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Humanitarian Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Strategies in Addressing the Thailand-Cambodia Border Crisis Impact

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ABSTRACT

This study examines ASEAN's role in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis (2025-2026) through a humanitarian diplomacy approach amidst regional security dynamics. The primary focus is on strategies for mitigating humanitarian, political, and economic impacts, as well as the integration of digital technology and cross-border coordination. Using descriptive qualitative methods, data is sourced from official ASEAN Secretariat documents, AHA Centre technical reports, and related literature. The findings indicate that while humanitarian diplomacy was effective in defusing short-term tensions and coordinating aid through digital platforms, its overall effectiveness was hampered by disparities in political interests among member states. These barriers include a rigid adherence to the principle of non-intervention and unequal digital access, which slowed the response to the humanitarian crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of refugees. The study concludes that strengthening collective mediation mechanisms and digitizing preventive diplomacy are crucial for future regional stability.

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INTRODUCTION

The border crisis between Thailand and Cambodia has been escalating since the early 21st century, peaking again in 2025 (Eurasia Review, 2026). This tension not only impacts bilateral relations between the two countries but also significantly impacts the stability of the Southeast Asian region. Its impact is widespread, encompassing political, social, and economic sectors, significantly impacting other ASEAN member states (Chunyu, 2025). The conflict has caused infrastructure damage and displaced thousands of civilians from the border area, leading to a major humanitarian crisis (WHO, 2025). Although several ASEAN-facilitated mediation efforts, including a ceasefire brokered in 2025 (ASEAN, 2025), the peace process has demonstrated the limited effectiveness of ASEAN in managing transnational conflicts (Andinny et al., 2026). This issue is particularly relevant because ASEAN's role in maintaining regional peace and security continues to be

tested by bilateral conflicts such as the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute (Sanglee, 2025).

The humanitarian impact of conflict escalation in 2025 is urgently needed, going beyond mere displacement statistics. Situation reports from UN humanitarian and non-governmental organizations revealed that more than 400,000 people were displaced in Cambodia, with approximately 186,000 sheltering in temporary shelters by early January 2026. Vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women, and people with disabilities face increased protection risks, psychosocial stress, and disrupted access to education and basic health services (HRF, 2026).

Figure 1. Map of refugee locations due to the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict
Source: (World Vision International in Cambodia, 2026)

Economically, this conflict triggered a significant two-way supply shock that disrupted exports and imports of key raw materials and threatened the $15 billion bilateral trade target, resulting in significant economic losses for both countries. ASEAN's failure to respond quickly and effectively not only exacerbated the crisis on the ground but also risked undermining the organization's credibility as a guarantor of regional stability in the eyes of the international community (Nhean, 2026).

Given the limitations in the effectiveness of ASEAN's humanitarian diplomacy in resolving such transnational conflicts, it is important to understand the broader context through existing literature. In recent years, research related to humanitarian diplomacy and border conflicts in Southeast Asia has flourished, but many gaps remain, particularly regarding the use of digital technology to enhance the coordination and effectiveness of ASEAN's response. Therefore, the following section of this study will review relevant previous research developments and identify gaps in the literature that need to be addressed in the context of the Thailand-Cambodia border.

Current studies of ASEAN humanitarian diplomacy demonstrate persistent structural challenges. Research by Wangke (2024) underscores the limitations of cross-border coordination in responding to humanitarian crises in the ASEAN region. This is further reinforced by Prabandari et al. (2025), who highlight the selective application of humanitarian norms due to an excessive focus on sovereignty, which ultimately hinders comprehensive refugee protection. On the other hand, Cook (2021) notes that reliance on non-governmental partnerships based on the principle of consensus often leads to delays in crisis response. Furthermore, Setyowati & Nurulita (2023) also criticized this issue of effectiveness regarding reliance on external powers in resolving border disputes. Similarly, Sokhuon (2025) emphasizes the importance of international law but acknowledges the limitations of ASEAN's mediation capacity. Based on this review, the main gap identified in this literature is the lack of studies discussing the integration of digital technology to accelerate aid coordination and real-time crisis monitoring in the ASEAN region. Based on this gap, this study aims to evaluate how optimizing digital platforms can address the weaknesses of conventional coordination, which has been hampered by bureaucracy and sovereignty issues. Therefore, the main focus of this study is to analyze ASEAN's strategy in utilizing digital technology to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian diplomacy, especially in mitigating the impact of the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis in the 2025-2026 period.

Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes the Complex Interdependence theory developed by Robert O. Keohane & Joseph S. Nye Jr. in their work entitled "Power and Interdependence" (2012). This theory espouses a Liberal perspective, opposing the Realist view that prioritizes military power and the centrality of states in international relations. Instead, the complex interdependence theory emphasizes the importance of interdependent relationships between states and other international actors, as well as how non-military issues, such as humanitarian crises, can dominate the political agenda and alter power dynamics among interdependent actors (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

Keohane and Nye identified three key underlying characteristics of this theory, which form the basis of this research's analysis. First, multiple channels describe relationships between states through formal channels, such as government, and informal channels, such as NGOs or digital communities. In humanitarian crises, digital technology can accelerate aid coordination by overcoming bureaucratic barriers, enabling ASEAN to reduce information gaps and respond more quickly to crises. Second, this theory emphasizes the absence of a hierarchy of issues, where humanitarian, economic, and social issues can be more pressing than traditional security issues such as claims of territorial sovereignty. In the context of the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, humanitarian issues such as refugees and health must be prioritized through digital technology. Finally, this theory emphasizes the minor role of military force in situations of high interdependence, where the use of military force can exacerbate tensions. ASEAN prioritizes diplomacy and negotiation, with a non-interventionist approach, and peaceful solutions to resolve crises, which are more effective than military force.

