



CENTRE FOR
STRATEGIC AND
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

Analysis of 2025 ASEAN and Related Summits and Outlook for 2026: CSIS Special Edition Commentaries





Photo: ASEAN leaders attend a plenary session during a high-level regional summit, seated alongside their national flags.

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주 아세안 대한민국 대표부
Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN

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About the Publication

CSIS Special Edition Commentaries

Analysis of 2025 ASEAN and Related Summits and Outlook for 2026: CSIS Special Edition Commentaries serves as a platform to provide insightful articles and op-eds from regional experts and diplomats from ASEAN and Dialogue Partners. This initiative aims to cater to diverse stakeholders to ASEAN cooperation, including diplomats, scholars, international relations students, and the wider public, fostering a deeper, practical, and timely understanding of ASEAN's regional affairs.

CSIS Indonesia

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta is an independent, non-profit organisation focusing on policy-oriented studies on domestic and international issues. It was established in 1971. CSIS undertakes research in economics, politics and social change, and international relations, with topics selected on the basis of their relevance to public policy. Interdisciplinary studies are encouraged. In the area of foreign policy, CSIS research is complemented and strengthened by its relations with an extensive network of research, academic, and other organizations worldwide.

Foreword

Turning Vision into Reality: ASEAN's Path to Deeper Cooperation

As ASEAN moves from Malaysia's Chairmanship in 2025 toward the Philippines in 2026, the region finds itself navigating a convergence of structural shifts that will define its cohesion and relevance in the decade ahead. Geopolitical competition continues to sharpen, global economic uncertainty persists, and expectations from Dialogue Partners remain high. At the same time, ASEAN is working to translate the aspirations of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 into concrete pathways that can sustain regional integration and cooperation over the long term. This is a moment that demands clarity of purpose, adaptability, and renewed commitment to collective action.

Against this backdrop, this Special Edition of the CSIS Commentaries, *Analysis of 2025 ASEAN and Related Summits and Outlook for 2026*, seeks to provide readers with a broad framing of the opportunities and pressures confronting the Association as it enters a critical phase of institutional and strategic evolution. The aim is not to offer definitive answers, but to illuminate the key questions ASEAN will need to grapple with in the year ahead: How can the region maintain its capacity to convene and deliver amid intensifying external pressures? What forms of cooperation will matter most for ASEAN's future resilience? And how can member states balance national priorities with the collective interests of the community?

“These insights underscore that ASEAN’s ability to navigate complexity will depend not only on external conditions, but also on the Association’s continued investment in strengthening its own institutions and processes.”



The contributions assembled here reflect a diverse set of perspectives from policymakers, scholars, and practitioners who engage with ASEAN from within the region and beyond. Collectively, they examine how ASEAN's agenda is being shaped by emerging economic priorities, evolving sectoral cooperation, and the deepening of strategic partnerships. These insights underscore that ASEAN's ability to navigate complexity will depend not only on external conditions, but also on the Association's continued investment in strengthening its own institutions and processes.

We are grateful to the Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN for its partnership and support in producing this volume. As one of ASEAN's most active Dialogue Partners, the Republic of Korea has consistently contributed to the region's initiatives in economic cooperation, people-to-people exchanges, and broader community-building efforts. Their collaboration has been essential in enabling CSIS Indonesia to support informed policy discussion and regional understanding. We also extend special appreciation to Ambassador Lee Jang-keun for his valuable contribution to this Special Edition.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all contributors to this volume—Amb. Joanna Jane Anderson, Mr. Beni Suryadi and Ms. Aqwika Deviena Hermawan, Dr. Shafiah Muhibat, Dr. Sinderpal Singh, Dr. Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, Dr. Mirza Sadaqat Huda, and Ms. Elina Noor—whose insights bring clarity, depth, and analytical rigor to the themes explored in this publication. Their diverse perspectives, ranging from diplomacy and security to energy integration and digital governance, collectively enrich our understanding of ASEAN's evolving landscape in 2025.

It is our hope that this publication serves as a useful resource for policymakers, analysts, and all those invested in ASEAN's future. At a time when the region stands at an important crossroads, thoughtful reflection and sustained dialogue will remain critical to ensuring that ASEAN continues to contribute meaningfully to peace, stability, and prosperity in our region.

Jakarta, November 2025

Lina A. Alexandra
Head of Department of International Relations
CSIS Indonesia

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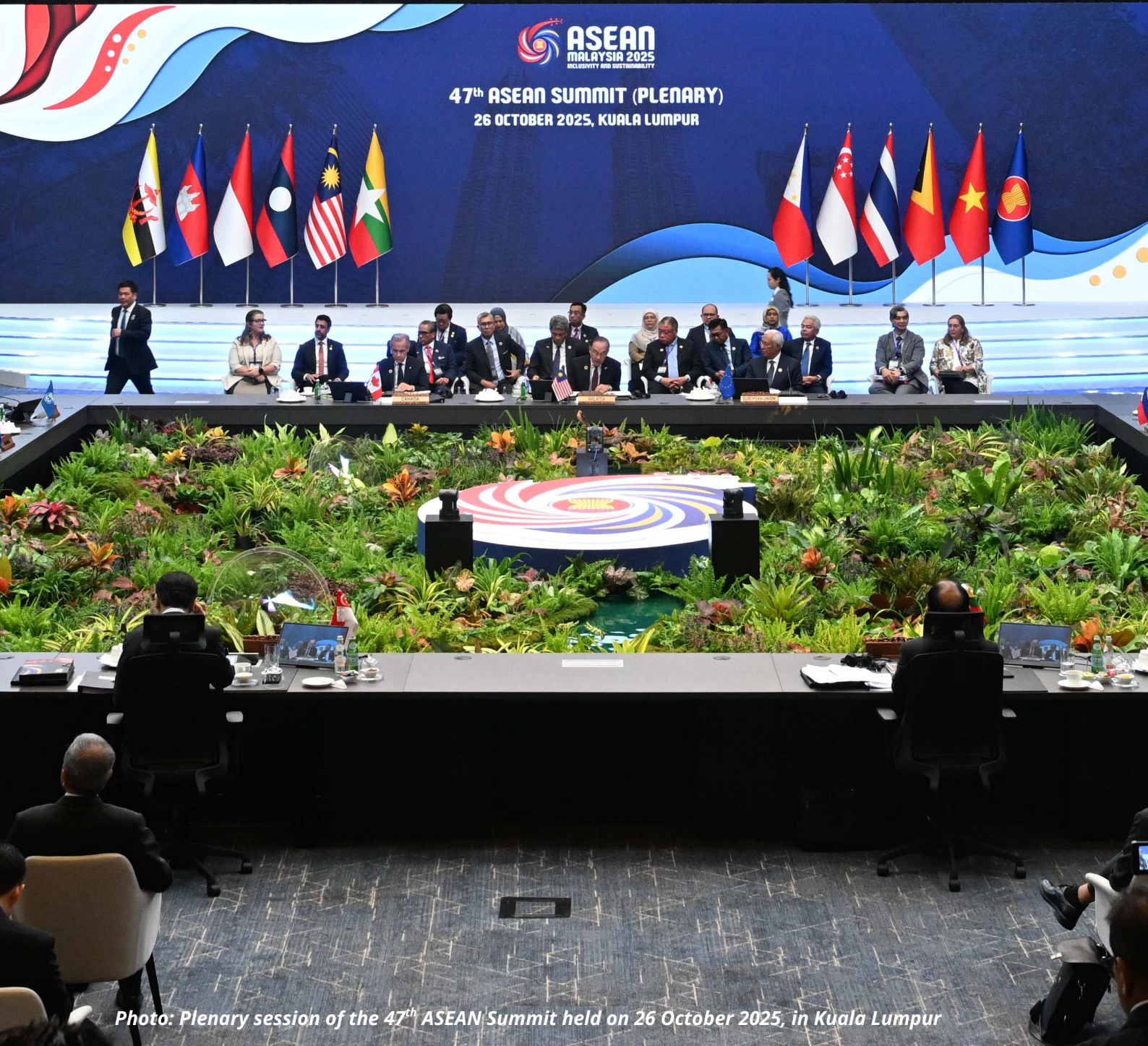


Photo: Plenary session of the 47th ASEAN Summit held on 26 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur



Photo: The 20th East Asia Summit held on 27 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur

Introduction

Delivering Change? ASEAN's Post-Kuala Lumpur Trajectory

Andrew W. Mantong
CSIS Indonesia

Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma
CSIS Indonesia

As ASEAN wrapped up its 47th Summit under Malaysia's Chairmanship, the region's diplomatic rhythms remained as carefully choreographed as ever. Yet beneath the polished communiqués and commemorative group photos lies a more complex picture—one of partial breakthroughs, persistent institutional inertia, and competing pressures from within and beyond. This Special Edition of CSIS Commentaries captures that tension: a snapshot of ASEAN in 2025 as it seeks to move from vision to delivery without losing coherence or credibility.

Malaysia's 2025 Chairmanship produced some important milestones. The formal admission of Timor-Leste as ASEAN's 11th member symbolized the organization's commitment to inclusivity. The endorsement of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and an upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) signalled intent to modernize key regional frameworks. Progress was made on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), and energy connectivity gained renewed momentum through plans to enhance the ASEAN Power Grid. Yet the institutional machinery underpinning ASEAN cooperation—its ability to respond to crisis, resolve conflict, and adapt to global disruptions—remains under strain. The 46th and 47th Chairman's Statements as ASEAN' outcome documents under Malaysia' Chairmanship acknowledged this by calling for greater unity, but stopped short of outlining how structural reform might happen.

This volume brings together eight contributions that approach these questions from diplomatic, institutional, and functional angles. Together, they reflect not only how global challenges shape ASEAN, but how ASEAN itself must evolve if it is to remain a meaningful and credible actor.

Two essays from ASEAN's Dialogue Partners offer valuable perspective on how external actors continue to view ASEAN as an indispensable regional anchor. Ambassador Lee Jang-keun of the Republic of Korea outlines a forward-looking framework for ASEAN-ROK cooperation under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2024. Through the lens of Korea as a contributor, springboard, and partner, Lee offers a blueprint for deepening strategic and functional cooperation in the face of global uncertainty.

In turn, Ambassador Joanna Jane Anderson of New Zealand reflects on five decades of

ASEAN–New Zealand relations. She revisits foundational commitments to values-based cooperation and shared regionalism, while encouraging greater ASEAN leadership in navigating today's polycentric order. Taken together, these essays suggest that ASEAN's relevance remains intact—but contingent on its ability to act.

That question of action—or inaction—is taken up sharply in Shafiah Muhibat's essay. She revisits ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis and the brief 2025 border flare-up between Cambodia and Thailand, both of which tested ASEAN's credibility as a conflict management institution. Muhibat critiques ASEAN's overreliance on informal diplomacy and consensus, warning that without structural recalibration, the bloc risks institutional stagnation. Her argument echoes concerns that have grown louder over the past two years: that the so-called "ASEAN Way" may no longer offer an effective compass for complex, transnational crises.

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby picks up this thread in her analysis of the Philippines' upcoming 2026 chairmanship. Rather than simply diagnosing institutional dysfunction, she advances pragmatic solutions—calling for more empowered special envoys, stronger secretariat coordination, and clearer mandates for crisis response. Her proposal to institutionalize high-level representatives moves beyond ad hoc diplomacy, pressing ASEAN to replace symbolic gestures with structural readiness—especially given its faltering responses to crises like Myanmar. In linking ASEAN's future credibility to its institutional agility, Misalucha-Willoughby reminds us that reform needs not wait for crisis; it can be preemptive.

While these contributions centre on ASEAN's internal mechanisms, others examine how ASEAN navigates its external positioning. Sinderpal Singh's essay situates ASEAN in the evolving dynamics of the Global South. He notes that ASEAN increasingly finds itself balancing between traditional partners in the liberal order and emerging alignments such as BRICS. Rather than seeing this as a liability, Singh suggests ASEAN could leverage its unique convening power to act as a bridge. However, this requires political will to avoid being bypassed by smaller, more decisive minilateral groupings—an outcome ASEAN has long feared.

