



The nexus between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship, Thailand-Cambodia conflict management, and the sustainable development goals

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Received Date: December 29, 2025

Revised Date: January 20, 2026

Accepted Date: February 24, 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: This research aims to explain the relationship between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship, the management of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, and the sustainable development goals. The research focuses on examining the concrete leadership aspects carried out by Malaysia in carrying out its duties as the 2025 ASEAN Chair—especially in managing the escalation of the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict which increased sharply in 2025. **Methods:** This research approach is qualitative with a descriptive explanatory method, using secondary data from academic journals, books, and credible institutional reports. The analytical framework integrates Role Theory and international conflict management activities to evaluate Malaysia's leadership as Chair of ASEAN 2025. Furthermore, this study examines the relationship between conflict management and SDG Pillar 16 (Peace) through explanatory methods. **Findings:** The results of the study indicate a link between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship, Thailand-Cambodia conflict management efforts, and sustainable development goals. Malaysia effectively executed four out of five international conflict management activities, including verbal intervention, diplomatic facilitation of the July 2025 ceasefire, and the deployment of a military monitoring team to prevent further casualties. **Conclusions:** This research concludes that despite critical notes in the management of the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict, Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship was quite significant in reducing the escalation of tensions on the Thailand-Cambodia border, thus effectively preventing new victims from military violence. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The novelty of this research lies in its integrated analysis of Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship through the dual lenses of Role Theory and SDG 16, while simultaneously offering a critical original assessment of how regional mediation can operationalize global peace targets despite persistent institutional consensus vulnerabilities.

Keywords: ASEAN 2025; Malaysia; Sustainable Development Goals; Thailand-Cambodia.

1. Introduction

The bilateral relationship between Thailand and Cambodia has de facto demonstrated a fluctuating dynamic. At times, the two neighboring states appear harmonious; at other moments, however, they engage in direct military confrontation. The deadly war between Thailand and Cambodia from 24–28 July 2025 visibly underscored that Southeast Asia is no different from other regions prone to interstate armed conflict (Suriyasenee & Rusher, 2025). The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia war unequivocally demonstrated the structural fragility of Southeast Asia. Indeed, in the words of the Indian-born international relations scholar Amitav Acharya, Southeast Asia has been described as the “Balkans of the East”

Cite This Article:

Alim, M. Z. (2026). The nexus between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship, Thailand-Cambodia conflict management, and the sustainable development goals. *Journal of National Paradigm-Based Resilience Strategy*, 3(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.61511/napbres.v3i1.2026.3185>

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(Acharya, 2001). The recent destructive conflict between Thailand and Cambodia strongly reinforces this premise.

The open war between Thailand and Cambodia in 2025 did not emerge instantaneously; rather, it represented an accumulation and continuation of precedents established in earlier periods of confrontation. Chronologically, at the beginning of 2025, bilateral relations already exhibited signs of discord. This was evidenced on 23 February 2025, when armed forces from both countries were involved in a minor confrontation in the vicinity of Prasat Ta Mone Thom. Three months later, tensions persisted and escalated into reciprocal armed exchanges along the border, culminating in the death of Cambodian military personnel on 28 May 2025 (Michaels & Laksmana, 2025).

The May 2025 incident proved to be a catalyst for a far more severe escalation in July 2025, when Thailand and Cambodia entered a full-fledged diplomatic and military crisis. Each side reinforced its military presence along the border. The situation intensified on 16 July 2025, when a Thai military patrol was injured by a landmine explosion. Subsequently, on 23 July 2025, five additional Thai soldiers were wounded by landmines, with one soldier suffering the loss of a limb. As a consequence of the escalating border crisis, both Thailand and Cambodia recalled their ambassadors and closed official border checkpoints (UN Security Council, 2025).

According to reports from the United Nations Security Council, both countries accused each other of instigating the tensions. On 24 July 2025, Thailand and Cambodia each submitted formal letters to the Security Council. In its correspondence, Thailand explicitly asserted that its military casualties resulted from landmines planted by Cambodia. Thailand further alleged that Cambodia initiated hostilities on 24 July 2025 by firing upon Thai defensive positions, specifically targeting a Thai military base located in Surin Province. In response, Cambodia, in its official letter to the Security Council, categorically accused Thailand of conducting a deliberate and premeditated military aggression against Cambodian territory along the border areas, including around Ta Mone Thom Temple, Ta Krabey Temple, and Mom Bei Temple, situated along the border between Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey provinces. As a concrete retaliatory measure against Thailand, Cambodia subsequently launched attacks on four Thai provinces: Buriram, Si Sa Ket, Ubon Ratchathani, and Ratchathani.

Thailand and Cambodia militaries clash along their border

Armed clashes have broken out between Thailand and Cambodia militaries since July 24 at multiple locations along the Cambodia-Thailand border.



Source: Reuters reporting; The Humanitarian Data Exchange | Pasit Kongkunakornkul • July 26, 2025 | REUTERS

Fig. 1. Thailand-Cambodia border crisis map 2025
(Reuters, 2025a)

In practice, Thailand subsequently deployed its F-16 fighter jets to launch attacks against Cambodia (Naing & Pookasook, 2025). As a consequence, the two states became engaged in a deadly military confrontation, employing advanced weaponry such as artillery, tanks, rockets, and drones (Roblin, 2025). As a result of this exchange of attacks, at least 43 individuals were killed, comprising 15 Thai military personnel, 15 Thai civilians, 5 Cambodian military personnel, and 8 Cambodian civilians. The number of fatalities resulting from the 2025 war exceeded the total casualties recorded during previous major conflicts in 2008 and 2011, which together amounted to 28 deaths (AFP, 2025b). Beyond the loss of life, the Thailand–Cambodia war also produced severe humanitarian consequences. According to available data, hundreds of thousands of Thai and Cambodian residents were displaced, forced to abandon their homes to escape the impact of the military hostilities (Tanakasempipat, 2025).

