

ASEAN POLITICAL SECURITY COMMUNITY – A LONG TERM VISION

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Abstract. In the first decade of the 21st century, ASEAN, the oldest and most successful Asian organization, decided to deepen cooperation between the member countries by creating several pillars, one of which was ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC). This Community aims to intensify cooperation in the political and security fields, the most sensitive areas of inter-state cooperation. The documents adopted by ASEAN on the APSC present a vision through which Southeast Asia can become a peaceful, stable and secure region, regardless of changes in the international system, based on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. But, even after these documents were signed, Thailand and Cambodia reignited their historical armed conflict at their disputed border. This conflict undermines the construction that all ASEAN countries, including the two in conflict, want to achieve by the year 2045.

Keywords: *ASEAN; ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC); Thailand – Cambodia Conflict*

ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) is one of the three pillars of ASEAN, alongside the Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community. It was announced by the “Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)” in 2003, then it was developed in the Charter of the ASEAN adopted in 2007 and in the ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint, a document adopted in 2009. This dimension of ASEAN was established in an international context in which the competition between the great powers intensified in Southeast Asia. “Southeast Asia is at the centre of the interregional logistical scramble encapsulated in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the American Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), both of which build on the region’s demographic, economic, and geostrategic potential. Consequently, Southeast Asia (ASEAN) is being put on a collision course between the People’s Republic of China and the U.S. and their respective like-minded countries (including Australia, India, and Japan).”¹

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¹ Agata W. Ziêtek, Grzegorz Gil, “ASEAN in a Changing World. Introduction”, in Agata Wiktorja Ziêtek, Grzegorz Gil (eds.), *ASEAN in a Changing World*, Berlin, Peter Lang GmbH, 2021, p. 9.

ASEAN, an organization of the ten Southeast Asian states – established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, which were later joined by Brunei in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999 – was created with the main aim to encourage the regional cooperation between the member states in different fields, especially the economic one, and to promote peace and stability in the region, in the context of the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War, the economic dimension of cooperation was developed through several instruments, such as AFTA (ASEAN Free Trade Area) and Chiang Mai Agreement, the last one being adopted after the 1997 Asian financial crisis that affected the ASEAN member states. ASEAN became one of the most successful regional economic cooperation zone that followed its own path, because it took into account the development level of each member state, their cultural backgrounds or the differences between their political structures. The political and security dimension of ASEAN was developed in parallel with the economic dimension, even if it had a slower pace. ASEAN is an inter-governmental organization, this character being maintained until today, so it “is known to operate mostly through meetings among member states representatives, rather than as an independent body of autonomous bureaucrats.”²

ASEAN is a regional international organization, a “formal institution, created by international treaties.”³ As an international organization, ASEAN was also “created by the commitments made by sovereign states, and their purpose is to bind those states to their commitments.”⁴ There are three forces that action in an international organization: “the commitments states make to international organizations, the choices states make regarding compliance and non-compliance with those commitments, and the powers of enforcement held by each international organization.”⁵ The resulting actions of these forces provide the measure of the cohesion of an organization, that is, the extent to which the principles, policies and strategies of an organization are followed by all member states to achieve common goals, stated in the signed documents. We will pursue ASEAN coherence in the APSC dimension, the pillar created to maintain peace and security in the region.

Building the Political-Security Dimension of ASEAN

A political and security dimension of ASEAN has existed since the organization’s creation, the ASEAN Declaration of 1967, affirming the founding states’ intention to “promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence

² Ceren Ergenç, *ASEAN as a Method. Re-centering Processes and Institutions in Contemporary Southeast Asian Regionalism*, London & New York, Routledge, 2021, p. 2.

³ Anna Van der Vleuten and Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann, “The politics of inter-regionalism: relations between international regional organizations”, in Bob Reinalda (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Organization*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 430.

⁴ Ian Hurd, *International Organizations. Politics, Law, Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

to the principles of the United Nations Charter.”⁶ The beginnings of the political alliance between the five founding states were modest, with minimal cooperation between them, but ASEAN “soon became a central figure in the broader Asia Pacific region”⁷, and based on two political dimensions promoted in international and regional relations during the Cold War. The first dimension was the association with the non-alignment movement initiated by the Bandung Conference (Indonesia) in 1955, and the second dimension was that “ASEAN accompanied the regional states through their state-building processes”⁸, the vast majority of which were countries with a short history as independent states.

