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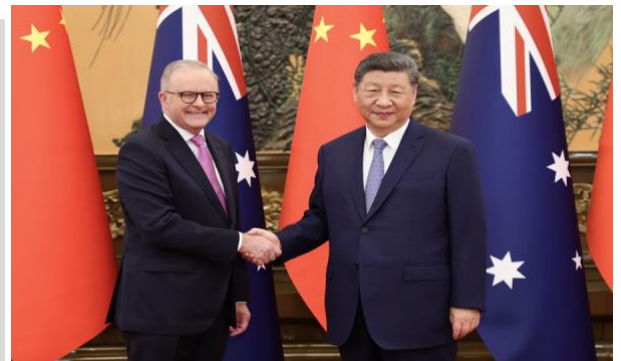
Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

EAST ASIA EXPLORER JULY 2025

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ABOUT US

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Cover Images:

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who was on an official visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, on July 15, 2025. Source: [Australian Government – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet](#)

Acting Thai Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, met to negotiate a ceasefire under the aegis of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, in Kuala Lumpur on July 28, 2025. Source: [X/@anwaribrahim](#)
Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita co-chaired the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on July 10, 2025. Source: [X/@PmargheritaBJP](#)

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Australian PM Albanese's China visit draws criticism at home and interest from allies

by

Pradeep Taneja

The Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, was in China from July 12-18 to further stabilise relations with China. This was his second visit to Australia's largest trading partner since becoming prime minister in 2022, but the first since his re-election in May this year. The visit attracted criticism from the opposition at home and was watched by Australia's Quad allies with interest, if not concern.

Mr Albanese tried to achieve multiple objectives during his visit to China. The foremost among these was to advance Australia's economic interests, including a review of the ten-year-old China-Australia Free Trade Agreement that has delivered significant benefits to both countries. This was despite China imposing sanctions on Australian wine, barley and lobsters under the government of Albanese's predecessor, Scott Morrison, that cost Australian exporters billions of dollars in lost income.

Albanese was also seeking to further develop economic links with Chinese businesses to boost investment and trade opportunities and promote cooperation in agriculture and tourism.

In addition to increasing Australian exports to China in the short term, Mr Albanese was also promoting industry-led decarbonisation initiatives in the resources sector, reflecting shared environmental goals as well as ensuring that Australia remains China's top source for minerals and energy for as long as possible.

While in Beijing the agenda was dominated by meetings with China's top leaders, including President Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Li Qiang and the Chairman of the National People's Congress, Zhao Leji, it was business that dominated engagements in Shanghai. Albanese attended a Steel Decarbonisation Roundtable with companies like BHP, Fortescue and Rio Tinto, alongside Chinese steelmakers, and a new policy dialogue on steel decarbonisation was announced.

Steel decarbonisation is being seen by Australian iron ore miners as a key to Australia remaining preferred supplier of raw materials to China's steel industry in the long term. Australian companies like Fortescue are pursuing an ambitious hydrogen-based green iron plan that will not only help reduce carbon emissions but also allow Australian iron ore exporters to move up the steel value chain by selling green iron to China instead of exporting iron ore.

The Australian prime minister also visited Chengdu in Sichuan province where he engaged with Australian companies operating there in health and medical technology and visited a panda conservation centre.

But Mr Albanese's relatively long China visit was not without criticism at home, especially as it came barely a few months after China's People's Liberation Army Navy ships circumnavigated Australia and conducted live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea without giving advance notice to Australian authorities, raising significant concerns in Australia and New Zealand.

Mr Albanese raised these concerns with President Xi Jinping, but they were apparently brushed aside by the Chinese leader.

This context fuelled debates in Australia about whether the visit was premature and potentially signalled a lax attitude toward China. The opposition and some Australian security analysts argued that the prime minister's visit undermined Australia's stance on regional security, especially given recent tensions, including a May 2024 incident where a Chinese fighter jet dropped flares near an Australian navy helicopter, which Mr Albanese had [called](#) "completely unacceptable".

