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CSEAS Commentary #47/August 2025

## **ASEAN Was Born in Bangkok. Thailand Now Turns Its Back on It.**

*Chhay Lim and Sokkosol Keo*

When Thai forces crossed into disputed border territory at dawn on 24 July 2025 at dawn, the clash quickly escalated into the worst violence between Thailand and Cambodia in over decades. At least [43 people](#)—some are civilians—were killed, including 12 Thai nationals, and the conflict displaced over [300,000](#) people across both nations.

Mr. Anwar Ibrahim, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the ASEAN's 2025 Chair, calls for restraint and an immediate ceasefire during his phone call conversation with both Cambodian and Thai Prime Ministers. Cambodia embraced the proposal without hesitation, reaffirming its willingness to settle the dispute peacefully through ASEAN's channels. But ASEAN's mediation meant little to Bangkok—Thailand only shifted its position once the United States threatened economic retaliation. At first, Thailand seemed on board as it agreed with Anwar in that phone call. But within hours, Bangkok backtracked, announcing it was “not ready for a ceasefire”. That reversal was no accident. It was a calculated choice to shut the door on ASEAN and deal with its smaller neighbor alone, without outside scrutiny.

The message was reinforced by former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who posted on X: *“Many countries are concerned about the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, offering to help mediate. I thanked everyone but said I’d like to ask for some time. Because we probably need to let the Thai military do their duty to teach Hun Sen a lesson about his cunning ways first.”* Though Thaksin holds no official power today in Thailand, his words reflected a mindset that views force not as a last resort, but as a tool for political messaging.

Thailand's official actions followed that script. On 23 July, one day before the strike, Bangkok recalled its ambassador from Phnom Penh and expelled Cambodia's envoy, one day before the military strike. On 25 July, its Foreign Ministry declared [it needed no mediation](#) — not from ASEAN, not from the United States, not from China. On 29 July, just one day after ASEAN announced a ceasefire agreement in Kuala Lumpur, Thai forces [captured](#) 20 Cambodian soldiers under the pretext of a handshake. Two were later returned in visibly poor condition — one injured, the other reportedly suffering severe trauma. If this is how Thailand behaves under international attention, what would it do behind closed doors?

Cambodia, by contrast, turned to the rulebook. After a Cambodian soldier was killed in a previous clash on 28 May, Phnom Penh [petitioned](#) the International Court of Justice on 15 June. Following the 24 July escalation, Prime Minister Hun Manet [appealed](#) to the United Nations Security Council for an emergency meeting and reaffirmed to Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim that Cambodia was ready for ASEAN-mediated dialogue. Phnom Penh has consistently pursued legal and diplomatic avenues — in line with [Article 2](#) of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which prohibits the use of force, and [Chapter VIII](#) of the ASEAN Charter, which obliges members to settle disputes peacefully.

These commitments are not symbolic; they form the backbone of ASEAN's foundational agreements, including the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II and the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint.

That fact should deeply trouble Southeast Asia. This was not just a rejection of a mediation proposal, but a dismissal of ASEAN's relevance. And when a founding member — the very state that hosted the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok in 1967 — ignores the institution it helped create, it undermines the entire premise of ASEAN unity.

ASEAN's shortcomings in hard security are well known. It has always functioned more as a forum for dialogue than an enforcer of rules. But its principles are not ornamental. They are binding commitments. On the conflict mediation, ASEAN has [stepped in](#) before — including during the 2011 Preah Vihear clashes between Thailand and Cambodia, when it played a mediation role under the Indonesian Chairmanship. The

difference this time is that Thailand rejected ASEAN involvement from the outset—and only shifted its position after the United States, not ASEAN, applied pressure. U.S. President Donald Trump’s threat to cancel trade talks and impose tariffs forced Bangkok to accept the ceasefire under ASEAN mediation. Thailand’s export-driven economy, where international trade accounts for over [65% of its GDP](#), was in no position to absorb punitive tariffs from one of its largest export markets outside Asia. It was Washington’s leverage, not regional consensus, that brought Thailand to the table.

For smaller states, the implications are serious. If ASEAN cannot enforce its own Charter, they are left to face coercion without meaningful regional support. Cambodia is not asking for favors—only that ASEAN uphold the very rules meant to apply equally to all members, regardless of size or strength. Without accountability, ASEAN’s oft-cited language of “peace” and “mutual respect” becomes hollow.

ASEAN has endured crises before by choosing silence. But silence today is enabling, not neutral. The Thailand–Cambodia clash is more than a bilateral fight. It is a test of whether ASEAN still matters in a region where power increasingly dictates outcomes. If ASEAN cannot act when one of its founding members openly defies its commitments, then what assurance does it offer?

For a body born in Bangkok, the irony is stark: ASEAN’s credibility now rests on the restraint of the very state that once championed its founding principles and gave it life.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of their respective institutions or affiliations. The authors gratefully acknowledge peer review and constructive feedback from Nory Ly and Sovitou Long.

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