



Analysing ASEAN Chairmanships in Perspective

Malaysia in 2025 and Future Leadership Outlook
Amid Vision 2045

Dr Prashanth Parameswaran

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Executive Summary

In recent years, multiple Southeast Asian states holding the annually-rotating ASEAN chairmanship have been managing an agenda fraught with a series of global and regional challenges. This paper develops a new GRID framework to explain how ASEAN chairmanship agendas can be assessed over time. This GRID framework argues that the evolving mix of continuity and change can be understood as a product of the dynamic interplay of four factors: (i) the geopolitical environment; (ii) regional developments; (iii) institutional context; and (iv) domestic realities. Applied to Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2025, the framework contextualises the dynamics behind an active and multifaceted agenda that the country has developed and implemented, with a mix of elements of continuity and change across these aspects. Additionally, beyond 2025, there remain outstanding questions about how the regional initiatives being shaped as well as the existing challenges are likely to interact and influence dynamics in the coming years that bear careful watching. This will evolve along with ASEAN's own Community Vision 2045.

Introduction

“This is the kind of groundwork on which lasting security is built,” Malaysia’s Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim proclaimed just after the unveiling of ASEAN’s new twenty-year outlook known as Community Vision 2045 under Malaysia’s chairmanship.¹ Malaysia’s 2025 Chairmanship comes at a time when Southeast Asian countries have been confronting a confluence of stronger geopolitical headwinds, heightening regional flashpoints, a crowded institutional agenda, and a challenging domestic landscape.² These challenges have been visible across the ASEAN Chairmanships over the past few years. As such, it will provide valuable insights not only into the evolving regional agenda, but also how an ASEAN founding member and active global player is navigating this context amid wider shifts.

This paper examines Malaysia’s chair year as a case study within the broader dynamics of rotating ASEAN Chairmanships. It makes three arguments. First, while headlines tend to focus on potential shifts and discontinuities in ASEAN chair years, the evolving mix of continuity and change is better understood as a product of the dynamic interplay of four factors: (i) the geopolitical environment; (ii) regional developments; (iii) institutional context; and (iv) domestic realities. These can be captured via an original GRID framework that analyses the contextual factors shaping individual ASEAN Chairmanships.

Second, applying this GRID framework to Malaysia’s ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 reveals an active and multifaceted agenda, balancing elements of continuity and change. Third, beyond Malaysia’s Chairmanship, it is crucial to consider how the year’s regional agenda will interact and influence the post-2025 regional landscape as future chairmanships proceed under the wider banner of ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

Assessing ASEAN Chairmanships: Contours and Realities

Any assessment of ASEAN Chairmanships should begin by acknowledging the inherently limited and circumscribed nature of the ASEAN Chair. Formally, Articles 31 and 32 of the ASEAN Charter specify that the Member State assuming the Chairmanship will preside over key meetings, and whose role includes: (i) actively enhancing ASEAN interest and well-being; (ii) ensuring ASEAN centrality; (iii) ensuring effective and timely response to urgent issues or crisis situations; (iv) representing

¹ Anwar Ibrahim, “Holding Our Ground: Southeast Asia In A Fractured World,” Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 31 May 2025, https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/statement/content/holding-our-ground-southeast-asia-in-a-fractured-world-speech-by-the-honourable-dato-seri-anwar-ibrahim-prime-minister-of-malaysia-at-the-shangri-la-d?

² For more on this point, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, “Minilateralism, ASEAN Centrality and Indo-Pacific Institutional Flux Amid Strategic Competition,” Wilson Center, 3 April 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/minilateralism-asean-centrality-and-indo-pacific-institutional-flux-amid-strategic>.

ASEAN in promoting ties with external partners; and (v) carrying out other tasks and functions as required.³

In practice, the annual rotation of ASEAN's Chairmanship ensures there is a handover process that allows each Member State to advance its own agenda while also addressing pre-existing priorities and taking into account who will be the succeeding chair. This includes foundational institutional priorities that need to be advanced and even deadlines for the launch of initiatives that may have been delayed. Consensus-based decision making also limits the influence of even the most active ASEAN Chair, which prevents the advancement of agenda items without broad support.

Contextually, given the recent history of ASEAN chairmanships in the current domestic, regional, and global environment, the assessment of any ASEAN Chairmanship should take into account four factors: (i) the general global geopolitical and geoeconomic environment during the chair year; (ii) the regional developments during the chair year; (iii) the evolving institutional agenda and state of play within ASEAN as a grouping; and (iv) the individual domestic circumstances surrounding the Chair itself. These can be summed up via the GRID framework, which examines the global, regional, institutional, and domestic factors affecting an ASEAN Chair during its term. An advanced framework, GRID takes into account the caveat that there are potential overlaps between factors and that not all variables can be neatly categorised.

Table 1. GRID Framework on Evolving ASEAN Chairmanship Dynamics

Component	Focus	Examples
Global	State of the general global geopolitical and geoeconomic environment during chair year	Outbreak of COVID-19 during Vietnam's Chairmanship in 2020; US-China competition during Thailand's 2019 Chairmanship and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific debates and eventual adoption
Regional	Regional context and related dynamics within which a Chairmanship year is occurring	Myanmar coup outbreak during Brunei's 2021 Chairmanship; intraregional tensions over South China Sea between the Philippines and other ASEAN states during Laos' 2024 Chairmanship
Institutional	Evolving state of old and new institutional agenda items within the multispeed ASEAN orbit	Introduction of new ASEAN Maritime Outlook during Indonesia's 2023 Chairmanship; Singapore advancing the regional cyber agenda during its Chairmanship in 2018
Domestic	Domestic context for Chairmanship and effects on areas like theme and logo	Focus on subregional connectivity including for Davao during the Philippines' 2017 Chairmanship under Duterte; Influence of Cambodia's elections and transition on its 2022 Chairmanship

³ASEAN Secretariat, "Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations," Adopted 20 November 2007.