The open conflict between Thailand and Cambodia that erupted in 2025 once again reopened longstanding wounds between the two countries, which have frequently been triggered by competing claims of territorial sovereignty. At the same time, the absence of an effective regional conflict resolution mechanism under the auspices of ASEAN has often rendered the protracted Thailand–Cambodia conflict difficult to contain, leaving it susceptible to recurring escalation and generating casualties and tensions that threaten regional security.

The military confrontation along the border between Thailand and Cambodia severely disrupted the stability and regional order of Southeast Asia, a region long perceived as stable, peaceful, and relatively insulated from interstate warfare. This precedent of open conflict clearly demonstrates that ASEAN, as a regional cooperation organization, faces a substantial institutional challenge in ensuring that it functions not merely as a ceremonial forum or consultative assembly. Malaysia's leadership during the 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship was significantly tested in managing the Thailand–Cambodia conflict. As the holder of the ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia's responsibilities and obligations were necessarily aligned with ASEAN's established blueprints and broader international frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This research therefore examines the interrelationship between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship, the management of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, and the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

One of ASEAN's important mechanisms for resolving intra-regional conflicts is the ASEAN Way. According to former Singaporean Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar, this mechanism emphasizes inclusiveness, intensive consultation towards consensus, and peaceful dispute resolution (Acharya, 2001). The ASEAN Way also allows for the involvement of ASEAN partners and external parties in the conflict resolution process within ASEAN member states (Lardo, 2021). Specifically, the ASEAN Way is characterized as a practical policy of consultation, consensus-based decision-making, non-confrontation, and behind-the-scenes diplomacy (Ryu, 2011).

Since its establishment on August 8, 1967, the ASEAN Way has been the basis for ASEAN in its efforts to resolve any conflicts involving ASEAN member states. In the context of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict in 2025, Malaysia, as the Chair of ASEAN, has consistently used the ASEAN Way as a means of conflict resolution. Malaysia has demonstrated this through concrete steps to facilitate a measured resolution of the conflict by calling on Thai and Cambodian authorities to discuss solutions to the conflict, proposing a ceasefire, and opening to the involvement of third parties such as the United States and China in mediating the Thai-Cambodian conflict.

Unfortunately, the ASEAN Way, which forms the basis of Malaysia's actions as a mediator, has often proved ineffective as a solution to the Thailand-Cambodia conflict. In practice, the ASEAN Way appears to be effective only at the outset, successfully persuading the Thai and Cambodian authorities to agree to a ceasefire and a commitment to peace. However, it has subsequently become counterproductive as the agreements reached have been violated. Each side continues to carry out military attacks that claim lives. Despite working hard to reconcile the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, Malaysia, as the Chair of ASEAN

in 2025, does not have the power to prevent violations of the consensus. This is because the ASEAN Way appears to be normative without rigid clauses containing sanctions for parties that violate the consensus, which makes it binding for those who have agreed to it. This is the problem and limitation of the ASEAN Way that has been common in the ASEAN region.

2. Methods

To elaborate further, this article is inspired by the work of Sothirak (2013). Based on that study, it can be concluded that the open conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011 was triggered by competing sovereignty claims over a border area whose land demarcation process had not yet been completed. In the author's assessment, that study intersects with the present research in terms of its thematic focus. The primary distinction lies in the temporal context and in the identity of the state holding the chairmanship of ASEAN at the time the Thailand–Cambodia war erupted. In Sothirak's article, the 2011 ASEAN Chairmanship under the leadership of Indonesia is explicitly examined. It is explained that Indonesia played a significant role in mediating the Thailand–Cambodia conflict by offering a peace package in the form of a ceasefire proposal, accompanied by concrete measures whereby Indonesia served as an observer of the implementation of the peace initiative.

As a result of Indonesia's leadership role, Thailand and Cambodia agreed to establish a Joint Working Group (JWG) to facilitate the withdrawal of their respective troops from the conflict area. Nevertheless, the article does not specifically provide a critical analysis of Indonesia's role as ASEAN Chair in 2011, nor does it comprehensively assess ASEAN's institutional role in ensuring that the Thailand–Cambodia conflict was conclusively resolved without further repercussions. The present author identifies this gap as a research opportunity that motivates the development of a new and more reflective study based on contemporary developments. Given that this study analyzes the nexus between Malaysia's role during the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, the management of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), role theory is employed as one of the principal analytical frameworks.

The state, as the primary actor in global affairs, possesses both the authority and responsibility to determine its policy orientation in accordance with its obligations (Agastia, 2020). The role assumed by a state within an intergovernmental organization facilitates patterns of interaction between the leading state and member states (Thies & Wehner, 2019). In the context of state roles within the international system, at least nine distinct role types can be identified (Holsti, 1970). From these typologies, this article examines their relevance to Malaysia's role in mediating the Thailand–Cambodia conflict in 2025.

From the perspective of academic literature, international conflict management consists of five principal forms of activity (Vuković, 2016). Of these five forms, this study analyzes which measures were undertaken by Malaysia and evaluates their effectiveness. More broadly, interstate conflict is generally driven by four main factors: geopolitics, capitalpolitik, realpolitik, and idealpolitik (Wallensteen, 2023). Since this article also seeks to analyze the interconnection between Malaysia's role in the ASEAN Chairmanship 2025, the management of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, and the Sustainable Development Goals, it further examines one key variable within SDG Pillar 16—namely peace, justice, and strong institutions.

This pillar has 12 indicators, and researchers will only focus on the first indicator, which is reducing all forms of violence and mortality rates everywhere. This indicator has a sub-indicator of deaths caused by armed conflict (UN Report, 2025). Researchers will analyze specific actions taken by Malaysia as Chair of ASEAN in 2025 in mediating the Thai-Cambodian military conflict, which escalated in 2025, in relation to efforts to achieve sustainable development goals, particularly the goal of reducing mortality rates due to armed conflict.