The Albanese China visit also coincided with apparent [demands](#) being made by the United States Undersecretary for Defence, Elbridge Colby, for allies such as Australia to clarify if they would commit troops in the event of a conflict with China over Taiwan. Mr Colby is the man who was undertaking a US Government review of the nuclear submarine pact with Australia under the three nation AUKUS partnership, also involving the United States and United Kingdom. There are fears in Australia that Mr Colby's review will place new demands on Australia.

The opposition parties in Australia were also critical of Mr Albanese's China visit, particularly as Mr Albanese has not yet met with President Trump since his re-election. The Liberal and National parties, the main opposition, have

attacked Mr Albanese for not being able to secure a meeting with President Trump to discuss trade and security issues.

The opposition's Senator James Paterson described Albanese's China visit as "indulgent," questioning the tangible outcomes and highlighting picture-friendly stops like the Great Wall and a panda research facility in Chengdu. The newly elected Leader of the Opposition, Sussan Ley, also expressed disappointment over the lack of assurances regarding Chinese military activities, such as the live-fire drills, emphasizing the need for a "strong and respectful relationship" that stands up for national interests.

Mr Albanese [dismissed](#) the opposition criticism as baseless, pointing to the near collapse of communications between Australia and China during former prime minister Scott Morrison's term in office.

Australia's security allies, especially the Quad partners such as India, have also been closely watching the country's improving relations with China for signs of a pro-China tilt in Australian foreign policy. But these fears may be exaggerated as foreign minister Penny Wong has herself said in the past that there is no going back to the kind of bilateral relationship that existed before 2017. Although the slide in Sino-Australian relations was halted after Mr Albanese came to power in 2022, his government has said it is only seeking to stabilise relations with China.

In an attempt to reassure Australia's security partners and to allay concerns at home, Mr Albanese has said that his government is going ahead with its decision to force the Chinese company, Landbridge, to sell the port of Darwin back to Australian interests. Landbridge paid 509 million Australian dollars in 2015 to secure a 99-year lease on the strategically important port. The decision to lease the port to a Chinese company was strongly criticised by prominent Australian security analysts. The US government had also expressed its opposition as Darwin is where up to 2,000 US marines are deployed on a rotating basis.

Australia's improving relations with China, as demonstrated by Albanese's visit, may have implications for India and the Quad – which aims to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific – if they move beyond economic relations into security cooperation. But given the chaotic foreign and trade policies of the United States at the moment, everyone is hedging, and Australia is no exception.

Tensions Resurface: The Thailand-Cambodia Conflict

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

The eruption of the Thailand and Cambodia conflict on July 24 was not unforeseen or sudden; it had been a ticking time bomb that had caused regional concern since the beginning of the year. The border dispute has long been a flashpoint between the two nations, with multiple deadly skirmishes occurring in 2008 and 2011. In 2013, the International Court of Justice awarded the lands around Preah Vihear to Cambodia and ordered Thailand to withdraw its forces from the area. However, unmarked areas around the temple continued to be a source of tension.

In 2025, the situation intensified following Cambodia's release of a confidential phone conversation between Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Hun Sen, the former Cambodian leader and current President of the Senate, as well as the father of the current Prime Minister. The leak led to political repercussions in Thailand, resulting in Shinawatra's suspension and sparking renewed unease across Southeast Asia. Hun Sen, a powerful figure in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, has asserted that the conflict was exacerbated by Thai generals who temporarily closed Prasat Ta Muen Thom. Nevertheless, the level of fighting that ensued between the two nations after July 24 was quite rare.

On July 24, tensions escalated when Cambodia accused Thailand of violating a long-standing agreement regarding the Ta Muan Thom Temple, which is part of the Preah Vihear Temple Complex. Cambodia claimed that Thailand was deploying barbed wire at the base of the temple. This incident was soon followed by the deployment of surveillance drones from both nations. Shortly after, both sides opened fire, each accusing the other of initiating the conflict.