The first row concerns the global geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures during the Member State's chair year. This is critical to keep in mind because the environment can either increase or decrease the room within which the ASEAN Chair can manoeuvre.⁴ For instance, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during Vietnam's chair year in 2020 disrupted Hanoi's agenda for the year, including key engagements meant to commemorate its 25th year as an ASEAN member.⁵ While intensifying US-China competition also consumed Thailand when it chaired in 2019, it helped shepherd the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Some Thai diplomats contend that this contribution is frequently underrecognised in comparison to more proactive Member States like Indonesia.⁶

The second row concerns the regional environment within which the ASEAN Chairman is operating. For instance, the region being consumed by the coup in Myanmar which broke out in 2021 affected Brunei's chair year, including initial efforts to establish the Five Point Consensus and a special envoy office.⁷ Intraregional tensions over the South China Sea also factored into Laos' 2024 chair year, including Philippine perceptions that it was not getting adequate support from fellow ASEAN members amid China's continued assertiveness.⁸ Veteran regional observers noted that some concerns on regional flashpoint management have spilled over into the public domain. This included a delay in the issuance of a joint statement following the August ASEAN ministerial meetings and the absence of a joint statement at the East Asia Summit in October.⁹ Yet, beyond challenges, 2024 also saw some new ideas including Vietnam's convening of the ASEAN Future Forum.

The third row relates to the evolving institutional agenda and state of play. This is an important consideration because an ASEAN Chair plays a role not just in introducing new ideas, but also moving the ball forward on previous initiatives as well. For instance, the introduction of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook under Indonesia's Chairmanship in 2023 as a sectoral stocktaking exercise was an innovative one for the grouping, particularly as it adopted a comprehensive notion of the maritime sector.¹⁰ Singapore also played an important role in advancing the agenda on cybersecurity cooperation during its Chairmanship back in 2018. This included the setting up of a

⁴ For more on this point, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Southeast Asia and US-China Competition: Contours, Realities, and Implications for the Indo-Pacific," Wilson Center, 21 December 2023, https://www.google.com/acik?sa=l&ai=DChcSEwiFuN226reMAxX_m1oFHVujOZIYABABGgJ2dQ&co=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwna6_BhCbARIsALIdZ23YVN7Xd3Bva6rqVxo_x-D8weouXyru6Od0cKcJ2aP1LTfFvM2IKYgaAofUEALw_wcB&sig=AOD64_2FjulKvwesJr-TbwpdUhlGC0BV1w&q&adurl&ved=2ahUKEwj8zcy26reMAxUFF1kFHUJmOu8Q0Qx6BAgREAE

⁵ See for instance: Toru Takahashi, "Vietnam's Lost Year: Coronavirus Dulls Diplomatic Ambitions," Nikkei Asia, 6 April 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Vietnam-s-lost-year-Coronavirus-dulls-diplomatic-ambitions>.

⁶ Author's conversations with Thai diplomats, September 2024; Also see for instance: Thana Boonlert and Kornchanok Raksaseri, "Mixed Year for ASEAN Chair," Bangkok Post, 31 December 2019.

⁷ Author's conversation with Brunei diplomat, July 2024.

⁸ See for instance: Rod McGuirk, "Philippines Urges Neighbors to Stand Together More Strongly Against China in the South China Sea," Associated Press, 4 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/australia-asean-philippines-china-malano-myanmar-4fdb6358b4267d45e1ad45e6d58e6304>.

⁹ See for instance: Kavi Chongkittavorn, "ASEAN's United Front Amid Global Shifts," Bangkok Post, 30 July 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2837993/aseans-united-front-amid-global-shifts>.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO): Indonesia's Initiative to Strengthen Comprehensive ASEAN Maritime Cooperation," 31 August, 2023, <https://www.publicnow.com/view/BC39A3D48C911E94E93293A133E67883F69F053D?1693475138>.

cybersecurity centre as part of broader ASEAN capacity-building efforts with key dialogue partners such as Japan.¹¹

The fourth row concerns the domestic landscape during the chair year, and how those factors may affect the nature of the Chair's involvement. That involvement stretches from proposing what agenda items may be prioritised, down to the logo and theme of that particular chairmanship year. For example, the Philippines' Chairmanship back in 2017 saw the inclusion of granular cross-border and subregional connectivity projects as prioritised by newly-elected President Rodrigo Duterte, including the Davao-General Santos-Bitung route of the ASEAN Roll-on, Roll-off (RO-RO) system.¹² Cambodia's positioning on key issues such as the Russia-Ukraine war and post-coup Myanmar during its 2022 Chairmanship was affected by its upcoming elections and intergenerational regime transition that was set to occur in 2023.¹³

Malaysia's Chairmanship Context in 2025

The application of the above four-part GRID framework indicates that Malaysia's Chairmanship is expected to be an active one. This is unsurprising, given the country's longtime position as a founding ASEAN member as well as the fact that it is being led by a prime minister who is a global thinker with extensive, decades-long cross-continental connections extending to the Middle East, Europe, and the US. While leaders are only one variable in foreign policy formulation, they can certainly exert a significant role in contexts like ASEAN which as former practitioners have noted remains a leader-led, intergovernmental grouping.¹⁴

Yet, this is also a product of the broader geopolitical, regional, institutional, and domestic dynamics under which Malaysia will be assuming the Chairmanship. Some of it was already visible in the many months of behind-the-scenes preparations, including staffing, preparatory meetings, and handovers involving Malaysian government ministries and the ASEAN Secretariat among others.¹⁵ This will continue to play out during Malaysia's chair year in 2025, with hundreds of meetings taking place both in and beyond the country's capital of Kuala Lumpur.

