

# CSCAP

## Regional Security Outlook



COUNCIL FOR  
SECURITY COOPERATION  
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Malaysia's ASEAN  
Chairmanship  
**2025**





The logo of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is pictured in front of Malaysia's Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur on May 15, 2025. (Photo by MOHD RASFAN/AFP via Getty Images).

## **MALAYSIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP**

### **REIMAGINING REGIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A SHIFTING INDO-PACIFIC**

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Malaysia assumes the ASEAN Chair in 2025 at a time of considerable flux in the regional and global order. Intensifying strategic rivalries, shifting economic currents and rising internal pressures within ASEAN are all testing the bloc's cohesion and credibility. Far from taking on a mere symbolic role, Malaysia's chairmanship will be a defining moment to demonstrate that ASEAN can adapt, respond and lead.

As a founding member with a reputation for moderation and constructive diplomacy, Malaysia is well-positioned to steer ASEAN towards a more responsive, cohesive and forward-looking trajectory while navigating the competing narratives that define the Indo-Pacific.

A key deliverable under Malaysia's watch will be the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, hitherto much vaunted in the rhetoric but less understood in its purport. This document must go beyond aspirational declarations to chart an actionable course for the next two decades, that addresses structural limitations of the current pillar-based approach and offers a more integrated framework for cross-cutting challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), supply chain resilience, and geopolitical uncertainty.

Crucially, Malaysia must ensure that the Vision 2045 process is grounded in both ambition and realism. Learning from the implementation gaps of the Vision 2025 agenda, the new blueprint should embed clear metrics, performance indicators and accountability frameworks. Broader and deeper engagements with youth, civil society and the private sector will be essential in crafting a vision that is both state-driven and people-centred; an ASEAN that is more attuned to the hopes and dreams of its over 650 million citizens.

Malaysia is going for pragmatic and inclusive leadership, and for putting our money where our mouth is. As the region grapples with increasingly mangled trade dynamics, compounded by the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reconfiguration of global supply chains, there is an urgent need to ensure ASEAN's trade architecture remains relevant, efficient and competitive.

On the political-security front, Malaysia will have to walk a tightrope. The Myanmar crisis remains the most visible and consequential test of ASEAN's credibility. While the Five-Point Consensus continues to serve as the official framework of engagement, progress has stalled. There is a pressing need for more calibrated and principled approaches, exploring meaningful engagement with stakeholders beyond the military junta, including civil society groups and ethnic resistance organisations. In this regard, the recent formation of the Informal Advisory Group for Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship 2025 as spearheaded by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim demonstrates the imperative to move the needle towards resolution. Malaysia can further reinforce ASEAN's convening power by revitalising platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and pressing for more substantive dialogue within the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Recent events have also underscored Malaysia's value as a reliable regional partner. Apart from the pledge of financial aid of ten million ringgit (US\$2.3 million), the deployment of a Malaysian search-and-rescue team following the devastating earthquake that struck Myanmar and Thailand exemplifies Malaysia's commitment to regional solidarity in times of crisis. As ASEAN Chair, Malaysia can capitalise on this momentum by strengthening regional mechanisms for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), particularly under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) framework. Enhancing interoperability, building rapid response capabilities and even institutionalising an ASEAN Disaster Response Fund would reinforce ASEAN's credibility in addressing non-traditional security threats, especially those exacerbated by climate change.

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This broader view of security should also include a revival of foundational ASEAN instruments such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). These frameworks, though conceived during the Cold War, can be reframed to address contemporary challenges in a multipolar world. Strategic dialogues on non-alignment, transparency and confidence-building among major powers in Southeast Asia will be increasingly critical as external powers jostle for influence.

Maritime cooperation is another area where Malaysia can lead. With tensions escalating in the South China Sea and the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations with China showing little progress, Malaysia can advocate for clearer timelines, transparency in the negotiation process, and practical confidence-building measures. As a littoral state, Malaysia carries credibility and strategic interest in promoting rules-based conduct in disputed waters. It could also drive initiatives to improve maritime domain awareness, strengthen coast guard collaboration and enhance the blue economy through sustainable fisheries, marine conservation and technological innovation.

At the institutional level, Malaysia can seize the moment to push for much needed reform. Strengthening ASEAN's internal machinery, especially the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat, improving funding mechanisms, and encouraging better coordination across sectoral bodies, will be essential to delivering on ASEAN's ambitions.

Malaysia's chairmanship also coincides with the rise of non-ASEAN-led regional initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS. While the jury is still out on the geopolitical impact of these minilateral groupings, with some member states viewing them as threats to ASEAN centrality and some welcoming them with open arms, nevertheless, Malaysia can underscore ASEAN's continued relevance by leading on key regional issues such as green transition, digital economy governance and inclusive development. The forthcoming ASEAN Blue Economy Framework and ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement present timely opportunities for Malaysia to take the lead in shaping forward-looking regional rules that respond to real-world challenges.



Photo by Orbital 01 Studio via Unsplash.





Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (R) is given the ceremonial gavel by Laos' Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone during the closing ceremony of the 44th and 45th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summits, with Malaysia set to take over the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, in Vientiane on October 11, 2024. (Photo by Tang Chhin Sothy / AFP) (Photo by TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP via Getty Images)

To make these frameworks more effective and widely embraced, Malaysia should promote a whole-of-community approach, engaging not only governments but also the private sector, academia, and civil society. Broad-based participation will help embed these initiatives within ASEAN's economic and social fabric, strengthening resilience and collective ownership.

Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025 will not be without other challenges. And that is none other than the repercussions of the trade and foreign policies of America under the Trump 2.0 administration. Granted that Trump has declared to the world at large that tariffs will be imposed "on all countries", this is therefore not a problem germane only to ASEAN. But the chairmanship arrives at a critical juncture – when ASEAN must prove that it is not only relevant but capable of leading amid uncertainty. With a legacy of moderation, a track record of constructive diplomacy and a clear-eyed view of regional dynamics, Malaysia has the wherewithal to shape a compelling narrative of renewal. One that reaffirms ASEAN's centrality and cohesiveness while reimagining its role in a fast-evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.

As the region looks ahead to 2045, the year of ASEAN's centenary, Malaysia's leadership in 2025 could mark a turning point—from a reactive bloc to a more proactive and purpose-driven community.

# COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Established in 1993, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is the premier Track Two organisation in the Asia Pacific region and counterpart to the Track One processes dealing with security issues, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum. It provides an informal mechanism for scholars, officials and others in their private capacities to discuss political and security issues and challenges facing the region. It provides policy recommendations to various intergovernmental bodies, convenes regional and international meetings and establishes linkages with institutions and organisations in other parts of the world to exchange information, insights and experiences in the area of regional political-security cooperation. [www.cscap.org](http://www.cscap.org)

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## LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

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