The political dimension of ASEAN, however, became much more pronounced after the accession of all the countries that are now members and after the end of the Cold War. It has experienced a gradual and staged development, reflected in the programmatic documents that the organization has adopted and based on the principles that have constantly guided it since its creation. The 1997 ASEAN Vision 2020, a document adopted in Kuala Lumpur, in December 1997, spoke, for the first time, of “a concert of Southeast Asian nations”, seen as a “zone of peace, freedom and neutrality”.⁹ The document also addressed one of the thorniest issues facing the region, namely territorial border disputes that hindered cooperation between ASEAN states. Thus, the document stated that ASEAN aimed to become by 2020 “a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, as envisaged in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 1971. ASEAN shall have, by the year 2020, established a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia where each nation is at peace with itself and where the causes for conflict have been eliminated, through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and through the strengthening of national and regional resilience. We envision a Southeast Asia where territorial and other disputes are resolved by peaceful means.”¹⁰ This was an extremely ambitious goal, which expresses the intention of the member countries to strengthen their collaboration with the aim of transforming the region into a model of cooperation for other regions of the world.

The most important document for the development of the political and security dimension in ASEAN was “Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)”, adopted by the Heads of State/Government at the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia on 7 October 2003. This declaration announces for the first time the creation of the ASEAN Community that “shall be established comprising three pillars, namely political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation that are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing for the purpose of ensuring durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region.”¹¹ The document details the goals and principles that underpinned the

⁶ “1967 ASEAN Declaration”, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1967-ASEAN-Declaration-1.pdf>.

⁷ Ceren Ergenç, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ “1997 ASEAN Vision 2020”, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1997-ASEAN-Vision-2020-1-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ “2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)”, <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/declaration-of-asean-concord-ii-bali-concord-ii/>.

ASEAN Security Community. So, “The ASEAN Security Community is envisaged to bring ASEAN’s political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment. The ASEAN Security Community members shall rely exclusively on peaceful processes in the settlement of intra-regional differences and regard their security as fundamentally linked to one another and bound by geographic location, common vision and objectives.”¹² It was recognized “the sovereign right of the member countries to pursue their individual foreign policies and defence arrangements and taking into account the strong interconnections among political, economic and social realities, subscribes to the principle of comprehensive security as having broad political, economic, social and cultural aspects in consonance with the ASEAN Vision 2020 rather than to a defence pact, military alliance or a joint foreign policy.”¹³

The ASEAN Security Community was created on the principle of comprehensive security, a large concept that includes both military and non-military threats. “It is an expanded security concept that goes beyond the traditional preoccupation with military threats to national security to include political, economic and socio-cultural issues.”¹⁴ The comprehensive security concept is very well adapted to the Southeast Asia, a region where the challenges to security are very diverse, including traditional and non-traditional issues: political instability, the rivalry between the great powers, inters-state disputes, terrorism, drug trafficking, pandemic, natural disasters, displaced populations, etc. The comprehensive security concept has been the core of the ASEAN Political Security Community, stated in all its subsequent programmatic documents.

“Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)” was followed by the “2004-2010 Vientiane Action Programme”¹⁵, a new programmatic document adopted by ASEAN in 2004, which sets out the goals and strategies for achieving an ASEAN Security Community. This community was to be “subscribes to the principle of comprehensive security, which acknowledges the strong interdependencies of the political, economic and social life of the region. Thus, it views political and social stability, economic prosperity, and equitable development as strong foundations for the ASEAN Community, and will accordingly pursue programmes that will build on these foundations.”¹⁶ The Security Community was to be developed on the basis of five strategic directions: political development, norm-setting and sharing, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, the implementation of which would focus on actions that could be achieved by 2010.¹⁷

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ Mely Caballero-Anthony, Lina Gong, “Beyond Securitization: Governing NTS Issues in Southeast Asia”, in *Non-traditional security issues in ASEAN: agendas for action*, edited by Mely Caballero-Anthony and Lina Gong, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, p. 4.

¹⁵ “2004-2010 Vientiane Action Programme”, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2004-2010-Vientiane-Action-Programme-1.pdf](https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2004-2010-Vientiane-Action-Programme-1.pdf).