First, in terms of global geopolitics, Malaysia's Chairmanship in 2025 will occur as it seeks to balance strengthening and diversifying its economic and military relationships while preserving its diplomatic space in an increasingly challenging and

¹¹ ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement of the 33rd ASEAN Summit Singapore," 14 November 2018, https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/11/ASEAN_CS_ChairStatement.

¹² ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement of the 31st ASEAN Summit," 13 November 2017, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/final-chairmans-statement-of-31st-asean-summit.pdf>.

¹³ The Nation, "Cambodia cooled 'hot Asean stone' before handing it to Indonesia: Hun Sen," 13 November 2022, <https://www.nationthailand.com/world/asean/40022040>.

¹⁴ See for example: Ong Keng Yong, "Leaders Matter," in ASEAN @ 50 Volume 1: The ASEAN Journey: Reflections of ASEAN Leaders and Officials, ERIA, 13 October 2017.

¹⁵ This includes ministries and clusters of issues, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (cluster including political, defense, and citizenship issues); Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (cluster including economics and trade) and Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (cluster including cultural and social issues).

fragmented international environment.¹⁶ Anwar vividly framed this wider global context early on his premiership during a key speech in August 2023 at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur, where he said that an uncertain “age of flux” with major power rivalry, exclusionary minilaterals, sectoral bifurcations, and conflicts require countries like Malaysia to shape a more diverse, connected world order through various steps including reinforcing ASEAN mechanisms, engaging with other subregions, and leveraging ties with both the US and China.¹⁷ At a special address during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May 2025, he argued that amid this age of flux, ASEAN remains a key part of how Southeast Asia would be “holding our ground,” noting a series of challenges including US tariffs and conflict in Gaza.¹⁸

More broadly, Malaysia will be chairing ASEAN as the grouping seeks to reinforce itself in a geopolitically fragmented world. Malaysia has made strengthening ASEAN centrality a core mission amid anxieties that groupings such as the Quad and the Australia-UK-US may undermine ASEAN's role in the region. ASEAN will also continue pursuing key initiatives such as securing signatories for the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ), and advancing defence-related aspects of the AOIP to address regional sectoral needs through inclusive engagement of dialogue partners. Geopolitics has also been seeping into regional sectoral conversations in areas like undersea cables and critical minerals.

Malaysia has faced some struggles operating in this context. Most notably, Malaysia's US-China balance was initially complicated by its stance on the Israel-Hamas war, hindering prospects for closer strategic ties with Washington. Meanwhile, ties with Beijing continued to advance, marked by President Xi Jinping's visit to the country in April 2025 and Malaysia's growing engagement with BRICS amid Russia's attempt to mitigate its post-Ukraine war isolation.¹⁹

Longer-term dynamics have also grabbed attention. A case in point is advancement in the East Coast Rail Link project, which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative and could contribute to China's long-delayed goal of a pan-Asian railway. Malaysia plays an important role in this context as the only country capable of connecting Beijing's rail developments in mainland Southeast Asia to maritime Southeast Asia via Thailand.²⁰ This is despite the reality that US-Malaysia ties continue

¹⁶ These assumptions are not unique to the Anwar government and indeed were articulated in part in defence and foreign policy frameworks issued in the country's post-2018 policy context. Specifically, the defence white paper and initial foreign policy framework were issued in 2019, with a subsequent foreign policy framework unveiled in 2021.

¹⁷ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, “Keynote Address by YAB Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim Prime Minister of Malaysia at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable,” 10 August 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2023/08/keynote-address-by-yab-dato-sri-anwar-ibrahim-prime-minister-of-malaysia-at-the-36th-asia-pacific-roundtable-apr/>

¹⁸ Anwar Ibrahim, “Holding Our Ground: Southeast Asia In A Fractured World,” Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 31 May 2025, https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/statement/content/holding-our-ground-southeast-asia-in-a-fractured-world-speech-by-the-honourable-dato-seri-anwar-ibrahim-prime-minister-of-malaysia-at-the-shangri-la-d?

¹⁹ Author's conversations with Malaysia officials, April 2025. See: David Han Guo Xiong, “Commemorating 50 Years of Malaysia-China Diplomatic Ties,” RSIS Commentary, 29 August 2024.

²⁰ China Embassy, “Premier Li Qiang Attends Groundbreaking Ceremony for East Coast Rail Link Gombak Integrated Terminal Station with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim,” 19 June 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/index_55.html.

to evolve quietly via inroads in areas like technological investments and maritime security assistance, while Anwar's government further expands ties with a wider array of partners including Quad members Australia, India, and Japan.²¹

These geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics will likely persist during Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship. On the US-China front, the country will be simultaneously holding the role of coordinator for ASEAN-China dialogue relations that it assumed in August 2024, as well as the position of being the first Southeast Asian nation to hold the ASEAN Chair under the administration of US President Donald Trump, whose tariff policies have offered an early sign of its unpredictability. These twin realities potentially bring forth opportunities to shape key relationships and challenges to managing them.

