



# FSI OPINION

Forumsinologi.id

8 October 2025

## **How China Woos ASEAN's Chairman to Exert Its Influence in the Region**

Ratih Kabinawa

China's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be traced back to the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the early years of the decade above, China, which had previously been reluctant to engage with ASEAN, began to welcome ASEAN's invitation to participate in the institution. The reasons behind China's eventual participation in the forums led by ASEAN varied. However, the idea that China should proactively shape the development of these institutions from within was one of the reasons, if not the most important one.<sup>1</sup>

China's eagerness to deepen its influence in Southeast Asia, and thereby to engage with ASEAN as an organisation, as well as with each of its members, has increased since the appointment of Xi Jinping by the National People's Congress in 2013. Seeking to enhance its international image and solidify its territorial claims in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, Xi Jinping's China has engaged in a range of economic, political, diplomatic, and socio-cultural initiatives with ASEAN, both with individual member states and as a regional bloc. One notable example is China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has sparked widespread debates over the program's effectiveness and how Beijing has leveraged it to expand its influence across the region. While pursuing various forms of cooperation, China has also strategically capitalised on its engagement through the ASEAN chairmanship. Understanding why and how ASEAN chairmanship matters for China's diplomacy is essential to grasping the role external powers have played in shaping the bloc and the region.

The ASEAN chairmanship is rotated annually among its ten member states, giving each country an equal opportunity to lead the group. While performing key duties, such as serving as a

spokesperson, leading and facilitating official meetings and task forces, and introducing new initiatives and programmes<sup>2</sup>, the ASEAN chair holds a strategic position in fostering consensus-building, setting the agenda, and conducting conflict resolution and diplomatic mediation<sup>3</sup>. Given this vital role, the chair is expected to strike a balance between their country's national interests and those of the bloc, particularly when engaging with external dialogue partners.

However, it is not uncommon for the chair's close bilateral ties with external powers to compromise its autonomy and raise questions about its impartiality in fulfilling its role. A prominent example occurred during Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2012, when the bloc failed to produce a joint communiqué due to Cambodia's veto of any mention of the Scarborough Shoal standoff, which had been raised by the Philippines and Vietnam. Some scholars have argued that this incident was followed by China's allocation of \$500 million in loans to Cambodia<sup>4</sup>. A study by Lim and Kim found that between 2000 and 2017, China exclusively directed its development aid to the country holding the ASEAN chair, aiming to influence agenda-setting in favour of its regional interests<sup>5</sup>. While it is feasible for China to distribute the foreign assistance across all member countries, Beijing has strategically targeted the ASEAN chair, citing both budget efficiency and the chair's critical role in shaping the agenda and ensuring consensus-building<sup>6</sup>.

While Cambodia has long been known as China's ally in the region, it is worth examining further how China has expanded its influence over the ASEAN chairmanship, particularly through medium-power countries such as Malaysia, which do not share a 'patron-client' relationship with China<sup>7</sup>. Historically, Malaysia was the first Southeast Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1974, following the Republic of China's (ROC) removal from the UN in 1971 and the global recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legitimate government of China. Ever since, bilateral ties between the two countries have steadily strengthened, with Malaysia seeking to maintain a policy of equidistance between China and the US amid intensifying great power competition<sup>8</sup>. The election of Anwar Ibrahim as Malaysia's Prime Minister in 2022 paved the way for the strengthening of Sino-Malaysian relations. China, for example, was the first country outside ASEAN that Anwar visited after assuming office<sup>9</sup>. In return, China reciprocated Malaysia's goodwill with a high-level official visit in 2025.

During Malaysia's fifth term as ASEAN Chair in 2025, ASEAN has experienced both challenges and progress, with China playing a significant role. In its capacity as chair, Malaysia successfully lead the ASEAN's agenda of strengthening ties with China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by hosting the first-ever ASEAN-GCC-China Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 27 May 2025. While the summit may be seen as largely symbolic<sup>10</sup>, its implications are twofold. First, it took place amid heightened tensions in Gaza, at a time when many Southeast Asian countries had publicly expressed support for the Palestinian cause, often against the position of the US and

its Western allies. Second, China's active and leading participation<sup>11</sup> in driving the success of the summit signalled Beijing's commitment to advancing multilateralism, positioning itself in contrast to the US, particularly during the Trump administration, which was widely seen as sceptical of multilateral arrangements. While the efficacy of the new trilateral grouping remains to be seen, China's involvement, facilitated through Malaysia's chairmanship, demonstrates its growing influence in shaping ASEAN's agenda amid increasing geopolitical tensions.