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

In 2007, at the Singapore Summit, the ten-member states adopted the Charter of ASEAN¹⁸, one of the most important programmatic document that deepens the cooperation between the Southeast Asia states. It established “an ASEAN Community, comprising the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community”¹⁹. In this document, ASEAN states stated that are “committed to intensifying community building through enhanced regional cooperation and integration, in particular by establishing an ASEAN Community comprising the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, as provided for in the Bali Declaration of ASEAN Concord II.”²⁰ Among the fifteen goals that the organization proposed were those that concerned the ASEAN Security Community: “To maintain and enhance peace, security and stability and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region; To enhance regional resilience by promoting greater political, security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation; To preserve Southeast Asia as a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone and free of all other weapons of mass destruction; To ensure that the peoples and Member States of ASEAN live in peace with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment.”²¹ The achievement of these objectives was to be based on several principles assumed by the member countries, which they committed to promote in their relations with each other and in international relations in general, including: “respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all ASEAN Member States; shared commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity; renunciation of aggression and of the threat or use of force or other actions in any manner inconsistent with international law; reliance on peaceful settlement of disputes; non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States; national respect for the right of every Member State to lead its existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion; enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting the common interest of ASEAN etc.”²²

The ASEAN Charter officially changed the name of the organization’s first pillar from the ASEAN Security Community to the ASEAN Political Security Community. “This was not a mere change of name, but rather reflected the recognition that ASEAN security cooperation was inseparable from political cooperation. This recognition had deepened through the series of discussions that began with the Indonesian concept paper, continued through the Bali Concord II, the Vientiane Action Programme, and the ASC Plan of Action, and culminated with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007.”²³

¹⁸ “Charter of the ASEAN”, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Shoji Tomotaka, “ASEAN Political Security Community: Development of Multilateral Cooperative Frameworks and Further Challenges”, *Security & Strategy*, Vol. 3 (January 2023), p.103, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/security/pdf/2023/01/09.pdf>.

Starting in 2009, ASEAN established specific long-term plans for APSC, consistent with the adoption of new programmatic documents of the ASEAN Community which also set up the specific development milestones of this pillar. ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, adopted in 2009, “is a principled document, laying out the activities needed to realise the objectives of the ASEAN Political Security Community” and “provides a roadmap and timetable to establish the APSC by 2015”.²⁴ The document stated that “the ASEAN Political-Security Community envisages the following three key characteristics: a) A Rules-based Community of shared values and norms; b) A Cohesive, Peaceful, Stable and Resilient Region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security; and c) A Dynamic and Outward-looking Region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world.”²⁵ As an action-oriented document, ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint stated principles and actions in different areas like good governance, protection of human rights, democracy, peace and stability in the region, peace and stability in South China Sea, or conflict prevention/confidence building measures. The last area was very important for the member states and the organization itself, because only in peace and understanding between them, the region and all its entities could develop. So, for conflict prevention, the most important instruments were considered confidence building measures and preventive diplomacy. “They mitigate tensions and prevent disputes from arising between or among ASEAN Member States, as well as between ASEAN Member States and non-ASEAN member countries. They will also help prevent the escalation of existing disputes.”²⁶

The next document, ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025, was adopted in 2016 and it intended “to elevate ASEAN political and security cooperation to an even higher level.”²⁷ This document was consequent to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, a strategic document adopted by the heads of States or Governments in 2015 that charted the future directions for ASEAN for the next decade and expressed the purposes and the principles for all the ASEAN Communities, including ASEAN Political-Security Community. This Community was built on the basis on principles, values and norms that were shared by all Member States, such as “a rules-based community”, “an inclusive and responsive community”, “tolerance and moderation”, “peace and stability”, “unity and cohesiveness”, “friendly and mutually beneficial relations”.²⁸

ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 was a document that shifted its focus on people, being a “people-oriented” and a “people-centred” paper, with the key characteristics adapted consequently: “1. A rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred community bound by fundamental principles,

²⁴ “ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint”, 2009, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.myasean2025.my/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/APSC_BluePrint.pdf.

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ “ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025”, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ASEAN-APSC-Blueprint-2025.pdf.