Photo: The Closing Ceremony of the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



If these essays deal with ASEAN's structure and positioning, others explore sectoral cooperation as a source of renewal. Mirza Sadaqat Huda's chapter on the ASEAN Power Grid charts meaningful progress in energy integration, made possible in part by Malaysia's push to operationalize financing mechanisms and technical coordination. Huda shows that despite institutional constraints at the political level, functional cooperation—especially in energy transition—continues to move forward. The contribution by Beni Suryadi and Aqwika Deviena Hermawan is expected to complement this by examining ASEAN's broader path toward energy security and strategic autonomy, particularly in the face of climate risk and supply shocks.

In a different domain, Elina Noor turns to ASEAN's ambitions in digital and AI governance. While ASEAN moves forward with DEFA and tech frameworks, Noor cautions that growth without governance risks deepening inequalities. She calls for people-centered digital governance, underpinned by sustainability and human rights. Her contribution broadens the volume's institutional focus to include normative and developmental concerns, reminding us that ASEAN's relevance is tied not just to what it builds, but for whom it builds.

Across the volume, certain themes recur. Many authors question whether ASEAN's existing decision-making model can accommodate today's fast-moving crises. There is shared concern about the bloc's marginalization amid intensifying great-power competition, and scepticism that declarations alone cannot preserve centrality. Yet there is also cautious optimism: functional cooperation in energy and digital infrastructure, renewed commitments from partners, and growing internal debate about reform all point to possible pathways forward.

The contributions diverge, however, in how they assess ASEAN's agency. Some frame ASEAN as primarily reactive—shaped by external pressures and constrained by norms. Others highlight ASEAN's potential as a proactive convenor, capable of strategic leadership if reforms are embraced. This tension—between structural realism and institutional ambition—is at the heart of ASEAN's current predicament.

Ultimately, this tension also underscores a deeper question: whether ASEAN's internal cohesion is resilient enough to withstand the strategic and institutional pressures now confronting it. In this context, concerns about unity, institutional bottlenecks, and the growing influence of major-power politics become increasingly salient. As with the great power-brokered ceasefire deal in the Thai-Cambodia conflict resolution, ASEAN's cohesion faces mounting strain as member states navigate more assertive external patronage, dynamics that risk subtly eroding regionalisation while exposing long-standing institutional weaknesses, from sluggish decision-making on key regional problems to persistently weak cross-pillar coordination.

At a time when national interests are increasingly pursued through personal rapport and leader-level bargains, any subpar interpersonal ties among ASEAN leaders can slow collective decision-making or undermine timely regional responses. Without stronger procedures and

more resilient mechanisms, ASEAN may find itself with less to say—and less to contribute—as a driver of both economic dynamism and strategic stability.

As the Philippines prepares to assume the chairmanship in 2026, it inherits both unfinished business and new opportunities. The momentum generated under Malaysia’s chairmanship—on digital transformation, energy transition, and partnership deepening—can be carried forward, but only with political clarity and institutional backbone. If 2025 was a year of promises and pilot frameworks, 2026 must be a year of delivery and structural boldness.

This Special Edition offers no single roadmap. But in drawing together voices from government, academia, and diplomacy, it surfaces the hard questions ASEAN must confront—and some credible paths it might take. If the region’s cooperative architecture is to remain not just intact, but impactful, recalibration can no longer be delayed.

Photo: Signing ceremony of the Declaration on the Admission of Timor-Leste into ASEAN held on 26 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur



Photo: Opening ceremony of the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits held on 26 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur



Photo: President Lee Jae Myung at the 26th ASEAN-Korea Summit held on 27 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur



CSP-Contributor, Springboard, Partner: A Vision to Further Advance the ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Ambassador Lee Jang-keun

Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN

Last year, Korea and ASEAN marked a historic milestone by establishing the ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, commemorating the 35 years of dialogue relations. Our ties, which began as a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1989 and matured into a full Dialogue Partnership in 1991, have yielded numerous achievements - from deeper engagement among leaders to expanding trade and investment, and vibrant people-to-people exchanges. Yet, we are determined to achieve greater milestones in the years to come.

Under the ASEAN-ROK Plan of Action, which was newly adopted in July this year, both sides committed to forging deeper cooperation to address regional and global challenges, working together toward a smarter, more sustainable, resilient, and connected future.

The new administration of the Republic of Korea, since its inauguration in June 2025, has reaffirmed its steadfast commitment to ASEAN and a strong determination to deepen our ties. President Lee Jae Myung made his official debut at the 26th ASEAN-ROK Summit held last month in Kuala Lumpur. There, he introduced a clear, action-oriented framework for realizing our shared goals through the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, distilled into three guiding principles citing the letters C.S.P. The Republic of Korea will stand as a Contributor for Dreams and Hope, a Springboard for Growth and Innovation, and a Partner for Peace and Stability.

C – Korea as a Contributor for Dreams and Hope

People-to-people exchanges have always been the bedrock of Korea-ASEAN relations—fostering trust, deepening mutual understanding, and enabling robust cooperation across all sectors. In 2024 alone, nearly 10 million Koreans visited ASEAN, making it the most-visited region by Korean nationals. At the same time, more than 780,000 nationals of ASEAN Member States reside in the Republic of Korea, including multicultural families, students, and workers contributing across diverse sectors, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and fisheries.

At the 26th ASEAN-ROK Summit, President Lee announced a forward-looking goal: reaching 15 million people-to-people exchanges annually. Working toward this shared aspiration, we are confident that stronger kinship at all levels will bring our communities even closer,

making our partnership more enduring, resilient, and aligned with ASEAN's vision of a truly people-centred Community.

K-Culture and diverse ASEAN cultures will continue to play a vital role in connecting the region's youth. Harnessing the positive impact of cultural and creative industries, we have launched a range of innovative programs to foster Korea-ASEAN cultural exchanges and share expertise in the creative sector. The ASEAN-Korea Music Festival, supported by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF), stands out as a dynamic platform where talented young musicians from both ASEAN Member States and Korea gather to showcase musical collaboration and cross-cultural dialogue.

This commitment to mutual understanding is also facilitated by institutions like the ASEAN-Korea Centre in Seoul and the ASEAN Culture House in Busan, which actively promote the rich and diverse histories and cultures of each ASEAN member state to the Korean public, enabling our people to build affinity and strengthen bonds.

S – Korea as a Springboard for Growth and Innovation

Economic cooperation has accelerated significantly over the past 35 years. Bilateral trade between ASEAN and Korea surged from USD 8.2 billion in 1989 to USD 193 billion in 2024 - a remarkable 23-fold increase. This growth was anchored by the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA), which entered into force in 2007. Adapting to new geo-economic circumstances, we will commence the AKFTA upgrade negotiations early next year upon the completion of respective domestic procedures, aiming to tap new areas of growth and ensure meaningful benefits for our people and businesses.

In the digital economy, ASEAN is poised to conclude the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) next year, unlocking the region's potential to reach USD 2 trillion digital economy by 2030. Korea is an active supporter, enabling ASEAN DEFA negotiators to meet their goals by providing capacity-building sessions in key areas such as cross-border e-commerce, data innovation, and artificial intelligence. Korea will continue to support DEFA's effective implementation, contributing to a digitally empowered and inclusive future for the region.



Inclusive and innovative development also requires empowering the next generation with future-ready skills. Korea has extended a range of scholarship opportunities and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs to ASEAN nationals. Notably, the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) Program was awarded to over 700 ASEAN students last year, providing opportunities for undergraduate or graduate degrees in Korea. The ASEAN-ROK Technical and Vocational Education and Training for ASEAN Mobility (TEAM) program, funded by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, engaged nearly 500 trainees in key sectors including IT, construction, electronics, tourism, and automotive between 2023 and 2025.

At the APEC Leaders' Meeting held in Gyeongju on 1 November 2025, President Lee Jae Myung reiterated Korea's vision to build a global AI basic society where all humanity can equally benefit from technological progress. In this spirit, Korea is committed to ensuring more ASEAN people can access and utilize AI technologies. Through the Korea-ASEAN Digital Academy project, Korea aims to establish and operate digital academies across all ASEAN Member States, bridging the digital literacy gap and enhancing regional capabilities for a more inclusive and innovative future.

As articulated in the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 – Our Shared Future, ASEAN aspires to become a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centered community, positioning itself as the epicenter of growth in the Indo-Pacific region. Korea, as a global powerhouse in technology and innovation, is an indispensable partner for ASEAN's ambitious journey.

P – Korea as a Partner for Peace and Stability

Today, we face a variety of complex and interconnected threats to regional peace and stability. Among those, transnational crime—particularly online scams—has evolved both in scale and sophistication. These scams, often intertwined with trafficking in persons and money laundering, disrupt the financial ecosystem and pose serious risks to the safety and well-being of our people, especially the vulnerable. To tackle the vicious threats, President Lee Jae Myung called for intensified cooperation and greater coordination among national efforts at the recent ASEAN-ROK Summit. Korea remains committed to working closely with ASEAN to strengthen investigative, prosecutorial, and judicial cooperation, including through joint projects and operations with ASEANAPOL.



Photo: Republic of Korea-ASEAN Digital Academy Opening Ceremony on 5 June 2025 in Cikarang, Indonesia



Collaboration in Action
Crushing Scams, Disrupting Fraud, and Protecting People



Photo: The 43rd ASEANAPOL Conference attended by the Korea National Police Agency on November 6, 2025, Bangkok

The South China Sea is a vital sea lane carrying an estimated one-third of international trade; hence, maintaining its peace and stability is directly linked to the prosperity of our peoples. In support of ASEAN's aspirations for the South China Sea to be a sea of peace, stability, and prosperity, Korea pledged to focus on strengthening ASEAN's maritime security capacities through enhanced cooperation among coastguards, in line with its concrete efforts to implement the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

Finally, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula are inseparable from those of Southeast Asia and the wider region. Under the new administration, Korea has implemented proactive de-escalation measures to build trust and resume dialogue. We will continue to work towards lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, as President Lee elaborated in his speech at the UN General Assembly in September through the E.N.D. initiative: expansion of inter-Korean Exchanges, Normalization of relations, and advancing Denuclearization. Recognizing ASEAN's steadfast commitment to dialogue and diplomacy, especially through the ASEAN Regional Forum, we deeply value ASEAN's continued support and cooperation in realizing peace on the Korean Peninsula.

In 2025, ASEAN marked another historic milestone with the launch of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045—its guiding blueprint for the next twenty years. As a trusted and reliable neighbor, Korea is proud to support ASEAN's journey toward realizing a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred Community. Through these efforts, Korea will continue to stand as a Contributor to Dreams and Hope, a Springboard for Growth and Innovation, and a Partner for Peace and Stability.

Looking ahead, we eagerly anticipate hosting the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit in the Republic of Korea in 2029, marking the 40th anniversary of our relations. Having been privileged to host the last three commemorative summits, in Jeju (2009) and Busan (2014 and 2019), we hope to make the 2029 event another leap forward in ASEAN-Korea ties, commemorating our achievements and bringing palpable and tangible benefits to our people in the years to come.