By late morning, Cambodia launched BM-21 rockets at various locations along the border, while Thailand scrambled F-16 fighter jets to target military sites in Cambodia.¹ This increase in hostilities came just a day after Thailand recalled its ambassador to Cambodia and announced plans to expel Cambodia's ambassador in Bangkok. This decision was made following a landmine

¹ "Thailand launches airstrikes on Cambodian military targets as deadly border dispute escalates". CNN, July 24, 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/thailand-cambodia-border-dispute-07-24-25-intl-hnk>

explosion that injured five Thai soldiers along the border.² In the previous escalation in 2011, 16 people lost their lives. This recent conflict has resulted in the deaths of at least 35 individuals and the displacement of 300,000 people.³

These developments occurred following several months of escalating tensions, culminating in an earlier skirmish on May 28, 2025. This incident represents a significant increase in hostilities between the Southeast Asian nations involved. On that date, a Cambodian soldier was fatally injured during an engagement between the armed forces of both countries in an area referred to as the “Emerald Triangle”⁴—a disputed border region comprising parts of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Both nations assert territorial claims over this region, and each side has accused the other of initiating hostilities. In light of these escalations, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen released a statement on Facebook, declaring, “We hate war, but we are compelled to wage it when facing foreign aggression—just as we did between 2008 and 2011—by employing a three-pronged approach: military, diplomatic, and legal.”⁵ As a result of the heightened tensions, both countries have consequently strengthened their military presence along their respective borders.

Though it initially appeared that a de-escalation had occurred—with troops returning to their military positions agreed upon last year on June 8—tensions quickly resurfaced. The dispute escalated into a tit-for-tat response that seemed aimed at appeasing and fuelling nationalistic sentiment surrounding the conflict. Throughout June, the Thai army took control of border checkpoints, while Bangkok threatened to cut off electricity and internet access to Cambodia. In retaliation, Cambodia banned Thai media, including television and movies, and disconnected cross-border internet links to Thailand.

On June 17, Cambodia prohibited the import of Thai produce, and Thailand responded by preventing Thais from crossing the border to work in casinos and other entertainment venues in Cambodia's Poipet. The situation further intensified when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet announced via

² Thailand recalls ambassador to Cambodia amid border tensions”. The Hindu, July 23, 2025. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/thailand-recalls-ambassador-to-cambodia-amid-border-tensions/article69847064.ece>

³ Suriyasenee, Angela and Ruser, Nathan. “Thailand-Cambodia conflict: legacy politics and premeditated escalation”. ASPI, July 29, 2025. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/thailand-cambodia-conflict-legacy-politics-and-premeditated-escalation/>

⁴ Guzman, Chad de. “Thailand and Cambodia’s Friendship Falters as Border Clash Escalates: What to Know”. Time, June 17, 2025. <https://time.com/7294994/thailand-cambodia-border-dispute-hun-sen-thaksin-paetongtarn-history-explainer/>

⁵ “Hun Sen condemns border clash between Cambodian and Thai forces”. The Nation, May 29, 2025. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40050587>

Facebook on June 16 that Cambodia had sent an official letter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) seeking assistance in resolving border development issues. He stated, “Cambodia chooses international law and peace.”⁶

Thailand’s foreign ministry, however, dismissed the possibility of ICJ intervention, expressing a preference for bilateral talks. They believed that the unilateral decision by Phnom Penh to approach the ICJ – which Thailand does not recognise as having jurisdiction – only aggravated the situation. Thailand has previously rejected ICJ rulings related to the Preah Vihear Temple and viewed Cambodia's actions as a breach of the understanding that border issues should be addressed bilaterally through the Joint Border Commission (JBC), established for this purpose in 2000.