Furthermore, this study aims to answer research questions such as: How is Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship related to the management of the Thailand-Cambodia

conflict and the achievement of sustainable development goals? The researcher deliberately formulated this research question to explore facts related to the effectiveness of Malaysia's leadership role in the ASEAN organization in 2025 in reconciling the long-standing Thailand-Cambodia conflict, which broke out again in 2025. This study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach. Regarding data collection techniques, the researcher used secondary data through literature and information studies, namely by reading journals, books, analyzing facts, news, and data from credible institutions relevant to the research topic. As for the data presentation technique, the author used an explanatory method, which is to explain in detail the relationship between Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship, the management of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, and the achievement of sustainable development goals.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The socio-historical dimension as the root of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict

From a socio-historical perspective, the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia cannot be separated from their long and complex historical trajectory. The principal root of the dispute between these neighboring states lies in their 508-mile (817-kilometer) land boundary, sections of which remain undermarketed and lack clearly defined boundary lines (Reuters, 2025b). Historically, Thailand—formerly known as the Kingdom of Siam, which was never colonized—and Cambodia, which experienced French colonial rule, engaged in negotiations that culminated in the Franco-Siam Treaties of 1904 and 1907. Under these agreements, both parties fundamentally agreed that issues concerning territorial demarcation would be resolved through a joint Franco-Siamese Mixed Commission (Ciorciari, 2009).

Pursuant to the Franco-Siam Delimitation Commission's work, the so-called Annex I Map was produced as a follow-up to the 1904 and 1907 treaties. This map specifically placed the Preah Vihear Temple within Cambodian territory. Subsequently, Thailand contested the validity of the map, arguing that the boundary line depicted therein did not fully conform to the watershed principle—namely, the natural boundary defined by ridgelines and drainage basins—as stipulated in the 1904 Franco-Siam Treaty (International Court of Justice, 1962).

This disagreement marked the beginning of the prolonged Thailand–Cambodia dispute, which eventually proceeded to international adjudication before the International Court of Justice. In 1962, the Court ruled that, by reference to the map produced by the Franco-Siam Delimitation Commission, Thailand had effectively accepted the previously determined boundary line. The Court therefore decided in favor of Cambodia, affirming that Preah Vihear Temple lies within Cambodian sovereignty (International Court of Justice, 1962).

Although legally the dispute over Preah Vihear Temple was settled in Cambodia's favor, *de facto* Thailand remained reluctant to accept the ruling and continued efforts to assert claims over the site and its surrounding areas. Evidence of this resistance can be observed in the post-1962 period, when Thailand—often referred to as the “Land of the White Elephant”—engaged in military actions that contributed to renewed border crises in 2008 and 2011 (Daverson, 2025).

In response, Cambodia once again brought the Preah Vihear dispute before the International Court of Justice in 2011, seeking an interpretation of the Court's 1962 judgment. In its 2013 decision, the Court explicitly clarified that the temple promontory, including its immediate vicinity, belonged to Cambodia and ordered the withdrawal of Thai troops from the disputed area. However, the Court refrained from delineating the broader boundary line, instead assigning this responsibility to a bilateral Joint Boundary Commission (Daverson, 2025). The Court's decision, which left certain technical aspects of demarcation unresolved, created space for continued friction, as Thailand and Cambodia retained the opportunity to maintain overlapping sovereignty claims. This ambiguity ultimately manifested again in 2025. Other sites located along the Thailand–Cambodia

border—such as Prasat Ta Mone Thom, Ta Krabey Temple, and Mom Bei Temple—have, in practice, become catalysts for renewed bilateral tensions, given their status as areas subject to overlapping territorial claims by both states.