Overall, this Complex Interdependence theory can be used to analyze how ASEAN, through humanitarian diplomacy, creates conditions for mutually beneficial interdependence among member states, using digital technology as a channel to accelerate aid coordination and reduce information gaps. This theory also provides a strong basis for assessing ASEAN's digital strategy in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis in real time amidst evolving regional political dynamics.

METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method that aims to delve deeper into ASEAN's role in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis through humanitarian diplomacy in 2025-2026 (Naamy, 2019). This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore diplomatic phenomena in their natural context, without manipulating variables, while still producing a systematic and comprehensive narrative. The descriptive qualitative approach is considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of ASEAN's diplomatic strategies, as well as illustrating how digital technology can be utilized to accelerate aid coordination and reduce information gaps between ASEAN member states during the crisis.

Research Subject

The subject of this research is ASEAN as a regional institution, with a specific focus on the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) as the primary actors in humanitarian diplomacy related to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. The object of analysis includes ASEAN's diplomatic policies, statements, and coordination mechanisms issued between 2025 and 2026, as well as the digital platforms and technologies used to support the distribution of humanitarian aid and cross-border information exchange.

Research Procedure

This research was carried out through several stages. First, the researcher identified relevant documents and literature related to ASEAN's humanitarian diplomacy and the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. Second, the collected data were selected and classified based on their relevance to the research focus, namely diplomatic strategies and the utilization of digital technology in humanitarian aid coordination. Third, the data were examined in depth to identify recurring patterns and themes. Finally, the findings were compiled into a descriptive narrative that explains the dynamics of ASEAN's role as a whole, from the emergence of the crisis to the diplomatic responses undertaken.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study were collected from secondary sources, such as official documents of the ASEAN Secretariat, technical reports of the AHA Centre, and relevant literature, including the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) report and previous studies on border crises (Lamont, 2022). The main instrument used in this study is the researcher,

who acts directly in searching for, selecting, and interpreting data through document study and literature review techniques. Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques, namely by systematically tracing, recording, and compiling data from official ASEAN publications, research reports, and other credible secondary sources related to the research topic.

Data analysis technique

The data will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns in the humanitarian diplomacy strategies implemented by ASEAN, as well as the use of digital technology in humanitarian aid coordination. The analysis process was carried out through several stages, namely data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, and theme definition. This approach is in accordance with the described methodology that emphasizes the importance of an in-depth understanding of diplomatic and managerial practices for international relations research, thereby enabling the researcher to construct a coherent interpretation of ASEAN's role in managing the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

1) ASEAN Strategy in Mitigating the Humanitarian Impact of the Border Crisis

This study examines ASEAN's humanitarian diplomacy strategy in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, focusing on the significant challenges ASEAN faces in coordinating humanitarian assistance. Disparities in political interests between member states, as well as bureaucratic obstacles, often slow down responses to such crises. In this context, the border crisis between Thailand and Cambodia reflects the deep political differences among ASEAN members, particularly regarding the often conflicting territorial claims between the two countries. The ongoing tensions in the Preah Vihear Temple area, depicted on the map of the 4.6 square kilometer disputed area between the two countries (Figure 1), serve as a clear example of how these differences complicate ASEAN's efforts to provide a more concrete response.

This map shows the locations of fighting between Thailand and Cambodia, as well as flashpoints along their border, with emphasis on the area around the Preah Vihear Temple, the epicenter of tensions. The map depicts the areas affected by conflicting territorial claims and shows the administrative border separating the two countries. The flashpoints depict the locations of fighting along the border, which is part of a broader escalation of conflict between the two countries. This map provides a clear visual depiction of how these tensions are impacting regional stability and creating a humanitarian crisis along the Thai-Cambodian border.

After viewing the map depicting flashpoints and fighting along the Thai-Cambodian border, this border crisis clearly demonstrates the deep divergence of national political interests among ASEAN member states. The tensions arising from the prolonged conflict, particularly around the Preah Vihear Temple and other border points, have led to military clashes that have damaged critical infrastructure and prompted refugees to flee to safer areas. In this context, ASEAN, as a regional organization, faces significant difficulties in

reaching a common consensus, as the principle of non-interference in consensus-based decision-making limits the organization's scope for effective collective action. As a result, ASEAN's response is often limited to administrative and diplomatic measures that lack binding force (Suzuki, 2019).

Figure 2. Map of the Thailand-Cambodia border and the location of war flashpoints along the border conflict on July 24, 2025,
Source: (CNN Indonesia, 2025)

Contemporary studies have shown that ASEAN tends to rely on traditional diplomatic approaches focused on dialogue, consensus, and restraint in conflict management. While this approach is often successful in defusing tensions between conflicting parties, it is inadequate for rapidly escalating disputes, as seen in the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis of 2025. In practice, ASEAN's response to this crisis has largely followed the classic ASEAN Way, prioritizing verbal communication over robust collective action. Consequently, these conflicts often face bilateral mediation with a political logic that differs from ASEAN's core strategy (Heng, 2025).