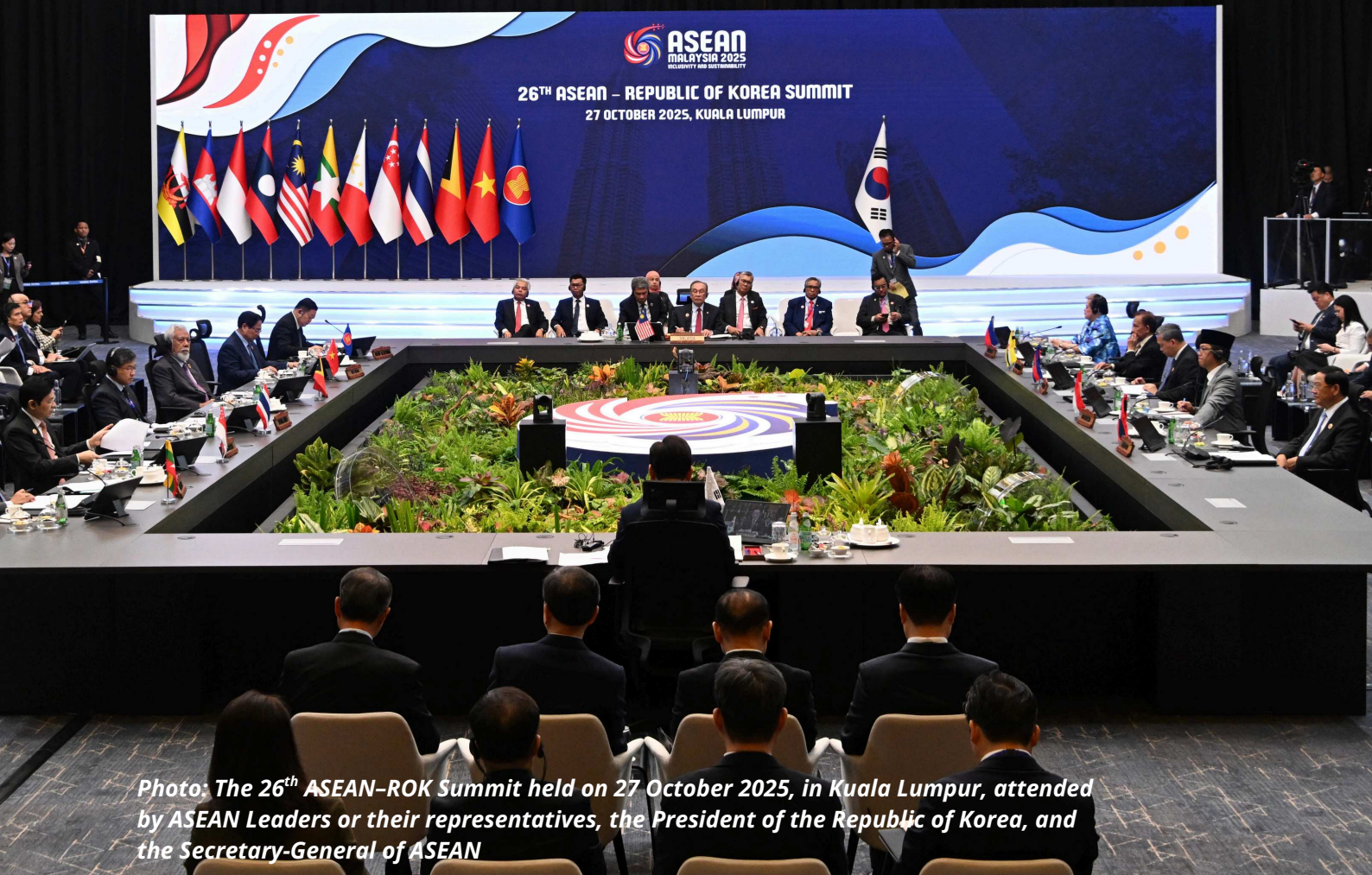


Photo: The 26th ASEAN-ROK Summit held on 27 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, attended by ASEAN Leaders or their representatives, the President of the Republic of Korea, and the Secretary-General of ASEAN



Photo: ASEAN-Korea leaders' group photo taken at the 26th ASEAN-Korea Summit held on 27 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur



Photo: ASEAN-New Zealand Commemorative Summit established an ASEAN-New Zealand Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The 50th Anniversary of the ASEAN-New Zealand Dialogue Partnership and the Establishment of CSP

Ambassador Joanna Jane Anderson
Mission of New Zealand to ASEAN



In 2025, New Zealand and ASEAN mark 50 years of partnership. Since 1975, we have built an enduring relationship grounded in mutual trust and regional cooperation. As ASEAN's second-oldest Dialogue Partner, New Zealand now takes a strategic step forward with the elevation of ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signalling a deeper, more future-focused commitment amidst growing regional and global uncertainties.

A Look Back

ASEAN was established in 1967 during a period of regional and global turbulence. It has now grown from five to eleven member states, with the accession of Timor-Leste's full membership in 2025. Since its inception, ASEAN has expanded its mandate for cooperation and dialogue on economic and regional security issues, to include promotion of regional peace and socio-cultural development.

New Zealand has always recognised the value of partnering with ASEAN, supporting ASEAN-led initiatives and building understanding through people-to-people connections and practical development cooperation. Since the first East Asia Summit in 2005, New Zealand has actively engaged in this premier Leader-led forum, supporting ASEAN Centrality and working together on key regional political, security, and economic issues.

50 Years of Partnership

2025 also marks a significant milestone for ASEAN, with the completion of its ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Our Shared Future, which charts ASEAN's direction for the next twenty years. New Zealand, as a forward-looking partner, recognises the importance of maintaining a partnership with ASEAN that is adaptive and responsive to new and emerging needs in the region.

Our 50th anniversary logo reflects the unique character and nature of this deep and long-standing partnership. The *purapura whetū* (seeds of the stars) honours our shared history; the layered koru symbolises strength and renewal; the branching koru reflects growing connections in people-to-people and business links; the blue circle represents our oceanic ties and a shared vision for an inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific; and the ASEAN emblem at the centre reaffirms New Zealand's support for ASEAN Centrality.

Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The elevation of the ASEAN-New Zealand Dialogue Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is a significant milestone in our long-standing relationship. This strategic upgrade marks a shared commitment to addressing key regional challenges and fostering sustainable, inclusive growth, including through biennial ASEAN-New Zealand Summits, closer collaboration across emerging sectors, and continued support for ASEAN-led mechanisms.

New Zealand continues to deliver impactful development outcomes through flagship initiatives in four pillars of activity: Peace, Prosperity, People, and Planet, supporting ASEAN community-building as well as the efforts to realise the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and its Strategic Plans. These are in line with the thematic priorities of the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship 2026, anchored on three key pillars: Peace and Security Anchors, Prosperity Corridors, and People Empowerment.

Partnership for Peace

Central to our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is our shared commitment to maintaining peace and security in the region. Promoting and maintaining a rules-based order and open dialogue requires a robust regional security architecture that upholds international law, with ASEAN Centrality remaining at the heart of our engagement. This provides a platform for mutual coordination and the sharing of expertise. Our active participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime Consultation, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, underscores the value we place in fostering mutual trust through confidence-building and preventive diplomacy measures.

New Zealand is committed to advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in the region, including through the AMPLIFY initiative, a five-year programme designed to address the disproportionate impact of armed conflict and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia.¹ We are also committed to working together to expand ASEAN's capability to detect, disrupt, and dismantle criminal networks across the region through our priority initiative on transnational organised crime.

Partnership for Prosperity

In an era of economic volatility, New Zealand and ASEAN must act as catalysts for stability and growth. Our economic partnership is founded on the principles of free, open, and rules-based trade. The ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area remains the cornerstone of

[1] "The Asia Foundation Announces New Regional Initiative to Amplify Women's Peace Actions in ASEAN," The Asia Foundation, 22 March 2024. <https://asiafoundation.org/the-asia-foundation-announces-new-regional-initiative-to-amplify-womens-peace-actions-in-asean/>.

our economic ties, whilst our active participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement helps to ensure that this agreement delivers lasting benefits for the region.

A significant area of opportunity for future collaboration is the digital economy. New Zealand is committed to supporting the ASEAN Digital Economic Framework Agreement and enhancing the digital transformation of the region with emphasis on digital integration, cross-border digital payment systems, and e-commerce.

Partnership for People

At the heart of New Zealand's relationship with ASEAN is our enduring commitment to people-to-people cooperation. Education and cultural exchange have been central to the partnership for over five decades. The expansion of programmes such as the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships helps ASEAN citizens access world-class education in New Zealand, equipping them with the skills to drive innovation and leadership across the region.

Alongside scholarships, initiatives like the Young ASEAN Diplomats and the Young ASEAN Trade and Economic Officials Study Tours, the Young Business Leaders Initiative, and the English Language Training for Officials provide platforms to further strengthen both people-to-people and government-to-government ties. These programmes help to cultivate the next generation of leaders and foster a deeper understanding between our peoples.

Partnership for Planet

Addressing climate change and environmental challenges is one of the defining issues of our time, and New Zealand is fully committed to working with ASEAN on these urgent matters. Our collaboration with ASEAN centres of excellence, particularly in areas where we have specific experiences and expertise, helps to advance shared goals in sustainable development, renewable energy, and climate adaptation, such as through our collaboration with the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, and the ASEAN Centre for Energy.



Photo: At the Commemorative Summit, ASEAN and New Zealand leaders hold hands, reaffirming their long-standing partnership that has resulted in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)

New Zealand is also a committed partner in strengthening regional disaster management and response. Since 2017, we have worked alongside the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) to enhance the region's disaster preparedness. As current co-chair of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief until 2027, New Zealand will continue to support ASEAN in its efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change and natural hazards.

Cross Pillar Cooperation

A key strength of New Zealand's relationship with ASEAN is our ability to work across pillars and sectors. Cross-sectoral collaboration ensures a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex, transnational challenges we face, from climate change and regional security to economic integration and disaster response.

New Zealand is committed to enhancing connectivity within ASEAN and with New Zealand, including through the implementation of tangible connectivity projects under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan.

Looking Ahead

The newly established Comprehensive Strategic Partnership reflects our shared aspirations and provides a practical framework for long-term cooperation. With the Philippines set to assume the ASEAN Chair in 2026, the first year of implementing the new ASEAN-New Zealand Plan of Action will bring new momentum to our relationship.

It presents an excellent opportunity to deepen collaboration in key areas that are critical to both New Zealand and ASEAN's strategic priorities. As we move forward together, the shared focus on maritime cooperation, sustainable development, and regional resilience will provide significant opportunities for collective action, creating tangible outcomes that benefit our peoples and the broader region.

Looking ahead for this partnership, we also hold with us all that has shaped this relationship over the past 50 years. There is a Māori saying that captures this: "Titiro whakamuri, kōkiri whakamua", which means "reflecting on our past, so that we can step into our future".

Photo: The ASEAN-New Zealand 50th Anniversary (ANZ@50) Dialogue was attended by Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, who held a meeting with Joanna Jane Anderson