China's influence in shaping the region's political and security architecture via ASEAN chairmanship is also evident in its intermediary role during the recent border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand. The five-day armed standoff, rooted in longstanding tensions over territorial and temple claims, opened the door for both China and the US to step in as mediators, an initiative coordinated under Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship. Following multiple rounds of discussions, Cambodia and Thailand agreed to a ceasefire, with China and the US acting as key interlocutors, showing their strong ties with both parties. While the US has long been recognised as a conflict intermediary in several conflicts across the globe, China is a relatively new player. Its role in this ceasefire helped lay the groundwork for its image as a future mediator in regional disputes.

The conflict and subsequent ceasefire over Thailand and Cambodia carry two key implications. First, ASEAN's limited capacity for conflict management and crisis prevention<sup>12</sup> has created an opportunity for external powers to intervene. In the case of the Thailand-Cambodia dispute, their involvement marked a diplomatic success for Malaysia, which fulfilled its role as chair in facilitating mediation and balancing between competing great power interests. However, in conflicts where China is a direct party, such as in the South China Sea, ASEAN's institutional weaknesses could lead to outcomes that disadvantage regional states, given the conflicting interests between China and the other claimants, as well as China's close bilateral ties with some countries like Cambodia. For instance, ASEAN's muted response to China's often aggressive actions against the Philippine Coast Guard in the South China Sea reflects the bloc's paralysis in the face of competing member-state interests tied to Beijing. Second, the neutrality of the ASEAN chair plays a critical role in managing potential conflicts, both within and beyond the region. Malaysia's balancing act between China and the US, supported by its established diplomatic credibility, contributed to securing the ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia, even though it did not guarantee long-term conflict resolution.

Overall, ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making has served as a building block in preventing any single member state from dominating the bloc's direction. While China's involvement is not always overt, its strong bilateral ties with the ASEAN chair can enable it to subtly shape the bloc's agenda and outcomes in ways that advance Beijing's own strategic interests.

## **Ratih Kabinawa**

Adjunct Research Fellow at the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Australia  
and Research Fellow at the FSI

---

<sup>1</sup> Kuik Cheng-chwee, “Multilateralism in China's ASEAN Policy: Its Evolution, Characteristics, and Aspiration,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 27(1), April (2005): 102-122.

<sup>2</sup> Tang Siew Mun, “The ASEAN chairmanship: duties, obligations, and challenges,” International Institute for Asian Studies, 2016, available online at [https://www.iias.asia/sites/iias/files/nwl\\_article/2019-05/IIAS\\_NL73\\_18.pdf](https://www.iias.asia/sites/iias/files/nwl_article/2019-05/IIAS_NL73_18.pdf) (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Phar Kim Beng, “The Chairmanship of ASEAN Explained,” Bernama, 17 March 2025, available online at <http://web13.bernama.com/asean/news.php?id=2403141> (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>4</sup> John D. Ciorciari, “A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, (2014): pp. 245-278.

<sup>5</sup> Taegyun Lim & Sung Eun Kim, “Buying influence? Rotating leadership in ASEAN and allocation of Chinese foreign aid.” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, (2022): pp. 351-377.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ciorciari, “A Chinese model”.

<sup>8</sup> Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, “China dan Malaysia: Kawan atau Lawan?,” Forum Sinologi Indonesia, 18 August 2025, available online at <https://api.forumsinologi.id/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/China-dan-Malaysia-Kawan-atau-Lawan.pdf> (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Ngeow Chow Bing, “Malaysia-China Relations under Anwar Ibrahim’s Unity Government: A Return to the Special Relationship?” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 26 September 2024, available online at <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/IP24077.pdf> (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Hasan Alhasan & Asna Wajid, “The ASEAN-GCC-China Summit: more symbolism than substance,” International Institute for Asian Studies, 24 June 2025, available online at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/06/the-aseangccchina-summit-more-symbolism-than-substance/> (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Nadia Helmy, “China’s role in the success of the ASEAN-GCC Joint Summit in Malaysia 2025,” Modern Diplomacy, 16 May 2025, available online at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/05/16/chinas-role-in-the-success-of-the-asean-gcc-joint-summit-in-malaysia-2025/> (accessed 5 October 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Morgan Michaels & Evan A. Laksmana, “The complex fault lines of the Thai-Cambodian armed conflict,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, 13 August 2025, available online at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/08/the-complex-fault-lines-of-the-thaicambodian-armed-conflict/> (accessed 5 October 2025).