



Diplomacy Without Drama: Malaysia's Role in the Cambodia- Thailand Conflict

Ilango Karuppannan



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By Ilango Karuppannan

SYNOPSIS

In July 2025, border clashes between Cambodia and Thailand posed an unexpected test of Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship. As ASEAN's formal mechanisms struggled to respond, Malaysia moved quickly to host talks and help broker a ceasefire.

COMMENTARY

On 24 July 2025, Southeast Asia was jolted by a rare event: two ASEAN member states exchanging fire along their shared border. The clashes near the Ta Moan Thom temple disrupted ASEAN's long-standing norm of intra-regional peace. This crisis became an unexpected test for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's foreign policy and Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN. This commentary examines how Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's personalised approach, backed by quiet diplomacy and soft power, enabled Malaysia to manage a regional crisis that caught the regional grouping off guard.

When Anwar Ibrahim became Prime Minister in late 2022, he brought with him a long-standing interest in regional affairs. Early in his tenure, he spoke publicly about long-standing grievances in Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines and advocated stronger ASEAN action on the Myanmar crisis. Therefore, when Malaysia assumed the ASEAN chairmanship in January 2025, there were expectations that Anwar would offer renewed direction to a grouping grappling with multiple challenges.

Yet progress across key issues remained limited – particularly on Myanmar, where efforts to revive ASEAN's role faced setbacks. Anwar's appointment of Thaksin Shinawatra and Hun Sen as informal advisors on Myanmar raised questions about his broader strategic approach. The sudden outbreak of the Cambodia-Thailand border clashes then presented an even more immediate and high-stakes test – one that could have deeply undermined Malaysia's leadership credentials.

The Cambodia-Thailand Clashes: Escalation and Regional Shock

The escalation of the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia took everyone by surprise. Both sides accused the other of provocation – Cambodia alleged that a Thai surveillance drone had violated its airspace, while Thailand claimed Cambodian troops had moved aggressively toward the contested site. Within 48 hours, the situation escalated into a tense military standoff, with artillery fire exchanged at several locations, resulting in at least 35 dead and 300,000 displaced from both sides.

To seasoned observers, the geography was familiar: the Preah Vihear region has long been a flashpoint, with past clashes in 2008-2011 nearly spiralling out of control. But this time, the broader context was different. In both countries, domestic political pressures have intensified. Nationalist sentiment, amplified by social media, was no longer just a background factor – it had become a central political tool.

The clash caught ASEAN off guard. The organisation has prided itself on the fact that the norms of peace had been deeply ingrained among its members, and that made conflict virtually unthinkable. This incident upended that narrative, revealing how fragile peace may be when nationalism and unresolved border issues collide.

Malaysia's Diplomatic Calculus: Quiet Agency, Visible Outcome

Within a week of the clashes, Putrajaya (Malaysia's administrative centre) announced that it would host urgent peace talks. The announcement came as a surprise – just days earlier, Thailand's foreign minister had rejected third-party mediation, insisting on bilateral dialogue.

What changed? Reports later suggested that US and Chinese diplomatic pressure played a role behind the scenes, urging both sides to accept mediation. The Cambodian Prime Minister referred to the meeting as “co-organised by the United States with the presence of China.” However, Malaysia's role was not passive – it exercised discreet diplomacy, coordinated communication, and built trust with both parties.

While US diplomatic pressure helped bring both sides to the table, Malaysia's willingness to act – and its acceptability to both parties – was what gave those external nudges practical effect. In this sense, Malaysia functioned as the region's enabler of diplomacy, not merely as a proxy.

Anwar's personal relationships may have played a role. He had visited both Phnom Penh and Bangkok earlier in 2025 as part of his familiarisation tour following his appointment as Prime Minister and had maintained open lines of communication with both leaders.

The fact that Cambodia and Thailand agreed to talks, however preliminary, was a diplomatic success for Malaysia. While it did not resolve the crisis overnight, the ceasefire that followed was a direct result of Malaysia's intervention.

Without seeking the spotlight, Malaysia had acted with quiet determination. In a region where symbolism carries weight, the image of two disputing ASEAN member states coming together in Putrajaya was significant.

Malaysia also moved quickly to follow up on the ceasefire agreement. Within days of the Putrajaya talks, the Malaysian Chief of Armed Forces was sent to meet with his counterparts in both Cambodia and Thailand. This quiet but deliberate move signalled that Malaysia viewed its role not merely as a convener of dialogue, but as a partner in overseeing de-escalation. While ASEAN mechanisms remained dormant, Malaysia took on the informal responsibility of ensuring that ceasefire commitments were upheld on the ground.

Malaysia's intervention was necessary partly because ASEAN lacked the institutional capacity to act. Its foundational norms of consensus and non-interference, which are critical to regional unity, also inhibit timely responses to intra-regional crises. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) provides for peaceful settlement and even a High Council, but these mechanisms remain inactive.

Bilateralism remains the default approach – and fails when domestic politics fuel conflict. Despite repeated crises, ASEAN has not operationalised robust mechanisms for swift conflict resolution among member states. The absence of a standing institutional response capability makes ASEAN vulnerable to intra-regional instability.

Further complicating matters was the identity of the ASEAN Secretary-General, who is Cambodian. This made him an unacceptable intermediary for Thailand, which sidelined the ASEAN Secretariat at a critical moment. With trust eroded and formal institutions inactive, Malaysia stepped in – not because it wanted to lead, but because no one else could.

Lessons and Dilemmas for Malaysia's Foreign Policy

There is a striking irony in this episode. Earlier in his term, Anwar had appointed former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen as informal advisers on Myanmar – hoping that their political gravitas and regional networks could help break the deadlock within ASEAN. Yet in this border crisis, it was their respective governments that found themselves in direct confrontation.

This unexpected twist highlights the risks inherent in highly personalised diplomacy. While Anwar's personal ties may have opened the door for crisis communication in Putrajaya, the centralisation of Malaysia's regional diplomacy around his leadership also had structural implications. It placed the foreign ministry in a background role – necessary in moments of trust-building but challenging when continuity and institutional resilience are needed. Had the talks failed or had the escalation worsened, the political burden would have fallen squarely on the Prime Minister.

At the same time, Malaysia's handling of the crisis showcased its use of soft power – leveraging trust, access, and moral credibility rather than coercion. In a region sensitive to external interference, Malaysia's ability to convene talks and avoid public grandstanding was a demonstration of influence by invitation rather than imposition.

In this case, Malaysia emerged with credit. Its intervention enhanced ASEAN's regional standing and reaffirmed its relevance as a diplomatic actor. But the concentration of foreign policy decision-making at the top of the government also reveals long-term vulnerabilities in the country's diplomatic posture. Going forward, Malaysia's ability to blend high-level political access with institutional depth and soft power influence may prove to be its most enduring asset.

Ilango Karuppanan is an Adjunct Senior Fellow with the Malaysia Programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. A former Malaysian ambassador and commentator on ASEAN and global affairs, he is the founder and host of Diplomafify, a YouTube channel focused on Southeast Asia's strategic future.

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