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## The circumscribed power of ASEAN and its effective deployment of self-restraint

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## The Paradox of ASEAN's Group Chair

### AI Brief

- ASEAN avoids overreach, using soft power and restraint to maintain unity and credibility in regional and global issues.
- PM Anwar's leadership balances bold visibility with quiet diplomacy, letting member states lead while ASEAN facilitates.
- Strategic self-limitation is ASEAN's strength, allowing it to adapt, mediate, and sustain cohesion amid global tensions.

To external observers, the flurry of activities under [Malaysia's Group Chairmanship of ASEAN](#) seems almost unbounded. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has convened a string of ambitious initiatives — from the [GCC-ASEAN-China Economic Summit](#) to efforts at aligning [RCEP](#) and [AZEC](#) with ASEAN frameworks, even extending [invitations to all BRICS leaders](#) and [President Donald Trump](#) to engage at the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit.

On the surface, this activism may suggest an ASEAN that has shed its constraints, morphing into a convening hub of global importance. Yet, behind the pomp and scheduling lies a paradox: ASEAN's power is, in reality, highly circumscribed — but this very self-limitation has become the key to its effectiveness.

### Border Diplomacy: Ownership with Oversight

Take, for example, the [recent flare-up between Cambodia and Thailand](#) over their long-standing border disputes. As Group Chair, Prime Minister Anwar called for peace but stopped short of imposing an [ASEAN-led resolution](#). Instead, ASEAN encouraged both parties to retain ownership of the dispute while offering third-party surveillance as a confidence-building measure.

The General Border Committee, which met in Kuala Lumpur between [August 4 and 7](#), was not chaired by Anwar himself but by Malaysia's Chief of Defence Forces. This subtle choice demonstrated ASEAN's philosophy of restraint. It kept the process technical rather than political, showing that ASEAN does not seek to replace bilateral agency but to create an enabling environment. In doing so, ASEAN preserved its credibility as an [honest broker](#).

### Gaza: Caution Amidst Conviction

The Gaza crisis has posed another test. Despite [strong domestic sentiments](#) across ASEAN — especially given Southeast Asia's large Muslim population — the Group Chair has not insisted on a collective ASEAN mission, such as air-dropping humanitarian aid. While [Singapore has independently](#) carried out such operations, ASEAN as a whole has avoided a united military-style gesture that could trigger diplomatic backlash.

carefully avoided. By privileging circumspection over grandstanding, ASEAN has sustained cohesion — a currency more valuable than rhetorical militancy.

### The U.S. Factor: Strategic Flexibility

Perhaps the clearest example of ASEAN's circumscribed power is seen in its dealings with the United States under President Donald Trump. Malaysia has voiced support for a [U.S.-ASEAN Summit to address tariffs](#), but Anwar's invitation to Trump was open-ended, offering full diplomatic license. "President Trump is free to come as and when he feels the circumstances are right," Anwar [remarked in April 2025](#).

Such wording was not accidental. Trump, famously disdainful of scripted diplomacy, is more likely to engage when not pressured.

By avoiding ultimatums, ASEAN [exercised a soft power](#) that disarms rather than provokes. At the same time, other ASEAN leaders refrained from pressing Malaysia to push for a formal summit, even though their economies are [vulnerable to Trump's tariff regime](#). Again, restraint — rather than confrontation — sustained ASEAN's collective posture.

### Economic Self-Restraint: Beyond De-Dollarization

Economically, ASEAN has also displayed notable self-restraint. While discussions of [de-dollarization have grown louder globally](#), ASEAN has refrained from advancing a full-blown agenda to reduce dependence on the U.S. dollar. The reasons are pragmatic: ASEAN economies remain deeply tied to dollar-denominated trade and investment flows, and any abrupt shift could generate financial instability.

Instead, ASEAN has experimented quietly with local currency settlement mechanisms, such as those between [Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand](#). These initiatives are framed as supplementary rather than revolutionary. By refusing to politicize de-dollarization, ASEAN has avoided unnecessary provocation of Washington, while still signalling its desire for long-term diversification.

### Tariffs and Semiconductors: Absorbing the Shock

The same pattern is evident in the [semiconductor industry](#), arguably the lifeline of Malaysia and Singapore. Trump's tariffs on critical technology exports have been erratic, flippant, and often contradictory. Yet ASEAN states have not openly pitched themselves against Washington's unpredictability.

Instead, they have pursued quiet diversification strategies: [building alternative supply chain partnerships](#), courting Japanese, Korean, and European investors, and [deepening intra-ASEAN cooperation in E&E sectors](#). Rather than making loud threats, ASEAN absorbs the shocks, adapts, and hedges. This is self-restraint not born of weakness, but of strategic calculation.

### Circumscribed Power as ASEAN's Signature

This pattern reveals ASEAN's paradoxical strength. Unlike traditional powers, which often seek to project dominance, ASEAN wields influence by circumscribing itself. It does not impose but proposes, does not demand but encourages, does not dictate but facilitates.

Such an approach may seem passive to outsiders accustomed to power politics, but within [ASEAN's consensus-driven culture](#), it is the very engine of durability.

By self-limiting, ASEAN avoids fracturing along ideological or geopolitical lines. By refraining from maximalist agendas, it sustains unity. And by practicing restraint, it creates diplomatic space for adversaries to find

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's stewardship embodies this duality. On one hand, his chairmanship has been flamboyant — convening [multiple summits, clustering agendas](#), and making Kuala Lumpur the hub of global attention. On the other, his strategy has been infused with ASEAN's ethos of restraint: [letting border disputes remain bilateral](#), [soft-peddalling on Gaza](#), granting Trump flexibility, tempering de-dollarization, and [absorbing tariff shocks](#).

The result is a chairmanship that is both bold and cautious, exuberant yet disciplined. It reflects not the unlimited power of ASEAN but the effective deployment of its circumscribed power.

#### Conclusion: Restraint as Real Strength

The story of ASEAN under Malaysia's Group Chair is not one of grand breakthroughs or dramatic confrontations. It is instead the story of how a regional body, often dismissed as weak, wields its limitations as instruments of strength.

In a world defined by the flippant nature of great powers, ASEAN's self-restraint provides stability. Its circumscribed power may not resolve wars or end conflicts, but it sustains cohesion, protects unity, and creates diplomatic space where few others can.

Prime Minister Anwar's chairmanship illustrates that power in ASEAN does not lie in overreach but in restraint — not in imposing outcomes but in enabling processes. This is ASEAN's quiet genius: to turn limits into leverage, and self-restraint into the true hallmark of leadership.

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