While the exact trajectories of raging conflicts in Europe and the Middle East remain uncertain, they will inevitably draw periodic scrutiny to aspects of Malaysia's engagement. A case in point is the extent of alignment between Malaysia's Chairmanship priorities and aspects of the wider Global South agenda. Malaysian officials including Anwar himself have been among the most active in Southeast Asia in engaging with Global South aspirations, which are being increasingly recognised even in Western or international groupings like the European Union or the United Nations.²² Another priority for Malaysia was a follow-up summit between ASEAN and the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as the first-ever trilateral summit between both groupings and China. Beyond any substantive progress in cross-regional ties which have been difficult to concretise in the past, attention will also be on how this affects Malaysia's own domestic political interests in shoring up ties with states like Saudi Arabia as well as its broader geopolitical positioning on issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Second, by way of the regional environment, Malaysian officials have framed the chair year as an opportunity to strengthen regional solidarity amid unprecedented challenges. This centres on reasserting ASEAN's role as being central to the evolution of Southeast Asia's future in spite of headwinds it is experiencing. Anwar himself has noted that while Malaysia will attempt to "breathe new life" into ASEAN-led forums with a belief that it is critical to "double down on ASEAN," it "will not be easy" to overcome institutional obstacles.²³ Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship is also set against a backdrop of ongoing regional flux. Indonesia, a key neighbour, is forecasted to play a more active international role under President Prabowo Subianto compared to the domestic-focused, economic-centric approach of his predecessor Joko "Jokowi" Widodo. The Philippines, yet another important neighbourhood partner, is also set to chair ASEAN right after Malaysia as Manila seeks to step up its regional and international geopolitical and geoeconomic position.

²¹ Author's conversations with Malaysia diplomats, August-September 2024.

²² For more on this point, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Rising Global South Discontent Amid Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond," Wilson Center, 9 August 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/rising-global-south-discontent-amid-strategic-competition-indo-pacific-and-beyond>.

²³ Anwar Ibrahim, "Navigating Geopolitical Currents: Malaysia and Australia's Pivotal Role in the Asia Pacific," 2024 Gareth Evans Oration at the Australian National University, 7 March 2024, <https://www.isis.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Speech-by-YAB-PM-at-the-ANU-7-March-2024.pdf>.

Looking ahead, Malaysia's foreign minister Mohamad Hasan has described this effort as a push for regional "future-readiness," recognising that the coming years will be a profound test for Southeast Asia in terms of its resilience, shared norms and identity, as well as processes and mechanisms.²⁴ This is important given Malaysia's historical role in contributing to regional mechanisms. These include the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality or ZOPFAN in the 1970s amid US and British withdrawal from Southeast Asia, as well as the development of the East Asia Summit in the 2000s which cemented ASEAN's role as the leading diplomatic convenor in the Indo-Pacific region.

Given its outsized role in both, Malaysia's management of the twin flashpoints of Myanmar and South China Sea will be a critical aspect of its Chairmanship. Malaysia, in addition to historically supporting Myanmar's 1997 ASEAN admission and regional mechanisms for post-coup management, today hosts the largest number of Rohingya refugees in ASEAN and among the highest in the world, with actual numbers believed to exceed the official estimate of over 100,000.²⁵ Beyond the strength of any statements, Malaysia's approach to the Myanmar issue will be evaluated based on metrics we have seen in previous post-coup chair years, including the extent of engagement with actors beyond the junta as well as any opportunities to reinforce ASEAN unity at a time when shifts could occur towards a repeatedly-postponed and likely far from free or fair Myanmar election.²⁶

On the South China Sea, though Malaysia has traditionally adopted a more calibrated position relative to the Philippines, it is nonetheless one of the four ASEAN claimant states and will be simultaneously holding the position of country coordinator for ASEAN-China dialogue relations from 2024 to 2027.²⁷ Under its chairmanship, Indonesia made some effort to revive momentum in ASEAN-China South China Sea talks, including introducing new guidelines to accelerate negotiations for a code of conduct.²⁸ But this also means that the bar for future chairmanships has been raised, despite ongoing concerns about the efficacy of such mechanisms given Beijing's continued violation of the declaration on a code of conduct which was signed back in 2002. On its South China Sea position, Malaysian officials also recognise that they will be doing so under heightened public scrutiny amid evolving inter-claimant dynamics.²⁹ One publicised case in point was the leak of classified information from a China-

²⁴ Minister of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, "Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs Malaysia," United Nations Headquarters New York, 28 September 2024. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/statement-by-y-b-dato-seri-utama-haji-mohamad-bin-haji-hasan-minister-of-foreign-affairs-malaysia-79th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly->

²⁵ See for instance: International Office of Migration, "Countries: Malaysia," 2024; and ASEAN Secretariat, "Joint Communique of the 30th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, 28 July 1997," <https://asean.org/joint-communique-the-30th-asean-ministerial-meeting-amm/>

²⁶ See for instance: The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Junta Boss Promises General Election in 2025," 17 June 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/myanmar-junta-boss-promises-general-election-in-2025.html>.

²⁷ See for instance: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Playing it Safe: Malaysia's Approach to the South China Sea and Implications for the United States," Center for a New American Security, 4 March 2015, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/playing-it-safe-malysias-approach-to-the-south-china-sea-and-implications-for-the-united-states>.

