomatic language, gestures, and historical references can quickly trigger perceived slights. Research on symbolic and identity-based conflicts demonstrates that such disputes often persist not because of territorial value, but because they represent challenges to collective pride and historical legitimacy (Bar-Tal, 2013; Kelman, 2008).

Media Framing and Agenda Setting

Media institutions play a major role in shaping public interpretations of interstate conflict. Agenda-setting theory explains how news outlets influence which issues people perceive as important (McCombs, 2014; Stern et al., 2020). Framing theory further suggests that the way events are presented—what is emphasized, downplayed, or emotionally colored—conditions how audiences interpret political actions and motives (Entman, 2007; Reese, 2010). Studies of Southeast Asian media environments show that nationalistic framing, selective historical references, and conflict-heightening imagery are routinely employed during border disputes to mobilize public support and assert legitimacy (Veal, 2020). Social media intensifies these effects by enabling rapid circulation of emotionally charged narratives, memes, and misinformation that reinforce group identity and outgroup hostility (Tufekci, 2017).

When combined, these frameworks demonstrate that the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute cannot be understood simply as a legal disagreement over cartographic interpretation. Identity processes, hegemonic narratives, intercultural misunderstandings, and media amplification converge to produce heightened emotional stakes and polarized public perceptions. These communicative dynamics shape how political actors negotiate, how citizens respond, and whether conflict escalates or diffuses.

The four theoretical frameworks discussed above are not intended to function independently but rather as interconnected perspectives for interpreting how communication processes shape interstate tensions. Together, these frameworks provide an integrated analytical lens for examining how identity construction, hegemonic narratives, intercultural misunderstanding, and media discourse interact within the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border dispute.

The following sections apply these theoretical perspectives holistically to analyze two major dimensions of the conflict: the role of media and narrative power in shaping public interpretation, and the intercultural communication barriers that contribute to misunderstanding and escalation.

Media, Discourse, and Hegemonic Narratives

Applying narrative, hegemony, and media framing perspectives discussed earlier, this section examines how national media and political actors shape public understanding of the dispute through symbolic narratives, emotional framing, and hegemonic interpretations of sovereignty and national identity. Outlets in Thailand and Cambodia often frame events in ways that emphasize sovereignty, cultural pride, and historical legitimacy (Chandler, 2008; Kasetsiri et al., 2013). Through agenda-setting (McCombs et al., 2014; Stern et al., 2020) and framing mechanisms (Entman, 2007), media narratives define which interpretations are publicly framed as legitimate, defensible, or historically justified, political speeches frequently employ emotionally charged expressions such as “preserving heritage” or “defending the motherland”, reinforcing symbolic boundaries and legitimizing assertive responses.

For example, following the May 2025 border clash near Chong Bok and subsequent military escalation, news coverage and political communication in both countries increasingly emphasized themes of sovereignty, territorial defense, and national dignity. Thai and Cambodian political leaders made highly symbolic visits to border regions, while media reporting frequently framed the conflict through emotionally charged narratives concerning historical legitimacy, territorial protection, and national identity. Public discourse intensified further after Thailand imposed border restrictions and Cambodia responded with diplomatic criticism and renewed legal arguments concerning disputed territories (Reuters, 2025).

Social media platforms also amplified identity-based interpretations of the conflict. Online discussions frequently circulated nationalist rhetoric, emotionally charged imagery, and

accusatory narratives that reinforced antagonistic perceptions between the two publics. Reports during the 2025 tensions indicated that digital communication environments intensified public hostility, accelerated the circulation of conflict-centered narratives, and reduced exposure to conciliatory perspectives between Thai and Cambodian online communities (The Guardian, 2025).

Insights from cultural narrative research—including Inkaew’s (2018) analysis of identity construction in Thai country music—demonstrate how repetition, emotional resonance, and symbolic appeal solidify hegemonic storylines. Similarly, recurring political phrases associated with narratives of “protecting national dignity” or “recovering lost territory” evoke deep cultural meaning and help institutionalize particular discursive interpretations of history, sovereignty, and national identity.

Social media amplifies these effects, circulating emotionally charged content rapidly and reinforcing ethnocentrism while reducing exposure to alternative viewpoints (Howard et al., 2018; Sunstein, 2009). Moments of heightened tension—such as military standoffs—can escalate hostility faster than official channels can contain. Such hegemonic media environments may limit the visibility of alternative narratives emphasizing dialogue, historical contextualization, and diplomatic engagement.

