

EXPLAINING MALAYSIA'S MEDIATION IN THE THAILAND-CAMBODIA CONFLICT THROUGH LIBERALISM

Annisa Adlina¹⁾

¹⁾*Akademi Pariwisata Nasional Banjarmasin*

email: adlinaazzahra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia escalated again in mid-2025 after a violation of the code of ethics by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, as revealed in a phone recording. Although Shinawatra was ultimately dismissed from his post, the Thai people seemed to rise again to fight for Preah Vihear to be included in their territory. In response, Malaysia, as a neighboring country and the chair of ASEAN 2025, also offered to mediate the Bangkok-Phnom Penh conflict. This paper examines the factors influencing Malaysia's decision through the lens of liberalism. The results of the study indicate that Malaysia is driven to act rationally to guarantee its citizens' rights and create a better life and welfare through international cooperation. Once this is achieved, it is hoped that it can project a new and better state order, referred to as the concept of liberalism as a modern state.

Keywords: Malaysia, Thailand-Cambodia conflict, Liberalism, ASEAN

1. Introduction

The Thai-Cambodian conflict escalated again in mid-2025. This was triggered by a leaked telephone recording of a conversation between Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. In this telephone call, Shinawatra used informal language, calling Hun Sen 'uncle,' and sought to maximize his diplomatic cooperation to end the border conflict quickly. Furthermore, in his conversation with Hun Sen, Shinawatra also criticized one of Thailand's senior military commanders (Ratcliffe, 2025). This conversation was then spread widely by Hun Sen himself and caused great anger among the Thai people. At least 10,000 people took to the streets, urging Paetongtarn Shinawatra to resign from his position because he was considered to have betrayed his country.

After several days of public pressure, the Thai Constitutional Court officially dismissed Paetongtarn Shinawatra as Prime Minister at the end of August 2025, finding that he had violated the ethical code. Apart

from domestic political turmoil, this case also marks the escalation of the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. Throughout 2025, the two of them met several times to negotiate peace. On October 26, for example, Bangkok and Phnom Penh met in Kuala Lumpur, which led to a ceasefire agreement. Several days later, the two countries slowly withdrew their troops from the disputed border locations (Reuters, 2025). However, in mid-November, Thailand decided to no longer comply with the agreement due to a mine explosion that injured its soldiers. Not remaining silent, Cambodia also accused the Thai military of shelling the area.

1.2 Thailand-Kamboja Conflict History

The Thailand-Cambodia conflict actually started long before Paetongtarn Shinawatra's telephone recording was leaked in 2025. One of the places that became the main point of this conflict was Preah Vihear. Preah Vihear, also known as Phra Viharn to the Thai, is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. This temple is

located in the Dangrek mountains and is close to the border of Cambodia and Thailand. This temple is thought to have been built in the 9th century and completed between the 11th and 12th centuries by the Khmer Empire (Gardini, 2024). During their hundreds of years of rule, the Khmer kings also used this temple as a place of ritual and pilgrimage, and as a symbol of Khmer politics at the time (Teekah, 2025).

On the other hand, this empire also received various threats and challenges from various parties. One of the most impactful came from the increasingly powerful Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (Teekah, 2025). They became increasingly aggressive in carrying out attacks, looting, disrupting trade, and destroying the security of the kingdom's borders. Another challenge also comes from the religious aspect, as there is a shift toward Theravada Buddhism. This teaching emphasizes social equality and simplicity, in contrast to Hinduism, which has a class structure. The Khmer Empire collapsed in the 15th century.

Since its collapse, the region has been dominated by the Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya. During this period, temples were no longer focused on being Khmer religious centers but were instead managed by local officials (Teekah, 2025). In 1863, France began to enter the area. The increasingly weak Cambodian Kingdom actually exploited this position to stem Siam's domination in its territory. In the following years, France increasingly moved forward to dominate Cambodia, and by 1887, Cambodia officially became part of French Indochina. With two neighboring dominions (Siam and France), the region was often contested, leading to border conflicts. In 1893, the French-Siamese War broke out over disputed territory in the

Mekong River valley. Finally, the two parties signed a border agreement in 1904. The agreement also stated that there was a border in the north, near Preah Vihear, along the Dangrek Mountain River (Ciorciari, 2009). However, three years later, France issued a border map and recognized all of Preah Vihear as Cambodian territory. Thailand's anger peaked again, and they considered that France had made a fatal mistake in the map. The situation escalated in the following decades. In fact, Thailand also had an alliance with Japan to take over Preah Vihear in 1941 (Ciorciari, 2009). Twelve years later, France withdrew its troops and granted independence to Cambodia. In the newly independent domestic political situation, Cambodia continues to face security threats from Thailand. Until 1959, Cambodia reported this problem to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Three years later, the ICJ stated that Preah Vihear was part of Cambodia and Thailand had actually agreed to the border agreement established by France in 1907 (Ciorciari, 2009). With the issuance of this decision, Thailand and Cambodia are facing an increasingly heated conflict situation. Not only were military and mines placed in the border area, but they also cut off diplomatic relations.