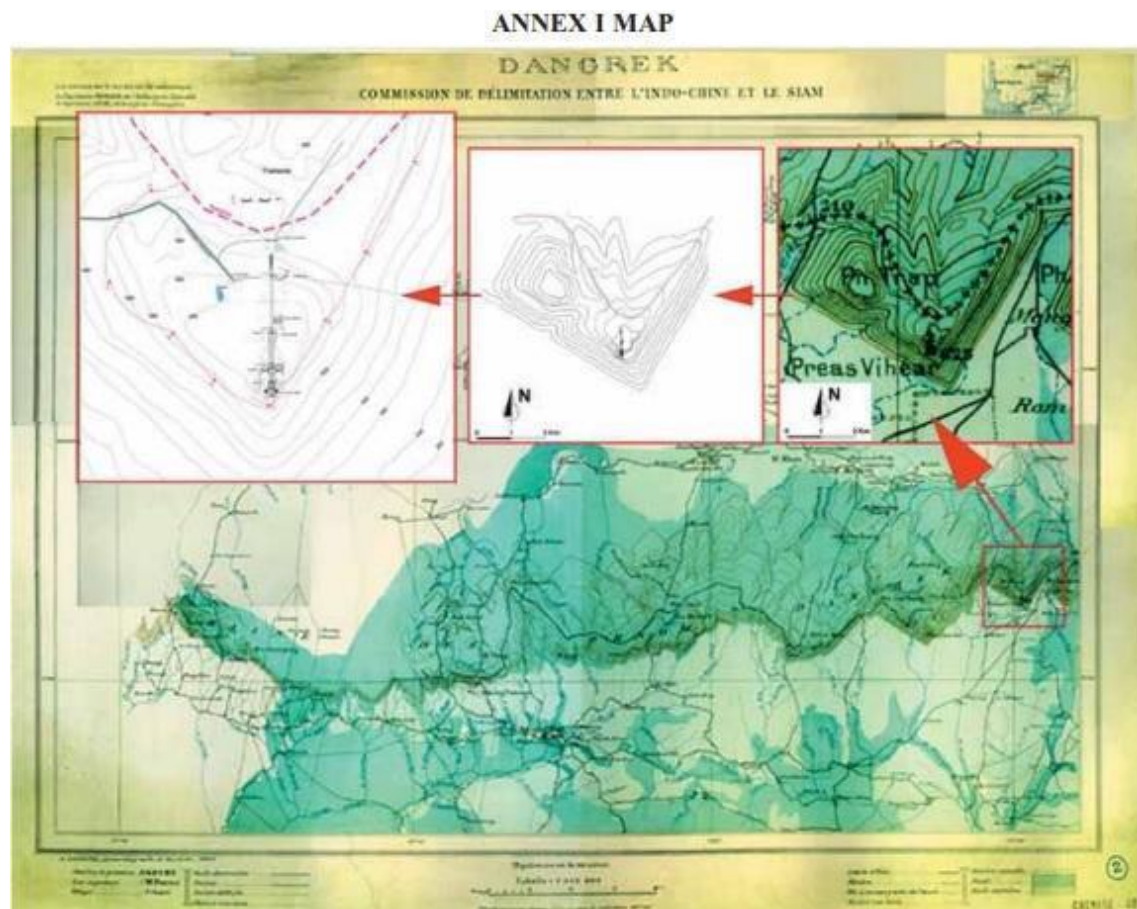


Fig. 2. Map of Appendix I of the work of the Franco-Siamese Commission which became the basis for the International Court of Justice ruling that Preah Vihear Temple was part of Cambodia in 1962 (The Cambodian National Commission for UNESCO, 2009)

3.2 Strategic geopolitical analysis of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict

The border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia may be categorized as a geopolitical conflict, as the contestation undertaken by both parties—whether physically or verbally—is fundamentally driven by motives of political geography. Each state competes to assert control over border territories claimed as part of its sovereign domain. This characterization is consistent with recent geopolitical research indicating that more than two-thirds of countries worldwide are involved in at least one territorial dispute. Furthermore, the study reports approximately 175 disputes involving competing claims over more than 100 distinct territories (Bowden, 2025).

The Preah Vihear Temple, according to the judgments of the International Court of Justice in 1962 and 2013, is *de jure* recognized as belonging to Cambodia (International Court of Justice, 2013). Nevertheless, Thailand has remained reluctant to fully accept these legal determinations. Moreover, Thailand continues to assert claims over additional temple sites located along the border, which are simultaneously claimed by Cambodia. Such overlapping claims have repeatedly exacerbated tensions along the Thailand–Cambodia frontier. Invoking the imperatives of sovereignty and territorial security, both states have resorted to military instruments in confronting one another. From a strategic calculation standpoint, available data concerning the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia war indicate that Thailand possesses overall military superiority relative to Cambodia.

Table 1. Thailand-Cambodia military strength comparison (2025)

Category	Thailand (Rnk of 145)	Cambodia (Rnk of 145)
Power Index (PwrIndx)	0.4536 (Rnk 25)	2.0752 (Rnk 95)
Defense Budget	\$5.88 Billion (Rnk 45)	\$860 Million (Rnk 92)
Active Personnel	360,850 (Rnk 13)	221,000 (Rnk 22)
Reserve Personnel	200,000 (Rnk 27)	0 (Rnk 145)
Total Aircraft	493 (Rnk 22)	25 (Rnk 100)
Fighter Aircraft	72 (Rnk 26)	0 (Rnk 145)
Dedicated Attack Aircraft	20 (Rnk 27)	0 (Rnk 145)
Tank Strength	635 (Rnk 23)	644 (Rnk 22)
Armored Vehicles	16,935 (Rnk 31)	3,627 (Rnk 77)
Mobile Rocket Projectors	26 (Rnk 61)	463 (Rnk 10)
Naval Fleet Strength	293 (Rnk 7)	20 (Rnk 66)
Helicopter Carriers	1 (Rnk 5)	0 (Rnk 145)
Frigates	7 (Rnk 11)	0 (Rnk 145)

(Global Fire Power, 2025)

In the author's assessment, this advantage likely contributed to Thailand's confidence in asserting claims over Preah Vihear Temple—despite its clear juridical status under Cambodian sovereignty—as well as over adjacent contested areas. Thailand's confidence was further reflected in its deployment of advanced military assets, including F-16 fighter jets, during armed confrontations with Cambodia. Within the framework of military politics, Thailand's above-average military capabilities function as both a strategic instrument and a significant bargaining asset, particularly when the "Land of the White Elephant" seeks to consolidate or expand control over additional sites beyond Preah Vihear along the disputed border.

Regarding approaches to conflict resolution, Thailand—backed by its dominant military capabilities—has consistently favored bilateral mechanisms, particularly direct negotiations. In contrast, Cambodia has demonstrated a preference for multilateral avenues in addressing border disputes with Thailand. This orientation may be understood as a rational response to Cambodia's recognition of its comparatively limited military capacity vis-à-vis Thailand, thereby rendering third-party international involvement a logical balancing strategy. Thailand's persistent reluctance to engage third-party mediators in its border disputes with Cambodia further suggests a perception of strategic superiority (Um, 2025).

In the context of the violent conflict in 2025, Cambodia promptly submitted a formal letter to the United Nations Security Council, requesting that the Council convene a session to address the military conflict with Thailand, which had escalated into open warfare from 24–28 July 2025. Thailand likewise submitted a letter to the United Nations during the same period. However, in its correspondence, Thailand expressed a preference for bilateral negotiations rather than international mediation as the primary mechanism for resolving the border dispute, consistent with its approach in previous periods. In response to these communications, the United Nations, through Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, urged both Thailand and Cambodia to exercise maximum restraint and to resolve their differences through dialogue and in the spirit of good neighborliness, with the objective of achieving a durable and permanent solution to the dispute (UN Security Council, 2025).