²⁸ ASEAN Secretariat, "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," 4 November 2002.

²⁹ Author's conversation with Malaysian officials, October 2024, <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/>.

Malaysia diplomatic note by a Philippine newspaper.³⁰ Additionally, due to ASEAN's decision to suspend Myanmar from chairing the grouping, the adjusted alphabetical order means the Philippines will be chairing ASEAN in 2026 right after Malaysia, thereby setting up an even more direct, highly-visible contrast of how two claimant states will be managing the South China Sea disputes in an ASEAN Chair context.³¹

Third, with respect to the institutional context, Malaysia is overseeing the implementation of the post-2025 ASEAN Community Vision, which has been developed over time by institutional mechanisms including a high-level task force comprising representatives from Member States. This is significant because this is the first time ASEAN is aiming for a two-decade-long community vision spanning out to 2045, shifting away from its previous single-decade approach. ASEAN, already being the world's fifth-largest economy, is expected to see its gross domestic product reach USD\$4.5 trillion by 2030, which could make it the world's fourth largest geoeconomic actor.³² Substantively, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (ACV 2045) officially released in May 2025 is centred on cross-pillar and institutional issues such as connectivity as well as the three traditional pillars in ASEAN – the ASEAN Political Security Community; ASEAN Economic Community; and ASEAN Sociocultural Community.³³ Symbolically, Malaysia's role in ushering in this new stage of ASEAN community-building holds significance given that the country was also chairman when the previous ASEAN Community Vision in 2015 was forged, paired with a post-2015 roadmap.³⁴ That said, while the ACV 2045 may have been set for unveiling during Malaysia's chair year, as is often the case with such community-building initiatives, components of the Vision and related agenda items have in fact been coming together over the course of several years³⁵ These include the “epicentrum of growth” vision and Bali Concord III during Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship, reflecting Jakarta's active and important role in the evolving vision for ASEAN as a grouping. There is also an upcoming ASEAN infrastructure connectivity masterplan developed across successive ASEAN Chairmanships to replace the one ending in 2025.

Malaysia will also play a role in advancing several key institutional priorities within ASEAN. On the economic integration front, apart from longstanding ones like narrowing the development gap and improving living standards, of particular note in a sectoral sense is the state of the Digital Economic Framework Agreement (DEFA), a multilateral sectoral pact which has the potential to double the value of the digital economy from approximately USD\$1 trillion to USD\$2 trillion by 2030. DEFA, which originally was slated for completion by the end of 2025, is being closely monitored by

³⁰ See for instance: Minister of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, “Leak of Classified Information Related to a Diplomatic Note,” 4 September 2024, <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/leak-of-classified-information-related-to-a-diplomatic-note>.

³¹ Christine Tjandraningsih and Puy Kea, “Philippines to be 2026 ASEAN Chair as No Progress on Myanmar Seen,” Kyodo News, 5 September 2023, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/09/52775f6b0d3a-asean-leaders-to-discuss-myanmar-crisis-south-china-sea-disputes.html>.

³² See for instance: Bernama, “Malaysia Hopes DEFA Can Be Finalized During its ASEAN Chairmanship,” 16 July 2024, <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2318024>

³³ ASEAN Secretariat, “ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future,” May 2025.

³⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Malaysia as ASEAN Chair in 2015: What To Expect,” *The Diplomat*, 22 November 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/malaysia-as-asean-chair-in-2015-what-to-expect/>.

³⁵ The ASEAN, “Beyond 2025: Forging a People-Centered and Resilient Future,” Issue 29, 2023.

companies as a benchmark for the feasibility of a regionwide digital market and as a datapoint regarding Southeast Asia's approach to game-changing digital transformations and technological changes.³⁶ That vision is calibrated with a recognition that Southeast Asian states will also be simultaneously pursuing their own individual digital journeys in aspects such as data flows or other agreements like the first-of-its-kind Digital Economic Partnership Agreement which includes Singapore.³⁷ As Malaysia's trade minister Zafrul Aziz has publicly noted, even as there is competition and differentiation among Southeast Asian countries in areas like semiconductors, "we have to make sure that the growth...is sustainable, inclusive, equitable and resilient, or you will not see ASEAN prosper together."³⁸

Fourth and lastly, on the domestic environment, Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship year is seeing the fusion of internal considerations with its external chairmanship agenda. Anwar's reign since he was sworn in back in November 2022 has seen a period of relative stability in Malaysian domestic politics following a tumultuous phase during which the country saw four prime ministers in four years after the May 2018 elections brought the opposition to power for the first time in its history. This stability enables the prime minister to engage effectively with complex geopolitical issues, utilise his extensive international connections, and leverage regional credibility as a senior statesman. At the same time, Anwar and his team are also keenly aware that domestic metrics like his popularity ratings hinges more on tackling issues like cost of living and employment rather than on major geopolitical issues such as US-China competition or BRICS membership.³⁹ Additionally, the government has already discovered that it needs to adroitly manage foreign policy issues that can quickly become lightning rods in the domestic political arena. Cases in point include the foreign ministry's clarification on Anwar's remarks on energy exploration in the South China Sea upon his return from Beijing in April 2023, as well as the government's defence of the presence of US firms at a key defence exhibition in May 2024 that did not go unnoticed in diplomatic circles.⁴⁰

³⁶ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "DEFA: ASEAN to Leap Forward Its Digital Economy and Unlock \$US2 Tn by 2030," ASEAN Secretariat, 19 August 2023, <https://asean.org/asean-defa-study-projects-digital-economy-leap-to-us2tn-by-2030/>. See also: Google, Temasek and Bain & Company, "e-Conomy SEA 2023," 1 November 2023, <https://www.bain.com/insights/e-conomy-sea-2023/>

³⁷ Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore, "The Digital Economy Partnership Agreement," 2024, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Trade/Digital-Economy-Agreements/The-Digital-Economy-Partnership-Agreement>.