²⁸ “ASEAN Community Vision 2025”, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf.

shared values and norms, in which our peoples enjoy human rights, fundamental freedoms and social justice, embrace the values of tolerance and moderation, and share a strong sense of togetherness, common identity and destiny; 2. A resilient community in a peaceful, secure and stable region, with enhanced capacity to respond effectively and in a timely manner to challenges for the common good of ASEAN, in accordance with the principle of comprehensive security; 3. An outward-looking community that deepens cooperation with our external parties, upholds and strengthens ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture, and plays a responsible and constructive role globally based on an ASEAN common platform on international issues; and 4. A community with strengthened institutional capacity through improved ASEAN work processes and coordination, increased effectiveness and efficiency in the work of ASEAN Organs and Bodies, including a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat, as well as with increased ASEAN institutional presence at the national, regional and international levels.”²⁹ For the first time in its history, the role for ASEAN institutions, like Chair of ASEAN, APSC Council or the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, were highlighted with the aim to “strengthen mechanisms under the ASEAN Political-Security Community”.³⁰ In this document too, to promote confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy activities were considered essential to “resolve differences and disputes by peaceful means, in accordance with the ASEAN Charter and principles of international law.”³¹

In 2025, the strategic and programmatic documents of ASEAN were extended. The ASEAN Summit held in May 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, adopted a new vision for the next two decades, “ASEAN Vision 2045. Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN”³². This strategic document developed the last strategic document on the base on evaluations of the progress of all three communities. In the same time, the vision for 2045 aimed to adapt the ASEAN strategy for evolving international and regional context, characterized by the escalating great powers rivalries, and to give the organization the instruments needed to face the challenges of the 21st century, so it can maintain its resilience and relevance in the international politics.

For the political-security dimension of the organization, the document states the goals and the principles and reaffirms that the ASEAN will be a “A peaceful, stable and secure region based on the fundamental principles as enshrined in the ASEAN Chart” and a “A Community that sustains and reinforces its centrality through ASEAN-led mechanisms and other relevant platforms” etc.³³

In the same Summit in Kuala Lumpur, in the same day, 26 May 2025, ASEAN adopted strategic plans for each community, including “ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan”. This document represents a new step for the political

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² “ASEAN Vision 2045. Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN”, <https://asean.org/asean-community-vision-2045-resilient-innovative-dynamic-and-people-centred-asean/>.

³³ *Ibidem.*

and security integration – in a Southeast Asia meaning – of the member states. It contains nine strategic goals for the next two decades that “shall be pursued in a holistic manner, which allows for greater synergy and coordination across sectors under the APSC Pillar, as well as with the other Community Pillars and ASEAN Connectivity, where relevant.”³⁴ The nine strategic goals were: a peaceful, stable and secure region; a Community that sustains and reinforces its centrality; a Community that is able to project ASEAN position on regional and global issues; an ASEAN that remains a primary driving force in shaping the regional architecture and contributes towards a rules-based international order amidst geopolitical tensions and rivalries; an ASEAN that is a contributor to the maintenance of international peace and security through upholding the rules-based multilateral system and international law; a Southeast Asia that is a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, and free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction; an ASEAN with shared commitment to maintaining and promoting peace, security and stability in the region, as well as to the peaceful resolution of disputes; a Community that pursues the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through concrete projects and activities; an inclusive and cohesive Community that respects political, social, religious, cultural, ethnic diversities, which upholds the principles of democracy, rule of law and good governance, and respects fundamental freedoms, promotes and protects human rights, and promotes social justice.³⁵ Each strategic goal had clear objectives and specific strategic measures for its successful and fully implementation in the next twenty decades.

“ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan” also contains provision regarding the institutional strengthening so that the Political-Security Community to be “anchored on ASEAN Centrality with enhanced institutional capacity and effectiveness, with ASEAN organs, bodies and mechanisms that are more decisive, responsive and timely as well as future-ready in addressing global and regional challenges, supported by a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat, with effective cross-sectorial and cross-pillar coordination, and sufficient ASEAN funding towards realising the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.”³⁶ The plan had four objectives with specific strategic measures for transforming the institutional capacity of ASEAN Political-Security Community in a structure more effective and more adapted to the challenges of the organization.

The ASEAN Political-Security Community was created and developed on the two major ideas, ASEAN Way and ASEAN Centrality, which implied an integration of the Southeast Asia states on an intergovernmental basis. The Southeast Asia states consider that this model of integration was proper for them, in a region with a complicated history and with many disputes resulting from the colonial period. Their desire to construct a Community which could contribute to the settlement of these disputes and to give the region a specific identity in the regional

³⁴ “ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan”, <https://asean.org/asean-political-security-community-strategic-plan/>.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

and international relations was stated in all the strategic and programmatic documents of the organization. But this wasn't an easy task and rather a commitment of the member states to work together and for a long time in the same direction, for building a region of peace and stability, of diplomacy and peaceful resolutions of disputes. "ASEAN chose «not to change» itself in the face of internal and external changes, and sought to overcome the stormy seas of the international community using the wisdom it had cultivated as a regional cooperation organization that had than thirty years."³⁷