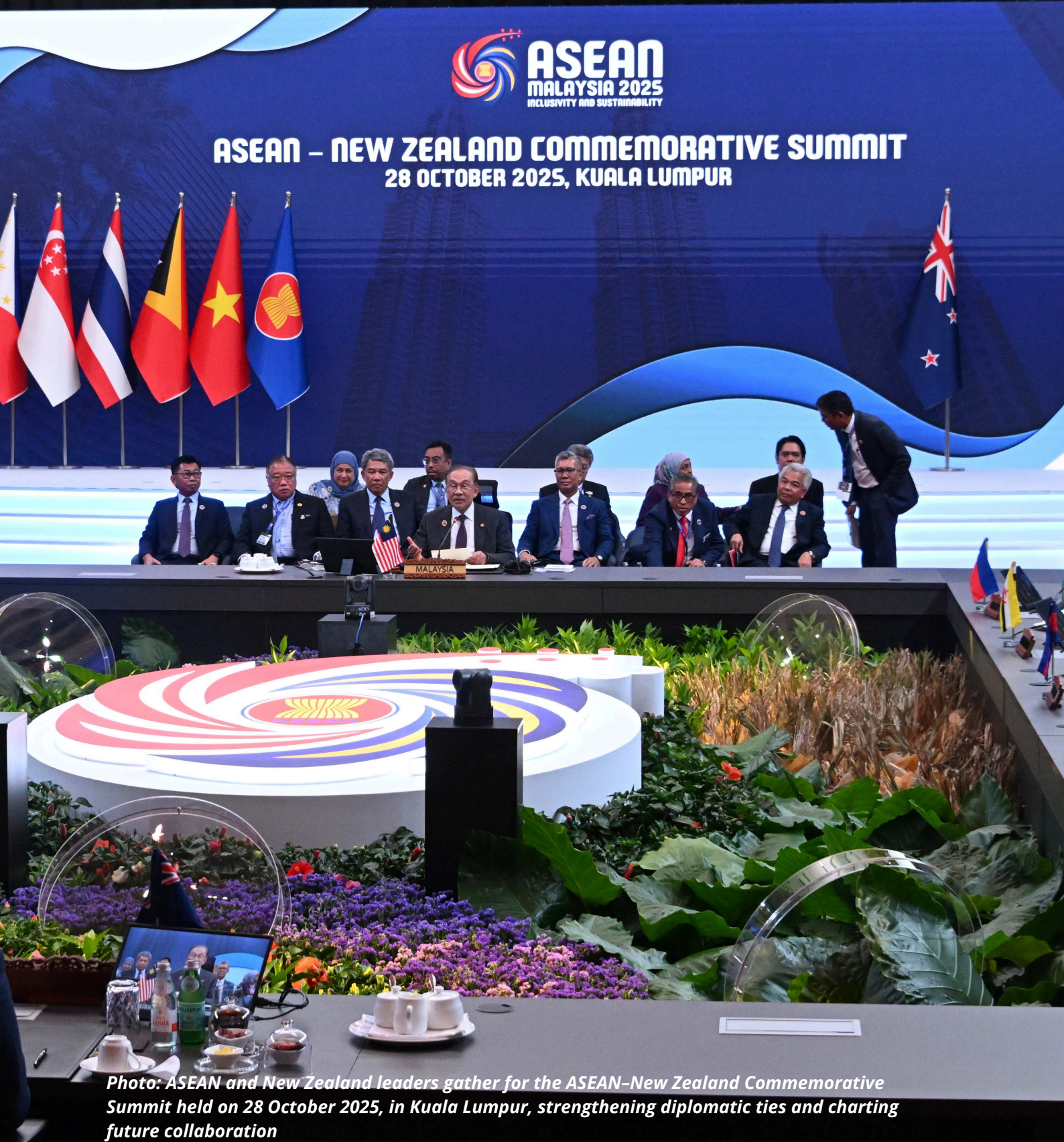


Photo: ASEAN and New Zealand leaders gather for the ASEAN-New Zealand Commemorative Summit held on 28 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, strengthening diplomatic ties and charting future collaboration



MSME Excellence Centre for Green Transition in ASEAN

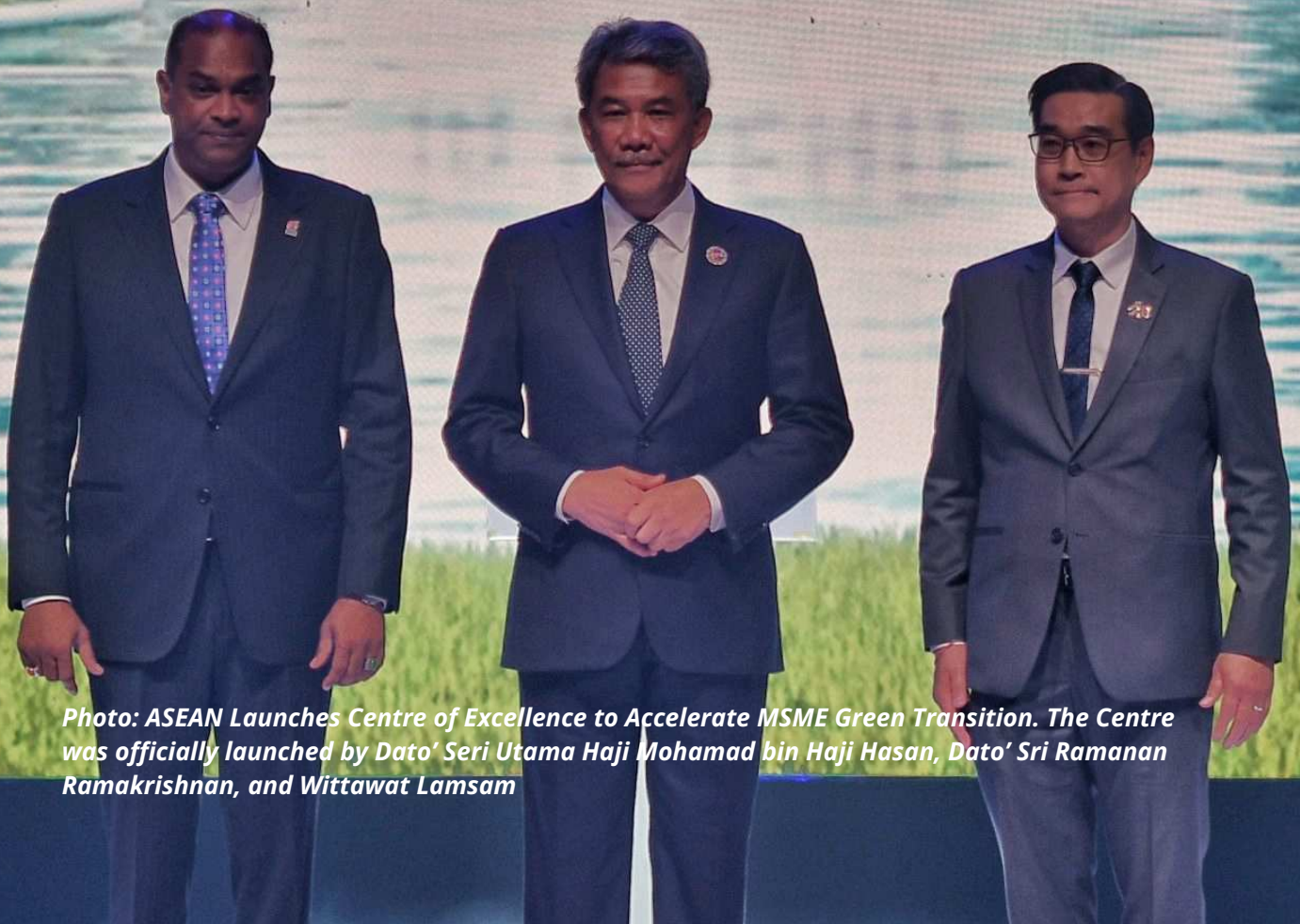


Photo: ASEAN Launches Centre of Excellence to Accelerate MSME Green Transition. The Centre was officially launched by Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, Dato' Sri Ramanan Ramakrishnan, and Wittawat Lamsam

Energy Security in Transition: ASEAN's Path to Strategic Resilience

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Southeast Asia is projected to see a continuous increase in rapid population and subsequent economic growth. Subsequently, the region's energy demand is projected to increase 2.6 times of its 2022 levels by 2050, elevating energy to a central strategic concern driven by geopolitical dynamics and market volatility.¹ This challenge is compounded by the fact that approximately 82% of this rising demand is still expected to be met by fossil fuels.² The core issue is whether fossil fuels can realistically continue to sustain the region's rapidly expanding energy needs, especially amid tightening supply conditions and mounting pressure to decarbonise.

Dependency as the Core Issue of ASEAN's Energy Security

Firstly, regarding the sustainability of fossil fuels, ASEAN is increasingly experiencing pressure as traditional energy sources become less reliable. The region has long depended heavily on coal for electricity generation. However, despite a relatively stable coal supply, ASEAN remains vulnerable due to the growing difficulty of securing other fossil fuel supplies, particularly oil and natural gas. The region is already positioned as a major import-dependent market for these resources, and ASEAN is projected to transition into a net natural gas importer by 2027.³ This should not come as a shock given the persistent decline in domestic natural gas production over the years across the ASEAN member states (AMS), which suggests that by 2045 the region's import dependency could reach as high as 93%, with annual import bills potentially exceeding USD 200 billion.⁴

If this trend continues, the region's dependence could leave it highly vulnerable to global price fluctuations.

[1] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2024. 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook. Jakarta: ACE. <https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/8th-ASEAN-Energy-Outlook.pdf>.

[2] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2025. The Role of Natural Gas in Balancing ASEAN's Energy Transition Aspiration and Energy Supply Security. Short Report. Jakarta: ACE. https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Short-Report_The-Role-of-Natural-Gas-in-Balancing-ASEANs-Energy-Transition-Aspiration-and-Energy-Supply-Security.pdf.

[3] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2024. 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook. Jakarta: ACE. <https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/8th-ASEAN-Energy-Outlook.pdf>.

[4] Suryadi, Beni. 2023. "Natural Gas Outlook and Policy: A Perspective from ASEAN Energy Transition." UNESCAP. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Natural%20Gas%20Outlook%20and%20Policy-A%20Perspective%20from%20ASEAN%20Energy%20Transition_Beni%20Suryadi%2C%20ASEAN%20Centre%20for%20Energy.pdf.

To give a reference of the sense of urgency here, the 2022 global energy crisis demonstrated how ASEAN's dependency on external energy supplies had exposed the region to external price shocks, directly affecting the region's energy experience. During the energy crisis, global energy prices surged by nearly 60% above their previous peak, directly affecting households and businesses and prompting changes in energy consumption.⁵ Overall, ASEAN experienced a 5.6% decline in natural gas consumption, highlighting the tangible impact of external price volatility on ASEAN's energy security.⁶

Integration as the Solution

To shift this trajectory, ASEAN may not need to look far. The region already possesses a major advantage in its abundant renewable energy resources. From Viet Nam's offshore wind corridors to Lao PDR's hydropower potential and Indonesia's geothermal potential, these resources suggest that regional integration in energy resourcing could offer a pathway out of energy dependency.

Realising this potential requires ASEAN member states to think beyond self-contained national power systems. The true opportunity lies in linking grids across borders to enable freer electricity trade. Such integration could help smooth out the natural fluctuations of renewable power, while any natural local disruption in renewable generation that might pose challenges for individual countries could then be mitigated should ASEAN have a more integrated system of electricity supplies.

It has been a long-standing regional goal for ASEAN to develop a flexible and resilient power system through the realization of the ASEAN Power Grid (APG). By delivering a shared network, the APG would enable the matching of supply and demand across broader geographies and over longer timeframes. In the long run, diversifying energy sources among neighbouring countries would allow for strengthened energy security, helping the region better anticipate and manage the growing unpredictability of global fuel markets.

Implementing Cooperation

Building a strong and reliable regional power grid requires massive support. The ASEAN Interconnection Masterplan Study (AIMS) III, under which the APG was developed, estimates that the region will need around USD 764 billion in transmission and power generation investment to support high levels of variable renewable energy adoption.⁷

[5] International Energy Agency (IEA). 2024. Southeast Asia Energy Outlook 2024: Executive Summary. Paris: IEA. <https://www.iea.org/reports/southeast-asia-energy-outlook-2024/executive-summary>.

[6] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2024. 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook. Jakarta: ACE. <https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/8th-ASEAN-Energy-Outlook.pdf>.

[7] ASEAN Secretariat. 2025. "ADB and World Bank Group Launch the ASEAN Power Grid Financing Initiative with the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE)." <https://asean.org/adb-and-world-bank-group-launch-the-asean-power-grid-financing-initiative-with-the-asean-secretariat-and-the-asean-centre-for-energy-ace/>.

By 2035, the annual investment for electricity networks might even double to about around USD 22 billion.⁸

Beyond investment, policy and regulatory frameworks must also evolve to facilitate the efficient movement of electricity across borders in line with changing energy trends. Through the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC), member states have pledged their commitments to employ initiatives aimed at realising a cleaner and low-carbon ASEAN energy landscape, leveraging each member state's diverse strengths to enable an accelerated collective progress.⁹ Under the APAEC, mechanisms such as the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Interconnection Project (LTMS-PIP) serve as the region's first multilateral cross-border electricity trade initiative, balancing technicality and commercial objectives.¹⁰ What is now needed, thus, is a way to accelerate similar progress for other ASEAN energy plans.

Strategic Cooperation with South Korea

Strategic partnerships with countries that navigated similar transitions offer both technical capabilities and institutional wisdom.