Intercultural Communication Barriers

Drawing particularly from social identity theory and intercultural conflict frameworks, this section examines how identity threat, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and communicative misinterpretation contribute to persistent communication breakdown between Thailand and Cambodia.

These intercultural tensions became particularly visible during periods of military confrontation and civilian evacuation in 2025. Public reactions on both sides frequently framed the opposing nation through narratives of aggression, territorial threat, and challenges to national sovereignty. In online environments, emotionally charged commentary and nationalist discourse often reinforced stereotypes and reduced opportunities for dialogic engagement. Reports surrounding the escalation further demonstrated how rapidly circulating conflict-centered narratives contributed to misunderstanding, emotional polarization, and identity-based hostility during interstate tensions (The Guardian, 2025).

1. **Identity Threat:** Territorial claims are deeply tied to collective dignity, historical pride, and national continuity. When either nation perceives symbolic encroachment, defensive communication patterns emerge, often rooted in face concerns and honor-based norms (Oetzel et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2005).
2. **Ethnocentrism and Stereotyping:** Publics and political leaders rely on simplified and often negative images of the “other.” These stereotypes—amplified through media representations and selective historical narratives—shape expectations, influence diplomatic tone, and reduce openness to compromise (Gudykunst, 2004).
3. **Digital Echo Chambers:** Online networks encourage identity-based interpretations and amplify emotionally provocative content, heightening misunderstanding and hostility (Howard et al., 2018; Sunstein, 2009).
4. **Dialogic Breakdown:** Hegemonic narratives marginalize alternative or conciliatory perspectives. This constrains political leaders’ communicative space, discouraging nuanced discussion and undermining deliberative diplomacy (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Sorrells, 2016).

These barriers demonstrate that miscommunication is not merely incidental but structurally embedded within broader cultural, historical, and symbolic systems. As Inkaew (2018) argues in the cultural domain, narrative dominance shapes meaning-making and limits interpretive flexibility—patterns mirrored in cross-border conflict.

Pathways Toward Intercultural Understanding and De-escalation

Although communication barriers are significant, several culturally grounded strategies can enhance understanding and reduce escalation.

1. **Educational and Historical Dialogue:** Introducing multiperspectival histories contextualizes the dispute and reduces ethnocentric interpretation (Cole, 2007; Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Winichakul, 1997).
2. **Media Responsibility and Narrative Reframing:** Journalists and communicators can avoid sensationalism, situate the dispute within broader historical contexts, and highlight cooperative efforts (Entman, 2007).
3. **Public Diplomacy and Cross-Border Engagement:** Joint cultural programs, archaeological collaborations, heritage conservation projects, and youth exchanges

humanize the “other,” reduce stereotyping, and build relational trust (Avruch, 1998; Nye, 2004).

4. **Symbolic Reconciliation:** Co-management of heritage sites and collaborative interpretation of cultural symbols transform contentious objects into shared cultural resources, disrupting adversarial narratives.

These strategies address the emotional and symbolic layers of the conflict—dimensions often overlooked in legal or geopolitical analyses. Intercultural communication emphasizes that meaningful de-escalation must occur not only through diplomatic channels but also through shifts in collective meaning-making.

Conclusion

The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border dispute demonstrates that territorial conflicts cannot be understood solely through geography, treaties, or geopolitics. They are deeply embedded in cultural narratives, identity politics, and symbolic communication. Revisiting *Hegemonism in Thai Country Music* (Inkaew, 2018) illuminates how narrative hegemony, emotional symbolism, and identity construction shape national interpretations of conflict. These mechanisms, though evident in cultural expression, operate similarly within interstate relations.

By applying intercultural communication frameworks—social identity theory, narrative theory, conflict frameworks, and media analysis—this article reveals how cultural meaning contributes to misinterpretation and escalation. It also highlights pathways toward de-escalation through historical dialogue, narrative reframing, and symbolic reconciliation.

Ultimately, sustainable peace between Thailand and Cambodia requires not only diplomatic negotiation but also the reshaping of the cultural narratives that define how each nation sees itself and its neighbor. Intercultural communication provides an important framework for fostering this transformation through dialogue, mutual understanding, and more inclusive forms of historical interpretation.

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