3.3 Malaysia's role in the 2025 ASEAN chair

In response to the statement of the United Nations Secretary-General concerning the crisis along the Thailand–Cambodia border, Malaysia, as Chair of ASEAN in 2025, acted promptly. Malaysia intensified coordination with both Thailand and Cambodia in order to mitigate bilateral tensions (Tan, 2025). Furthermore, Malaysia formally proposed a ceasefire initiative to the two conflicting states (Ghoshal, 2025). Initially, Thailand rejected the proposal, expressing its preference to resolve the geopolitical dispute with Cambodia without third-party involvement (The Nation, 2025). However, under mounting

international pressure—including encouragement from the United States and diplomatic support from ASEAN foreign ministers—both Thailand and Cambodia eventually agreed to accept Malaysia's proposed ceasefire (Dom, 2025). During its tenure as ASEAN Chair in 2025 and drawing upon the analysis of Karuppanan (2025), Malaysia undertook several significant initiatives in mediating the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, as follows.

Facilitating diplomacy and negotiations. Within days of the escalation of tensions, Malaysia adopted a proactive political stance by designating Putrajaya as the host venue for peace negotiations. Employing personal diplomacy, quiet diplomacy, and soft power. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim leveraged personal engagement, political influence, and persuasive diplomacy to encourage both parties to accept mediation. Compensating for ASEAN's institutional limitations through rapid diplomatic initiatives. Malaysia recognized that ASEAN's institutional mechanisms are often constrained in delivering swift responses during crises involving member states. Compounding this challenge was the fact that the incumbent ASEAN Secretary-General is a Cambodian national, which could further complicate the organization's neutrality and mediation capacity in a dispute directly involving Cambodia. Convening top leaders and securing a ceasefire agreement. Through sustained and persuasive political communication, Malaysia successfully facilitated a ceasefire agreement between Thailand and Cambodia on 28 July 2025. Actively monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire. Following the acceptance of the ceasefire proposal, Malaysia dispatched its Chief of Defense Forces to visit both Cambodia and Thailand, engaging directly with military officials from both sides to ensure the effective implementation of the ceasefire commitment.

Based on the foregoing analysis, the role model enacted by Malaysia in its efforts to reconcile Thailand and Cambodia can be characterized as that of a mediator. This mediation was operationalized through facilitative negotiations aimed at achieving a mutually beneficial, win–win outcomes for all parties involved. Malaysia demonstrated a strong and sustained commitment to mediating the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, contributing to the gradual stabilization of a military confrontation that had previously escalated into deadly hostilities.

3.4 Malaysian conflict management model

Of the five principal forms of international conflict management—namely verbal action, diplomatic engagement (mediation), judicial processes, administrative assistance, and the use of military force—Malaysia's conduct in managing the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia conflict demonstrates that it successfully implemented four of the five categories of international conflict management activities.

The findings of this study indicate that, first, Malaysia undertook verbal action. On 25 July 2025, one day after tensions between Thailand and Cambodia reached their peak, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim personally telephoned the respective heads of government, urging both parties to cease hostilities along their shared border, where military forces from both sides had engaged in lethal exchanges of fire. Prime Minister Anwar emphasized that his intervention was motivated by profound concern over the violent tragedy unfolding between the two nations. In addition to direct verbal communication, he also expressed Malaysia's concern in written form via social media, publicly calling upon both national leaders to halt the fighting, prevent further escalation, and pursue constructive dialogue and diplomatic engagement (Strangio, 2025). These actions constitute Malaysia's model of both verbal and written diplomatic intervention in mediating the conflict.

Second, beyond verbal initiatives, Malaysia actively pursued a diplomatic approach. This was evidenced by its successful hosting of the Thailand–Cambodia peace negotiations, during which the respective heads of government traveled to Putrajaya, Malaysia, to discuss and negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution to their bilateral tensions. Malaysia's diplomatic initiative—led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who formally invited the leaders of Thailand and Cambodia to attend a special trilateral meeting on 28 July 2025—ultimately resulted in a ceasefire agreement, demonstrating the effectiveness of Malaysia's

diplomatic mediation (Calderwood, 2025). Third, Malaysia provided administrative assistance by facilitating the venue and secretariat arrangements for preparatory meetings of Thailand–Cambodia general border officials. These efforts culminated in the establishment of an Interim Observation Team (IOT), specifically designed to monitor developments along the border (Cambodian People Party, 2025).



Fig. 3. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim successfully mediated between Thai and Cambodian leaders, resulting in a ceasefire agreement on July 28, 2025.

Fourth, Malaysia adopted a model of conflict management involving the use of military instruments in a supervisory capacity. Following the ceasefire agreement between Thailand and Cambodia, Malaysia—together with Indonesia and Philippines and subsequently joined by Brunei and Singapore—deployed military representatives to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire along the Thailand–Cambodia border. These personnel operated under the framework of the Interim Observation Team established under Malaysia’s leadership to oversee compliance with the ceasefire agreement. This initiative marked the first occurrence in the history of ASEAN in which a collectively mandated observation mechanism was created in response to a regional security crisis (Bernama, 2025a). Collectively, these measures illustrate the model of international conflict management employed by Malaysia in addressing and stabilizing the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict.

3.5 The US, China, and Malaysian nexus in mitigating the Thailand-Cambodia conflict

Malaysia’s vital and successful role in managing the Thailand–Cambodia tensions cannot, in practice, be separated from the involvement of external partners of ASEAN. Two major ASEAN partner countries—the United States and China—also contributed to the management of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict. The facts indicate that following the outbreak of tensions along the Thailand–Cambodia border, which escalated into broader hostilities, U.S. President Donald Trump explicitly urged the leaders of Thailand and Cambodia to implement an immediate ceasefire. President Trump reportedly warned that the United States would maintain the previously imposed 36 percent trade tariffs on both countries unless they agreed to de-escalate tensions through a ceasefire (Head & Jordan, 2025). One day after this pressure was conveyed, the leaders of Thailand and Cambodia attended Malaysia’s invitation for peace talks and agreed to a ceasefire.