During the oil shocks of the 1970s, South Korea, a country heavily dependent on oil imports, experienced a severe energy crisis, which forced it to diversify fuel sources, invest in new power plants, and establish institutions dedicated to energy efficiency and conservation.

Today, Korea's technical capabilities align closely with ASEAN's infrastructure needs. The country has now become one of the global leaders for high-voltage direct current (HVDC) projects, highlighted through its latest 2024 completion of the 500 kV Bukdangjin-Godeok HVDC Phase II project that enhanced transmission capacity to Seoul by 3 GW.¹¹ Collaborative actions that leverage Korea's expertise in HVDC transmission, through capacity building and technical support, can be proven beneficial for ASEAN's overall energy development. Such cooperation directly addresses the region's geographically dispersed renewable resources and facilitates access to proven, high-performing technology.

[8] International Energy Agency (IEA). 2024. Southeast Asia Energy Outlook 2024: Executive Summary. Paris: IEA. <https://www.iea.org/reports/southeast-asia-energy-outlook-2024/executive-summary>.

[9] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2025. APAEC 2026-2030. Jakarta: ACE. <https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/APAEC-2026-2030.pdf>.

[10] ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE). 2024. "ASEAN Launches the ASEAN Power Grid Advancement Programme (APG-AP)." <https://aseanenergy.org/post/asean-launches-the-asean-power-grid-advancement-programme-apg-ap/>.

[11] ReGlobal. n.d. "South Korea's Power Plans: Ambitious Expansion Strategy for a Sustainable Future." <https://reglobal.org/south-koreas-power-plans-ambitious-expansion-strategy-for-a-sustainable-future/>.



SIGNING CEREMONY
KUALA LUMPUR DECLARATION
on
ASEAN 2045: OUR SHARED FUTURE

26 MAY 2025



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Photo: ASEAN leaders seated together before their national flags during the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future, held on 26 May 2025, in Kuala Lumpur

A Commentary on ASEAN: The Gap Between Vision and Reality

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is at a critical juncture, anchored in the ambitious ASEAN Community Vision 2045. This blueprint, which seeks to transform the region into a "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred" community, is a powerful statement of collective aspiration.¹ However, this grand vision is accompanied by a solemn recognition that institutional mechanisms must evolve. As stipulated in the foundational documents reaffirmed at the recent 47th ASEAN Summit, the bloc explicitly resolved to "enhance ASEAN's institutional capacity and effectiveness" and ensure "seamless coordination across pillars and sectors" to advance the Vision's implementation.

However, crises like the long-standing Thai-Cambodia border conflict, including the latest flare up near the Preah Vihear temple in mid-2025, and the civil war in Myanmar reveal a persistent gap between ASEAN's visionary goals and its institutional realities. The ultimate success of Vision 2045 rests not on its rhetoric, but on the association's ability to abandon the paralyzing "ASEAN Way" and develop the decisive conflict resolution mechanisms mandated by its own Charter. This commentary assesses whether ASEAN can bridge this gap by confronting its internal structural limitations and resisting the geopolitical erosion of its centrality.

The Lofty Vision: Community 2045's Grand Promises

The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 serves as the definitive statement of the association's aspiration, providing a forward-looking blueprint built upon four strategic pillars. This Vision is critical because it explicitly raises the institutional bar for the entire region.

The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Strategic Plan is perhaps the most audacious, aiming to create a cohesive and peaceful region by reinforcing ASEAN Centrality and promoting a robust rules-based order. It positions ASEAN not merely as a diplomatic convener, but as a proactive player in global security governance, robust enough to manage complex geopolitical dynamics and ensure the region remains the "epicentre of growth in the Indo-Pacific." This commitment was immediately underscored at the 47th Summit by new efforts to strengthen regional collaboration against transnational crimes.²

Concurrently, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Strategic Plan focuses on radical deepening of integration, prioritizing resilience against external shocks. Key initiatives

[1] ASEAN. (2025, May 26). ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN.

[2] ASEAN. (2025, October 25). Chairman's Statement of the 30th ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Council Meeting, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

include streamlining cross-border data flows, ensuring digital system interoperability, and building a more dynamic, single market—a commitment immediately underscored at the 47th Summit by the push to finalise the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) and accelerate the energy transition.³

The integration of Timor-Leste as the 11th member at the 47th Summit⁴ immediately tested and reinforced the people-centred goals of the Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Strategic Plan, which emphasises closing the development gap and addressing complex issues like demographic and climate change. Taken together, these pillars constitute a clear, unambiguous Vision for an active, effective, and unified ASEAN—a perfect benchmark against which to measure the organization's current performance.

The Test of Reality: Structural Paralysis and the “ASEAN Way”

The recurring Thai-Cambodia border dispute offers a sobering case study of ASEAN's institutional fragilities. The conflict, rooted in colonial-era border demarcations and historical rivalries over territories, including the area around the Preah Vihear temple, flared up again in a series of deadly clashes in 2025. This crisis was a direct test of ASEAN's ability to manage security issues between its own members, and the results confirmed the dominance of internal structural paralysis.

The conflict demonstrated that the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, a core tenet of the "ASEAN Way," is not just a diplomatic protocol; it is a significant obstacle to effective crisis management. The "ASEAN Way" prioritizes quiet diplomacy, consensus, and non-confrontation, which are ill-suited to resolving violent, sovereignty-based disputes.

This institutional paralysis was most evident during the 2025 border clashes. Despite calls for immediate action, ASEAN's response was characterized by slow, consensus-driven diplomacy, which could not keep pace with the escalation of violence. The Association's initial statements were vague, urging "all parties to exercise utmost restraint." The repeated failure to activate the formal conflict resolution mechanism outlined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), specifically its High Council, is a clear sign that the Vision's security mechanisms are institutionally neutered by the necessity of consensus.

A crucial counterpoint to this pattern of paralysis emerged at the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025, where leaders of Thailand and Cambodia signed a Joint Statement on a peace agreement.⁵ While this bilateral success is a testament to quiet diplomacy, it does not

[3] ASEAN. (2025, October 28). Chairman's Statement of the 47th ASEAN Summit. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

[4] ASEAN. (2025, October 26). Declaration on the Admission of Timor-Leste into ASEAN. Signed at the 47th ASEAN Summit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

[5] Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia & Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand. (2025, October 26). Joint Declaration on the Outcomes of Their Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Signed on the sidelines of the 47th ASEAN Summit.

absolve ASEAN of its systemic weakness. The resolution came from a bilateral agreement—not a forced intervention or a mechanism-based solution—underscoring the organization's reliance on members' self-interest over collective obligation. Furthermore, the vacuum created by ASEAN's slow response—which necessitated external mediation—serves as the critical link to a larger failure: the erosion of ASEAN Centrality.

The Geopolitical Cost: The Erosion of Centrality

The internal paralysis created by the "ASEAN Way" carries a steep and widening external cost: the Erosion of Centrality. For decades, ASEAN has claimed the driver's seat in regional security forums, positioning itself as the indispensable hub for dialogue between major powers. However, in the face of intensifying US-China rivalry, the reality suggests ASEAN is being increasingly relegated to the role of a venue, not a genuine strategic driver.

Great powers, frustrated by ASEAN's slow, consensus-driven pace and its demonstrated inability to swiftly manage internal crises like the Thai-Cambodia dispute, are increasingly bypassing the association entirely. This strategic impatience is evidenced by the rise of minilateral arrangements (such as the Quad, AUKUS, and other bilateral security pacts) that address critical regional security challenges outside of the ASEAN-led framework. When the most pressing geopolitical issues are resolved or discussed in groups that exclude the majority of Southeast Asian nations, ASEAN's claim to be the region's central convening power becomes hollow.

Furthermore, geopolitical competition is now intertwined with economic statecraft. Major powers exert pressure on individual ASEAN members through tariffs, technology controls, and supply chain demands, forcing them into bilateral arrangements that prioritize external security interests over the collective Vision of economic integration. This constant pressure exacerbates the internal division and makes achieving the seamless digital and economic market envisioned by the AEC Strategic Plan much more difficult. If ASEAN cannot demonstrate a unified and decisive voice on matters of high politics, its Centrality will transform from an operational reality into a diplomatic courtesy, further widening the gap between its lofty vision and its geopolitical reality.

26TH ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY COUNCIL (AECC) MEETING

24 OCTOBER 2025

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA



Photo: Participants join hands to symbolize unity at the 26th ASEAN Economic Community Council (AECC) Meeting held on 24 October 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Prognosis: Bridging the Gap Through Structural Reform

The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 is a necessary blueprint, but its pursuit is undermined by a destructive feedback loop: structural paralysis creates a geopolitical vacuum, leading to the erosion of Centrality. While the commitment to "enhance institutional capacity" was reiterated at the 47th ASEAN Summit,⁶ the internal bottleneck of the "ASEAN Way" remains a potent obstacle to the decisive security community envisioned.

For Vision 2045 to be a reality, ASEAN must embrace structural reform. This necessity suggests three concrete, though difficult, paths forward: institutional reform and flexibility; pragmatic minilateralism; and redefining centrality.

Institutional reform remains the most formidable task. It requires moving beyond the consensus rule by adopting mechanisms like the "ASEAN-X" formula, allowing core groups of willing members to proceed on security issues. This flexibility is crucial to prevent the slowest member from impeding progress, and it mandates the active use of the dormant TAC High Council to mediate disputes.

A second path is pragmatic minilateralism. Instead of waiting for eleven members, influential states like Indonesia and Malaysia could formally act as "proxies" for ASEAN's agency in specific conflicts. This approach acknowledges that sub-regional cooperation is often the most effective tool for immediate crisis management.

Finally, ASEAN must redefine its "centrality" by pivoting toward "low-politics" issues where it excels. By aggressively focusing on digital and green economy integration, humanitarian assistance, and technical cooperation, ASEAN can demonstrate continued practical relevance and build the internal trust necessary to eventually tackle high-stakes security challenges.

The upcoming Philippines Chairmanship in 2026, under the theme "Navigating Our Future Together," will serve as the immediate test of this renewed commitment to implementation. As a claimant state facing escalating maritime tensions, the Philippines will prioritize peace, security, and maritime cooperation, with the aim of finalizing the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. Manila's greatest homework, however, is not simply advancing its national agenda, but forging the collective ASEAN stance necessary to uphold the principles of international law, thereby proving that the organization's mechanisms—not external powers—remain the central anchor of regional stability.

Ultimately, the ability to manage intra-regional conflicts decisively, without relying on external actors or ad-hoc bilateralism, is the ultimate test of the association's institutional maturity. Without this shift toward more proactive and effective enforcement mechanisms, the promise of a "politically cohesive" and "resilient" ASEAN will remain elusive, and its claims of regional centrality will continue to be called into question.

[6] ASEAN. (2025, October 28). *Chairman's Statement of the 47th ASEAN Summit*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Forum on ASEAN: Shaping a More Inclusive and Sustainable Future

2 October 2025 | Hilton Kuala Lumpur



Photo: Forum on ASEAN on Shaping a More Inclusive and Sustainable Future, with Datuk Jojie Samuel MC Samuel as the moderator, and H.E. Dato' Astanah Abdul Aziz, Farish A. Noor, and Elina Noor as panelists.



Photo: 34th Meeting of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) in Selangor, Malaysia



Photo: The 22nd ASEAN-India Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ASEAN's Role in the Global South Amid the Emerging Multipolarity

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This piece will make three key points. The first is understanding the increasing prominence of the Global South as both a grouping of countries as well as a political and economic project within global politics. The second looks at how ASEAN, as an organisation, has sought to relate itself to this idea. Thirdly, this piece looks at how there are variations amongst ASEAN member states in how they relate their individual national strategies to various articulations of the Global South.