³⁸ Tan Ai Leng, "ASEAN Aims to Conclude Digital Economy Framework in 2025, Attract FDI as Bloc," 9 September 2024, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/international/asean/asean-aims-conclude-digital-economy-framework-2025-attract-fdi-bloc>.

³⁹ Author's conversations with Malaysia officials, October 2024. See for instance: Merdeka Center, "Malaysia State Elections 2023 Voter Survey Highlights," 11 August 2023, <https://merdeka.org/malaysia-state-elections-2023-voter-survey-highlights/>; Ariel Tan, "Anwar Ibrahim's Cabinet Reshuffle: Staying the Course," RSIS Commentary, 19 December 2023, <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CO23186.pdf>; and Nawaljeet Singh Rayar, "Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025," RSIS Commentary, 5 March 2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IP24022.pdf>.

⁴⁰ See for instance: Associated Press, "Malaysian government defends presence of companies that supply weapons to Israel at defense show," 7 May 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/malaysia-israel-arms-suppliers-exhibition-f697eea39d565757ea0f63ddd2dd67d2>; and Minister of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, "Malaysia's Position on the South China Sea," 8 April 2023, <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/malaysia-s-position-on-the-south-china-sea>.

As such, given current dynamics, Malaysian officials have unsurprisingly sought to more strongly align external engagements with domestic priorities in their ASEAN agenda. Malaysia's official chairmanship theme, "Inclusivity and Sustainability", reflects its external approach amid manifold challenges like contestation and climate change while also connecting these themes to the country's domestic positioning as a multiracial and principled country under Anwar's leadership.⁴¹ Anwar has also personally signalled the prioritisation of bridging initiatives such as intensifying ASEAN-GCC+China engagement and continuing to accelerate East Timor's integration into ASEAN.⁴² Visually, Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship logo is centred on its national flower, the hibiscus. The petals represent an inclusive commitment towards stability, peace, and prosperity, and the stigmas represent the Madani core values of sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and care and compassion.⁴³

This has played out with respect to sectors as well. Malaysia's finance ministry has already been publicly positioning the ASEAN Chairmanship as an opportunity to enhance global awareness on the country's tourism sector, with 2026 already being designated "Visit Malaysia Year."⁴⁴ This includes more infrastructure upgrades and skill development alongside other government bodies such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. Malaysia's trade ministry has consistently viewed challenges like inflation or supply chain disruptions as opportunities, including being more aggressive about sending trade missions abroad, leveraging its competitive advantage in areas like semiconductors, and getting more foreign companies to invest in the country.⁴⁵ Malaysia's Deputy Trade Minister Liew Chin Tong has even developed an external pitch to key countries like China as a country defined by "five middles": (i) an indispensable middle in the global supply chain; (ii) a middle ground for businesses from China and the West; (iii) a middle-class societal quest; (iv) a moderate middle of the road approach to ethnicity and religion in a polarised world; and (v) being in the middle of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, Anwar himself has also linked Malaysia's external geoeconomic and geopolitical positioning to his government's Madani Economy Approach, aimed at restructuring the economy and enhancing competitiveness, evidenced by the slogan's prominent display at the country's international airport.

⁴¹ See for instance: V. Sankara, "ASEAN-Malaysia Chairmanship in 2025 Symbolizes Six Core Values of PM Anwar's Malaysia Madani," BERNAMA, 22 October 2024, <https://www.bernama.com/en/world/news.php?id=2355101>.

⁴² Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, "Remarks of YAB Prime Minister at the Handing Over Ceremony of the ASEAN Chairmanship," 11 October 2024, <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2024/10/remarks-of-yab-prime-minister-at-the-handing-over-ceremony-of-the-asean-chairmanship/>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See for example: Bernama, "MOF to Allocate Adequate Funds For Tourism Sector Ahead of ASEAN Chairmanship, VMY 2026," 19 September 2024, <https://asean.bernama.com/news.php?id=2342083>.

⁴⁵ See, for example: Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz, "Global Headwinds: Malaysia's Industries Must 'Go Big or Go Home'," Malay Mail, 8 July 2023, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/07/08/global-headwinds-malaysias-industries-must-go-big-or-go-home-tengku-zafrul-abdul-aziz/78517>. For more general context, see: Leslie Lopez, "PM Anwar Rattles Malaysia's Business Elite with his Wooing of Tesla," Channel News Asia, 11 August 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-tesla-headquarters-selangor-anwar-ibrahim-elon-musk-economic-reform-election-3689991>.

⁴⁶ Liew Chin Tong, "Explaining Malaysia to China: The Five Middles," 1 June 2024, <https://liewchintong.com/2024/06/01/explaining-malaysia-to-china-the-five-middles/>

Of course, as with any ASEAN Chairmanship, there could also be no shortage of unexpected, domestically salient crises or groundbreaking developments that end up dominating attention or consuming Malaysia's Chairmanship. While Anwar's government may be stable for now, the recent history of changing prime ministers suggests that domestic political instability will likely continue to loom in the background. This includes Peninsula Malaysia's ties with the states of Sabah and Sarawak as well as ties between the government and Malaysia's powerful, newly-appointed King Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar from the southern state of Johor.