Despite pressure from Thailand, Cambodia has remained consistent in defending its interests over Preah Vihear. In July 2008, Cambodia registered the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In just a few days, UNESCO granted the request, recognizing it as an extraordinary architectural heritage of the Khmer Empire (UNESCO, 2026). This, of course, sparked anger in Thailand once again, which was becoming increasingly anarchic. Apart from that, military forces from both countries also exchanged fire in

August, which killed at least 3 soldiers (Antara News, 2009).

Various parties have attempted to act as mediators to resolve the conflict. However, the peaceful situation only lasted for a moment, and the two countries returned to attacking and accusing each other. One of the countries most actively moving to bridge communications between Thailand and Cambodia is the United States. In 2025, for example, the US, under the leadership of Donald Trump, is pressuring both parties to immediately implement a ceasefire so that trade cooperation with the US can run smoothly. According to Trump, these negotiations succeeded in bringing Thailand and Cambodia towards peace (Wee & Suhartono, 2025).

Furthermore, the US was also one of the countries that witnessed the signing of the Thailand-Cambodia peace agreement in Kuala Lumpur on October 26 2025. However, Trump's optimism was not in line with the results. Conflict resumed in November when both sides accused each other again after one of the Thai soldiers was hit by a mine explosion. Finally, in early December, Thailand again carried out air attacks and exchanged fire with the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (Reuters, 2025).

Apart from the US, China also offered assistance in mediating the conflict but adopted a softer approach. Instead of imposing sanctions, Beijing positions itself as a partner to both parties to protect regional stability (Patton, 2026). Through Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China also offered to assist 20 million yuan, or the equivalent of US\$2.86 million. These funds are intended to help rehabilitate damage to communities and property on both sides. In line with China, Malaysia is also aiming for a more cooperative approach. Malaysia

actively pushed for a ceasefire agreement and offered to mediate between the parties.

Focusing on Malaysia, active involvement in efforts to resolve the Thailand-Cambodia conflict shows an increasingly significant role in maintaining stability in the Southeast Asian region. Through various diplomatic initiatives and cooperative approaches to mediating conflicts, Malaysia seeks to encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes through regional dialogue and cooperation, without coercing or pressuring either country through sanctions. This is worth discussing in more depth because it shows that a country is not only focused on national interests but also seeks to create regional stability. Therefore, in this article, the author examines the factors behind Malaysia's active offer to mediate the Thailand-Cambodia conflict in 2025.

2. Literature Review

Writings on the Thailand-Cambodia conflict have been widely studied. Moreover, this border issue began when France demarcated the border between the two countries in 1907. After more than a hundred centuries, the conflict escalated again in mid-2025, when Bangkok and Phnom Penh each claimed that the ancient temples were part of their countries. Until finally, on July 27, Cambodia accused its neighboring country of invading its territory and attacking civilians. One author who explains the history of this conflict in detail is Otto F. von Feigenblatt (2012).

In his article, entitled "Exploring the Relationship Between Prospect Theory and International Conflict: The Thai-Cambodian Border Dispute as a Case Study," Feigenblatt highlights the history of the conflict up to 2012 (when his article was published) using prospect theory.

According to him, there is no bright spot that can resolve this conflict in the near future. One reason is the historical discontinuity that links the place of glory of Angkor to Cambodia (Feigenblatt, 2012). The difficulty of finding the word 'peace' is also acknowledged by John D. Ciorciari (2009), who emphasizes Preah Vihear. Instead of recognizing the temple's potential to connect the two, Thailand and Cambodia are encouraging discord. This is evident in the attitude of the governments of each country, which are reluctant to acknowledge the temple's complex history and avoid discussing it (Ciorciari, 2009).

Apart from security issues, prolonged conflict also negatively affects other sectors. One thing highlighted by Chunyu Yang (2025) is the economic obstacles, especially in Cambodia. In the tourism sector, tourists from Thailand are among the most frequent visitors to Cambodia. However, the number of visitors declined sharply when bilateral relations between the two worsened again this year. Apart from that, many imported goods from Thailand were also boycotted by the Cambodian public in solidarity with the conflict. According to Yang (2025), if the conflict is not resolved immediately, Cambodia will face more challenges from tourism, remittances, and trade.