The dispute over the shared land border between Cambodia and Thailand is ignited by a long-standing conflict concerning various non-demarcated areas that stretch over 800 kilometers.⁷ A central aspect of this dispute involves the Preah Vihear temple complex, along with several Hindu temples located in the Dangrek Mountains and Ba Nong Khanna.

The origins of the border dispute can be traced back to a treaty signed in 1904 between the Kingdom of Siam and the French colonial government in Cambodia, followed by a subsequent treaty in 1907. These treaties not only established a land boundary but also gave rise to maritime disputes. The treaties assigned a “Mixed Delimitation Commission,” composed of French and Siamese officials, the task of setting the new boundaries within four months of ratification.⁸ However, the Commission never completed its work, leaving significant portions of the border undemarcated.

At the same time, the French produced their own maps that deviated from the text of the 1904 and 1907 treaties in certain respects, leading to ongoing contention. In 1962, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) reaffirmed Cambodia's sovereignty over the Preah Vihear temple complex but did not make a ruling on the adjoining territory. For many Cambodians and Thais, the

⁶ Strangio, Sebastian. “Cambodia Officially Requests ICJ Intervention in Thai Border Dispute”. The Diplomat, June 16, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/cambodia-officially-requests-icj-intervention-in-thai-border-dispute/>

⁷ “Cambodia-Thailand Border Clashes: Urgent Private Meeting”. Security Council Report, July 25, 2025. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/07/cambodia-thailand-border-clashes-urgent-private-meeting.php>

⁸ Strangio, Sebastian. “The Roots of the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict”. The Diplomat, July 28, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/the-roots-of-the-thailand-cambodia-border-conflict/>

idea of losing even a small amount of territory is closely tied to deep-rooted feelings of national loss and humiliation.

The assumption that violent conflicts between Southeast Asian states were a thing of the past was shattered by the escalation on May 28, followed by fighting on July 24 that resulted in airstrikes and the deployment of fighter jets. The skirmish undermined two key tenets of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation - 'non-interference into internal affairs of member states' and 'the renunciation of threats or the use of force' between member states.

This latest crisis highlights ASEAN's sluggish approach in addressing conflicts like it has with the conflict in Myanmar, as well as its continued failure to issue any joint communique regarding the South China Sea disputes. Criticism of ASEAN intensified as tensions persisted for weeks as mentioned even before July 24, yet the grouping demonstrated a singular lack of urgency in pursuing a resolution or facilitating dialogue between the two nations.

Nevertheless, after four consecutive days of the conflict, ceasefire negotiations were convened in Malaysia on July 28, with participation from the Acting Prime Minister of Thailand, Phumtham Wechayachai, and the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Manet. Following the discussions, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar, who presided over the negotiations in his capacity as head of the ASEAN regional bloc, indicated that both parties had achieved a mutual understanding to restore normalcy and agreed to an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire" effective from midnight on July 28. While the initial credit was given solely to Prime Minister Anwar, it was revealed that meeting was also a result of direct pressure from US President Donald Trump who warned that the US may not proceed with trade deals with either country if the hostilities continued.

Had tensions between Thailand and Cambodia escalated further without the mediation of Malaysia in its capacity as the ASEAN chair, particularly against the backdrop of the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, the consequences could have severely impacted the region's economic and political stability. The containment of the crisis within the ASEAN framework represents a noteworthy development. Maintaining regional peace is imperative for the bloc, especially at a time when it faces significant challenges, including intensifying U.S.-China tensions, high tariffs imposed by the Trump administration, and increasing assertiveness from China in the South China Sea. Although the ceasefire agreement remains intact, breaches have already been reported, and it will be

incumbent upon Malaysia, as the ASEAN chair, to facilitate the ongoing border discussions. A diplomatic resolution is the only viable path toward ensuring long-term peace.