The Global South, as a term, gained currency at the end of the Cold War, as it came to replace the earlier Third World concept. It was seen as a response to the 'Global North', as the Global South countries sought a more equitable position within the emerging global post-Cold War political and economic order. Over time, a few countries formed the core caucus of the Global South, advocating for greater representation and larger voice for countries in the Global South especially in the context of significant expansion of certain economies within Asia. First China and then India demonstrated high levels of economic growth and positioned themselves as the leading global economies of the future, as many analysts foresaw a possible shift of economic and political power from the West to the East. Institutions such as BRICS, formed in 2009, became symbols of rise of the Global South as well as the apparent shifting of some economic and political order away from the Global North. Inevitably, over time, increased tensions between China and India have led to a competition between them to define the aims and strategies of the Global South. Increasingly, the struggle for the leadership of the Global South will impact how ASEAN member states relate to increasingly differing visions, aims and strategies for the Global South.

Photo: The 20th EAS Summit held in Kuala Lumpur on 27 October 2025, represented by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar



At ASEAN's formation in 1967, all, if not most, of its founding member states viewed themselves as part of the Third World, based on relative economic power as well as being non-aligned and not wanting to choose between either the Western alliance (First World) or the Soviet bloc (Second World). However, ASEAN as an organisation, and individual ASEAN states have undergone a dramatic transformation since its founding, winning praise for managing intra-ASEAN conflict (Thailand-Cambodia border skirmishes being the notable exception here), managing great power competition within East Asia and expanding its membership to eleven members, with Timor-Leste the most recent addition. The transformation and expansion of ASEAN since 1967, however, has also brought greater heterogeneity, and this relates to ASEAN's engagement with the Global South. This diversity has led to ASEAN engaging both the Global South as well as the Global North, engaging in various forms with institutions and processes associated with both sets of countries. ASEAN's approach broadly mirrors its broader strategy of navigating an emerging multipolar global order, where ASEAN views the utility of not choosing one side over the other but instead acting as a bridge between the two sides. In this way, ASEAN as an institution, as well as many individual ASEAN members, look to reap the benefits to being associated with both sides in different areas with differentiated capacities, which analysts have termed a 'multi-alignment' strategy. In this respect, ASEAN remains engaged with the Global South via processes such as the ASEAN-GCC-China Summit in 2025, signalling ASEAN's continued engagement with members whose identities are the Global South. It also remains engaged with processes and forums associated with the Global North, such as the G20 and the G7, wherein since 2009, the rotating chair of ASEAN has been invited to the annual G20 summit and several ASEAN member states being invited to G7 summits over the years.

This shows ASEAN's continued desire to achieve three goals. Firstly, it aims to ensure it is not perceived as choosing one side over the other, especially as multipolarity looms both globally and in East Asia specifically. Secondly, ASEAN aims to be able to play the role of 'bridging states' that can help reduce tensions between the US and China by embedding ASEAN within both Global South and Global North processes and activities. Thirdly, it helps ASEAN achieve a minimum level of agreement and consensus amidst its growing diversity of perceptions and strategies, arising, to some extent, from its expanded membership.





Photo: Brazil, a key partner from the Global South, represented by President Lula da Silva, participates in high-level discussions with ASEAN nations during the 20th East Asia Summit

ASEAN member states, in their own individual capacities, have varying perceptions of and strategies towards the Global South. A clear area of difference is membership of BRICS which has Indonesia (full member since 2025), Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam (all partner nations) within its fold. The remaining ASEAN member states have decided not to pursue either full or partner status in BRICS, which is increasingly recognised as a one of the Global South's key institutions. This exhibits the difference in strategies amongst states in Southeast Asia even when the overall objective of multi-alignment is shared between these states. It also reflects the varying domestic economic needs of the different countries in this region. Indonesia's application for full membership under the current administration is attributed, in some part, to accessing development funds from the New Development Bank for Indonesia's ambitious domestic economic plans under President Prabowo. The other three partner states have calculated that multi-alignment is served by partnering with BRICS but not necessarily being a full member of it. For these states, and the remaining Southeast Asian states who have decided not to apply to be part of BRICS, an association with BRICS is not necessarily a cost-free choice. China's endeavour to be the leader of the Global South by expanding Global South institutions like BRICS, which appears committed to de-dollarisation of the global economy and increasing tensions between BRICS founding members (China and Russia specifically) and Western states, raises the possibility of BRICS serving as an anti-Western organisation.

President Trump has publicly outlined his intent to hit back at BRICS if it goes through with its de-dollarisation plans and this highlights just one potential cost to countries associated with BRICS, especially as these countries try to manage trade tariffs with the United States. ASEAN member states who are members and partners of BRICS will hope that BRICS will focus less on delivering on actual goals such as de-dollarisation but remain useful as both a symbolic nod to the Global South as well as serve as a useful forum to expand economic opportunities with other BRICS countries. At the end of the day, ASEAN member states do not want to choose between the Global South and the Global North but instead build alignments across both groupings and associated forums to ensure a goal shared by ASEAN states since 1967 – to craft as much autonomy as they can for the region and for themselves individually.

Photo: A symbolic handshake marks the official transfer of the ASEAN Chairmanship to the Philippines as the ASEAN Summit comes to a close



Prospects for the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026

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The 47th ASEAN Summit concluded in October 2025. During its Chairmanship, Malaysia managed several notable accomplishments. First and foremost, Timor-Leste has formally acceded to ASEAN as its 11th member.¹ After being on the waitlist for 14 years, including being granted observer status in 2022, Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN is a testament not only to Malaysia's leadership but also to the grouping's continued commitment to inclusivity and regional kinship.

Malaysia's other crowning achievement is in the economic sphere, having upgraded the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), amended various free trade agreements, and reiterated the utilization of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Additionally, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam signed trade deals, with Malaysia and Thailand playing bigger roles in the supply of critical minerals to the US.² These efforts are meant to "future-proof" ASEAN economies by providing transparency, stability, and predictability.³

Despite these wins, some issues remain unresolved and will predictably carry over into next year. At the top of the list is Myanmar. Numerous new groups emerged after the coup in 2021 and are now engaged in an open armed struggle. Consequently, the humanitarian crisis continues to loom large. Complicating matters are the emergence of conflict economies. Scam centers proliferate (more so now after the March 2025 earthquake), alongside the narcotics trade, human and organ trafficking, and informal networks of critical mining.⁴

Another issue is the Thai-Cambodia border dispute. At the recent summit, President Donald Trump presided over the signing of an expanded ceasefire that built on the July 28 agreement.⁵ The two sides agreed to replace missing markers, accelerate border

[1] "Dream realised': East Timor becomes ASEAN's 11th member," Al Jazeera, 26 October 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/26/dream-realised-east-timor-becomes-aseans-11th-member>.

[2] Claire Jiao and Philip J. Heijmans, "Trump's trade deals give US edge over S-E Asia," The Star, 29 October 2025. <https://www.thestar.com.my/business/insight/2025/10/29/trumps-trade-deals-give-us-edge-over-s-e-asia>.

[3] Chloe Mari A. Hufana, "Marcos expecting regional trade to offset threat to 'rules-based' order," Business World, 29 October 2025. <https://www.bworldonline.com/economy/2025/10/29/708942/marcos-expecting-regional-trade-to-offset-threat-to-rules-based-order/>.

[4] "Myanmar is a demonstration of Chinese hegemony in action," The Economist, 4 June 2025. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/06/04/myanmar-is-a-demonstration-of-chinese-hegemony-in-action>.

[5] Sebastian Strangio, "In Malaysia, Trump presides over 'peace accord' between Cambodia and Thailand," The Diplomat, 27 October 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/in-malaysia-trump-presides-over-peace-accord-between-cambodia-and-thailand/>.

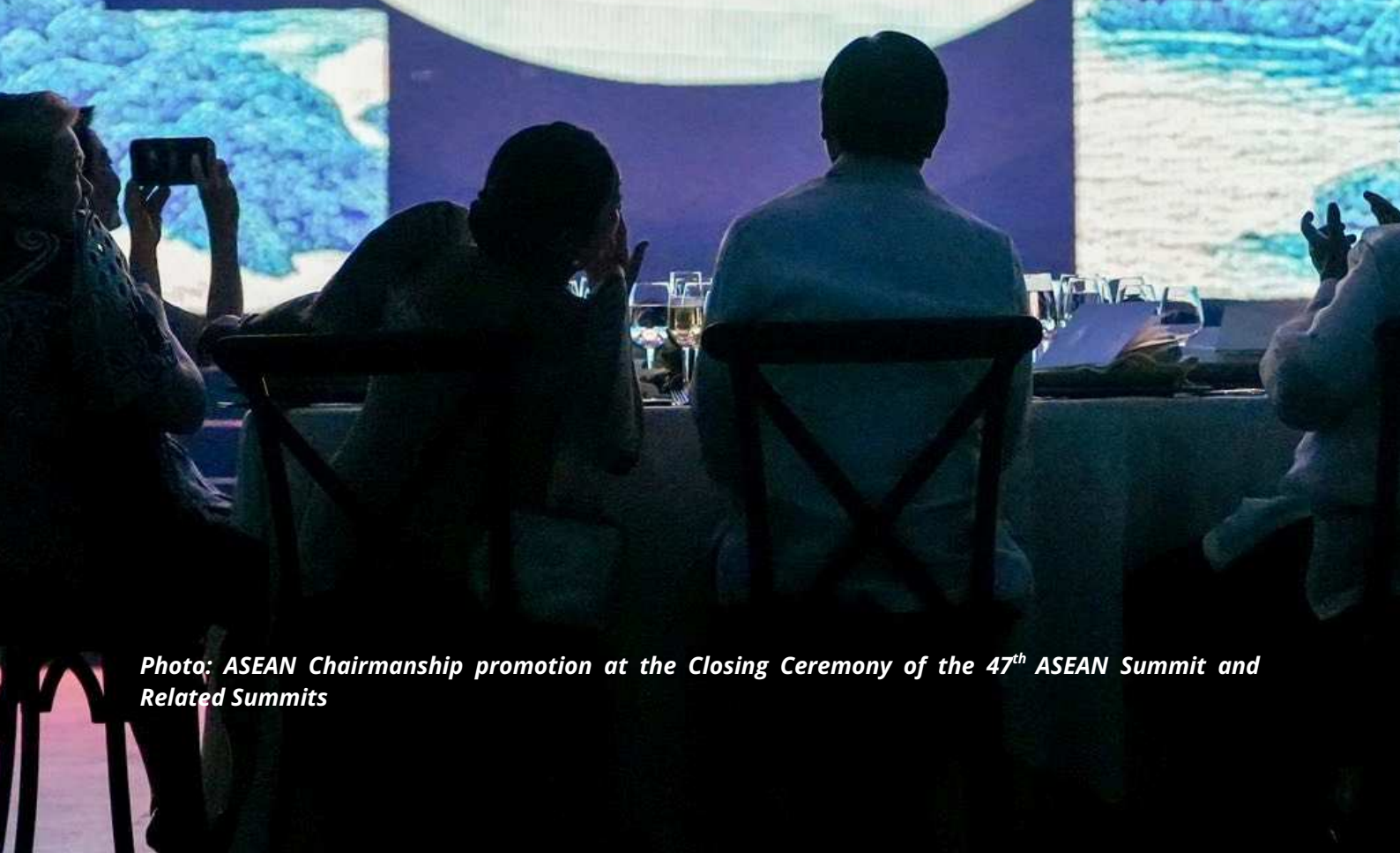


Photo: ASEAN Chairmanship promotion at the Closing Ceremony of the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits

demarcation efforts, withdraw heavy weapons, clear landmines, and enhance cooperation to stanch scam centers. The agreement created an ASEAN Observer Team to monitor the ceasefire, with Thailand committing to release the 18 Cambodian soldiers in its custody. The existing bilateral mechanisms, including the General Border Committee, the Regional Border Committee, and the Joint Boundary Commission, will continue as the main platforms for the peaceful resolution of border issues between the two countries. While these existing mechanisms hold the promise that discussions can continue, by no means do they resolve the underlying causes of the dispute, i.e., diverging interpretations of a 1907 treaty between French Indochina and the Kingdom of Siam. Moreover, the commitments notwithstanding, the agreement was a clear projection of Trump's image as a "peacemaking president." The event largely spotlighted his image as a 'peacemaking president,' potentially overshadowing ASEAN's own role.⁶ Whether or not that projection will result in an effective ceasefire remains to be seen.

