



# **International Boundary Study**

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## **Burma – Thailand Boundary**

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**INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY**

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## **BURMA – THAILAND BOUNDARY**

### **I. BOUNDARY BRIEF**

The Burma–Thailand boundary extends for approximately 1,118 miles from the Laos tripoint on the upper Mekong southward to the west coast of the Malay peninsula. For the most part, the boundary coincides with mountain crests, and major water divides, or the thalwegs, deep water channels, of various rivers.

The boundary has been demarcated and no disputes over specific alignment are known to exist.

### **II. GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **A. Physical**

With the exception of the Mekong–Nam Kok Valley adjacent to Laos and the Salween Valley, the Burma–Thailand frontier is primarily a mountainous region, although elevations are not extreme. West of the Mekong, the boundary traverses a granitic region composed of prominent and elongated ridges broken by isolated mountain peaks. The heavily weathered granite base has been sharply dissected by numerous small streams which have cut deep, narrow valleys. The majority of the peaks and ridges attain elevations of 4,000 feet or more, while maximum elevations range between 6,000 and 7,500 feet.

At approximately 20° North and 99° East, the granite ridges give way to a more complex landscape. The primary rocks are shales and sandstones but intrusions of metamorphosed slates and limestones occur locally. The former are deeply weathered and relatively soft rocks producing low, flattish ridges and hills. In contrast, the more resistant slates and limestones develop into greater elevations and steeper slopes. The limestones, which occur in isolated and elongated belts, have in places decomposed into the normal karst topography of solution pits or sinks, high, steep, and jagged cliffs and sharp, isolated peaks. Elevations, generally lower than in the granitic region to the northeast, average about 4,500 feet above sea level, with individual peaks attaining 5,500 feet. At approximately 18°30' North, the boundary breaks through the low Menam–Salween divide (2,300 to 2,800 feet) to join the latter river. For 81 miles the Salween serves as the boundary between the two states. An additional 240 miles of boundary are formed by the meandering Salween tributary, the Nam Mae Moei (Thaungyin River), as far south as 16°30' North. Both valleys lie below 1,000 feet in elevation although they are paralleled by higher ridges and peaks. The valley of the Salween is narrow and constricted, while that of the Nam Mae Moei varies from one to five miles in width.

South of the headwaters of the Moei, limestone mountains again occupy the frontier. Lesser streams and tributaries become intermittent due to the loss of water through

surface percolation. Isolated peaks, sink holes, and other karst-like features appear. The average elevation along this sector is approximately 4,000 feet although a few peaks in Burma exceed 6,000 feet. The limestone mountains terminate at approximately 15° North latitude in the approaches to peninsular Burma and Thailand. In this area, the boundary mounts the main drainage divide between the waters flowing west to the Andaman Sea and those flowing east to the Gulf of Siam. The central core of the Tenasserim range is a granite ridge, although the adjacent and parallel ridges are overlain with shale, sandstone, and slates. The general alignment of the main ridge is north-south, but the extensive drainage system cut many transverse ridges. Major lowlands exist only along the coasts with restricted sectors found in the valleys of the major rivers, e.g., the Great Tenasserim, the Little Tenasserim, and the Pakchan. The valley of the Pakchan marks the terminal sector of the frontier.

A considerable amount of tin mining and washing occurs in the boundary valleys in the peninsula.

The border region has a tropical monsoon climate, although in the north, temperatures are almost subtropical due to the latitudinal position. There are two distinct seasons with two additional transitional periods. From December through February, the northeast monsoon, which blows off the continent, produces the "dry season." Each of the three months of this period is virtually rainless, even on the peninsula. In contrast, the moisture-laden southwest monsoon dominates the weather from May to October. Heavy rainfall on most days is normal although rainless but cloudy periods of short duration do occur.