Along with the diplomatic difficulties ASEAN faces in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, the contestation factor among ASEAN member states is a key factor affecting ASEAN's ability to act collectively. The principle of non-interference, a cornerstone of ASEAN governance, often hinders robust collective action in resolving bilateral disputes, as in this border dispute. While this principle is designed to maintain internal stability for its member states, in practice it has actually worsened ASEAN's response to rapidly evolving crises. ASEAN often finds itself mired in verbal diplomacy without concrete action, given the limited consensus that can be reached among member states (Global South Forum, 2026).

Differing political interests between countries often pose a major obstacle to reaching a mutually beneficial agreement, particularly in the face of escalating crises. The territorial claims at stake between Thailand and Cambodia, particularly around the Preah Vihear Temple, are not merely administrative but also touch on issues of national identity and political legitimacy for each country. Both countries view these claims as integral to fully resolving the issue, and the UNESCO registration status further exacerbates existing tensions and complicates bilateral and multilateral mediation processes (Sebastian, 2025). Domestic political interests also exacerbate this contestation. For Thailand, these territorial claims represent an important symbol of sovereignty and inviolable territorial integrity. Meanwhile, for Cambodia, defending these territories is seen as a form of resistance against the dominance of major powers and an effort to maintain the balance of power in the region (Garbowsky, 2017).

Conversely, disagreements among ASEAN countries regarding their approach to international disputes have also exacerbated the response to this crisis. ASEAN member states have varying policies regarding involvement in international disputes, with some preferring non-intervention, while others support increased ASEAN involvement in mediation. This exacerbates ASEAN's efforts to resolve crises effectively, as the principle of consensus requires the agreement of all members before taking collective action (Wijaya, 2022).

ASEAN's inability to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis on the Thailand-Cambodia border not only affected relations between the countries involved but also had far-reaching repercussions across Southeast Asia, particularly on security, social, economic, and ASEAN's reputation. The impact of this contestation exacerbated existing tensions and provided important lessons regarding the limitations of ASEAN's collective diplomatic mechanisms in addressing complex bilateral disputes. This crisis had significant security implications not only for Thailand and Cambodia, but also for the stability of the Southeast Asian region. The tensions on the border have triggered military clashes that risk escalating into open conflict that could involve other ASEAN countries, exacerbating regional instability. ASEAN should be able to act as a mediator in easing the tensions that occur, but the principle of non-interference actually hinders ASEAN's capacity to act quickly and effectively (PACIS UNPAR, 2025).

This graph depicts humanitarian aid provided to more than 400,000 people displaced by the border crisis, including basic necessities such as food, shelter, clean water, and psychosocial support. ASEAN's inability to provide adequate assistance has exacerbated the suffering of affected civilians.

The economic impact of this crisis has affected the entire Southeast Asian region, particularly due to damaged infrastructure along the border, which has hampered the distribution of goods and services and disrupted vital trade routes between Thailand and Cambodia. The crisis has also created economic uncertainty by discouraging investment and reducing revenues from disrupted trade. ASEAN, which should play a role in facilitating regional economic integration, appears to have failed in its handling of this crisis, ultimately exacerbating economic tensions in the region.

This map illustrates the disruption of trade routes and the distribution of vital goods resulting from the conflict, leading to a decline in trade volume and economic losses of

$125 billion. Damage to infrastructure and the disruption of goods distribution have been major factors contributing to the economic uncertainty in the region.

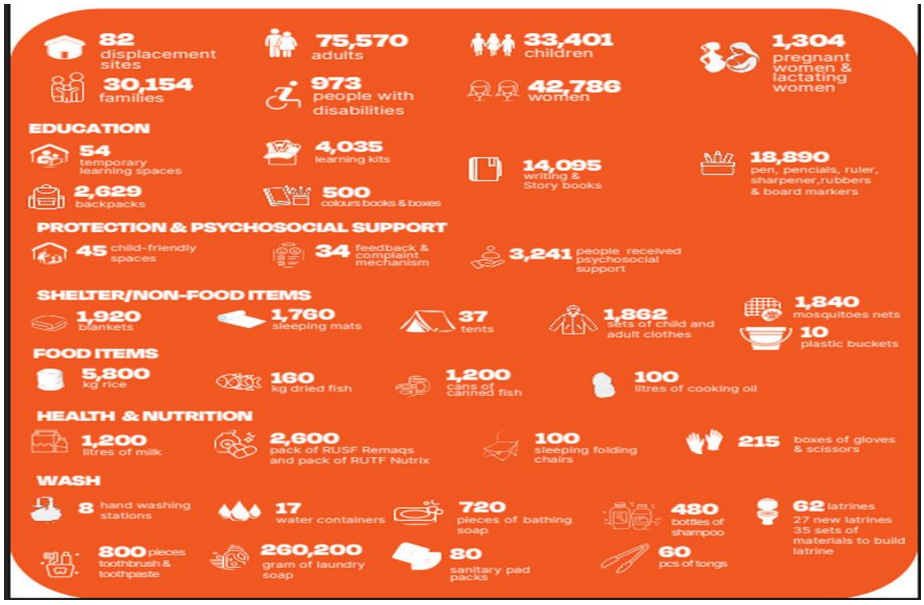

Figure 3. Infographic on humanitarian aid for refugees affected by the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict
Source: (World Vision International in Cambodia, 2026)

This crisis provides valuable lessons on the limitations of ASEAN's collective diplomatic mechanisms. Reliance on the principle of consensus, which requires the agreement of all member states before collective action can be taken, often leads to deadlock and slows down responses to urgent crises. In situations requiring swift action such as this, a more flexible and responsive approach is crucial. However, the principle of non-interference upheld by ASEAN in resolving conflicts between its member states has exacerbated the situation, leading ASEAN to prioritize verbal dialogue over concrete action. This crisis underscores the need for diplomatic policy reform within ASEAN to address conflicts more quickly and effectively in the future, and to maintain the credibility and stability of a region increasingly vulnerable to political and social tensions.