In contrast to the United States’ more assertive approach, China adopted a comparatively cautious and measured posture in efforts to reconcile the Thailand–Cambodia conflict. Even prior to the outbreak of open warfare on 24 July 2025, during the

ASEAN Summit held in Malaysia, China had offered to play a constructive, objective, and impartial role in mediating the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia (Reuters, 2025a). Following the five-day war between Thailand and Cambodia and building upon Malaysia's success in facilitating a ceasefire agreement, China continued its diplomatic engagement. On 14 August 2025, in Anning, Yunnan Province, China hosted a trilateral meeting attended by representatives of Thailand and Cambodia, with China acting as mediator. On that occasion, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed support for dialogue between Cambodia and Thailand, encouraging both sides to dispel misunderstandings, rebuild mutual trust, restore normal exchanges and cooperation, and fully implement the agreements reached at the Extraordinary Meeting of the Cambodia–Thailand Border Committee. He also emphasized the importance of strengthening the ceasefire arrangement without delay (Xinhua, 2025). China's mediation efforts did not conclude at this stage.

On 9 September 2025, in Malaysia, Chinese authorities engaged in discussions with officials from Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia concerning the border conflict. During this meeting, China reaffirmed its commitment to acting fairly and prudently since the outbreak of the Thailand–Cambodia border war. China also reiterated its readiness to play a constructive role in sustaining the ceasefire and facilitating improvements in bilateral relations between Thailand and Cambodia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). Both the United States and China also participated as observers in the special meeting convened by Malaysia in Putrajaya on 28 July 2025, as well as in the meeting of Thailand–Cambodia general border officials that subsequently produced a joint press statement by the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kingdom of Thailand, 2025a). This constellation of engagement illustrates the nexus between the United States, China, and Malaysia in the broader effort to mitigate the Thailand–Cambodia conflict.

3.6 International response to Malaysia's leadership role in ASEAN 2025

Malaysia's leadership of the ASEAN in 2025, particularly in mediating the July 2025 military conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, received widespread international acclaim. Figures such as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed gratitude to Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for Malaysia's leadership and initiative in the ceasefire process, which Rubio credited to Malaysia's sincere collaboration with the United States in organizing the Special Meeting on 28 July 2025 that culminated in a ceasefire agreement (Rubio, 2025).

In addition to Secretary Rubio, U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia Edgard D. Kagan also praised Malaysia's critical role as ASEAN Chair in 2025 for facilitating peace between Thailand and Cambodia. He noted that Malaysia's organization of the Special Meeting on 28 July 2025 and the Extraordinary Meeting of the General Border Committee on 7 August 2025 clearly demonstrated Malaysia's leadership in bringing the two conflicting nations to negotiate at the table (The Star, 2025). The pinnacle of recognition came in September 2025, when U.S. President Donald Trump, during a phone conversation with PM Anwar Ibrahim, specifically acknowledged Malaysia's success in mediating the Thailand–Cambodia ceasefire agreement. In President Trump's view, this represented an extraordinary achievement that underscored Malaysia's credibility and capacity as ASEAN Chair 2025 (Bernama, 2025b).

Appreciation for Malaysia was also expressed by the foreign ministers of other ASEAN member states. They welcomed the outcomes of the Special Meeting, led, organized, and witnessed by PM Anwar Ibrahim as ASEAN Chair 2025, which addressed the Cambodia–Thailand crisis on 28 July 2025 in Putrajaya. They further commended Malaysia's role in facilitating bilateral dialogue leading to a ceasefire between Cambodia and Thailand (ASEAN, 2025). Furthermore, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto praised Malaysia's diplomatic breakthrough in achieving peace between Thailand and Cambodia. Specifically, President Prabowo congratulated Malaysia on its leadership as ASEAN Chair 2025, which

was judged successful in mediating the conflict and securing a ceasefire between the two countries (The Jakarta Globe, 2025).

3.7 The impact of Malaysia's role in Thailand-Cambodia conflict management 2025 on the Southeast Asian region

Malaysia's leadership in chairing ASEAN in 2025 deserves full credit. Its leadership at the Southeast Asian level was truly tested. Malaysia's ability to navigate the bloc and maintain cohesion under its command was remarkable; even when the neighboring countries Thailand and Cambodia engaged in military conflict, ASEAN remained united and coherent. Under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia successfully broke the deadlock when the regional organization faced a critical test: the outbreak of the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute, which escalated into a humanitarian crisis along their border.

Malaysia's concrete actions—conducting high-level diplomacy directly with the heads of government of Thailand and Cambodia, coordinating with ASEAN's external partners such as the United Nations, U.S. authorities, and China—ultimately yielded results. The two conflicting ASEAN leaders were motivated to sit together and discuss peaceful solutions to the conflict. Southeast Asia, which had previously attracted international attention due to the prolonged Thailand–Cambodia border conflict from early to mid-2025, experienced a turning point thanks to Malaysia's assistance, mediation, and facilitation. The Special Meeting was successfully held in Putrajaya, Malaysia, on 28 July 2025. The meeting, attended by representatives from Thailand and Cambodia as well as neutral observers from the UN, the U.S., and China, resulted in a formal commitment to a ceasefire (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025).



