



International Boundary Study

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Cambodia – Laos Boundary

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CAMBODIA - LAOS BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

From the Vietnamese tripoint, situated at approximately 107° 32' E. and 14° 41' N., the Cambodia - Laos boundary extends 336 miles,¹ westward to the Thailand tripoint at the Col de Preah Chambot in the Chaîne des Dangrek (mountains). For the most part, the boundary follows water divides (210 miles); elsewhere major and minor streams are utilized.

The delimitation of the boundary stems from various French declarations of protection as well as from internal administrative actions of the former French Indochinese Government. Since no disputes over precise alignments are known to exist, official United States maps should carry the boundary as international. However, the standard disclaimer should be utilized.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

The Cambodia - Laos frontier transects three physiographic regions: (1) The Chaîne Annamitique, (2) the Middle Mekong Valley, and (3) the Dangrek mountains.

In the east, the boundary is anchored on the Chaîne Annamitique (Annamite Chain). The chain, in spite of its name, is not a mountain massif but rather a heavily dissected series of plateaus overshadowed by isolated and higher peaks. In the immediate frontier region, the predominant rocks are limestone and sandstone although harder crystalline formations, including lava flows, do exist. The steeper pitch of the plateaus faces eastward with gentler slopes prevailing in the west. As a result, west-flowing rivers are longer, have easier gradients and, generally, wider valleys. Elevations in the chain average between 800 meters (2,625 feet) and 1,000 meters (3,280 feet). Isolated peaks, however, attain elevations over 1,500 meters (approximately 5,000 feet).

The boundary attains the second physiographic province, the middle Mekong valley, in the valley of the Se Kong. Elevations decrease immediately to 100 to 200 meters with the exception of a brief area immediately to the east of the Mekong where an isolated outlier of the volcanic Plateau des Bolovens is traversed. The basic mantle is composed of ancient and modern alluvium deposited by the Mekong and its tributaries. To the west of the Mekong, the same feature continues virtually to the border of Thailand. Elevations, however, as well as local relief are generally more moderate. The result is a broad almost

¹ Measured in the Office of the Geographer on the Carte de l'Indochine, at the scale of 1:100,000.

featureless plain broken by a few rounded hills.

The third and final province is the dissected sandstone plateau of the Dangrek, the sharp escarpment of which effectively outlines the limits of both Laos and Cambodia with Thailand. Elevations rise steeply from the plain to an average of 500 meters (1,640 feet) on the escarpment's face.

Climatically, the entire region is dominated by the seasonal monsoons so typical of southeast Asia. The temperature regime is essentially tropical with the hottest month (85° F.) normally occurring in April and the coolest (79° F.) in December. A second maximum (82° F.) and minimum (80° F.) develop in August and July, respectively, as a result of the passage of the monsoon. Average daily ranges in temperature exceed average annual ranges. The rainy season commences in April and continues into November. The remainder, late November through March, constitutes the dry, winter monsoonal period. Within the rainy period, maxima of precipitation normally occur in July and August with 20 inches or more falling in each month. The annual average rainfall for the frontier region is between 80 and 120 inches per annum. Even in the dry season no month is without precipitation; winter rainfall results from typhoon activity.

With the exception of the Mekong valley, which is largely cleared for cultivation, the frontier region bears a dense cover of forest. In the wetter areas with heavy soils, the true tropical rain forest dominates while the monsoon forest grows in areas of porous soils and/or lower rainfall.

The tropical rain forest seldom has areas of pure stands; rather multiple species abound. Consequently, commercial utilization of the forest suffers. The typical rain forest is evergreen and multilayered, comprising many species and is easily penetrated. As a result of widespread practice of "slash and burn" cultivation, primary or true rain forest is restricted to remote areas. A secondary or modified rain forest, which resembles the true rain forest but lacks the valuable hardwoods, now dominates much of the area. The monsoon forest, due to the seasonal drought, is deciduous and generally possesses less dense stands of trees. Undergrowth is rare, although tough, coarse grasses are common in the more open areas.