The APSC has often been criticized "as ineffective in its efforts to uphold regional peace and security due to the intricate nature of the challenges involved and the absence of a robust organizational framework within ASEAN."³⁸ On the other hand, it was recognized that the APSC made a major contribution to stabilizing the region and reducing the number of conflicts and disputes in the region. Eliminating the causes of all these conflicts is a difficult and long-term task. But APSC and the benefits it brings to all its member states played an important role in resolving conflicts that arose in recent years.

The Conflict between Thailand and Cambodia

On July 24, 2025, less than two months after the signing of the latest APSC political and strategic documents, an armed conflict broke out between Thailand and Cambodia, both ASEAN members. The cause was a historical border dispute that the two states have over ancient temples and the territories surrounding them. Similar conflicts took place between 2008 and 2011, resulting in casualties and population displacements, all of which have their roots in a centuries-old cultural rivalry and colonial treaties that have marked the history of the two states.

The 2025 conflict was the latest in a series of conflicts that marked Southeast Asia after World War II – a period when ASEAN had a smaller number of member states – and which transformed it into the "Balkans of Asia."³⁹ The number of such conflicts decreased significantly after the end of the Cold War, a process that took place in parallel with the entry of other countries in the region into ASEAN, with some leaders in the area seeking precisely to avoid the "balkanization" of Southeast Asia, as stated by one of the leaders considered to be among the five founding fathers of ASEAN, the Singaporean leader S. Rajaratnam.⁴⁰

ASEAN's reaction to the Cambodian-Thai border conflict in July 2025 was swift. Foreign Ministers of ASEAN states adopted a statement in 27 July, stating the "deeply concerned over the ongoing situation at the border areas between the

³⁷ Shoji Tomotaka, *loc. cit.*, p. 103.

³⁸ Khoirunnisa Khoirunnisa, "Toward a Political-Security Community in Southeast Asia. Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects", in World Century Publishing Corporation and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2023, pp. 1-26, DOI: 10.1142/S237740023500136.

³⁹ Agata W. Ziêtek, Grzegorz Gil, *loc. cit.*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ "The Founding of ASEAN" (part 2), <https://asean.org/the-founding-of-asean/the-founding-of-asean-part-2/>.

Kingdom of Cambodia and the Kingdom of Thailand which have resulted in increasing number of casualties on both sides and destruction of public properties, as well as displacement of a large number of people along the border areas.”⁴¹ They “emphasise the need for both sides to exercise maximum restraint and undertake an immediate ceasefire, and refrain from taking any actions that may undermine it. We further urge both sides to cease all hostilities, return to the negotiating table to restore peace and stability, and settle disputes and differences by peaceful means, based on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the ASEAN Charter, as well as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and in the spirit of ASEAN family, unity and good neighbourliness.”⁴² They also express their support for the ASEAN Chair, held by Malaysia, for facilitating the dialogue between the two states and for stopping the fighting. This was the consequence of Thailand position that insists on bilateral talks for a ceasefire that has limited the organization’s mediating role, including ASEAN itself.

In this situation, Malaysia took the lead role for mediating between Thailand and Cambodia. Just like in any other regional conflicts, the great powers were also present, the United States and China being the most interested in finding a solution to this conflict. On 28 July 2025, a ceasefire was announced between the two countries following negotiations mediated by the three states. The ceasefire declaration was renewed on 7 August 2025, after many rounds of negotiations that took place in the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. The full Joint Press Statement that was published on the same day stated that the both sides agreed on many points, including “a ceasefire involving all types of weapons”, “not to undertake provocative actions that may escalate tensions”, “promptly consult at the local level through existing bilateral mechanisms to prevent the situation from escalating along the entire border”, “agreed to refrain from disseminating false information or fake news in order to de-escalate tensions”, etc.⁴³ Most important from our perspective was the fact that the two states in conflict accepted the implication of ASEAN in the ceasefire process. So, they accepted the formation of a Regular Border Committee (RBC) and “agreed to assign the respective RBCs to carry out the implementation of the ceasefire coordinated and observed by the ASEAN observer team led by Malaysia.”⁴⁴