Between the dry season and the wet season, i.e., from March to May, is a transitional period of hot weather with light and variable winds. As the monsoon approaches, humidity and cloudiness increase and the weather becomes oppressive. Annual temperature maxima normally occur during this period. A similar but reversed transition leads from the wet season to the dry season, i.e. from October to November. This marks the retreat of the monsoon with decreasing humidity, cloudiness, and precipitation.

Since the boundary region is primarily a mountainous area, rainfall is particularly heavy due to the combined monsoonal and orographic factors. In the Tenasserim core range, annual precipitation exceeds 150 inches in contrast to 45 inches on the east coast (in the rain shadow). The northern mountains, as a result of their interior position, receive less precipitation, approximately 80 inches, but over 80% of it falls during the wet monsoon period.

As a consequence of the tropical and subtropical temperatures and the high precipitation, most of the border region is covered with a heavy forest growth. An evergreen rainforest dominates the mountains of the peninsula except where cultivation has removed the original cover. Northward the moist monsoon forest flourishes. As the amount of annual precipitation lessens and the length of the dry season increases poleward, the number of individual species of trees decreases and the forest takes on a

semideciduous and then a deciduous nature. Some species drop their leaves entirely during the dry season while others put out an entire new growth with the beginnings of the rains. The forest, as a result, has a barren look during the dry period and a definite seasonal rhythm exists. Finally, in the far north, a mixed forest of pine and oak covers the mountain slopes above 2,000 feet, with a pure pine forest occasionally found above 4,000 to 5,000 feet.

## **B. Historical**

Although written records are scant and positive proof is lacking, the early Burmese and Thai peoples probably originated in the South China region centered between Tibet on the west and Yunnan on the east. The first Thai kingdom known to history, Nan-chao, was situated near modern Yunnan. Nan-chao resisted the southward thrust of successive Chinese dynasties from the 7th through the 12th centuries. The early Burmese were probably subjects of Nan-chao and occupied the region bordering on Tibet. In the 9th or 10th century, they began a southward movement into the Valley of the Irrawaddy displacing local peoples, probably of Mon-Khmer stock.

Nan-chao was shattered by the Mongols in their conquest of China in the 13th century. This event speeded a southward movement of Thai people which had been progressing slowly for several centuries. Minor Thai kingdoms appeared in what is now northern Thailand as early as the 11th century. During the same period, the Burmese reached the sea near the mouth of the Irrawaddy. In the 13th century, the Thai kingdom of Sukothai, with its capital in the north of Thailand, claimed control over most of the center and south of modern Thailand. Concurrently, the related Shan people occupied the hill lands astride the Salween and exerted control over much of modern Burma. There followed several centuries of alternating political control as the Burmese, Thai, and Khmer people (to the east) strove to dominate the region. New centers of power in both Burma and Thailand rose in the south at Pegu and Ayutthaya, respectively. In the middle of the 16th century, a series of disastrous Burmese–Thai wars began. In 1568, the Burmese sacked and razed the Thai capital and kept the entire state under direct control for 15 years. Thailand, re-created in 1584, began a decade of almost continuous warfare with neighboring Burma and Cambodia. The Thai annexed Tenasserim and Tavoy in 1593 and obtained additional territory in 1599. For the next century, the fortunes of each state ebbed and flowed. Finally, in 1767, the Burmese laid siege to Ayutthaya and eventually destroyed the power of Thailand.

A period of slow reconstruction began in Thailand. The capital moved to Bangkok in 1782, and a new dynasty attempted to re-create the basic institutions of Thai society. Burma, in the meantime, embarked on a campaign of expansion. Arakan fell in 1785, and Manipur and Assam in 1819, thus bringing Burma into direct contact and conflict with British India. As a result, a war broke out (1824–26) which ended in a defeat for Burmese arms. Britain annexed Tenasserim and Arakan (as well as Assam and Manipur) to India. In the Second Burmese War, the annexation of Lower Burma (Pegu) joined Arakan with Tenasserim, cutting the remainder of Burma from access to the sea. In 1886, as a result of the Third Burma War, Upper Burma was added, and by 1890 the

incorporation of the Shan States completed the British acquisition of Burma. Thus, the modern limits between Burma and Thailand were established.