B. Ethnographical

The Cambodia - Laos frontier is inhabited primarily by ethnic minorities. The valley of the Mekong and the lower courses of its tributaries on both sides of the boundary are settled by Tai (Lao) peoples. Their economy is one of settled agriculture, based upon paddy rice and associated crop patterns. In the hill country, Mon-Khmer peoples, known in Cambodia as Khmer Loeu or Upper Cambodians, dominate. These peoples follow the classical patterns of "slash and burn" agriculture, moving their villages and fields as the fertility of the soil declines. Most of the tribal groups have established areas within which they migrate. In the extreme east, a small intrusion of Malayo - Polynesians, particularly Jarai tribes, are found. The Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesians have stood aloof from the main stream of

civilization and economic development for generations. While Cambodia has recently endeavored to assimilate these peoples into the life of the country, the results have been limited. The village remains the center of life. While variations exist in certain cultural patterns, i.e., lines of inheritance, land ownership, etc., the basic economic pattern is quite similar. The village is a self-sufficient economic entity. Dry rice is planted in fields which have been cleared by slashing, burning, and/or girdling. The ash from the burned trees is utilized as fertilizer. Supplementary garden crops, domesticated animals, hunting and fishing supplement the villager's diet. After the natural fertility of the soil is depleted and yields fall off, fields are abandoned, village moves on and the process recommences. The untended plots revert rapidly to forest.

The total number of inhabitants in the frontier region is very small and population pressure on the land is almost non-existent.

C. Historical

Historically, civilization in southeast Asia developed and flourished in the lowland areas. The highlands have been traditional buffer zones between the expanding and contracting riverine empires and continual contact with stable civilizations has been limited. The great Khmer Empire, based on Angkor Wat, extended its control over this territory in the 6th to the 13th centuries. However, with the expansion of the Thai into present-day Thailand, the power of the Khmer Empire receded and in the period prior to French entrance on the scene, most of modern-day Laos and northern Cambodia had fallen to Thai control. In addition, Annamese pressures were exerted on Cambodia in the lower Mekong.

French protection was extended to Cambodia in 1863 with greater influence gained in 1884. Protection over Laos stems from the treaty with Siam (Thailand) of 1893 whereby Siam renounced all territories east of the Mekong (including the islands in the river). As a result of this action, the former Cambodian province of Stung Treng (modern-day Stung Treng and Ratanakiri), which had been conquered by local Laotian rulers in the 18th century and by the Thai in the 19th century, became a part of French Laos. The Indochinese Decree of December 6, 1904, effective January 1, 1905, transferred the province back to Cambodia. However, an imprecisely-defined portion of the province was detached and placed under the administrative and political dependence of Annam.

With the collapse of Indochina, Laos became an independent state on July 19, 1949 and Cambodia followed on November 8 of the same year.

III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The precise alignment of the Cambodia - Laos boundary may be determined only from the 1:100,000 Carte de l'Indochine published by the French Service Geographique de l'Indochine and subsequently adopted by the various national geographic institutes of the states. The texts of the various treaties and acts are too imprecise to be of value.

In the east, the boundary originates in the Chaîne Annamitique, at approximately 107° 32' East longitude and 14° 41' North latitude. The Chaîne in this area reaches approximately 900 meters (3000 feet) in elevation. The boundary trends generally southwestward for 98 miles in a sinuous path along the watershed between the Se Kong (Laos) and the Se San (Cambodia). Turning northwestward for 30 miles, the boundary follows a minor water divide between two tributaries of the Se Kong to reach the river approximately 31 miles southwest of Attopeu. For the next 15 miles the boundary coincides with the river. About ½ mile beyond the confluence of the Se Kong and the Se Khampho, a right bank tributary, the boundary departs from the river to follow briefly a minor tributary and then to gain a local watershed. From this point to the Mekong, the boundary often follows specific physical features but in such a random manner that one suspects the basis of the line is probably historical, i.e., specific northern limits of the province of Stung Treng. The region, which is occupied by Tai (Lao) peoples, is more densely settled than the region to the east.

In its tortured course between the Se Kong and the Mekong, the boundary follows minor watersheds for the most part. Four minor streams--Houei Tin Hiang, Houei Loung, Houei Lane, and Houei Khampha -- are crossed and, in addition, one--the Houei Khalieng with its tributaries--forms the frontier for approximately 15 miles. The Mekong is reached immediately west of the Cambodian village of Voun Kham. The relationship between the boundary and the adjacent Route Nationale No. 13 is most complex in this area. After paralleling the road to the north for about 10 miles, the boundary slices across the highway leaving access to the above-mentioned Cambodian village only through Laotian territory.