Having discussed the various forms, factors, and impacts of the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, it is important to analyze how ASEAN as a regional organization responded to and managed this crisis. This summary of findings provides an overview of ASEAN's efforts to address the conflict and evaluates the effectiveness of its response in defusing tensions. Several mitigation measures, including calls for a ceasefire and bilateral mediation between Thailand and Cambodia, have been implemented. However, ASEAN's response has often been hampered by the principle of non-interference, which limits the organization's ability to act collectively and swiftly. Assistance provided has primarily focused on humanitarian assistance for affected refugees, although a lack of coordination and limited funding have exacerbated the situation.

Overall, ASEAN's response has tended to be limited to verbal dialogue and diplomatic communication. The mediation efforts undertaken have often been insufficient

to address the rapid escalation of the crisis. ASEAN has failed to adequately coordinate humanitarian assistance, worsening the social and economic impacts in the region. These findings demonstrate that while ASEAN has a well-established diplomatic mechanism, the crisis has highlighted its limitations in addressing complex bilateral disputes.

Figure 4. Map of the Economic Impact of the Thailand-Cambodia Border Crisis (2025)
Source: (Chunyu, 2025)

With these findings revealed, it is now time to further explore how ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms have addressed the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. Therefore, Keohane and Nye's theory of Complex Interdependence provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of relations between ASEAN countries and the challenges faced in responding to this complex conflict. In responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, Keohane and Nye's theory of Complex Interdependence can be used to understand how ASEAN attempts to handle a conflict involving two member states with conflicting interests. This theory emphasizes the interdependent relationship between countries to resolve non-military problems, such as humanitarian crises.

ASEAN is an organization that prioritizes non-military diplomacy in its efforts to reduce tensions through mediation and ceasefires. However, the principle of non-interference often hampers these efforts. According to the theory of complex interdependence, relations between ASEAN countries should facilitate collective action to resolve crises. However, the principles of consensus and non-interference actually slow down decision-making, preventing ASEAN from acting quickly. This theory also explains ASEAN's limitations in acting decisively in bilateral conflicts despite the interdependence of

its member states. However, in practice, the ASEAN Way, which prioritizes verbal communication, is often insufficient in responding to rapidly evolving crises. Therefore, despite ASEAN's potential for resolving international crises, reform of its diplomatic mechanisms is urgently needed to be more responsive and decisive in handling future crises.

The findings of this study align with a study by Wangke (2024), which underscores that limited cross-border coordination remains a chronic obstacle in ASEAN's response to humanitarian crises. This study reinforces this view, particularly in the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute, where strict adherence to the principle of non-interference often hinders responsive collective action. Similarly, Prabandari et al. (2025) noted that the dominant norm of state sovereignty creates a double standard in crisis management, which in this case manifested itself in the slow resolution of overlapping territorial claims. Furthermore, these findings confirm Cook's (2021) argument that ASEAN's reliance on non-governmental partnerships actually hinders strategic decision-making. The data in this study demonstrates that ASEAN's tendency to prioritize verbal dialogue without following it up with firm enforcement action only exacerbates escalations on the ground. This is exacerbated by ASEAN's low collective diplomatic capacity, as noted by Setyowati & Nurulita (2023), which causes the organization to lose momentum as an independent mediator and become more reliant on external influence. Finally, although Sokhuon (2025) highlights the importance of the international legal framework, this study demonstrates that without reforms to the consensus mechanism, these legal instruments are more difficult to implement effectively. This comparison confirms that without a redefinition of the role of non-interference in bilateral crises, ASEAN will continue to face credibility challenges in maintaining regional stability in the future.

After comparing the findings of this study with the existing literature, we can draw several important implications regarding the limitations of ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms in responding to rapidly escalating bilateral crises. These implications are key to understanding the direction ASEAN needs to take to improve its effectiveness in the future. These findings suggest that the principle of non-interference, the foundation of ASEAN diplomacy, needs reform to be more responsive to bilateral crises that require swift action. Without changes to this principle, ASEAN will continue to face challenges in managing conflicts involving rapidly escalating territorial claims. This reform is crucial for ASEAN to act as a more effective mediator, without sacrificing the sovereignty of its member states.

Reliance on consensus, which requires the agreement of all member states before action can be taken, often leads to deadlock. The implication of these findings is the importance of expanding collective diplomatic capacity to enable ASEAN to act more quickly in emergency situations. This could include adjusting decision-making procedures to provide greater flexibility in responding to crises. The slowdown in decision-making has weakened ASEAN's role as an independent mediator. These findings imply that ASEAN needs to strengthen its internal capacity to handle international disputes without relying on external influence. ASEAN's role as a mediator will depend heavily on its capacity to act decisively in resolving conflicts without involving third parties. The importance of the

international legal framework must be balanced with adjustments to the ASEAN consensus mechanism to ensure more effective implementation of international legal instruments. Without reforms in the implementation of the mechanism, legal barriers will continue to be hampered, exacerbating existing tensions and undermining ASEAN's credibility as a dispute resolution actor.