As the 47th ASEAN Summit ended, Malaysia handed over the baton to the Philippines, which will assume the Chairmanship in 2026. In the run-up to the turnover ceremony, discussions in Manila regarding the upcoming chairmanship revolved around the conclusion of the Code of Conduct. Whether or not this can come into fruition (after more than two decades of stalled negotiations) is unclear. What shone through, however, was that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., in his acceptance speech, implied that maritime security would likely dominate next year's agenda.

Focusing on the South China Sea is a positive development to a certain extent, as the Philippines will be in a position to draw regional attention to the issue, leverage the gains of the 2016 arbitration, and marshal support for international law and the rules-based order. Holding the Chairmanship, however, ought to be more about finding common ground in the region and less about advancing one's national interest. Considered as an "outlier," the Philippines is, sadly, lacking substantive support in Southeast Asia regarding the South China Sea.⁷ It is often seen as a troublemaker or a provocateur, as being too pro-American, and currently enjoying the status of being America's proverbial golden child. In this context, many in Southeast Asia perceive the South China Sea as a Philippine problem. In the same way, many in the Philippines see the Myanmar or Thai-Cambodia border disputes as a distant reality: a problem, indeed, but not necessarily a concern in the here and now.

Herein lies the challenge for the Philippines. The Philippines must weave these seemingly disconnected issues into a coherent regional agenda. Reframing issues to resonate with the region can be one way of doing this. For instance, maritime security needs to be broadened beyond the traditional definitions of sovereignty and territoriality. These are, of course, fundamental issues, but attention must likewise be paid to the non-traditional aspects of maritime security, including seabed mining, marine environmental protection, submarine

[6] Susannah Patton, "ASEAN summits in 2025: Trump centrality," *The Interpreter*, 24 October 2025. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/asean-summits-2025-trump-centrality>.

[7] Susannah Patton, "The Two Southeast Asias," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/southeast-asia/two-southeast-asias>.

cables and the security of digital infrastructure, as well as supply chain resilience in the maritime domain.⁸

The resolution of the border disputes between Thailand and Cambodia is important, but so is the recognition that energy security is at stake. The Mekong can be a vital source of hydropower and is therefore a critical area of cooperation. The same border disputes can likewise be reframed as combating transnational crimes that result from conflict economies, which are tangential to the rising humanitarian costs in Myanmar.

Finally, the range of issues that ASEAN confronts behooves the regional organization to upgrade its conflict management—if not conflict resolution—mechanisms as befits the dynamics of the day. The Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, for instance, is hinged on the Special Envoy attached to the rotating ASEAN Chair. A lasting and sustainable alternative is to opt for a Standing or a Permanent Special Envoy dealing specifically with issues relating to Myanmar.

Another example is arbitration to peacefully settle disputes. Currently, the ASEAN Charter rests on voluntary arbitration. In view of the goal of regional integration, the Charter should be revised to specify compulsory arbitration to peacefully settle territorial disputes. The matter can apply to the extended continental shelf of Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The parties can submit the claims for compulsory arbitration so that, guided by the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the overlaps can be divided equitably among them.

The Philippines inherits both momentum and unresolved challenges from Malaysia's chairmanship. Its true test lies in transforming national concerns into regional priorities – only then can it credibly claim to steer ASEAN toward a more cohesive and resilient future.

[8] Marie Shröter and Monica Ang-Tan, "ASEAN Economic Security in the South China Sea," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Philippines, October 2025.



Photo: The Chairmanship Handover Ceremony of the Asean Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur

Photo: President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at the Closing Ceremony of the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits

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AN SUMMIT AND RELATED SUMM





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ASEAN
MALAYSIA 2025
INCLUSIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY



ASEAN in 2025: Shaping an inclusive and sustainable future



Photo: Forum on ASEAN in 2025. Shaping an inclusive and sustainable on 2 October 2025

Three Key Priorities in the New Era of the ASEAN Power Grid

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Southeast Asia is at a critical juncture of its energy transition agenda. For the first time in almost 30 years since the launching of the ASEAN Power Grid (APG), there is consistent political momentum towards the realization of multiple cross-border grid projects. The last three years has seen the realization of two key milestones that has eluded energy cooperation for almost three decades: the expansion of energy trade from the bilateral to the multilateral phase; and political momentum towards the realization of subsea power cable projects, which can be a game changer for energy trade in archipelagic Southeast Asia.¹

Sustained political will by regional leaders has been a major driver of contemporary progress. Energy integration has featured prominently in ASEAN Summits but has received particular importance and relevance during Malaysia's Chairmanship. At the 43rd ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting (AMEM) in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025, Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim referred to the APG as the 'crown jewel' of ASEAN's energy vision. Beyond rhetoric, the AMEM resulted in concrete progress on three important issues: 1) Endorsement of the Enhanced APG Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which aims to harmonizes technical standards and regulatory frameworks for cross-border projects; 2) Launch of the ASEAN Power Grid Financing Facility (APGF), by the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank that will invest over USD 12 billion in interconnection projects; and 3) Adoption of the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) Phase III (2026–2030) which set a new regional renewable electricity target of 45% by 2030 (up from 35% in the previous five-year plan).

In terms of project development, nine out of 18 key interconnections of the APG have been completed to date. The commissioning of the region's first multilateral power integration initiative, the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project (LTMS-PIP) in 2022 proved the technical and commercial viability of energy trade and generated increased commercial and political enthusiasm for interconnection projects. As shown in Table 1, multiple interconnection projects are currently at advanced stages of negotiation and development. This includes two projects that have been prioritized during the Malaysian Chairmanship: a subsea and overland interconnection project between Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore and a subsea interconnection project between Sarawak and Singapore.

[1] Huda, M.S. 2025. The geopolitics of energy regionalism in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. *International Affairs*, Volume 101, Issue 4, Pages 1279–1299.

Table 1. Progress on Cross-Border Energy Projects in ASEAN

	Proposed Interconnections	Status	Energy Trade (Potential)
1	Singapore – Indonesia	Conditional approval (EMA)	3.4 GW
2	Singapore – Sarawak	Conditional approval (EMA)	1 GW
3	Singapore – Cambodia	Conditional approval (EMA)	1 GW
4	Singapore – Vietnam	Conditional approval (EMA)	1.2 GW
5	Monsoon Wind Project (Laos-Vietnam)	Operationalized (2025)	600 MW
6	Vietnam-Malaysia-Singapore	Joint Development Agreement	2,000 MW
7	Australia - Singapore	Conditional approval (EMA)	1.75 GW

Source: Author's compilation from various sources.

The contemporary political momentum towards the APG offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to accelerate energy transition in Southeast Asia. The APG is advancing despite the existence of critical political challenges at the regional and extra-regional levels. At the regional level, resource nationalism continues to undermine energy integration. In some Southeast Asian countries, there is a prevailing notion that domestic resources need to be utilized to meet national climate and energy goals first, before being considered for export.



Photo: Secretary-General of ASEAN meets with the Executive Director of the ASEAN Centre for Energy

At the extra-regional level, the closure of USAID, which played an important role in providing technical assistance to APG projects, and the general withdrawal of the United States from global climate governance has intensified existing fears of hegemonic influence in the energy sector. Southeast Asian countries will need to continue engaging with China, the region's largest investor in energy, while also collaborating with partners such as the European Union, Australia, Japan and South Korea to accelerate the development of interconnections.

The outcomes of the 43rd AMEM demonstrate that ASEAN has the necessary agency to accelerate energy integration in an increasingly conflictual geopolitical landscape. In this context, concrete advancement on three key areas in the coming years can move interconnection projects from the planning to the implementation stage: 1) A Regional Framework on Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs); 2) An ASEAN Projects of Common Interest (APCI); and 3) An ASEAN Subsea Power Cable Development Framework. There are briefly described below:

A Regional Renewable Energy Certificate (RECs) Framework

The APGF will provide a much-needed boost to de-risking investments in interconnection projects. However, the APG requires an enormous amount of finance. The Asian Development Bank estimates at least USD 100 billion is needed by 2045 for transmission infrastructure, while broader generation and distribution investments could reach USD 764 billion.

The region therefore needs to continue to develop frameworks that can attract investments from public and private sources. One contemporary priority is the development of a regional RECs framework. While there are well-established domestic RECs markets in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, international standards like RE100 currently do not recognize cross-border RECs for grid-based power traded outside North America and the EU.

Recognition by RE100 and similar global benchmarks is essential for selling RECs to multinational firms. Currently, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), the Energy Market Authority (EMA) of Singapore and International Tracking Standard Foundation (I-TRACK Foundation) is developing a framework for Cross-Border RECs that can enable countries and companies to better account for renewable energy trade, thereby increasing investment in the APG.

ASEAN Projects of Common Interest

Given the region's limited infrastructure funding, ASEAN Member States (AMS) must prioritize projects that have the highest impact on energy integration and transition. This will require collective focus on a set of strategic "backbone" projects that can accelerate regional energy integration and align national infrastructure plans with ASEAN's broader goals. A relevant global model is the European Union's Projects of Common Interest (PCI) initiative, which prioritizes energy projects with significant regional and transition benefits. ASEAN could adopt a similar framework — an ASEAN Projects of Common Interest (APCI) — to direct



Photo: ASEAN in 2025: Shaping an inclusive and sustainable future

funding and policy support toward critical interconnections that would serve as the backbone of the APG.

Establishing the APCI may begin with broad consultations among energy stakeholders to define inclusion criteria, followed by joint studies assessing the costs and benefits of each proposed link. Ensuring that the APCI is developed through an open, transparent, and evidence-based process would enhance its legitimacy, foster regional ownership, and attract greater investor confidence. The identification of priority interconnections under the ASEAN Interconnection Masterplan Study III (AIMS III) can be used as a basis for developing the APCI.²

ASEAN Subsea Power Cable Development Framework

While subsea cables can accelerate energy trade, they are also constrained by multiple challenges. One key issue is constraints in supply chains. At the global level, only a few companies manufacture subsea power cables. A study by the USAID and the ASEAN Centre for Energy found that there is likely to be a 10-12 year waiting period for High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) subsea cables.³

This can lead to significant delays in project implementation. In addition, these infrastructures will need to be structurally sound to withstand anchoring activities and seismic conditions, while having minimal impacts on the environment. Subsea cable projects will also need to traverse multiple maritime jurisdictions in a geopolitical environment marked by increasing tensions in the South China Sea.

The region's leaders are currently working on developing an 'ASEAN Subsea Power Cable Development Framework' that aims to address the technical, political and legal challenges associated with these interconnection projects. The completion and endorsement of this framework can be used to generate consensus on developing regional protocols on procurement and maintenance of subsea power cables, dispute resolution mechanisms and environmental and social safeguards.

[2] Huda, M.S. and Seah. S. 2024. 'A Strategic Approach to Energy Regional Blueprint', in 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook. ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE): Jakarta

[3] USAID and ACE. 2025. A Playbook for ASEAN Power Grid Interconnector Feasibility Studies.

Conclusion

The APG is due for completion in 2045. The outcomes of Malaysia's Chairmanship demonstrates that despite the continuation of violent conflicts in the Middle East and Europe, the withdrawal of Washington from the region's energy transition agenda and the existence of resource nationalism, ASEAN has the agency and convening capacity to facilitate consistent progress on the APG. While financial, political and technical challenges remain, they can be addressed by prioritizing the development of regional frameworks on investment and infrastructures. For these frameworks to successfully lead to project implementation, ASEAN will need to generate consensus among stakeholders at the regional level, while also deliberately cultivating strategic partnerships with a broad and diverse set of extra-regional actors.



Photo: Secretary General of ASEAN meets with the Executive Director of the ASEAN Centre for Energy



ASEAN Ahead: ASEAN STI Ecosystem Foresight 2035 and Beyond



Photo: Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan receives the "ASEAN Ahead: STI Ecosystem Foresight 2035" report from Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Chang Lih Kang during the launch of ASEAN Initiatives on Inclusivity and Sustainability at KLCC, ahead of the 47th ASEAN Summit. Also present was ASM President Tengku Molla Azzman Shariffadeen Tengku Ibrahim.