Fig. 4. The signing of the Thailand-Cambodia peace agreement on October 26, 2026, witnessed by US President Donald Trump in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kingdom of Cambodia, 2025)

Evidence indicates that following the meeting and the ceasefire agreement, Southeast Asia appeared stable and was regarded as conducive. Furthermore, in August 2025, a series of international meetings to discuss peaceful resolution mechanisms for the Thailand–Cambodia conflict—whether hosted in Malaysia under its initiative or organized externally by ASEAN partner countries with Malaysia's continued involvement—further reinforced ASEAN's centrality through Malaysia's chairmanship. This demonstrated that ASEAN could take concrete action for its members and the region at large. This aligns with ASEAN's Indo-Pacific vision, which emphasizes the importance of ASEAN centrality in resolving regional

issues affecting countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Thailand, Cambodia, and other ASEAN member states (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023).

Although in practice there were dynamics in implementing the ceasefire—where both Thailand and Cambodia accused each other of violations—Southeast Asia generally appeared normal, stable, and controlled under the spirit of ASEAN solidarity. In recognition of these positive outcomes and commitments, ASEAN leaders invited U.S. President Donald Trump to the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. President Trump attended on the first day (26 October 2025) to directly witness and sign the peace agreement between Thailand and Cambodia (Hunnicuttt & Latiff, 2025). This stands as tangible evidence of Malaysia's impact in managing the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia conflict.

3.8 The anomaly of ASEAN regional organizations, the paradox of Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship, and its solution

Despite Malaysia's significant role as ASEAN Chair in 2025, particularly in managing the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict, the researcher observes both anomalies and paradoxes. Indeed, Malaysia as ASEAN Chair in 2025 exerted every effort, resource, and potential to lead member states, providing special attention and management, especially when ASEAN members faced crises such as the military conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2025. The paradox, however, lies in questioning the effectiveness and actual authority of ASEAN in fulfilling its commitment to maintaining Southeast Asia as a zone of peace, friendship, consensus, dialogue, and other high norms. Where is this vision ultimately heading? Evidence shows that despite the ceasefire commitment between Thailand and Cambodia facilitated by Malaysia on 28 July 2025, followed by the Extraordinary Meeting of the Joint Border Committee on 7 August 2025, counterproductive dynamics quickly emerged: each side accused the other of violating the ceasefire and peace principles (Reuters, 2025c).

Both Thailand and Cambodia accused one another of betraying the ceasefire commitment. According to official Cambodian government reports, following the 28 July 2025 Special Meeting, certain Thai military units repeatedly entered Cambodian territory, specifically in the An She area of Preah Vihear Province. There, they reportedly installed barbed wire, destroyed Cambodian civilian homes, deployed heavy equipment to build bunkers and roads in multiple locations unlawfully. Additionally, the Cambodian government reported that 18 of its military personnel were captured and detained by Thailand. On 10 August 2025, the Commander of Thailand's 2nd Military Region declared the intent to retake Ta Krabey Temple and planned to close Ta Mone Thom Temple (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kingdom of Cambodia, 2025b). From the Thai side, official authorities reported that less than 24 hours after the ceasefire commitment was ratified (evening of 29 July 2025), Thai military forces stationed in Phu Makua, Si Sa Ket Province, were attacked with grenades and small arms by Cambodian forces. According to the Thai government, the attacks continued into the morning of 30 July 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kingdom of Thailand, 2025b).

Furthermore, even after the Thailand–Cambodia peace agreement was signed on 26 October 2025, the border situation remained unstable. On 10 November 2025, Thailand reported that four of its military personnel were injured due to a landmine explosion on the border, leading Thailand to suspend implementation of the previously signed peace agreement (AFP, 2025a). These facts reveal that behind the handshake gestures, mediator embraces, and warm meeting atmosphere that formally endorsed peace and a ceasefire, real-world implementation proved neither easy nor smooth. Why did such anomalies occur? The researcher argues that it stems from the weak legitimacy of ASEAN as a regional organization with authority to enforce commitments among its members.

Institutionally, ASEAN lacks robust mechanisms to bind members to collective rules and consensus. For example, while ASEAN declares itself a free, peaceful, and neutral zone, as per the 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration, simultaneously some ASEAN countries pursue defense alliances with external powers, undermining neutrality. Real cases include

Thailand–Philippines alliances with the United States and Malaysia–Singapore alliances with the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Such double standards are common, making unanimous ASEAN decisions largely symbolic.

In terms of intra-ASEAN conflict management, the so-called “ASEAN Way” emphasizes principles of non-intervention, territorial integrity, and intensive dialogue (Askandar, 2021). The problem arises when, even after these principles are observed, dialogues held, and consensus reached, unexpected violations still occur, as evidenced in the Thailand–Cambodia case. The question becomes: what concrete solution exists? This is the ASEAN anomaly. The researcher sees a clear need for neutral military forces serving as ASEAN peacekeepers.

Following the UN model, impartial peacekeeping troops—regularly deployed to conflict zones—could be replicated in ASEAN. Neutral military force is crucial to ensure that peace missions along the Thailand–Cambodia border are effectively realized. Importantly, these forces must have authority to take measured, accountable actions to ensure that conflicting parties do not violate agreements. Malaysia’s concrete initiative in establishing the Interim Observation Team (IOT)—composed of ASEAN military personnel to monitor the Thailand–Cambodia ceasefire—represents a breakthrough and should be institutionalized to create lasting positive effects on regional stability and peace.

Another ASEAN shortcoming is the absence of an enforcement body capable of acting decisively against any member state that violates collective agreements. A ceasefire solution without supervision or enforcement mechanisms is vulnerable to breach and may even exacerbate the conflict. Therefore, in addition to peacekeeping troops, ASEAN should consider establishing an ASEAN Conflict Supervision and Quick Response Mechanism with authority to act promptly, independently, and legitimately. This would ensure that agreed-upon commitments among ASEAN members are faithfully implemented, protecting civilian lives and upholding territorial sovereignty.