Various parties have undertaken efforts to resolve the border conflict. One of them is ASEAN, a regional organization comprising 11 countries, including Thailand and Cambodia. Consistently, ASEAN continues to strive for dialogue, discussion, and to encourage further cooperation to prevent conflict escalation (Naqsbandiyah, 2025; Sokhun, 2025; Chachavalpongpun, 2013; Mangku, 2011). However, repeated mediation has not yielded results, and ASEAN is considered a

failure. This is due to the existence of non-intervention regulations that prohibit the organization from interfering in the internal affairs of its member countries and from making decisions by consensus. Furthermore, (Chachavalpongpun, 2013) also assessed the lack of full support from other member countries, which led to ASEAN remaining stagnant.

Nevertheless, (Mangku, 2013) still sees positive directions that ASEAN can take to resolve this bilateral conflict and strengthen its position as a regional organization. First, ASEAN must consistently remind its member countries to act in accordance with its political foundation, which prioritizes regional progress. Therefore, everyone is obliged to act calmly, as much as possible, to avoid the use of military force and thus avoid conflict. Second, in line with the principle of non-intervention, Mangku (2013) also considers this an obstacle to ASEAN taking a firm stance. However, Mangku (2013) also notes that this principle can be used and maximized by ASEAN to maintain internal relations among its member countries.

Apart from ASEAN, efforts to resolve conflicts are also carried out by its member countries, namely Indonesia (Fadhillah, 2020; Sudrajat et al., 2020; Antuli et al., 2019; Joenoes, 2024; Chachavalpongpun, 2013). This even started when this organization was founded in 1967 through negotiation and persuasion. It continued at the end of the 70s where Indonesia focused on pressuring Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. Furthermore, Indonesia also initiated an informal bilateral meeting with Vietnam and again emphasized to Vietnam the need to leave Cambodian soil. The meeting was held again at the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM), which was held twice (1988 & 1989).

Indonesia, along with Vietnam and Cambodia, urged the signing of a peace agreement between the parties to end the conflict.

In the Thailand-Cambodia dispute, Indonesia also played an active role in resolving the conflict. At the ASEAN level, Indonesia, which held the ASEAN chair in 2011, often meets with top officials from Thailand and Cambodia for dialogue and discussions on conflict resolution. One of them, Marty Natalegawa, as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, made an official trip to Phnom Penh and Bangkok to urge the two countries to immediately withdraw their military troops (Fadhillah, 2020; Chachavalpongpun, 2013).

Another country that played an active role in resolving this conflict was Malaysia—like Indonesia, Malaysia assumed the ASEAN leadership in 2025 and used it to negotiate with Thailand and Cambodia. According to Karuppannan (2025), throughout 2025, Malaysia demonstrated its commitment to mediation between its two neighbors. Not only through Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, but Malaysia also actively mediated by sending representatives from various sectors. One example was the dispatch of the Chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces to Thailand and Cambodia to press for a ceasefire agreement. Although the conflict has not yet been fully resolved, Karuppannan (2025) still sees Malaysia's involvement as bringing positive changes to Thai-Cambodian relations.

Although articles have been written about Malaysia's role in the Thai-Cambodian dispute in 2025, such as Ilango Karuppannan's "Diplomacy Without Drama: Malaysia's Role in the Cambodia-Thailand Conflict," those studies focused solely on describing Malaysia's diplomatic role. This study

offers a different perspective by analyzing Malaysia's involvement through the theoretical framework of liberalism in international relations. This paper goes beyond Kuala Lumpur's actions during 2025. It also examines the reasons for Malaysia's active involvement by demonstrating how liberal principles were applied. Thus, this paper seeks to make a deeper theoretical contribution to understanding Malaysia's approach to conflict resolution in Southeast Asia.

3. Conceptual Framework

Liberalism

Since its emergence after World War I, the study of International Relations has offered various perspectives as analytical tools for understanding phenomena. One of the most dominant is liberalism, which will also serve as the analytical framework for this study. The concept of this perspective actually emerged in the 17th century. One philosopher in the history of the modern liberal state was John Locke (1632-1704), who viewed human progress in modern civil society and a capitalist economy as positively moving. According to Sorensen et al. (2022), this view was influenced by the scientific and liberal intellectual revolutions, both grounded in human reason and rationality. This concept was later deepened by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who described the situation of a republican state that would then establish perpetual peace. Another liberal philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, also developed this philosophy and coined the term international law (Dugis, 2016). According to him, rational constitutional states will comply with international law in their foreign policies (Rosenblum 1978 in Sorensen et al., 2022).

Based on these three philosophical ideas, a new approach

called liberalism emerged. Several centuries later, specifically at the end of World War I in 1920, the influence of the liberal perspective grew stronger. At that time, Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States, initiated the establishment of an international organization called the League of Nations (LBB). Its primary purpose was to promote international cooperation, prevent war, and ensure global peace. The establishment of this first international organization also marked optimism for peace through mechanisms of cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution.