From Voun Kham the boundary crosses the Mekong in an almost east-west direction to attain the west bank. At this point the river enters a narrower channel and a major break in navigation occurs. Trending northwestward for slightly over 8 miles, the boundary coincides with the Cambodian shore of the Mekong. From this point the median line of the major channel closest to the Cambodian bank of the river is utilized to the confluence of the Tonle Repou.

For 67 miles, to the Thailand frontier at the Col de Preah Chambot (Chong Bok), the Tonle Repou serves as the dividing line between Laos and Cambodia. The lower course of the Tonle Repou is inhabited by Tai (Lao) peoples while Mon-Khmers occupy the upper valley.

IV. TREATIES

The boundary between Cambodia and Laos has not been delimited in the normal sense by international agreements that are readily available in standard treaty collections. Several acts allude to or affect the frontier but no document has been found that specifically delimits its trace. The principal treaties and internal acts which bear on the boundary are given below:

A. Treaty between France and Cambodia, signed August 11, 1863 with

ratifications exchanged on April 14, 1864.

The French Government assumed protection over the Kingdom of Cambodia without, however, defining the limits of the state. At the time Cambodia was in a period of dynastic decline and was suffering from the encroachments of the more dynamic Thai and Annamese states.

B. Treaty between France and the Kingdom of Siam (Thailand) to regulate the political position and the limits of Cambodia signed July 15, 1867 with ratifications exchanged November 24, 1867.

The treaty restored two provinces of Cambodia to Siam but did not directly affect the Cambodia-Laos line. The Siamese, however, recognized the sole protection of France over Cambodian affairs.

C. Treaty between France and the Kingdom of Siam signed on October 3, 1893 with ratifications exchanged on February 3, 1894.

According to Article I, the Siamese Government renounced all pretensions to the territories situated on the left bank of the Mekong as well as all islands in the river. France thereby established its commission over part of modern-day Laos.

D. Convention to regulate certain difficulties in the delimitation ... of the Treaty of October 3, 1893 signed October 7, 1902 but not ratified (replaced by the convention of February 13, 1904).

The Dangrek mountains became the boundary between Cambodia and Siam (as well as Laos and Siam) hence establishing the Cambodia - Laos - Siam tripoint on the watershed.

E. Arrete of December 6, 1904, effective January 1, 1905.

According to all available information, this decree detached the former Cambodian province of Stung Treng (including the modern Ratanakiri) from the French colony of Laos and divided it between Cambodia and Annam. However, the complete wording of the decree has not been examined, and the degree of boundary definition is uncertain.

F. Convention between France and the Kingdom of Siam to regulate certain difficulties over the interpretation of the Treaty ... of October 3, 1893, signed February 13, 1904 with ratifications exchanged December 7, 1904.

As explained in D above, the convention established the Dangrek mountains as the boundary as far as the Mekong. This action transferred the Bassac to Laos and placed the tripoint on the watershed of the mountain chain.

It is virtually certain that French authorities over the next 40 years refined the Cambodia - Laos boundary by administrative action. This process was probably carried out with local authorities who knew the limits of the province of Stung Treng or of smaller, i.e., probably village, political divisions. In the area of the Chaine Annamatique, the drainage divide was probably adopted as a matter of convenience, although it may coincide with actual conditions. The unresolved questions, however, require that U.S. Government-produced maps carry the standard disclaimer that the map "is not necessarily authoritative."

V. SUMMARY

The primary source for the delineation of the Cambodia - Laos boundary is the Carte de l'Indochine 1:100,000 published (originally) by the French Service Geographique de l'Indochine. Since independence the new states had adopted this series of their own. Cambodia and Viet-Nam have been revising and re-issuing them as well. The boundary on U.S. Government maps should follow this version in so far as the scale of the map permits. The older and less accurate 1:400,000 map series should not be utilized, as it has been in the past, for the proper delineation.

Since both Cambodia and Laos appear to accept the alignment as plotted on the 1:100,000, U.S. maps may symbolize the boundary as an accepted international boundary. In view of the lack of detailed documentation a disclaimer should be utilized on all official maps showing the boundary.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Geographer, Office of Research in Economics and Science, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16.

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