Acting East: The AMM, ASEAN-India, EAS, and ARF Ministerial Meetings

by

Divya Rai

Introduction

A central theme dominating discussions at the ASEAN meetings was the escalation in global trade tensions, particularly following the U.S. government's announcement of revised tariffs targeting Southeast Asian countries. Against this backdrop, in the first week of July, Southeast Asia witnessed a series of significant diplomatic developments. From July 10 to 11, 2025, ASEAN convened the 58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This included ministerial meetings with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners – Australia, Canada, China, the European Union (EU), India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (US). Minister of State for External Affairs (MoS) Pabitra Margherita represented India at the 58th ASEAN Regional Forum, the 15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and the 32nd ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting and co-chaired the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India.

58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting

On July 9th, 2025, ASEAN held the 58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which brought together the region's top diplomats to reaffirm their commitment to unity, peace, and long-term resilience.⁹ The meetings took place amid geopolitical and trade uncertainties as US President Donald Trump announced revised tariffs on countries, including those in Southeast Asia. The 32-page joint communiqué largely focused on the rising global trade tensions and growing economic uncertainties, particularly unilateral actions relating to tariffs. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, in his opening remarks, criticised the tariffs, export restrictions, and investment barriers, saying, “tools once used to generate growth are now wielded to pressure, isolate, and contain”, and “have now become the sharpened

⁹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). “Joint Communiqué of the 58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Kuala Lumpur”, 9 July 2025. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FINAL-Joint-Communique-of-the-58th-AMM.pdf>.

instruments of geopolitical rivalry”.¹⁰ He further emphasised that to build a stronger, more connected ASEAN economy, there is increasing demand to trade and invest among ourselves and advance integration across sectors; then only ASEAN will have relevance and resilience for decades to come. The Joint Communiqué also expressed “deep concern” over these global economic situations, stressing on the importance of a rules-based multilateral trading system and the central role of the World Trade Organization. It particularly refrained from naming the US, instead using language about the need for predictability and fairness in global trade.

Throughout the session, ministers reaffirmed ASEAN’s unity and its central role in facilitating regional dialogue and managing great power engagement. There was strong emphasis on strengthening intra-ASEAN trade, advancing economic integration, and upgrading agreements such as the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) and Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). During the plenary and retreat sessions, the ministers reviewed ASEAN’s progress since the 46th ASEAN Summit and preparations for the 47th ASEAN Summit, including the full membership of Timor-Leste.

A notable highlight has been the formal endorsement of Timor-Leste’s progression towards full ASEAN membership at the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025. The outcome document expressed concern over the “growing risks of nuclear danger and conflict” and expansion and modernisation of nuclear arsenals. Another key development was China confirming its intent to sign the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) treaty¹¹. An unexpected move, as the treaty, in force since 1997, calls for the prohibition of nuclear weapons in the Southeast Asian region, including nations’ territories, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves. Alongside China, Russia has also agreed to sign the protocol, with the U.S. reportedly reviewing the matter.¹² ASEAN ministers also welcomed Algeria and Uruguay’s accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC)¹³, expanding the circle of

¹⁰ Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia. “Opening Address by Prime Minister For 58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” July 9, 2025. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2025/07/opening-address-by-yab-prime-minister-for-58th-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-2/>.

¹¹ Reuters. “Malaysia says China ready to sign SEA nuclear weapons-free treaty.” Reuters. July 10, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/malaysia-says-china-will-sign-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapons-free-zone-treaty-2025-07-10/>

¹² Bernama. “China Will Sign SEANWFZ Treaty as Soon as Documentation Is Ready - FM Mohamad.” July 10, 2025. <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2443595>.

¹³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). “Joint Communiqué of the 58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, Kuala Lumpur”, 9 July 2025. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FINAL-Joint-Communique-of-the-58th-AMM.pdf>.

partners supporting ASEAN's principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence.