On January 4, 1948, Burma became an independent nation, its boundaries being those delimited while a British possession.

### **C. Socio-economic**

The immediate border area between Burma and Thailand is of limited economic significance, as is true of much of South and Southeast Asia. The civilizations of the two countries are essentially riverine and are centered on the Irrawaddy and Menam–Chao Phraya valleys. The mountainous regions along the frontiers, for the most part, are inhabited by minority people who often have not been drawn into the mainstream of national life. As a result, they present an administrative problem to the national government.

In the northern section of the boundary, extending westward from Laos to approximately 19°30' North, ethnic Thai peoples inhabit the frontier. The principal group, particularly in Burma, are the Shan, although intrusions of Lao occur along the larger river valleys. The population density in this sector is generally less than one inhabitant per square kilometer, although the Lao locally reach 10 persons per square kilometer (approximately 25 per square mile). South of 19°30' North, ethnic Thai are replaced by Tibeto–Burman Karens and Kaw. The average density of population continues in a similar pattern: less than one per square kilometer in the hills and between 1 and 10 per square kilometer in the mountain valleys. However, areas of high density are found along the coast and in the major internal valleys. These areas normally represent Burmese and Thai settlement. This increase in population is particularly noticeable in the peninsula where the proximity of the coastal-plain, developed transportation, and local mining activities affect the population pattern. At the southern end of the boundary, Thai settlers occupy both banks of the Pakchan River and, as a result, both sides of the boundary.

The frontier-dwelling minority people practice primitive "slash and burn" agriculture. A small village is established and local fields are cleared for use by cutting and burning of the vegetation during the dry season. The ash from the burning adds a limited amount of natural fertilizer to the soil, but normally within 3–5 years, its fertility is exhausted. The process of clearing is repeated until all of the available land in the vicinity of the village has been exploited. Then a new village site is selected and the process repeated. The original clearings return to native vegetation rather rapidly, but due to the exhaustion of the soil, the new vegetation cover is usually of limited economic value. This type of agriculture is destructive and crop yields are low. Efforts have been made by the national governments to improve local practices and annual stock but results, to date, have been meager.

Land communications between Burma and Thailand are limited by a mountainous nature of the border lands and lack of a developed transportation system. Three routes

cross the border: 1) in the north, near the Lao tripoint, between Hawng Luk and Muang Chiang Rai, 2) in the north center, between Moulmein and Tak, and 3) in the Isthmus of Kra along the valley of the Haungtharaw. A railroad formerly utilized the last-named route but the tracks have been dismantled or fallen into disrepair since World War II.

### **III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT**

From the Laos tripoint at the confluence of the Nam Kok and the Mekong, the Burma–Thailand boundary follows the former stream westward to its junction with the Mai Sai. This stream then is the boundary westward to the ridgeline which forms the drainage divide north and west of the Nam Mae Kham system. The boundary then follows a minor drainage divide between tributaries of the Nam Mae Kok crossing the main river at approximately 20°04'30" North and 99°21' East. Continuing westward, the boundary joins the Salween–Mekong drainage divide. At the ridgeline which serves as the boundary between the Thai changwads of Chiang Mai and Mae Wong Song, the boundary departs from the main divide to follow a minor divide between the Salween (north-and west-flowing tributaries) and its tributary, the Nam Mae Pai (south-flowing streams). At Loi Kangmong peak (1,610 meters), the boundary turns southward along the same minor drainage divide to cross the Pai at approximately 19°13'30" North and 97°50' East. Continuing southward along the minor divide, the boundary rejoins the major water divide near Doi Pratu Wiang (approximately 19° North; 97°45' East). The border then turns westward to join the Salween at the northern limit of the (Burmese) Karen State.