A terrorist incident in May 2024, linked to the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militant group which has past ties with Al-Qaeda, serves as a reminder of how transnational challenges can emerge unexpectedly even amid the focus on major power competition.⁴⁷ In the case of Malaysia, anxieties date back to JI's role in past deadly attacks in Indonesia and the Philippines in the 2000s and foiled plots in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, some of which were linked to Malaysian JI leader Noordin Mohammad Top.

On the positive side of the ledger, gains Malaysia make in its ties with key neighbours like Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, or Thailand may yield a more tangible impact domestically than any achievement as the ASEAN Chair. While progress on sensitive border management issues remains confidential until finalised, one example is the game-changing opportunities the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone potentially bring.⁴⁸

The application of the GRID framework to key datapoints to watch during Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 is summarised below. This application suggests that numerous touchpoints are expected to arise during this period. As such, it will be important to monitor not just individual events, but the links and connections they have to the key variables at play.

Table 2. GRID Framework Applied to Malaysia ASEAN Chairmanship Dynamics

Component	General Focus Aspects	Example Areas for Malaysia Chairmanship
Global	State of the general global geopolitical and geoeconomic environment during chair year	State of US-China competition; status of conflicts in Ukraine and Middle East; evolving dynamics in wider Global South; ASEAN-GCC-China summit
Regional	Regional context and related dynamics within	Management of twin regional flashpoints Myanmar and South China

⁴⁷ See for instance: Associated Press, "5 Family Members of Malaysian Man who Attacked Police Station Face Terrorism Charges," 19 June 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/malaysia-attack-police-station-cfe968236c9a489d47f2c6b5ffb01d2b>.

⁴⁸ See for example: Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore, "Malaysia and Singapore Strengthens Economic Connectivity with Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone," 11 January 2024, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2024/01/Malaysia-and-Singapore-strengthens-economic-connectivity-with-Johor-Singapore-Special-Economic-Zone>.

	which a Chairmanship is occurring	Sea; evolving regional dynamics including Indonesia's evolving outlook under Prabowo
Institutional	Evolving state of old and new institutional agenda items within the multispeed ASEAN orbit	Rollout of ASEAN Community Vision 2045; advancing of sectoral inroads in notable growth areas such the digital domain amid challenges
Domestic	Domestic context for Chairmanship and effects on areas like theme and logo	Link of Malaysia's Chairmanship theme to domestic issues; dynamics between Anwar and wider government; potential domestic political instability and distractions

Lingering Post-2025 Questions

Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 is likely to see notable developments with reverberations beyond that year. This fits in with the utilisation of the GRID framework in this paper, which acknowledges that ASEAN Chairmanships are better understood as part of a series of evolving and multifaceted dynamics that occur before, during, and after the chair year. The chief institutional priority is kickstarting the implementation of the new ASEAN 2045 Vision, which will have implications for the regional grouping's strategic direction as it approaches the second half of the 21st century. But the handling of flashpoints like the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, the management of intensifying major power competition, and sectoral inroads in areas like the digital economy are also notable areas where Malaysia's impact is likely to endure beyond 2025. At the same time, irrespective of what Malaysia alone is able to accomplish during its Chairmanship in 2025, bigger questions remain for ASEAN as a grouping. Notably, three key areas are expected to be of significant focus for ASEAN Chairmanships beyond Malaysia's tenure in 2025.

The first is how ASEAN seeks to relate to a changing Asia and world. The grouping remains engaged regionally and globally, as evidenced by continued development of the AOIP and links being forged with groupings like the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the United Nations. Malaysia has also previously indicated that it intends to continue to build on these collaborations, be it through intensifying ASEAN engagement with Gulf countries or evaluating ongoing efforts to expand partnerships to other regions including the South Pacific.⁴⁹

But more broadly, the understandable mainstreaming of the AOIP into concrete, functional areas like maritime issues, connectivity, and sustainability will need to be paired with adroit management of major power competition so that geopolitics can be productively leveraged to make tangible inroads. While the initial AOIP areas are a good start, critical sectoral domains such as semiconductors and critical minerals are of consequence, where fears are spreading about a regional "slow race to the bottom"

⁴⁹ Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, "Keynote Address by YAB Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim Prime Minister of Malaysia at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable," 10 August 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2023/08/keynote-address-by-yab-dato-sri-anwar-ibrahim-prime-minister-of-malaysia-at-the-36th-asia-pacific-roundtable-apr/>.

rather than a “quick race to the top.”⁵⁰ Even forward-leaning ASEAN officials concede that in reality less than a handful of ASEAN states can be characterised as being actively involved in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Islands today, which underscores the additional effort needed to establish meaningful extraregional connectivity. Some of this will require reinforcement by individual Member States, with a case in point being the Philippines which has tried to advance a bid for a UN non-permanent member seat in 2027-2028.⁵¹

The second is ASEAN's ability to strengthen itself institutionally within and beyond its ongoing community-building process. The charting of the new 2045 vision formally declared during Malaysia's Chairmanship does indicate greater flexibility on ASEAN's part in moving away from its traditional three-pillar system -- political-security, economic, and socio-cultural -- established under the 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) and acknowledging the growing importance of other aspects including connectivity and institutional strengthening. The extended timeline to 2045, with a planned 2035 midterm review and ongoing assessments of individual strategic plans, calibrates short-term flexibility with long-term focus, suggesting that future visions are likely to be shaped by key founding members, as has been the case in the past.