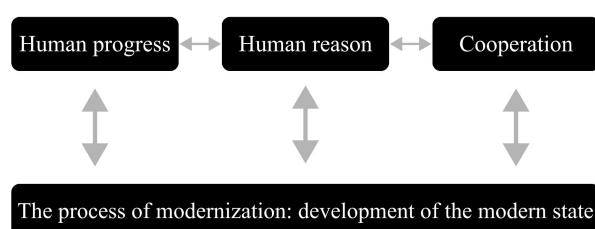
There are three basic assumptions of liberalism (Sorensen et al. 2022). The first is a positive view of human nature. Unlike realism, which views states as primary actors as selfish and always seeking power to maximize national goals, liberalism tends to view actors as more rational and believes that the principles of rationality can be applied to international affairs. Furthermore, liberalism also believes that states play a significant role in the international system. However, liberalism does not place states above all else. International relations are transnational relationships that connect individuals, groups, and organizations across countries, so they are not limited to a single country. The interactions among these actors shape what Dugis (2016) calls social pluralism.

The second assumption is the belief that international relations can be cooperative rather than conflictual. This is because human rationality desires progress, leading countries to cooperate to achieve mutual benefit. Cooperation can occur through international organizations, international trade, international regimes, multilateral diplomacy, and other forms. Third is the belief in progress, which focuses on individual

advancement. Liberalism holds that humans and societies can continually improve in technology, human values, knowledge, and other aspects of life. Therefore, relations between countries are also believed to become more peaceful and orderly over time.

These three assumptions then form the interrelated foundations of liberalism (Sorensen et al., 2022). First, in human progress and human reason, liberalism demonstrates a correlation in which scientific advances increase individual rationality. Conversely, rational individuals also produce innovations that drive progress. Second, according to liberalism, rational states will find it easier to build cooperation. Likewise, cooperation can increasingly encourage states to recognize the importance of rational solutions. Furthermore, in human progress and cooperation, cooperation accelerates progress, and progress creates the need for greater cooperation. These three assumptions will ultimately shape the modernization process, enabling countries to build mutually beneficial cooperation, thereby reducing conflict and increasing the likelihood of international peace. Ultimately, the modern state will create a better life for most individuals (Sorensen et al., 2022).

Figure 3.1 Basic Liberal Assumptions



Source: Sorensen et al., 2022

This concept was then applied in a study of Malaysia's involvement in the Thailand-Cambodia conflict in

2025. From a liberal perspective, Malaysia's involvement in the border conflict reflects the belief that conflict can be resolved through rationality and cooperation. As Chair of ASEAN 2025, Malaysia is not a country that aggressively seeks power and uses military or sanctions to resolve conflicts. Instead, Malaysia utilizes diplomacy and regional institutions to bring the two conflicting parties together. Malaysia's mediation efforts demonstrate that a state, as a rational actor, does not always rely on military force to resolve disputes but can instead use dialogue and cooperation to advance the common interest in regional stability. Thus, Malaysia's actions reflect the basic assumptions of liberalism regarding human rationality, the importance of cooperation, and the role of international institutions in creating progress and peace.

4. Research Method

This qualitative research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon based on data analysis. The data used are primary data obtained from official state documents, government information released through speeches or the official websites of relevant ministries, and other official documents. Furthermore, the researcher also utilized secondary data obtained through literature searches and previous research, as well as mass media in the form of factual announcements, and other sources. The data obtained was then grouped into categories aligned with liberalist theory.

The first section begins with an explanation of Malaysia's role as a mediator in the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, followed by a discussion of Malaysia's rationality, which plays a crucial role in advancing shared interests through a collaborative and

cooperative approach. The paper then discusses how Malaysia projects a new, better life, thereby expanding progress and cooperation across international borders. By using liberalism and mediation as its instruments, Malaysia hopes to curb conflict and stabilize the dynamics of Southeast Asia.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Malaysia as Thailand-Kamboja Conflict Mediator

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy located in Southeast Asia. With Kuala Lumpur as its capital, it shares borders with Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Singapore. This strategic location is also a key foundation for Malaysia's foreign policy. The official website of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2026) outlines ten key policy points that broadly emphasize the country's position of implementing an independent, principled, and pragmatic foreign policy, upholding the values of peace, regional and global security, humanity, and justice.

These values are also what Malaysia strives to apply when formulating its foreign policy in response to the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. As noted in the introduction, the Thai-Cambodian conflict has existed for hundreds of years, even long before the colonial era. Both countries have faced various timelines, with periods of conflict abating and ceasefires being established, but these situations were short-lived, and gunfire resumed. This also occurred in 2025, when the conflict escalated due to Thai public anger toward Paetongtarn Shinawatra. Various attempts at mediation and negotiation by third parties have consistently failed. The United States, for example, has even threatened Thailand and Cambodia with increased

tariffs on trade. Whether due to these threats or not, the conflict situation has subsided. However, the deeply ingrained conflict has escalated again.