For 81 miles to the confluence of the Nam Mae Moei, the Salween thalweg forms the limit between Burma and Thailand. The Moei thalweg, in turn, is the boundary for an additional 240 miles. At its source, the main ridge of the Pa-wan Range serves to carry the border to the main drainage divide which is, in turn, followed southward to peak Mugadok Taung (Khao Mu Gatu). The boundary is demarcated by eight straight line vectors in crossing the valleys of the Haungtharaw and the Megathat Chaung. These vectors form a nearly straight line. After rejoining the water divide, the boundary projects westward in a very narrow triangle to include the temple of Pra Ched Sam Ong in Thailand before again coinciding with the dividing ridgeline. This ridge forms the main water divide for the peninsula as far south as Khao Daeng in the province of Chumbon. Here, the boundary turns westward to join the headwaters (Kra-Mathe) of the Pakchan River, which in turn forms the boundary to the sea.

In its course down the peninsula, the boundary, at approximately 11°40' North, comes within 7 miles of the Gulf of Siam.

### **IV. TREATIES AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ACTS**

Britain and Siam (former name for Thailand) negotiated many treaties during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of them, however, were concerned primarily with trade

and friendly relations. Only the treaties which have a direct bearing on the boundary between Burma and Thailand have been included below:

**A. Treaty with the King of Siam** signed in Bangkok on June 20, 1826, with ratification at Agra (India) on January 17, 1828. (Great Britain, Foreign Office, British and Foreign State Papers, Vol. 23, pp. 1153 ff., London)

After victory in the First Burmese War, Britain negotiated this treaty with Siam covering the general area of commerce and friendly relations. Article III, however, agreed that should any boundary dispute evolve between the new British possession and Siam, it would be settled "by both sides in a friendly manner."

**B. Convention between the Governor-General of India and the King of Siam, defining the Boundary on the Mainland between the Kingdom of Siam and the British Province of Tenasserim**, signed at Bangkok September 8, 1868, with ratifications exchanged at Bangkok on July 3, 1868. (NOTE: The date of the treaty is so cataloged in the BFSP volume. Furthermore, all British references to the treaty in later acts give the date as September 8. However, the body of the treaty bears the date February 8, 1868, which would permit an exchange of ratifications on July 3, 1868, which the September date obviously would not).

The boundary from the Salween south to the Andaman Sea was delimited: "... on the north the channel of the River Maymuey [Moei] (Siamese) or Thuongyong (Burmese) up to its source in the Pa-wan range of mountains...then along the Pa-wan range to the main watershed, and along it to Kow Kradoo Moo, or Magadok Toung (Khao Mu Gatu), .... Here the boundary line crosses the valleys of the Hougdrau [Haung Tharaw] and the Maygathat [Megathat], in almost a straight line, and meets the main watershed.... From this point it runs down the central range of mountains which form the main watershed of the peninsula as far as Khow Htam Dayn [Khao Daeng], ...thence along the range known as Khow Dayn Yai, as far as the source of the Kra-na-ey [Kra-Mathe] stream, which it follows to its junction with the Pakchan; thence down the Pakchan River to its mouth ...

The boundary was subsequently demarcated (1892) when Thai settlers accidentally intruded into Burmese territory. Approximately 460 square miles of Burmese territory was involved, and a tabular list of pillars has been compiled. Two maps of the boundary were also exchanged on July 3, 1868, during the exchange of ratification showing the alignment as agreed upon.

"In 1889 the Siamese Government proposed the appointment of a joint commission to settle claims of sovereignty over certain districts on the east bank of the Salween<sup>1</sup>. Various difficulties, however, arose and the British commissioners were compelled to take up the investigation alone. Work was commenced in Karenni, and the boundary of Trans-Salween tract and of the small states (Mong Tun, Mong Hang, Mong Kyaut,

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<sup>1</sup> See British and Foreign State Papers, vol. 87, pp. 189–209 for the correspondence on the negotiations during this period.

