THE KL ACCORD AND ITS AFTERSHOCK:

MALAYSIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP AND THE LIMITS OF INFLUENCE

Opinion

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Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025 coincided with a moment when Southeast Asian regional cooperation was struggling to respond to political and security anxieties. Even before the Summit, we have seen the return of great-power rivalry and the emergence of new conflict zones. All this places more pressure on Southeast Asia's (already narrow) policy space. With this as the background, Kuala Lumpur was expected to restore some measure of coherence to regional decision-making. However, the chicken-and-egg situation is that the mentioned background constraints actually limited how far Malaysia itself could push the bloc towards more credible collective action. The 47th ASEAN Summit held in October became the clearest demonstration of these limits.

The most immediate test of Malaysia's capacity as ASEAN Chair came from right next door with the sudden escalation of the Cambodia-Thailand border crisis. The events surrounding these tensions outdid Malaysia's original key priorities at the Summit which included strengthening ASEAN centrality and strategic trust, maritime issues (e.g., the South China Sea), internal conflict (e.g., Myanmar), emphasis on economic recovery, institutional reform and ASEAN's ongoing community-building agenda. The focus has curiously been shifted to the fragility of the region's security.

Despite the "slight" swing of focus, Malaysia took leadership in mediating the crisis. We saw Malaysia facilitating and hosting the meeting that enabled both governments to come together and sign what came to be known as the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord. Rather significantly, the signing of the Peace Accord on 26 October 2025 was witnessed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and U.S. President Donald Trump. The Accord (formally a Joint Declaration) was properly accompanied by the finalisation of the Terms of Reference for the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) which were intended to help verify conditions on the ground and to prevent unilateral escalation. The event initially suggested that ASEAN could still serve as a useful organisation when its members faced acute security tensions.

The euphoria lasted barely two weeks. In early November, a landmine explosion on the Thai

side of the border injured several soldiers. Bangkok responded by suspending implementation of parts of the peace agreement. They argued that conditions no longer allowed for joint monitoring. This abrupt reversal exposed a very old Southeast Asian dilemma which is the illusion that ASEAN often serves as a stage upon which agreements are signed. Its ability, however, to further influence events after the handshakes depends almost entirely on political will within the member states themselves. The persisting reality is that once member states change their domestic priorities, ASEAN doesn't have much to fall back on besides persuasion and gentle diplomatic pressure.

Malaysia's position is therefore more complicated than much of the early assessments suggested. For one, the formal record of the Summit (including the Chairman's Statement) does not actually assign Malaysia as a standing mediation mandate. Secondly, it does not state anywhere that Malaysia is responsible for driving implementation of the peace mechanism. Instead, Malaysia's contributions, as reflected in statements during bilateral meetings and post-summit press engagements, emphasised readiness to support Cambodia and Thailand should they request additional facilitation. Now we have come back to the full circle of ASEAN's dilemma.

The fact that this is consistent with ASEAN practice: the Chair may convene, encourage or even help sustain dialogue, BUT cannot impose itself as a mediator unless both parties explicitly ask for such a role. This pattern reveals some of the structural constraints facing ASEAN and its chair. The principle of non-interference continues to dominate regional diplomacy, even as member states face new challenges that require greater coordination. Issues such as the Cambodia-Thailand border tensions expose ASEAN's weakest link: the bloc is often a platform for symbolic demonstrations of unity rather than a forum for bold intervention. And naturally, Malaysia's chairmanship did/could not alter this dynamic. The 2025 summit illustrates how far ASEAN still is from becoming a body capable of actively managing intra-regional disputes, let alone addressing major geopolitical or economic pressures.

However, it is not all gloomy here in Southeast Asia. Despite these constraints, Malaysia's chairmanship still matters for two reasons. First, the Accord was (still) signed in Kuala Lumpur after a prolonged stagnation in earlier rounds of negotiation. While we are clear that ASEAN's rotating chairs rarely determine outcomes, we also understand that the chairmanship can create enabling conditions for agreements. Malaysia took this leadership (albeit nuanced) and offered neutrality, facilitation of communication between the parties, logistical support for the meeting and diplomatic backing for confidence-building measures; all of which helped generate the momentum needed for the TOR's completion.

Second, Malaysia's framing of its chairmanship around "Inclusivity and Sustainability," acknowledged ASEAN's credibility to progress without leaving anyone behind by strengthening regional peace and prosperity. This reminds us that ASEAN can still act somewhat decisively when it leverages its convening power and political skill. By providing a stable environment for dialogue and peace treaty Malaysia showed that the Chair can strengthen regional trust and credibility. The Cambodia-Thailand case illustrates that, despite the structural limits of ASEAN, proactive and well-calibrated leadership can help create milestones towards peace and prosperity (again, albeit small milestones).

ASEAN will not transform into a collective security organisation; nor should it. But it can strengthen its preventive diplomacy, sharpen its mechanisms for de-escalation, and build a more consistent practice of crisis management. Ultimately what we can realistically synthesise here, the Cambodia-Thailand episode shows us a truth: regional cooperation cannot rely on ceremony alone. Agreements signed in the glare of international attention must be matched by political commitment long after the cameras are gone. Malaysia's challenge and opportunity is to help nurture this long-term commitment while acknowledging the limits of ASEAN's institutional design. If Malaysia succeeds in reinforcing habits of cooperation and encouraging its neighbours to return to the Accord's implementation when conditions stabilise, its 2025 chairmanship may yet be remembered as a period when ASEAN quietly rebuilt trust in its conflict-management role, even within shifting political winds.

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