Unlike the US, Malaysia has adopted a more conciliatory approach. Rather than threatening either country, it has frequently offered to mediate between the two parties. This began in mid-May and continued through mid-July 2025, when the conflict escalated again due to border clashes. In response, Malaysia, as the chair of ASEAN, acted swiftly, announcing that it would host urgent peace talks a week after the clashes began. On July 25, 2025, Malaysian Foreign Minister His Excellency Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad Haji Hasan issued an official statement urging both parties to immediately resolve the tensions and exercise restraint to avoid further loss of life and damage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025). In this statement, Anwar Ibrahim stated that he had contacted the Prime Minister of Cambodia and the Acting Prime Minister of Thailand to create space for dialogue and diplomatic resolution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025).

The following day, on July 26, Malaysia issued another statement through its Foreign Minister, warning both parties to immediately cease fire and exercise restraint to reduce the number of refugees and casualties. Furthermore, Malaysia expressed its desire to facilitate dialogue with neighboring countries to resolve the conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025). A third statement was issued on July 27, where Malaysia continued to pressure Thailand and Cambodia to immediately cease fire and engage in peaceful negotiations to prevent the conflict from escalating. On July 28, 2025, a Special Meeting between the two countries was held in Kuala Lumpur, attended by the Prime

Minister of Malaysia and featuring the active participation of the United States and China.

During the meeting, both Thailand and Cambodia agreed to an unconditional ceasefire and held an informal meeting of regional commanders the following day (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Furthermore, all parties present agreed to hold a General Border Committee (GBC) meeting on August 4, 2025. Malaysia also offered to contribute as an observer to ensure the committee's implementation. However, the ceasefire failed due to allegations of ceasefire violations initiated by Cambodia. On August 29, 2025, the Royal Thai Army (RTA) declared limited martial law in several areas bordering Cambodia (Anadolu Agency, 2025). Nevertheless, Malaysia remained confident that the conflict between the two countries could be resolved quickly.

A second meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur on October 26, 2025, attended by the Prime Ministers of Cambodia and Thailand, and witnessed by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Malaysia. As a result, the two countries signed another ceasefire agreement and released 18 Cambodian soldiers detained in Thailand (Hale & Hume, 2025). Furthermore, Malaysia would deploy troops to the border region to ensure a resumption of fighting. However, a few days after the agreement, conflict broke out again when a mine explosion injured Thai soldiers.

On December 22, 2025, ASEAN Foreign Ministers gathered again in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the current situation between Thailand and Cambodia. This meeting was again chaired by the Malaysian Foreign Minister, during which discussions focused on solutions that ASEAN

would pursue to support conflict resolution. Furthermore, this meeting also promoted ASEAN's spirit of establishing good and peaceful neighborly relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025). Five days later, Malaysia, as the ASEAN chair, issued a statement reaffirming its support for conflict resolution and promoting a good-neighborly environment between Cambodia and Thailand, and between Southeast Asia as a whole (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025).

5.2 Malaysia's Rationality in the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict

In the liberal perspective, rationality is a positive trait, reflecting individuals who believe in reason and are centered on progress. At the country level, this rationality can be seen in how policymakers act in the common interest. According to John Locke, the state exists to guarantee the freedom and property of its citizens, enabling them to live their lives and pursue their happiness without interference from others (Sorensen et al., 2022). And in the end, an advanced society will produce a modern civilization, as Sorensen (et al., 2022) describes it, a better life in which the country and its society are free from authoritarian government.

Focusing on the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, Malaysia, as a neighboring country and ASEAN 2025 chair, took a rational step by offering to mediate between the two countries. This is because regional security issues have become a key focus of Malaysia's foreign policy. The official website of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2026) states:

Malaysia's foreign policy is largely influenced and shaped by three key factors, namely its strategic location in Southeast Asia, its attributes as a trading nation as well

as its unique demography. While the foreign policy approaches may have differed over the years due to changing domestic and external factors, the basic principles of the policy have continued since independence. Policy-making has been guided by the criteria of credibility together with consistency and coherency, which have served the country's best interests. This point is listed second only to Malaysia's main foreign policy principles of independence, principle, and pragmatism. This demonstrates the importance of Southeast Asia's geographic security, which shapes the country's foreign policy. Malaysia also understands the region's unique demographics, necessitating a dynamic approach.

The efforts of the various parties described above make it clear that the conflict is far from peaceful. Thailand and Cambodia have been feuding over Preah Vihear and the surrounding territory for centuries. As of 2025, both countries continue to maintain their claims to Preah Vihear. A greater escalation of the conflict in the coming years is even possible.