Regarding various regional flashpoints, particularly situation in the Middle East, the ASEAN officials expressed "great concern over the continued tension in the Middle East and called on all parties concerned to exercise self-restraint and avoid acts that may aggravate the situation". The final Communiqué of the reaffirmed its "longstanding support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the rights to self-determination and to their homeland," and called on all parties "to work towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Addressing the 12-day war between Israel and Iran, the foreign ministers welcomed the ceasefire between Israel and Iran on June 24, brokered by the US. Interestingly, the joint statement did not mention US strikes on Iranian nuclear sites. While on the enduring Myanmar crisis, the ministers expressed concern over the prolonged political crisis in Myanmar and encouraged progress on the implementation of the ASEAN Leaders' Five-Point Consensus (5PC). However, despite this, ASEAN's ability to enact meaningful change remains limited by the organisation's consensus-driven approach and the intractability of the situation on the ground.

58th AMM encapsulated ASEAN's efforts to sustain relevance and cohesion amid multiple economic and geopolitical challenges. The meeting's outcomes, including moves toward deeper economic integration and membership expansion, suggest a group that is beginning to revive the idea of enhancing the regional security.

ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AIFMM)

MoS for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita visited Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from July 10 to 11, 2025, to attend the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM). Pabitra Margherita, who is India's country coordinator for ASEAN, co-chaired the meeting alongside Theresa P. Lazaro, Undersecretary for Bilateral Relations and ASEAN Affairs of the Philippines. The AIFMM deliberated on enhancing collaboration in crucial areas such as digital transformation, disaster management, defence, maritime cooperation, and economic growth¹⁴. During the same week, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar held bilateral talks with his

¹⁴ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). "ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with India Reaffirms Commitment to Further Deepening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." July 10, 2025. <https://asean.org/asean-post-ministerial-conference-with-india-reaffirms-commitment-to-further-deepening-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Beijing and took part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 14-15, 2025.

Renewing commitment to expand cooperation and strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership between India and ASEAN, a new Plan of Action for 2026–2030 was formally adopted. This new roadmap serves as a concrete roadmap to implement the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, building on previous phases and adapting to new regional and global challenges. The new roadmap gives greater impetus to a wide range of sectors, including digital cooperation, economic engagement, defence and maritime security, disaster management, public health, and the longstanding civilisational and cultural bonds that unite the two sides.¹⁵

Under the new plan of action, the two sides will further strengthen the ASEAN-led mechanisms including ASEAN-India Summit, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). The plan envisages holding ASEAN-India Defence Ministers' Informal Meetings and activities and strengthening practical defence cooperation to address challenges in maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, humanitarian mine action, peacekeeping operations, and cyber-security¹⁶. In the field of economic cooperation, the two sides agreed to conclude the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) through targeted initiatives and timelines for practical cooperation that is more effective, user-friendly, simple, and trade-facilitative for businesses as well as to foster mutually beneficial trade. In the area of connectivity, the two sides agreed to work closely to expedite the early completion and operationalisation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway while looking forward to its eastward extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Viet Nam".¹⁷

In his remarks, MoS lauded Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN for the current year, under the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability". He highlighted the importance of ASEAN as the cornerstone of India's Act East Policy and

¹⁵ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2026-2030)". <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Final-POA-to-Implement-ASEAN-India-CSP-2026-2030.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Visit of MoS (PM) to Malaysia for participation in ASEAN related Foreign Ministers' Meeting", July 14, 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/39801/Visit+of+MoS+PM+to+Malaysia+for+participation+in+ASEAN+related+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting>.

¹⁷ Ibid

ASEAN's Unity and Centrality in India's Indo-Pacific vision. He called for greater cooperation between India and the ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific through strong convergence and complementarity between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative". He underscored the significance of the effective implementation of the 10-point plan for strengthening the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the ASEAN-India Summit last year in Vientiane.¹⁸ The ASEAN Foreign Ministers appreciated India's consistent support to ASEAN and discussed preparations for the upcoming India-ASEAN Summit in October this year.