Reimagining AI Governance through a People-centred Approach

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What if we were to reframe artificial intelligence (AI) governance in ASEAN to a people-centred, people-oriented approach? What could it look like?

As ASEAN wrapped up its 47th series of summit meetings in Malaysia, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, who was in Malaysia for the ASEAN-UN Summit issued an ominous warning: The world will overshoot its Paris commitment to limit global heating to 1.5C within the next few years, with devastating consequences to come.¹

Against this stark backdrop sits the disturbing delusion of business-as-usual in Southeast Asia, as countries competitively position themselves to offer critical natural resources such as land, minerals, and water to the highest bidding investors. This is done ostensibly to power domestic growth through the green and digital revolutions. On the sidelines of the recent ASEAN Summit, Malaysia and Thailand each signed separate memoranda of understanding with the United States. Both agreements focus on developing and expanding critical mineral supply chains. The US-Cambodia agreement on reciprocal trade also signed at the summit opens the way for US extraction, refinement, and export of Cambodia's "critical minerals and energy resources to supply power, telecommunication, transportation, and infrastructure services."²

Despite government and industry rhetoric on sustainable digitalization, the dissonance with reality is jarring. There are already over 500 data centres in the region and dozens more in the works.³ In 2024, industry reports valued the regional data centre market at USD13.71 billion with an estimated compound annual growth rate of 14.23 percent to reach USD30.47 by 2030.⁴

Data centres are notoriously energy and water intensive, with more acute consequences in Southeast Asia's equatorial climate where extreme weather events – including abnormally high temperatures for much of 2024 – are occurring more regularly.⁵

[1] Jonathan Watts and Wajã Xipai, "Change Course Now: Humanity Has Missed 1.5C Climate Target, Says UN Head," *The Guardian*, October 28, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/28/change-course-now-humanity-has-missed-15c-climate-target-says-un-head>.

[2] The White House, "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Cambodia on Reciprocal Trade," *Statements and Releases*, October 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/10/agreement-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-kingdom-of-cambodia-on-reciprocal-trade/>.

[3] Baxtel, "Data Centers in Southeast Asia," accessed October 31, 2025, <https://baxtel.com/data-center/southeast-asia>.

[4] Arizton Advisory & Intelligence, *Southeast Asia Data Center Market – Industry Outlook and Forecast 2024–2029*, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.arizton.com/market-reports/southeast-asia-data-center-market>.

[5] World Meteorological Organization (WMO), "Rising Temperatures and Extreme Weather Hit Asia Hard," April 2025, <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/rising-temperatures-and-extreme-weather-hit-asia-hard>.

One 2021 study noted that over 95 percent of data centres in the region used inefficient air-based cooling systems.⁶

The expected rise in the number of data centres means a concomitant rise in the need for generators despite generators being major contributors to carbon emissions. Fossil fuels, particularly coal, power most of Southeast Asia's energy demands. In fact, in 2023, coal accounted for half of the region's electricity and about 30 percent of industrial demands.⁷

Earlier this year, Malaysia's National Water Services Commission warned of the strain on potable water resources with the growth of data centres in the country and said it approved less than 18 percent of water applications for the 101 data centres operating in three states on the peninsula – Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor.⁸ One hyperscaler data centre alone requires up to 17.5 megaliters per day, which is the equivalent of seven Olympic-sized pools.⁹

Although there have been pledges to increasingly turn to alternative cooling technologies and renewable energy to operate data centres, the region still lags in implementation and there are significant concerns about greenwashing in the race to draw sizeable foreign investment.¹⁰ Ongoing lessons from the United States about exponentially high electricity costs driven up by data centre demands ultimately being borne by consumers should give rise to more transparent and public discussions.¹¹ Similarly, with the diversion of potable water from households to data centres.

But data centres are only one, if substantial, piece of the AI puzzle. If ASEAN is to advance the principles of inclusivity and sustainability, which formed the basis for Malaysia's chairmanship this year, and if the grouping is serious about its commitment to a people-centred community reflected not only in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 but also for the next 20 years through the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, then it must reorient its focus to prioritise the region's people.^{12,13}

[6] Bain & Company, Microsoft, and Temasek, *Southeast Asia's Green Economy 2021: Pathway to Net Zero*, 2021, <https://www.bain.com/globalassets/noindex/2021/green-economy/bain-microsoft-temasek-sea-green-economy-2021-report-road-to-net-zero-main.pdf>.

[7] International Energy Agency (IEA), *Southeast Asia Energy Outlook 2024: Executive Summary*, 2024, <https://www.iea.org/reports/southeast-asia-energy-outlook-2024/executive-summary>.

[8] Joseph Sipalan, "Malaysia Data Centres Warned to Find New Water Sources to Ease Pressure on Public Supply," September 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3298241/malaysia-data-centres-warned-find-new-water-sources-ease-pressure-public-supply>.

[9] Narmatha Raja, "Only 18% of Data Centres' Requests for Water Approved Last Year," February 10, 2025, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/02/10/only-18-of-data-centres-request-for-water-approved-last-year>.

[10] Sara Loo, "Data Centres, Energy Demand and Sustainability: Can Malaysia Strike the Right Balance?" *Fulcrum*, August 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/data-centres-energy-demand-and-sustainability-can-malaysia-strike-the-right-balance/>

[11] Josh Saul, Leonardo Nicoletti, Demetrios Pogkas, Dina Bass and Naureen Malik, "AI Data Centers Drive Electricity Prices to New Highs," 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2025-ai-data-centers-electricity-prices/>.

[12] Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, 2015, <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

[13] Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN*, 2024, <https://asean.org/asean-community-vision-2045-resilient-innovative-dynamic-and-people-centred-asean/>.

This will require a major shift in thinking and doing since ASEAN is, first and foremost, an inter-governmental organization. Yet, ASEAN's people cannot simply be treated as a passive, downstream derivative – that is, users and consumers – of public and private sector decisions on AI. Rather, the region's people should be considered co-planners and co-creators of AI systems especially since they are the target market.

In the space of AI governance, this reorientation could look like the following.

First, any serious implementation of AI governance should encompass the entire life cycle of AI – from the hardware of its infrastructure to the design, development, deployment, and decommissioning of its systems. This is not a new or radical proposition.

In March 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution A/78/L.49 on, “safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development”.¹⁴ The text of that resolution, co-sponsored by more than 120 UN member states outlines 11 stages of the AI life cycles – pre-design, design, development, evaluation, testing, deployment, use, sale, procurement, operation and decommissioning – and emphasises the principles of human-centricity, reliability, responsibility, explainability, ethics, inclusivity, and international law, among others.¹⁵ While the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics and by extension, the Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics – Generative AI, makes reference to these same principles across the AI life cycle, its treatment of the life cycle is abbreviated to design, development, and deployment.¹⁶

At the technical level, the International Organisation for Standardisation first released ISO 14040, which lays out the principles and framework for life cycle assessment, in 1997. The current version of ISO 14040 was released in 2006 and last updated in 2020.¹⁷ ISO standards are reviewed every five years so this standard is due for an update soon. But the fact that it has been in existence for nearly three decades now should provide solid guidance for ASEAN member states in operationalising AI governance over the full spectrum of the technology's life cycle.

Second, a people-centred AI governance framework should go beyond the impact of deployed AI systems on “users”. Rather, there should be greater attention paid to the invisible labour building and running these systems. This labour pool includes data annotators in the Philippines who help label data to train machine learning algorithms but at much cheaper rates than their counterparts would get in Global North countries. This kind of

[14] United Nations, Draft Resolution A/78/L.49, 2024, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/L.49>.

[15] United Nations News, “UN Calls for Greater Climate Action Ahead of COP29,” March 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147831>.

[16] Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, February 2024, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics_beautified_201223_v2.pdf.

[17] International Organization for Standardization (ISO), “Environmental management — Life cycle assessment — Principles and framework,” 2022, <https://www.iso.org/standard/37456.html>.

gig work, with all of the tedium of sifting through and tagging large amounts of data which sometimes includes traumatising images, has drawn comparisons to digital sweatshops even as they are pitched as job opportunities in the digital economy for locals.^{18,19}

Similarly, the flexibility of gig work through multi-service platforms like Gojek or Grab has its own underbelly of exploitative labour practices that have drawn controversy and protest. This precarity of work is exacerbated by an algorithmic gamification that is obtuse to the riders and drivers who are fundamental to these platforms' success.^{20,21,22}

In a people-centred approach to AI governance, people would be meaningfully prioritised across the entire life cycle of AI. The term, "users" which the ASEAN guide unfortunately resorts to even as it expounds the importance of human-centricity in ethical AI systems imputes a lack of agency among the very target group AI solutions are marketed to.

Third and finally, there should be courage to depart from conventional constructs of AI governance. The recent ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Clean, Safe, Healthy and Sustainable Environment provides a promising pathway for ASEAN stakeholders to enforce this right in line with member states' own voluntary commitments to ethical AI.²³ One way to operationalise this Declaration in the context of AI governance is for states, through their courts, to grant legal status or personhood to non-human entities like rivers in order to enforce against pollution of waterways, for example, across the entire life cycle of AI

[18] Rebecca Tan and Regine Cabato, "Scale AI and the Hidden Workforce Behind Artificial Intelligence in the Philippines," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/28/scale-ai-remotasks-philippines-artificial-intelligence/>.

[19] Emiko Jozuka, "As More Work Moves Online, the Threat of Digital Sweatshops Looms," 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/as-more-work-moves-online-the-threat-of-digital-sweatshops-looms/>.

[20] Aulia Nastiti, "Drivers' Stories Reveal How Exploitation Occurs in Gojek, Grab and Uber," *The Conversation*, August 2023, <https://theconversation.com/drivers-stories-reveal-how-exploitation-occurs-in-gojek-grab-and-uber-82689>

[21] Joan Aurelia Rumengan and Lam Le, "Gojek Rider Communities Discourage Unionization," 2024, <https://restofworld.org/2024/gojek-rider-communities-discourage-unionization/>.

[22] Arif Novianto, "Grab in Indonesia," 2024, <https://labourreview.org/grab-in-indonesia/>.

[23] Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Clean, Safe, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment, October 2025, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/5.-ASEAN-Declaration-on-the-Right-to-a-Clean-Safe-Healthy-and-Suitable-Environment.pdf>.



Photo: The 2nd Korea-ASEAN Data and AI Training Programme for High-Performance Computing (HPC)



Photo: ASEAN AI Malaysia Summit 2025 outlines priorities for driving forward the future of Southeast Asia

systems. Again, this is not a revolutionary concept but one rooted in indigenous thought (including in Southeast Asia) and already upheld by courts in Bangladesh, India, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Colombia. While not an immediate policy prescription, this legal framing offers an illustrative pathway for ASEAN stakeholders to reinterpret environmental stewardship in AI governance.

This approach shifts the consideration of nature as property to having inherent rights.²⁴ Of course, this legal treatment is not without its challenges on the ground.²⁵ Still, given the massive ecological footprint of AI infrastructure and systems, as well as the exigencies of the climate crisis on the region, it is an approach that should at least be tested.

Underpinning these three recommendations is a premise that AI should be treated holistically – in a relational manner that acknowledges the intrinsic ties between technology and society including the environment, and their impact upon each other. This perspective should replace the narrowly rational treatment of AI the region has so far undertaken as well as the logic of extraction and patterns of exploitation that may not always be evident or intentional but that have certainly directed the trajectory of technology in this region. ASEAN has the opportunity to disrupt that arc with AI along with its governing frameworks.

[24] Rights of Rivers, "Home," accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.rightsofrivers.org/>

[25] Patrick Barkham, "Rivers Around the World Are Gaining the Same Legal Rights as People," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/25/rivers-around-the-world-rivers-are-gaining-the-same-legal-rights-as-people>.



Photo: The 2nd Korea-ASEAN Data and AI Training Programme for High-Performance Computing (HPC)



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