Prolonged instability in the Indochina region could also disrupt trade and investment and affect Malaysia's position as a middle-ranking country within the ASEAN security architecture. As a result, a secure, peaceful, and just situation is increasingly far from the aspirations of Malaysia and ASEAN as a whole. The existence of this border conflict does not rule out the possibility of future instability and security threats. For example, Malaysia has long faced non-traditional security threats related to drug smuggling across the Sungai Golok border.

According to Yasid (2022), drug trafficking, particularly opium, has existed since the 18th century in Southeast Asia (including Malaysia

and Thailand). Initially, opium was widely marketed, including to remote areas of Malaysia. However, only after the end of World War II did the British ban the sale and consumption of opium, and subsequent state laws were enacted in the following decades. Despite this, drug abuse in Malaysia increased in the 1960s, with Thailand becoming the largest distributor of drugs in Malaysia and Southeast Asia (Yasid, 2022). Various efforts have been undertaken by the Malaysian government, in collaboration with the Thai government and international organizations such as the ASEAN Police Organization (ASEANAPOL), the World Customs Organization (WCO), and the International Police Organization (INTERPOL), to combat drug trafficking and other transnational crimes.

The issue of drug trafficking from Thailand to Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia is one example of how border dynamics play a crucial role in the security and stability of a country and even a geographic region. Border regions play a crucial role, as Raharjo & Intarti (2021) describe them as a country's front yard or window, thereby becoming part of national policy priorities with a significant impact on state sovereignty. However, borders are at risk given the proximity of other countries. Indirectly, ongoing political instability has a domino effect on neighboring countries.

As in the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, the country's security instability will affect neighboring countries, including Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysia needs to take decisive and rational steps to prevent the conflict from spreading within its borders, allowing the government to continue protecting individual interests and guaranteeing the rights of its citizens. Leveraging its position as ASEAN Chair for 2025, Malaysia

continues to adopt a more collaborative and cooperative approach by offering to mediate between Cambodia and Thailand. Although the July ceasefire agreement was short-lived, Kuala Lumpur remained steadfast and optimistic, inviting both parties to resume discussions in the months that followed.

Malaysia's active role in this border conflict has also drawn attention from other world leaders on several occasions. One such example was United States President Donald Trump, who expressed support and appreciation for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's efforts to advance peace in the region. In addition, US Ambassador to Malaysia Edgar D. Kagan also expressed his appreciation. In July 2025, for example, Kagan mentioned the US and Malaysia's commitment to monitoring the ceasefire and ensuring compliance with it by Thailand and Cambodia to prevent further attacks on each other. Kagan also expressed optimism about this step and reiterated the need for continued close cooperation between Malaysia and the US (Strangio, 2025). A month later, Kagan again expressed his satisfaction and assessed that Malaysia had successfully played its role as ASEAN Chair, helping to defuse tensions in the Thailand-Cambodia conflict. He also stated that Malaysia would receive full support from the US. He reiterated the need for bilateral cooperation to develop a long-term mechanism to ensure the ceasefire remains in the region (Vietnamplus, 2025).

In addition to the US, China also expressed support and praised Malaysia's leadership as ASEAN Chair, noting that it had helped broker a ceasefire between Cambodia and Thailand following border clashes. China also believes this is Malaysia's first step toward resolving the issue

"the ASEAN way" (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025). Furthermore, Chinese spokesperson Gao Feng also stated his country's commitment to maintaining good relations with Cambodia and Thailand and actively contributing to the consolidation of the peace agreement (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025).

5.3 Modern State: Malaysia's Projections in Expanding Individual Progress and International Cooperation

From a liberal perspective, Sorensen et al. (2022) describe modernization as a projection of a new and better social life. This can be seen through advances in technology and science, increased prosperity, and a system free from authoritarian rule. Furthermore, this perspective is oriented not only toward traditional security interests but also toward improving economic prosperity through international trade and foreign investment. In line with this thinking, Malaysia also aspires to a virtuous modern society in which sovereignty and national interests are free from interference in other countries' affairs. This is specifically stated in the fourth point of Malaysia's Foreign Policy, which says:

Malaysia continues to promote a forward-looking and pragmatic foreign policy that facilitates trade, attracts foreign investment as well as projects Malaysia as a stable and peaceful country.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Malaysia (2026)

Based on these points, Malaysia's priority is to demonstrate that it views economic cooperation and interdependence as means to advance national interests. Therefore, this policy aligns with the liberal assumption that modern states tend to prioritize economic prosperity and

cooperative relationships over confrontation. Therefore, Malaysia must maintain regional stability to maintain a favorable trade and investment climate within its borders, thus creating a modern state order.

In subsequent points, Malaysia also repeatedly emphasizes the values of peace, humanity, justice, equality, and prosperity. At the regional level, Malaysia prioritizes the formation of its foreign policy based on its strategic location in Southeast Asia and its membership in ASEAN. Malaysia continues to promote good and friendly relations with neighboring countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2026). Therefore, in the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, it is crucial for Malaysia to actively participate in creating national prosperity based on friendship with other countries and to realize the ASEAN Community by 2015.