Mong Hta) previously in dispute was provisionally laid down. In 1889–1890 the demarcation was continued, and on this occasion representatives of both Siam and Keng Tung rendered assistance. A line of frontier extending as far as the Mekong was traced, and the whole of this border was accepted in 1892 by Siam. The final delineation of the boundary by a joint commission in the open season of 1892–1893 was arranged for. The Anglo–Siamese commissioners met at Mong Hang and the work of demarcation was begun in January 1893. On the 17th of October 1894, the King of Siam and Her Britannic Majesty's Minister exchanged maps in 3 sheets signed and sealed showing the boundary line as finally agreed upon between the two countries."<sup>2</sup>

**C. Anglo–French Declaration of January 15, 1896, relative to the delimitation of French and English possessions along the frontiers of the Kingdom of Siam**  
(*ibid.*, vol. 88, pp. 13 ff.)

Britain and France established the boundary between Indo–China and Burma along the upper Mekong (See International Boundary Study No. 33, June 18, 1964, "Burma–Laos Boundary" issued by the Office of the Geographer, Department of State.)

**D. Exchange of Notes ... regarding the Boundary between Burma (Kengtung) and Siam**, August 27, 1931, and March 14, 1932. (Great Britain, Foreign Office, Command 4112, Treaty Series No. 19, (1932). London)

The 1891–4 boundary in the mid-stream of the Mae Sai was modified to the 1929 deepwater channel (thalweg) of the river.

**E. Exchange of notes ... regarding the Boundary between Burma (Tanasserim) and Siam**, June 1, 1934. (*ibid.*, Command 4671, Treaty Series No. 19, (1934), London)

The same principle was extended to the Pakchan River. Specifically, "the deep water channel of the River Pakchan, wherever it may be, should always be accepted as the boundary... [in] that part...from the ...village of Marang northwards as far as said river forms the boundary..."

Two small parcels of detached territory, Klong Wan and Wang Tow, were transferred to Burma [40 acres and 9 inhabitants], while two additional plots, had Lan Kwai and See Sok, became Thai territory [70 acres and 114 inhabitants].

**F. Exchange of Notes...**, March 31 and April 1, 1937 (*ibid.*, Command 5475, Treaty Series No. 23 (1937), London)

The Notes confirmed the 1934 agreement and provided for citizenship of persons involved in that and future transfers.

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<sup>2</sup> Aitchison, C. U., A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads ..., vol. XIV, pp. 100–101, Government of India, Calcutta, 1931.

**G. Exchange of Notes ... regarding the Boundary between Burma and Thailand, October 1, and December 10, 1940. (ibid., Command 6262, Treaty Series No. 3 (1941), London.)**

The Mae Sai again changed course and the new channel was accepted as the boundary with the proviso that "the principle of the 'Deep Water Channel' is to remain applicable in the event of the Meh Sai river again changing its channel in the future."

The "deep water channel" principle was also extended to the river Meh Ruak (Nam Kok) by the Notes of December 10.

**H. Peace Agreement with Great Britain of January 1, 1946 (Command 8140 (1951))**

The agreement did not affect the boundary location, per se. However, it annulled the Tokyo Convention of May 9, 1941, which ceded Kengtung and Mong Pan from Japanese-occupied Burma. The territories were restored to Burma returning the boundary to the British–Thai negotiated line which has continued to the present.

Several Burmese–Thai agreements have been negotiated on border security since the independence of Burma. These, however, have not affected the alignment of the boundary.

## **V. SUMMARY**

The entire Burma–Thailand boundary has been demarcated by either monuments or specific (thalweg) channels in the border streams. As a result, it should be shown on official maps as an established international boundary. No disputes over the precise alignment are known to exist.

For compilation purposes, the boundary is shown identically on native map series and on official Survey of India maps produced before Burmese independence. The International Map of the World, 1:1,000,000, is an adequate depiction for small-scale maps.

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