3.9. Between Malaysia’s role in the 2025 ASEAN chairmanship, Thailand-Cambodia conflict management, and the sustainable development goals

One of the key principles of the ASEAN Community spirit is ASEAN’s commitment to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the 17 visionary development pillars for 2015–2030 is Pillar 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions. This pillar includes 12 work targets supporting the SDGs (The Global Goals, 2015). From these 12 targets, this article will focus specifically on the first target, which is reducing all forms of violence everywhere, in relation to Malaysia’s role as ASEAN Chair in 2025 and its management of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict.

Based on the data, facts, and information previously outlined, the researcher concludes that Malaysia’s leadership in ASEAN in 2025 was relatively effective in managing the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, producing a significant impact on peace between the two conflicting countries and on regional stability more broadly. This effectiveness is evident in Malaysia’s active role in conflict mitigation. When the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict in 2025 escalated into open warfare, threatening both regional stability and peace, Malaysia played a crucial and measurable role. This included verbal actions, calling on the national leaders of Thailand and Cambodia to exercise restraint and halt military tensions at the border; drafting peace proposals; pursuing diplomacy and bilateral engagement with the conflicting parties; facilitating the Special Meeting of the Thailand–Cambodia leaders, which resulted in a ceasefire consensus on 28 July 2025; coordinating the provision of locations and secretariat support for the joint border officer meeting between Thailand and Cambodia; and ultimately hosting the signing of the Thailand–Cambodia peace agreement on 26 October 2025.

Empirically, although the outcomes were not 100% complete and there were still shortcomings in implementation, Malaysia’s initiatives proved effective in preventing further violence along the Thailand–Cambodia border. The total death toll, which had reached 43 prior to the ceasefire, remained stable afterward. No further deaths occurred

because of military clashes or violent incidents. The ambitions of both Thai and Cambodian military forces to attack one another also decreased significantly, although, according to Cambodian reports, some of its personnel were captured by Thailand, and Thailand reported casualties among its personnel from landmine explosions during patrols. Overall, the conflict was gradually brought under control thanks to Malaysia's leadership as ASEAN Chair in 2025, which successfully encouraged both countries' leaders to implement the ceasefire. Despite the remaining gaps and imperfections, Malaysia's efforts visibly contributed positively to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Pillar 16 on peace, where one of the targets is the reduction of violence in all forms and locations.

4. Conclusions

Serving as the leader of regional organizations at the level of ASEAN constitutes a rare momentum that arises only once in a decade; thus, maximizing such an opportunity to address major internal challenges within the organization becomes an imperative. Malaysia, which in 2025 assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN, fully recognized that this was the moment to take meaningful action for the organization. This leadership coincided with a serious crisis in 2025, namely the outbreak of military hostilities between Thailand and Cambodia resulting from a long-standing geopolitical border dispute. Malaysia's leadership was significantly tested by the escalation of this complex conflict, and it assumed the role of mediator in a relatively effective manner. Empirical findings indicate that Malaysia, as mediator, managed the Thailand–Cambodia conflict proportionally and comprehensively. Of the five recognized forms of international conflict management activities, Malaysia undertook four. First, it engaged in verbal action by directly contacting the leaders of Thailand and Cambodia, urging restraint and an immediate de-escalation of military tensions along their shared border. Second, Malaysia pursued active diplomatic engagement by inviting and facilitating bilateral negotiations within the ASEAN familial framework, which culminated in a mutually agreed ceasefire on 28 July 2025. Furthermore, Malaysia provided administrative assistance by facilitating the provision of venues and secretariat support for preparatory meetings between Thailand–Cambodia general border officials, which subsequently led to the establishment of a Temporary Observation Team. At its peak commitment as mediator, Malaysia deployed military personnel to the Thailand–Cambodia border to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, a step that was later followed by the deployment of military personnel from other ASEAN member states.

In practice, the conflict management model advanced by Malaysia proved relatively effective in preventing the recurrence of military tensions following the open hostilities between Thailand and Cambodia that occurred from 24 to 28 July 2025. Nevertheless, behind Malaysia's success in performing its role as ASEAN Chair 2025 and mediator of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, several important considerations warrant attention. Among them is the vulnerability of ASEAN consensual agreements to violation by the very member states that endorse them. This vulnerability became evident in the dynamics along the Thailand–Cambodia border. Despite agreeing to a ceasefire facilitated by Malaysia on 28 July 2025, and even after the signing of a Thailand–Cambodia peace agreement on 26 October 2025 in the presence of Donald Trump, both parties subsequently accused one another of breaching their ceasefire commitments, as reported by their respective authorities.

Considering these developments, this study recommends that ASEAN establish a genuinely binding sanctions mechanism applicable to any member state that violates a mutually agreed consensus. Despite certain imperfections and limitations, this research concludes that Malaysia's actions in its capacity as ASEAN Chair 2025—particularly in managing the Thailand–Cambodia conflict—demonstrate a positive correlation with the objectives of the sixteenth pillar of the Sustainable Development Goals (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). This assertion is substantiated by evidence that, following Malaysia's initiative in facilitating the special Thailand–Cambodia negotiations on 28 July 2025 and the subsequent peace agreement signed on 26 October 2025, further fatalities resulting from

military violence linked to competing territorial claims along the border were successfully prevented. This outcome significantly contributed to achieving the first indicator of Sustainable Development Goal 16, namely the reduction of violence everywhere.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express their sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and insightful suggestions, which greatly contributed to improving the quality and clarity of this manuscript.

Author Contribution

Contributed to the literature search, interpretation, writing, and proofreading of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical Review Board Statement

Ethics approval was waived for this study because it is “not applicable” to research that does not involve humans or animals or is not related to public health and safety.

Informed Consent Statement

Not available.

Data Availability Statement

All data used in this research can be accessed openly as evidenced by the presence of a data link.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

During the preparation of this article, the author used Chat GPT to assist in the grammatical conformity. After using this tool, the author reviewed and re-edited the manuscript and takes full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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