2) Political Dynamics and Disparities of Interests Between Member States in Crisis Response

The Thailand-Cambodia border crisis revealed the complex political dynamics among ASEAN countries. Differing political interests among ASEAN member states played a significant role in shaping the response to this crisis. Based on the horizontal bar graph showing the positions of ASEAN countries regarding non-intervention and active mediation (Molthof, 2012; Spastyono et al., 2024), countries like Thailand, which prioritize national security and border stability, tended to choose a non-interventionist approach. On the other hand, countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines were more supportive of active support, supporting social stability and humanitarian assistance in Cambodia and Thailand (Tanteerawan, 2025; VNTR MOIT, 2025).

Malaysia, as the 2025 ASEAN Chair, played a key role in active mediation and initiated diplomatic steps to reduce tensions between the two countries involved. As ASEAN chair, Malaysia prioritizes diplomatic resolution and active mediation between the countries involved, emphasizing the importance of ASEAN's role in maintaining regional stability (Karuppannan, 2025). Singapore, while prioritizing the principle of non-interference, continues to encourage resolution through diplomatic dialogue and bilateral negotiations (MFA Singapore, 2025). Laos, the former ASEAN chair in 2024, also plays a role in easing regional tensions, though it prioritizes a neutral approach in line with the principle of non-interference (Hutt, 2024). Other member states, such as Brunei, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste, prioritize the principle of moderate non-interference in responding to the crisis, prioritizing a diplomatic approach of non-intervention (Chen, 2025; Spastyono et al., 2024).

The following graph illustrates the positions of ASEAN countries regarding active mediation versus non-intervention, demonstrating the differences in policy between countries in responding to this crisis. Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines tend to be more supportive of mediation, while countries such as Brunei, Myanmar, Laos, Singapore, and Timor Leste prioritize non-intervention, which can be illustrated in Figure 5.

This graph shows the policy positions of ASEAN member states regarding involvement in international disputes, with countries embracing the principle of non-intervention represented in pink, while countries supporting active mediation are represented in light green.

Political, economic, and security factors significantly influence the positions of ASEAN countries in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. Countries with close economic and security ties with Thailand and Cambodia, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are more likely to support active mediation and a diplomatic solution (Tarigan, 2025). These countries see regional stability as highly

dependent on good relations between Thailand and Cambodia, and therefore are more proactive in offering peaceful solutions (Haacke, 2023).

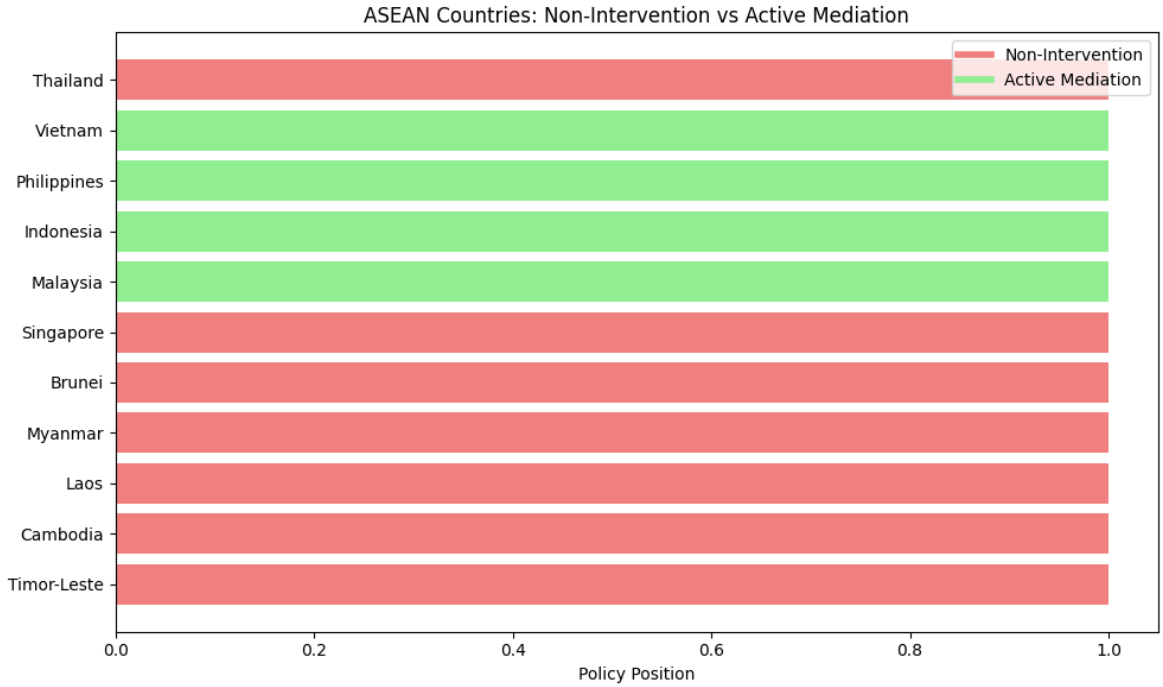

Figure 5. Horizontal bar graph showing the policy positions of ASEAN member states regarding non-intervention vs. active mediation.