15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting

MoS Pabitra Margherita represented India at the 15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting. The meeting was attended by the 10 ASEAN members and United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy, and Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong, amongst other high-level attendees. The 15th EAS FMM discussed ways and means to strengthen the leader-led EAS platform to make it more responsive to emerging challenges. Ministers also exchanged views on current regional and international developments, geopolitical challenges and reviewed preparations for a new "EAS Plan of Action". The importance of ensuring meaningful engagement among all EAS participating countries and preparations for the upcoming 20th EAS Summit scheduled in October 2025 were also discussed.¹⁹

The key issues of concern impacting regional peace and security identified were the recent surge in the DPRK's ICBM testing and ballistic missile launches, and the lack of progress on the timely implementation by Myanmar of the ASEAN leader's "Five Point Consensus", and the threat from extremist violence and radicalisation. On Ukraine, the chairman's statement reaffirmed the need to respect sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, the UN Charter, and international law but refrained from calling out Russia. The statement also expressed grave concern about the continued tension in the

¹⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Opening Remarks by MoS (PM) at ASEAN - India Foreign Ministers' Meeting, July 10, 2025." July 10, 2025. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39798/Opening_Remarks_by_MoS_PM_at_ASEAN_India_Foreign_Minister_s_Meeting_July_10_2025.

¹⁹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). "Chairman's Statement of the 15th East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Kuala Lumpur", 11 July 2025. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-15th-EAS-FMM-12-July-2025.pdf>.

Middle East and dire humanitarian situation in Gaza for over 20 months and called for an immediate and permanent ceasefire and the unconditional release of all hostages. The statement released took note of the tension in the Middle East and the ceasefire between Israel and Iran brokered by the US and mediated together with Qatar.²⁰

The 15th EAS took place weeks before the new U.S. tariffs on Southeast Asian countries took effect on August 1, 2025. The timing significantly intensified the meeting's economic focus and contributed to a sense of urgency among regional leaders to address rising protectionism and maintain stability in global trade. Like the Joint communiqué from the 58th AMM, the EAS chairman's statement carefully avoided explicitly naming the United States, but conveyed a firm, collective commitment to preserving a predictable, transparent, and rules-based multilateral trading system, with the World Trade Organization (WTO) at its core.

32nd ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting

The 32nd ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial Meeting was held on July 11, 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This meeting brought together foreign ministers and senior officials from the 27 ARF member countries along with the ASEAN Secretary-General to discuss regional security and promote dialogue and cooperation on key challenges. The chairman's statement reiterated "the importance of strengthening international and regional cooperative efforts and noted the progress in the implementation of the ARF Hanoi Plan of Action (HPOA) II 2020–2025, which has served as policy guidance for the ARF.

The meeting welcomed the adoption of the 'ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future' by the ASEAN Leaders to guide ASEAN Community-building in the next 20 years. In the chairman's statement issued after the meeting, some participants expressed "concern" over the declining commitment and cooperation in global non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament mechanisms and called on all countries, especially Nuclear Weapon States (NWS), to maintain and fully implement their commitments under these mechanisms. On the South China Sea, some ministers raised concerns about land reclamations and "serious incidents" and personal safety in the area that increased tensions. The meeting emphasised the importance of strengthening "mutual trust and confidence" and exercising self-restraint "in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability and avoid actions that may

²⁰ Ibid

further complicate the situation" in the South China Sea. They welcomed the completion of the third reading of the Single Draft Code of Conduct in the South China Sea negotiating text. The statement also identified key areas for future cooperation are:

- Non-Traditional Security Threats: Terrorism, violent extremism conducive to terrorism (VECT), and transnational organised crime
- Maritime Domain: piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, the degradation of marine ecosystem and biodiversity
- Disaster Management: early warning and preparedness, climate change and rising sea levels
- Non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament
- Use of ICTs to economic growth
- Cyber Security: Cyber-enabled and transnational organised crime, particularly online scams