At the same time, Anwar himself has warned that pushing through institutional reform can be difficult due to what he publicly characterised as a “degree of inertia” and “deep-seated conservatism.”⁵² One lingering structural challenge is that despite doubling in size and positioning itself as an Indo-Pacific diplomatic convenor, ASEAN has not been able to chart out a sustainable way to flexibly adjust mechanisms such as consensus-based decision making on major, sensitive flashpoints like the South China Sea. As a result, claimant states like Malaysia are often subject to haggling over ASEAN-wide statements when the grouping is chaired by non-claimants. Another is that beyond the institution itself, ASEAN has also still yet to address the reality that it remains a largely elite-driven grouping despite multiple calls over the years for a more people-centred community. Malaysia is not exempt from this challenge. For instance, one past ASEAN poll showed that Malaysians ranked the second-lowest among the five founding members in terms of citizen self-identification as ASEAN citizens.⁵³

The last is the willingness of individual Member States to continue to advance the broader regional agenda while also understandably realising their narrower domestic interests. We may see some minor manifestations of this during Malaysia's Chairmanship beyond individual instances like statement wording on ongoing Middle East dynamics, GCC engagement, or the Madani Economy concept. Yet, the more serious challenge faced by some Member States in crafting broader connections between domestic and regional interests is one that has been repeatedly noted by

⁵⁰ Author's conversation with Vietnam official, September 2024.

⁵¹ Jon Viktor D. Cabuenas, “PH Makes Case for UN Security Council Seat,” GMA Network, 29 September 2024, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/921985/ph-makes-case-for-un-security-council-seat/story/>.

⁵² Anwar Ibrahim, “Navigating Geopolitical Currents: Malaysia and Australia's Pivotal Role in the Asia Pacific,” 2024 Gareth Evans Oration at the Australian National University, 7 March 2024, <https://www.isis.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Speech-by-YAB-PM-at-the-ANU-7-March-2024.pdf>.

⁵³ ASEAN Secretariat, “Poll on ASEAN Awareness 2018,” December 2019, <https://asean.org/poll-on-asean-awareness-2018/>.

longtime ASEAN practitioners such as Indonesia's former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa.⁵⁴

While this consideration tends to diminish when the ASEAN Chairmanship is held by relatively bigger members like Malaysia in 2025, it is likely to resurface in the 2030s where the rotating alphabetical order returns to the first half with Member States like Cambodia or Laos. Cambodia's new leadership has articulated a explicit focus on boosting its domestic economic prospects, even if it means exiting subregional groupings or heightening concerns among neighbours like Thailand or Vietnam.⁵⁵ At the same time, Cambodian officials privately acknowledged that Phnom Penh needs institutions like ASEAN and subregional conceptions like the Mekong subregion to plug into a wider growth story because it is otherwise a market of only under 20 million. The balance between domestic realities and the regional agenda will also be an important consideration for East Timor should it be admitted fully into ASEAN and holds its inaugural Chairmanship. Dili's likely need for greater capacity-building will not be unique to it, as witnessed by the needs sought by Laos even for its 2024 Chairmanship which was its third iteration since joining ASEAN.

Conclusion

Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship is just the latest in a series of chair years where Southeast Asian states have been confronting multifaceted challenges across geopolitical, regional, institutional, and domestic realms captured in the original GRID framework presented in this paper. As such, Malaysian officials emphasise "expectations management" as a key strategy in its approach to the upcoming chairmanship both in internal policy formulation and external stakeholder communication. This includes careful calibration between articulating an ambitious yet focused agenda while also ensuring that there is clear understanding of what can be reasonably accomplished in a single year and what success may look like.

Yet as previous ASEAN Chairmanships have shown, Malaysia's Chairmanship in 2025 will also be assessed not just on how it manages the institutional agenda, but also how it grapples with unexpected challenges and dynamics and sets the stage for its own priorities to be developed and sustained under the Chairs that come after it. And while there may be a tendency to focus on Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship as an expression of its wider foreign policy outlook under Anwar, the contested nature of domestic politics over the past few years should also reinforce the importance of focusing on the connections between internal and external dynamics in 2025 and beyond. This will apply as well to future ASEAN chairs as they navigate their own mix of opportunities and challenges within the broader banner of ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

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⁵⁴ Marty Natalegawa, *Does ASEAN Matter?: A View From Within* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018).

⁵⁵ Niem Chheng, "Cambodia Withdraws From CLV-DTA to 'Put Out Fire'," Phnom Penh Post, 21 September 2024, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-withdraws-from-clv-dta-to-put-out-fire->.

About the Author

Dr Prashanth Parameswaran is the founder of ASEAN Wonk newsletter which produces analysis on Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific geopolitics and geoeconomics. He is also a senior columnist at The Diplomat, one of Asia's leading current affairs publications, and an advisor at BowerGroupAsia, a strategic advisory firm focused on the Indo-Pacific region. He teaches courses on Southeast Asia at the US State Department and the US Department of Defense.

Born and raised in Southeast Asia, Dr. Parameswaran's research currently focuses on Southeast Asia foreign and security policy as well as defense trends, major power dynamics and institutional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. His policy insights, research and commentary have been published widely and across the region in leading publications and journals including CNN, The Washington Post, The South China Morning Post, The Straits Times, Asia Policy and Contemporary Southeast Asia. He is the author of the book "Elusive Balances," which develops an original approach to understanding major power commitments and applies it to U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

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