Malaysia, as the 2025 ASEAN Chair, plays a key role in facilitating active mediation and initiating diplomatic steps to reduce tensions between the two countries. This country supports an approach involving active diplomacy, seeking to maintain political stability in the region through a more proactive mediation role. Furthermore, Laos, as the 2024 ASEAN Chair, has demonstrated a more neutral stance and focused on a non-interventionist diplomatic approach, in line with the ASEAN consensus principle in crisis management. Singapore, while prioritizing non-interference, continues to encourage resolution through diplomatic dialogue and bilateral negotiations. Countries that prioritize the principle of non-interference, such as Brunei and Myanmar, tend to avoid direct involvement in mediation or more active diplomatic solutions. These countries focus on a non-interventionist diplomatic approach that emphasizes dialogue and negotiation, rather than forceful collective action.

Furthermore, domestic political factors also play a significant role, with countries that prioritize national security or domestic political interests tending to find it more difficult to align their positions with ASEAN, an organization that prioritizes consensus in collective decision-making.

As ASEAN countries attempted to resolve the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, differing political interests impacted how quickly and effectively the organization could respond. Although various countries attempted to find a diplomatic solution, the inconsistency in their foreign policies slowed collective decision-making. This impacted not only the countries directly involved but also the stability of the ASEAN region as a whole.

The impact of differing political interests within ASEAN in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis was clearly visible on the effectiveness of the response. Disagreements among ASEAN member states over whether to prioritize active mediation or non-intervention slowed down the collective decision-making process, ultimately hindering a swift and effective response. This delay further exacerbated social and economic tensions in the region, with a growing refugee population and infrastructure damage hampering aid distribution. Countries favoring non-intervention, such as Brunei, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste, tended to be more limited in their active role in responding to the crisis, relying on verbal diplomatic approaches without concrete action. Conversely, countries favoring active mediation, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, were more involved in diplomatic resolutions, but they were often hampered by the principle of consensus, which requires the agreement of all ASEAN member states before taking collective action (Haacke, 2023).

This undermined ASEAN's reputation as a key mediator in the Southeast Asian region. This crisis highlighted the limitations of ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms, which rely heavily on consensus and the principle of non-interference, which diminishes its capacity to act swiftly and decisively in complex bilateral conflicts. Therefore, this crisis provides important lessons on the need to reform ASEAN diplomacy to make it more responsive and effective in the future.

After analyzing the forms, factors, and impacts of contestation, it is important to explore how ASEAN can more effectively respond to crises involving countries with conflicting interests. Despite having diplomatic mechanisms, political differences, the principle of non-interference, and reliance on consensus often slow responses. This section will analyze the findings within the context of complex interdependence theory and explore solutions for reforming ASEAN diplomacy.

The findings of this study indicate that ASEAN's response to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis was influenced by differing political interests among member states. Countries such as Thailand placed greater emphasis on national security and non-interference, while Indonesia and Vietnam focused more on humanitarian assistance and supported active mediation. Malaysia and Singapore also supported active mediation, although Singapore continued to prioritize the principle of non-interference. Political factors influencing ASEAN's response include member states' foreign policies, which focus on security, economics, and social stability. Countries with strong economic ties, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, are more involved in mediation, while more neutral countries, such as Brunei and Myanmar, prioritize the principle of non-interference. This difference slows collective decision-making, hampers crisis responses, and exacerbates social and economic tensions in the region. Reform of ASEAN diplomacy is needed to foster a faster and more effective response to bilateral crises.

The Complex Interdependence Theory proposed by Keohane and Nye (2012) can be used to understand how ASEAN attempts to manage the conflict between two member states with conflicting interests: Thailand and Cambodia. This theory emphasizes interdependence between states in addressing non-military issues such as humanitarian crises. ASEAN, as an organization focused on non-military diplomacy, attempts to reduce tensions through mediation and ceasefires, although the principle of non-interference

often hinders these efforts. In the complex interdependence theory, relations among ASEAN states should facilitate collective action to resolve crises. However, in the case of the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, the principles of consensus and non-interference actually hindered collective decision-making. This suggests that despite the interdependence of ASEAN member states to maintain regional stability, an approach that places too much emphasis on verbal diplomacy hinders the concrete actions needed to defuse rapidly escalating tensions.

This theory also explains how ASEAN, despite its potential as an active mediator, is often hampered in taking more assertive action. Laos and Singapore, East Timor, and Brunei support a non-interference approach but focus on bilateral dialogue and negotiation. In contrast, more proactive countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia have shown a greater willingness to engage in active mediation to resolve this crisis. However, in practice, the ASEAN Way, which prioritizes verbal communication and consensus, is often insufficiently responsive to rapidly escalating bilateral disputes, such as those seen in the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute. This crisis highlights the need for reforms in ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms to be more flexible and able to act more quickly in responding to international conflicts that require immediate solutions and decisive decisions.

After analyzing the existing findings, it is important to compare the results of this study with previous literature to understand how differing political interests and the principle of non-interference within ASEAN influence crisis responses. By linking these findings with relevant research, we can assess the effectiveness of ASEAN diplomacy in handling bilateral crises.