As ASEAN Chair for 2025, Malaysia also continues to encourage discussions to resolve the Thailand-Cambodia issue through meetings and statement releases on the ministry's official website. Malaysia consistently urges an immediate ceasefire to prevent further loss of life and damage to both parties. Rather than resorting to sanctions, as the US has done, Malaysia has demonstrated a warmer attitude by continuing to open dialogue and fostering the spirit of the ASEAN family (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2025).

In 2025, Malaysia, along with other ASEAN member states, launched the ASEAN Vision 2045 and formulated the Strategic Plan to Realize the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (ACV 2045), which had previously been proposed at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in 2023. At the meeting, held on May 26, 2025, ASEAN outlined its views on the

future of the region, divided into six sections: political security, economic, economic/socio-cultural, socio-cultural, connectivity, and institutional strengthening. Broadly speaking, this vision envisions progress toward an advanced, peaceful, stable, and secure Southeast Asian community. Furthermore, this vision promotes strategic trust among member states through dialogue, diplomacy, and sustained goodwill (ASEAN, 2025).

Based on Malaysia's stated vision and mission in its foreign policy, and its involvement as an ASEAN member and its chairmanship in 2025, it is clear that Malaysia views peace and progress as fundamental. As an actor in international relations, a state must act rationally to guarantee its citizens' right to a happy life, and this will be more easily achieved through cooperation. With this cooperative attitude, the ideal of a modern nation will be more easily achieved. Therefore, the author sees this as the primary impetus for Malaysia's active involvement in resolving the Thailand-Cambodia border issue in 2025.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines Malaysia's role in mediating the Thailand-Cambodia conflict through a liberal perspective. The findings emphasize the importance of cooperation, peaceful dispute resolution, and regional stability. As a country with close economic and political interests in Southeast Asia, Malaysia views conflicts between neighboring countries not only as a threat to regional security but also as an obstacle to continued economic cooperation, trade, and investment.

Through a liberal approach, Malaysia's actions as a mediator demonstrate that a state need not act

solely on self-interest, power, or recklessness. From the outset, Malaysia has never used force or imposed sanctions to intimidate either party. Instead, Malaysia emphasizes a cooperative approach and a friendly attitude to achieve regional peace and stability without further escalating problems. Malaysia's efforts to promote dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful resolution also reflect the belief that conflict resolution is not solely achieved through war or aggressive force. However, disputes between countries can also be resolved through communication, diplomacy, and the role of international institutions and norms.

Furthermore, Malaysia's foreign policy, oriented toward trade, investment, and economic development, strengthens the case for maintaining regional stability as a strategic interest. In this context, Malaysia's mediation not only aims to defuse tensions between Bangkok and Phnom Penh, but also maintains a regional environment conducive to economic growth and cooperation among ASEAN countries. Furthermore, it aims to establish a peaceful and just ASEAN community, as reiterated by ASEAN in its Vision 2045.

Therefore, this study concludes that Malaysia's involvement in mediating the Thailand-Cambodia conflict aligns with the principles of liberalism, particularly regarding the importance of international cooperation, economic interdependence, and peaceful conflict resolution. This role also demonstrates how Malaysia, as a modern state, strives to maintain regional stability to support national interests and shared prosperity.