The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord was signed in October 2025, in the capital of Malaysia, during the 47th ASEAN Summit, after more than two months of intense negotiations. The document was co-signed by the Anutin Charnvirakul, the Thailand prime minister, Hun Manet, the Cambodia prime minister, in the presence of the Malaysia prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and the US president Donald Trump. The Peace Accord contains several provisions, including some

⁴¹ “ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute”, <https://asean.org/asean-foreign-ministers-statement-on-thailand-cambodia-border-dispute/>.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ “Thailand, Cambodia agree on 13 key points to implement ceasefire agreement”, *The Nation*, August 07, 2025, <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/asean/40053719>.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

measures for “de-escalating tensions and restoring confidence and mutually beneficial relations between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Kingdom of Thailand”, including their “commitment to the settlement of border dispute and border demarcation through peaceful means and international law, refraining from the threat or use of force or any acts of provocation”⁴⁵. The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord enjoyed great international support, with hopes for a final resolution to the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. But some incidents that appeared at the common border, in the next months, prove the fragility of this accord.

In November 2025, Thailand suspended the Peace Accord after two of its soldiers were injured in a land mine explosion along the common border. In the following days, were reported another incident, including gunfire that injured some Cambodian civilians. Another incident, this time on a larger scale, was in December 2025, with both states accusing each other of opening fire on the other state’s armed forces. The confrontation, which included airstrikes, lasted several days. The prime minister of Malaysia and the US president got involved again, mediating a new ceasefire. These kinds of armed incidents can occur anytime if the roots of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict don’t find a lasting solution.

The conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, especially that of July 2025, was marked with the violence of the military confrontation and highlighted two important aspects from the perspective of regional cooperation. First, the two countries, members of ASEAN, violated all the programmatic documents of the organization that they had signed – the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025, ASEAN Vision 2025, ASEAN Vision 2045, etc. – documents that stated, among other things, that maintaining peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts are among the primary goals of the Community. Neither of the two states assumed responsibility for the start of the confrontation, each time they blamed the other state, but they actually violated the documents listed above by continuing military hostilities.

Second, this conflict both challenges and undermines what has been called the “ASEAN Way”, a distinct diplomatic approach that has been established as such in international relations. “The ASEAN Way emphasizes the inviolability of the sovereign independence of its member states at a discursive level... in principle, ASEAN as an institution refrains from building a bureaucratic structure in order to avoid a clash of institutional interests between the organization and its member states.”⁴⁶ The ASEAN Way has been characterized as a “diplomatic method” based on four major principles: non-interference, quiet diplomacy, non-use of force and decision-making through consensus, and has enshrined ASEAN’s approach in the region with the aim of creating a climate of peace and

⁴⁵ “Joint Declaration by the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand on the outcomes of their meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia”, The White House, October 26, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/10/joint-declaration-by-the-prime-minister-of-the-kingdom-of-cambodia-and-the-prime-minister-of-the-kingdom-of-thailand-on-the-outcomes-of-their-meeting-in-kuala-lumpur-malaysia/>.

⁴⁶ Ceren Ergenç, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

cooperation among member states and limiting the influence of great powers in the region. “ASEAN Way” is “central to the Southeast Asian diplomatic practices”⁴⁷ since the 1990s.

The conflict also undermined ASEAN’s second fundamental principle, namely “ASEAN Centrality.” The purpose for which this principle-concept was launched was to place the organization at the centre of international politics, considering the strategic role that the region plays in global politics. “The goal (of this concept, n.n.) highlights ASEAN’s emerging role as the ‘hub’ of regional cooperation in Asia-Pacific.”⁴⁸ ASEAN considerably diminishes its chances of being a credible actor in the arrangements that will reshape the security structure in the Asia-Pacific region as long as an armed conflict between two-member states is taking place within the organization. “The continued relevance of ASEAN centrality is its ability to strengthen stability and peace in the broader region. By bringing regional partners around the table and promoting the use of diplomacy as opposed to force, ASEAN has contributed to a more stable regional dynamic.”⁴⁹ This assertion is under question, while two ASEAN member states are in conflict. How can an organization contribute to the regional peace and stability when there is no peace within the organization? On the contrary, ASEAN centrality is diminished in these circumstances. Any conflict, especially armed conflict, between small or medium powers attracts the intervention of great powers with interests in the region, which usually take the leadership in resolving the respective conflict in accordance with their own interests.