This study's findings align with previous research on ASEAN diplomacy. Research by Wangke (2024) underscores that non-interference hampers ASEAN's collective response, as evident in the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. Prabandari et al. (2025) noted that ASEAN's selective humanitarian norms exacerbated its crisis response, a finding reflected in these findings, where countries prioritized national security over humanitarian assistance. Setyowati & Nurulita (2023) emphasized that ASEAN mediation was often hampered by a lack of consensus in crisis resolution. Meanwhile, Sokhuon (2025) argued that ASEAN needed to act more decisively. Consistent with these findings, delays in response exacerbated crises. Finally, Cook's (2021) research also noted that ASEAN's humanitarian diplomacy was often limited to administrative measures, demonstrating weaknesses in the implementation of more concrete humanitarian policies. Overall, these findings reinforce the view that divergent interests and non-interference hamper ASEAN's ability to act quickly and effectively in bilateral crises.

Given the impact of divergent political interests among ASEAN countries in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, it is important to explore the practical implications of these findings. These implications are not only relevant for ASEAN in facing similar crises in the future but could also influence more effective policy changes to address bilateral conflicts and enhance ASEAN's diplomatic capacity.

The findings of this study indicate that differing political interests among ASEAN countries can hinder a swift and effective crisis response. The main implication of this

research is the need to reform ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms. ASEAN needs to reevaluate the principle of non-interference, which hinders collective decision-making, and prioritize flexible diplomatic action in responding to rapidly escalating crises. Strengthening ASEAN's mediation capacity is also crucial to ensure that countries with divergent interests can cooperate more effectively in resolving crises. Countries with close economic and political ties to the involved countries, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, need to be more involved in mediation. Meanwhile, more neutral countries, such as Brunei and Myanmar, can help strengthen ASEAN's consensus without impinging on member states' sovereignty. Finally, reforms to the consensus process and strengthening active diplomacy are needed to accelerate ASEAN's collective action, enabling ASEAN to more effectively maintain regional stability and act as a credible mediator in resolving bilateral conflicts.

3) The Role of Digital Technology Integration and Cross-Border Coordination

In addressing the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, ASEAN faced a significant challenge in coordinating a swift and effective response among its member states. One increasingly important aspect is the role of digital technology integration, which can facilitate cross-border coordination, accelerate decision-making, and improve the distribution of humanitarian aid. The application of digital technology in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict has highlighted the importance of technology in coordination between ASEAN countries. Several ASEAN member states have used digital platforms to monitor the situation in real-time, data-driven ways to facilitate faster decision-making (Philbeck, 2024). Countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam have used online humanitarian aid platforms to facilitate aid distribution to affected areas (IFCR, 2024; Vietnam Briefing, 2025).

However, not all ASEAN member states have the same capabilities in implementing this technology. Countries with more advanced digital infrastructure, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have found it easier to integrate technology in their crisis response. Singapore demonstrates higher digital readiness, with its data-driven public services and technological connectivity (Philbeck, 2024), while Malaysia ranks second in ASEAN in the 2025 National Digital Index and also has a robust digital infrastructure for crisis response (EPU, 2021). Meanwhile, member states with limited access to technology, such as Myanmar and Brunei, face greater challenges in implementing technology and coordinating across borders. Furthermore, a report from the AHA Centre (2024) shows how ASEAN is strengthening its ICT infrastructure to facilitate a faster response, although inequitable digital access remains a major challenge.

Figure 6. Cover of the AHA Center Annual Report 2024
Source: (AHA Center, 2024)

The 2024 AHA Centre report outlined ASEAN's efforts to strengthen ICT infrastructure to respond more quickly to crises. Despite challenges related to inequitable digital access, these efforts demonstrate ASEAN's commitment to improving cross-border coordination and more efficient distribution of humanitarian aid.

In addition to differences in technological infrastructure capabilities, policy factors across ASEAN countries also play a significant role in the use of technology in responding to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. One key factor is the use of digital technology in the policies of each ASEAN member state. Several countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, with more open policies toward digital technology integration, utilize online platform systems to coordinate humanitarian aid, monitor situations, and make faster decisions (Mondejar & Wai-lung, 2021). These countries have also developed data-driven platforms to expedite aid distribution (Tissayakorn, 2025).

Other ASEAN countries have more pragmatic foreign policies that prioritize the principle of non-interference, limiting the use of technology in responding to bilateral crises. For example, Brunei and Myanmar prioritized traditional approaches to crisis management, hindering the implementation of digital technology for cross-border coordination (Munajat & Irawati, 2025). Another contributing factor is the limited access to digital technology among ASEAN member states, as in Laos and Cambodia, which faced difficulties integrating technology-based solutions into crisis resolution (Tissayakorn, 2025). Limited technological infrastructure has slowed rapid responses and hampered efficient coordination between countries (Chen & Kimura, 2024).

Furthermore, dependence on external aid and non-governmental partnerships often also slows the integration of technology into the response process. ASEAN countries that are more dependent on international aid face difficulties in building technology systems that can operate independently (Elnathan & Wiswayana, 2025). This dependence exacerbates the challenges of international coordination in responding to crises more effectively.

The misalignment in the use of digital technology across ASEAN countries has hampered coordination in the response to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis. Countries with more advanced digital infrastructure, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have been able to respond more quickly and effectively by utilizing online platforms for aid distribution and real-time situation monitoring. However, countries with more limited infrastructure, such as Cambodia and Laos, have struggled to integrate technology into their crisis response. This slows decision-making and exacerbates the crisis, as digital disruptions in aid coordination and situational awareness are often hampered by the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure across ASEAN member states (Jayus, 2023; Krishnan & Musa Kutty, 2025).

