ASEAN'S AI MOMENT:
WHAT MALAYSIA ACHIEVED IN 2025

Opinion

ZAIM MOHZANI
RESIDENT WRITER

Zaim Mohzani is the Senior Director of External Relations at KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific and Programme Director of the KSI Fellowship Program.

Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 will be remembered for placing artificial intelligence at the centre of regional policy. ASEAN entered the year with scattered initiatives and uneven readiness. It ends the year with a more coherent base shaped by shared principles, updated guidance and renewed political attention. Malaysia played a central part in this shift by reframing AI governance around public trust, inclusion and regional resilience. This pushed the conversation beyond technical concerns and into broader economic and social territory.

Key ASEAN instruments progressed during the year. The expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, including its section on generative AI, provides a common frame for governments and companies (ASEAN, *Expanded Guide*). Development of the ASEAN Responsible AI Roadmap, intended to guide regional work through 2030, also advanced. Ministers reaffirmed the link between AI policy, cross-border trust and digital trade through ongoing work under the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (ASEAN, *DEFA*). These developments signal that ASEAN is beginning to treat AI as a strategic issue rather than a niche regulatory field.

Malaysia's style as chair widened participation. Small and medium-sized enterprises, civil society groups and youth organisations were brought into regional discussions that had previously centred on government officials and the private sector. This helped ASEAN explore skills, inclusion and labour market effects alongside innovation and investment, resulting in a more grounded approach and understanding of AI's implications for the region.

Parallel tracks: Malaysia's safety push and Singapore's technical leadership

Malaysia launched the ASEAN AI Safe initiative during the chairmanship, framing safety as a shared regional priority grounded in practical risk management and public trust. Singapore continued to lead the ASEAN Working Group on AI Governance, drawing on its Model AI Governance Framework and its experience in testing, assurance and regulatory toolkits (IMDA, Model Framework). This technical depth is essential for ASEAN. Singapore's work gives the region practical tools rather than aspirational statements.

Malaysia's emphasis on safety added another dimension. While designed to be complementary, the two tracks did not always align neatly. Officials noted privately that the safety agenda and the standards agenda sometimes moved at different speeds.

The friction remained contained and both governments handled it responsibly, but the experience shows how easy it is for ASEAN initiatives to drift without stronger coordination. This is especially true in a field where terminology, risk models and governance philosophies differ across member states.

Even so, progress outpaced initial expectations. Malaysia's convening strength and Singapore's technical leadership ultimately raised the quality of regional debate. The challenge now is to ensure that these strengths reinforce each other rather than operate in parallel.

ASEAN's path within global AI governance

A comparison with external models highlights ASEAN's distinct approach. The European Union's AI Act relies on detailed, binding rules for high-risk systems (Future of Life Institute, 2025). The United States continues to use executive orders, guidance and voluntary commitments shaped heavily by the private sector. China advances through centralised rulemaking with rapid implementation. ASEAN does not intend to replicate any of these models. Its approach relies on flexibility, consultation and political consensus.

This approach is suitable for the region's diversity but carries risks. Without stronger diplomatic and institutional tools, ASEAN may struggle to influence global standards or ensure that its interests are reflected in international governance frameworks. The speed of technological change demands more consistent engagement with major technology firms, multilaterals and standard-setting bodies.

A practical step would be the creation of an ASEAN Tech Ambassador. ASEAN needs a dedicated envoy to coordinate policy, represent regional interests and engage directly with the global technology ecosystem (Mohzani). The events of 2025 strengthen the logic. As AI reshapes sectors ranging from finance to healthcare, ASEAN's external engagement cannot remain ad hoc. A specialised envoy would bring continuity, coherence and a clearer international voice.

What ASEAN should build next

The chairmanship year points to three areas where ASEAN can strengthen its position.

First, Malaysia and Singapore should formalise coordination. Singapore's strengths lie in testing, standards and industry partnerships. Malaysia contributes breadth, political framing and the ability to anchor AI in development and inclusion. These are complementary assets. Regular joint work plans, co-branded statements and structured official-level alignment would help avoid duplication and reinforce trust across the region.

Second, ASEAN should invest in regulatory and institutional capacity. Many member states still lack specialised regulators, evaluation facilities or national strategies, a gap already recognised in Malaysia's own Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL) and Malaysia National Artificial Intelligence Roadmap 2021–2025 (AI-Rmap). Regional frameworks will not be effective unless governments can interpret, adapt and implement them. Malaysia's inclusive framing provides a useful path to build support for shared programmes, especially those focused on skills, public sector readiness and small enterprise adoption.

Third, ASEAN should reinforce trust among member states and publics. A consistent regional approach to safe and responsible AI use will matter not only for digital trade, but also for investor confidence and societal acceptance. Continued work under the Digital Economy Framework Agreement provides a foundation for advancing data governance, interoperability and secure cross-border systems.

Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship exceeded early expectations. The region now has stronger documents, clearer principles and renewed political commitment. Yet the next phase will require deeper integration, steadier diplomacy and more robust institutions. An ASEAN Tech Ambassador, closer Malaysia–Singapore collaboration and targeted capacity-building would help sustain the progress made this year and prepare the region for an AI-driven future.

References

ASEAN. ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). ASEAN Secretariat, 2023, https://asean.org/asean-defa-study-projects-digital-economy-leap-to-us2tn-by-2030/.

ASEAN. Declaration on the Establishment of an ASEAN AI Safety Network (ASEAN AI SAFE). ASEAN Secretariat, 26th October 2025, https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-establishment-of-an-asean-ai-safety-network-asean-ai-safe.

ASEAN. Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics: Generative AI Addendum. ASEAN Secretariat, 2024, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Expanded-ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics-Generative-AI.pdf.

Future of Life Institute. The EU Artificial Intelligence Act. 2025, https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/.
Government of Malaysia. Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL). Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2021, https://ekonomi.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-02/malaysia-digital-economy-blueprint.pdf.
IMDA. Model AI Governance Framework. Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2020 and updates, https://www.pdpc.gov.sg/-/media/files/pdpc/pdf-files/resource-for-organisation/ai/sgmodelaigovframework2.pdf.
Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI). Malaysia National Artificial Intelligence Roadmap 2021–2025 (AI-Rmap). MOSTI, 2021, https://mastic.mosti.gov.my/publication/artificial-intelligence-roadmap-2021-2025/.
Mohzani, Zaim. "Navigating AI Disruption: The Case for an ASEAN Tech Ambassador." KSInsights, 5 Mar. 2024, https://kasi.asia/publications/navigating-ai-disruption-the-case-for-an-asean-tech-ambassador-ksinsights-feb-2024/.