The conflict between Thailand and Cambodia has profound implications for ASEAN. It may affect the organization’s ability to be a relevant political and security actor in the region and undermine the very foundations of the APSC. In fact, “the ASEAN has consistently faced criticisms and constantly experienced failures for its inability to completely realize an acceptable and sustainable condition of peace and stability in the entire region. Even the very establishment of the ASEAN Political-Security Community is questioned for its failure to fully organize a rules-based community of shared values and norms where all members of the region take part in maintaining a cohesive, peaceful, stable, and resilient international environment. The promising features of the APSC which are explicit in its Blueprint have failed to materialize and continue to experience struggles.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cheng- Chwee Kuik, Guido Benny and Zikri Rosli, “Linking Local Insights to Global IR Locating Malaysian Contours and Contributions”, in Chanintira na Thalang and Yong-Soo Eun (Editors), *Global International Relations in Southeast Asia*, London & New York, Routledge, 2025, p. 93.

⁴⁸ T. Chairil. R. A. A. K. Putri & S. B. Pertiwi, “Road to ASEAN political security community vision 2025: Understanding convergence and divergence in ASEAN voting behaviors in the UNGA”, *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 10(2), 2022, 263-284. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i2.8175>.

⁴⁹ Ponciano S. Intal Jr., Venkatachalam Anbumozhi, and Hank Lim, “ASEAN Present and Future Global and Regional Developments”, in *Collective Leadership, ASEAN Centrality, and Strengthening the ASEAN institutional Ecosystem*, Edited by Simon Tay, Shiro Armstrong, Peter, Drysdale, Ponciano S. Intal Jr., Jakarta, Economic Research institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2019, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Bama Andika, Darwis Putra & Burhanuddin, “ASEAN Political-Security Community: Challenges of establishing regional security in the Southeast Asia”, *Journal of International Studies*, 12(1), 2019, 33-49, doi:10.14254/2071-8330.2019/12-1/2.

These criticisms are exaggerated, however. The process of building an institution, in this case, the APSC, is not always an easy one and is not finalized after the signing of documents. In some cases, it is necessary to experience time and overcome major obstacles that may arise during this process, as in the present case. ASEAN acted quickly in the face of the Cambodian-Thai conflict, which can represent an experience that can help the organization improve its rapid reaction mechanisms, in addition to continuing trust-building policies and preventive diplomacy. The APSC programmatic documents can be improved and completed, so as to provide clear mechanisms not only when a conflict occurs, but also immediately after border incidents are reported – either by involving all member states or by creating a joint rapid reaction body responsible for such cases – in order to prevent them from turning into wider conflicts.

On the other hand, ASEAN can use all its diplomatic tools to help resolve the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand definitively. The signing of a Peace Agreement is only an interim solution that does not guarantee peace, as the armed incidents of the last months of 2025 have demonstrated. A definitive solution can only come through a Peace Treaty between the two countries, which would clearly and definitively delimit the common border.

Conclusions

ASEAN is an organization that is fundamental to the stability of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Built and developed around shared values⁵¹, it has constantly evolved, based on intergovernmental cooperation, which was also the basis for the creation of the APSC. “The foundation of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) is widely seen as a significant stride toward the promotion and preservation of peace in the Southeast Asian region”⁵², the peace in the region being the first aim of this pillar. Institutionalized and developed since 2009, the APSC has a short history, during which it has adopted several programmatic documents through which it has created some mechanisms for managing the political and security relations between member states, among which the most important are trust building and preventive diplomacy. However, these have proven to be insufficient, as the recent conflict between Cambodia and Thailand has proven. A real APSC cannot exist as long as there are armed conflicts between its members. More efforts by the organization and the member states to prevent armed conflicts, to maintain peace in the region and to achieve the major objectives for which the APSC was created can lead to the creation of a viable political and security Community that can represent a model of cooperation between states for the entire world.

⁵¹ See Ioan Voicu, “ASEAN and Universal Values”, in *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, Vol. XX, No. 1, 2023, p. 123, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://2c2e45e5-12d6-4ee7-81f3-41c6c611007c.filesusr.com/ugd/1c5576_2061351b22b844bf6ecf632a3a48c18.pdf](https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://2c2e45e5-12d6-4ee7-81f3-41c6c611007c.filesusr.com/ugd/1c5576_2061351b22b844bf6ecf632a3a48c18.pdf).

⁵² Khoirunnisa Khoirunnisa, *op. cit.*

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