The lack of uniform digital technology adoption has worsened the distribution of humanitarian aid. Without an integrated data-driven system, more than 400,000 refugees face difficulties accessing basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care. Delays in aid delivery are caused by the inability of countries with limited access to digital technology, such as Myanmar and Brunei, to use data-driven platforms to expedite aid distribution. This delay exacerbated the social impacts and prolonged the suffering of refugees, as well as exacerbating tensions in the region (Tissayakorn, 2025).

This delayed response damaged ASEAN's international reputation, particularly regarding its ability to manage regional crises. ASEAN, which should be an active mediator, was hampered by limitations in the use of digital technologies that could expedite decision-making and aid distribution. This highlights the need for reforms to ASEAN diplomacy that are more responsive to technology and accelerate international coordination. Reliance on external technology exacerbates challenges in cross-border coordination and hinders more effective response efforts in such crises (Elnathan & Wiswayana, 2025).

The Thailand-Cambodia border crisis highlighted the importance of integrating digital technology in responding more effectively to crises in the ASEAN region. Some countries with more advanced digital infrastructure, such as Singapore and Malaysia, successfully used online platforms for humanitarian aid coordination, situation monitoring, and rapid decision-making. However, countries with limited access to technology, such as Myanmar and Brunei, experienced difficulties in implementing technology, which slowed their crisis response. Furthermore, reliance on external aid and partnerships with non-governmental actors impedes international coordination in providing a more rapid and effective response. Limited technological infrastructure in some ASEAN countries slows decision-making and aid distribution, exacerbating the social and security impacts in the region. These response delays also impact ASEAN's reputation as a reliable mediator, eroding international confidence in its ability to manage crises.

After discussing the key findings related to the integration of digital technology in ASEAN's response to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, it is important to explore the theory of complex interdependence to help explain the dynamics involved. Digital technology plays a key role in accelerating cross-border coordination and faster decision-making, but limited access and differences in national policies within ASEAN hinder its broader implementation. This section will explore the challenges ASEAN faces in leveraging digital technology as a tool for crisis response. In response to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis, the theory of complex interdependence proposed by Keohane & Nye (2012) can provide insight into how ASEAN, as a regional organization, attempts to respond to bilateral conflicts with countries with conflicting interests. This theory emphasizes that every relationship between countries must be interdependent to create effective solutions to non-military problems, such as humanitarian crises.

In this context, digital technology should facilitate coordination among ASEAN countries to accelerate decision-making. However, the principle of coordination among ASEAN countries actually limits ASEAN's capacity to act quickly and decisively in responding to conflict. Furthermore, interdependence theory suggests that despite ASEAN countries' interdependence, the diversity in their digital infrastructure and technology policies creates imbalances that slow down crisis responses. Singapore and Malaysia, with more open policies toward technology, were able to leverage digital platforms to coordinate responses more quickly, while countries with more limited infrastructure, such as Myanmar and Brunei, experienced significant difficulties in integrating technology into their crisis responses. This misalignment impacted international coordination and exacerbated the impact of the crisis, both on humanitarian aid and regional security.

The findings of this study align with several previous studies on the role of digital technology in crisis management in the ASEAN region. Research by Wangke (2024) and Prabandari et al. (2025) noted that technological integration can improve coordination and aid distribution. However, the uneven technological infrastructure among ASEAN member states exacerbated ASEAN's mediation, hampered by the principle of non-interference, which slowed crisis responses. Sokhuon (2025) revealed that technological limitations often reduce ASEAN's effectiveness as an active mediator. Cook (2021) also noted that ASEAN's humanitarian diplomacy is often limited to administrative actions, exacerbating the challenges of rapid coordination in bilateral crises, such as the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis.

This research provides important implications for how ASEAN responds to bilateral crises, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by differences in technological infrastructure among its member states. Reforms in ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms are urgently needed to make the organization more responsive in responding to crises. Strengthening the digital technology capacity of all ASEAN member states, especially those with limited infrastructure, will improve cross-border coordination and rapid decision-making. ASEAN needs to re-evaluate the principle of non-interference, which slows collective decisions, and adopt more flexible policies to accelerate collective action.

Reflectively, the use of digital technology in humanitarian assistance and disaster management shows great potential to improve crisis response. However, without equal

access to technology and diplomatic reform, significant challenges will remain. ASEAN countries need to strengthen digital cooperation and internal coordination to make crisis responses more effective and faster. With technological limitations still remaining, ASEAN must review its policies and strengthen its diplomatic approach to be more adaptive to the rapid changes brought about by technological advances.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study finds that ASEAN's response to the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis remains hampered by significant structural challenges, particularly the principle of non-interference and political interests among member states. Despite humanitarian diplomacy and the use of verbal digital platforms, there has been no strong collective action. This failure to act swiftly exacerbates the impact of the humanitarian and economic crises in the region, damaging the organization's credibility in the eyes of the international community.

Based on this analysis, several key recommendations are made to enhance ASEAN's future effectiveness. First, profound reforms to ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms are needed, including reevaluating the application of the principle of non-interference to make them more flexible and responsive to rapidly escalating bilateral crises. Second, strengthening internal mediation capacity and accelerating decision-making processes is crucial to reducing reliance on external forces. Finally, the integration and standardization of digital technology across member states must be enhanced to accelerate cross-border coordination and data-driven decision-making, making the digitalization of preventive diplomacy a key driver of long-term regional stability.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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