REFERENCES

- Anadolu Agency. (2025). Thailand Imposes Martial Law in Border Town, Accusing Cambodians of 'Inciting Unrest'. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/thailand-imposes-martial-law-in-border-town-accusing-cambodians-of-inciting-unrest/3672564> . Accessed on June 1 2026.
- Antara News. (2009). Kronologi Konflik Thailand-Kamboja. <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/136978/kronologi-konflik-thailand-kamboja>. Accessed on January 1 2026.
- Antuli, R. et al. (2019). Analisis Peran Indonesia dalam Penyelesaian Konflik Thailand dan Kamboja melalui Pendekatan National Role Conception. *JUPIIS: Jurnal Pendidikan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial*, 11(2): 449-458.
- ASEAN. (2025). ASEAN Community Vision 2045 "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN". <https://asean.org/asean-community-vision-2045-resilient-innovative-dynamic-and-people-centred-asean/>. Accessed on June 10 2026.
- Chachavalpongpun, P. (2013). Thai-Cambodian Conflict: The Failure of ASEAN's Dispute Settlement Mechanisms. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* Vol. 1 No. 1 (2013), pp 65-86.
- Dugis, V. (2016). Liberalisme dalam Teori Hubungan Internasional. Surabaya: Cakra Studi Global Strategis (CSGS).
- Fadhillah, K. (2020). Shuttle Diplomacy Indonesia sebagai Upaya Penyelesaian Konflik Thailand-Kamboja. *Jurnal Kajian Wilayah* 11 (2020), pp 179-192.
- Feigenblatt, O. (2012). Exploring the Relationship Between Prospect Theory and International Conflict: The Thai-Cambodian Border Dispute as a Case Study. *Revista de Comunicacion Vivat Academia* Junio 2012, pp 14-30.
- Gardini, A. (2024). A Postcolonial Preah Vihear. <https://daily.jstor.org/a-postcolonial-preah-vihear/>. Accessed on January 4 2026.
- Hale, E. & Hume, T. (2025). Trump signs Thailand-Cambodia ceasefire pact at ASEAN summit in Malaysia. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/26/trump-jointly-signs-thailand-cambodia-ceasefire-agreement-at-asean-summit>. Accessed on June 10 2026.
- Joenoos, O. (2024). Reviving the Jakarta Informal Meeting. A Case for Indonesia to Mediate Ukraine and Russia. *Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy*, pp. 1-6.
- Karuppannan, Ilango. (2025). Diplomacy Without Drama: Malaysia's Role in the Cambodia-Thailand Conflict. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.
- Mangku, D. (2011). Peluang dan Tantangan ASEAN dalam Penyelesaian Sengketa Kuil Preah Vihear di Perbatasan Kamboja dan Thailand. *Pandecta* Volume 6. Nomor 2 Juli 2011, pp 106-116.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2026). Malaysia's Foreign Policy. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/foreign-policy>. Accessed on June 10 2026.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2025). ASEAN Chair's Statement Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Current Situation Between Cambodia dan Thailand. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/asean-chair-s-statement-special-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-the-current-situation-between-cambodia-and-thailand-22-december-2025-kuala-lumpur?redirect>. Accessed on June 1 2026.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia. (2025). Statement by The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia H.E. Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad Haji Hasan on Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute. <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/statement-by-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-malaysia-h-e-dato-seri-utama-haji-mohamad-haji-hasan-on-thailand-cambodia-border-disputes?redirect>. Accessed on June 1 2026.
- Naqsabandiyah, A. (2025). Revisiting ASEAN as Security Community: The Case of Thailand-Cambodia Longstanding Dispute. *Institute for Global and Strategic Studies*. Vol. 5 No.7 July 2025.
- Patton, S. (2026). Peace the Asian Ways?: China's Role in the Thailand-Cambodia Conflict. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/peace-asian-way-china-s-role-thailand-cambodia-conflict>. Accessed on June 11 2026.
- Raharjo, S & Intarti, Y. (2021). Human Security in Border Area: Security or Welfare?. *IR-UI Commentaries* Vol. II/No. 01 January 2021, pp. 1-6.
- Ratcliffe, R. (2025). The leaked phone call that could ring the changes for one of Thailand's most powerful dynasties. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/03/thailand-cambodia-leaked-phone-call-shinawatra-dynasty-paetongtarn>. Accessed on January 1 2026.
- Reuters. (2025). Timeline: Thailand-Cambodia Conflict. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/3152354/timeline-thailandcambodia-conflict>. Accessed on December 31 2025.
- Sorensen, G. et al. (2022). *Introduction to International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strangio, S. (2025). Cambodia, Thailand Agree to New Measures to Reinforce Border Ceasefire. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/cambodia-thailand-agree-to-new-measures-to-reinforce-border-ceasefire/>. Accessed on January 7 2026.
- Sudrajat, A. et al. (2020). The Role of Indonesia in Creating Peace in Cambodia: 1979-1992. *Journal of Critical Reviews* Vol 7, Issue 2, pp: 702-726.
- Teekah, E. (2025). Khmer Empire. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khmer-Empire>. Accessed on January 4 2026.
- The Malaysian Reserve. (2025). China commends Malaysia's constructive role in achieving Thai-Cambodian ceasefire. <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2025/07/30/china-commends-malaysias-constructive-role-in-achieving-thai-cambodian-ceasefire/>. Accessed on June 10 2026.
- UNESCO. (2026). Temple of Preah Vihear. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1224/>. Accessed on January 1 2026.
- Vietnamplus. (2025). US Supports Malaysia, ASEAN's Role in Easing Thailand-Cambodia Tension. https://en.vietnamplus.vn/us-supports-malaysia-aseans-role-in-easing-thailand-cambodia-tension-post324191.vnp?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed on January 7 2026.
- Yang, C. (2025). Assessment of the Impact of Cambodia-Thailand Border Conflicts on Cambodia's Economy. *ASEAN +3 Macroeconomic Research Office*, pp. 1-15.
- Yasid, A. (2022). Drug Trafficking from Thailand's Golden Triangle Region and Implications on Malaysia's Political Security. *Journal of International Studies*, 19(2), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2023.19.2.1>.