The statement also touched upon conflict in Myanmar, encouraged progress on the implementation of the 'Five-Point Consensus' aimed at a peaceful resolution, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza, among other issues. All ministers emphasised the importance of non-militarisation and self-restraint in the conduct of all activities by claimants and all other states.²¹

Bilateral Meetings of Minister of State for External Affairs (MoS) Pabitra Margherita

MoS Pabitra Margherita called upon the Secretary General of ASEAN and had bilateral meetings with the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Timor-Leste, and Philippines' Foreign Secretary.²² During his meeting with Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, both exchanged views on the progress of the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and discussed ways to further advance the cooperation and bringing it to greater heights²³. Pabitra Margherita also held bilateral talks with Bendito Freitas, Foreign Minister, Timor-Leste's and discussed strategic priorities and explored ways to strengthen bilateral

²¹ Ibid

²² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Visit of MoS (PM) to Malaysia for participation in ASEAN related Foreign Ministers' Meeting", July 14, 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/>.

²³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). "Secretary-General of ASEAN Meets with the Minister of State for External Affairs of India", July 10, 2025. <https://asean.org/secretary-general-of-asean-meets-with-the-minister-of-state-for-external-affairs-of-india/>.

cooperation – particularly in science, technology and pharmaceutical industry.²⁴ Pabitra Margherita also held a bilateral meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the Philippines prior to Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. visit to India in August.

Conclusion

For decades, Southeast Asia's growth and rising prosperity have depended on an open, rules-based multilateral trading system. Integration with global value chains allowed ASEAN countries to transform their economies, reduce poverty, and maintain strategic relevance with major powers. However, the current period is characterized by deepening economic volatility – with escalating protectionism, especially from the U.S., threatening foundational tenets of the global order. The spike in protectionist measures since early 2025, including new U.S. tariffs, has driven ASEAN leaders to put economic integration as a priority agenda. Upgrading the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), enhancing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), and modernizing legacy agreements have become critical. For many in the region, trade is the “lifeline” – a central lever to both resilience and relevance. While some – like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam – have reached partial settlements with Washington, many others are still embroiled in tough talks. Many ASEAN countries are now assessing the diminishing returns of negotiating economic concessions from the U.S, given a pattern of one-sided deals, or whether it would be better to deepen relations with other partners such as China, the EU, Japan, South Korea, etc. As for India, India sees a large ASEAN market and is actively engaging in the deepening of economic ties, particularly by revisiting and upgrading the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). However, given the slow pace of negotiations, achieving the target to conclude the review by the end of 2025, remains uncertain.

Amid the economic headwinds, the timing of the meeting is equally significant as it took place during the skirmishes between Thai and Cambodian troops along their disputed border. In an unexpected turn, on July 29, 2025²⁵, the dispute was resolved following peace talks facilitated by Malaysia, the current ASEAN chair. The agreement for an “immediate, and unconditional ceasefire” was significant. The fact that the crisis was contained within the ASEAN

²⁴ Tatoli. "Timor-Leste and India Discuss Cooperation in Science, Technology and Pharmaceutical Industry", July 14, 2025. <https://en.tatoli.tl/2025/07/14/timor-leste-and-india-discuss->

²⁵ Associated Press. "Thailand, Cambodia Clash on Border; Ceasefire Talks Underway", July 31, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/thailand-cambodia-armed-clash-border-ceasefire-talks-6d8cc517df1be1ad0bf911fe1c81c765>.

framework, underlines ASEAN's diplomatic capacity to convene and mediate critical regional disputes, also reaffirmed ASEAN's role as a stabiliser in the region. Had tensions between Thailand and Cambodia escalated further – especially alongside the ongoing civil war in Myanmar and persistent maritime clashes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea – it would have dealt a severe blow to the region's economic and political stability.



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