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## War or Peace: ASEAN must transcend differences to nurture civilizational seeds in East Asia

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The question that hovers over Southeast Asia today is simple but profound: war or peace? Accept clashes as inevitable or civilizational coexistence as a must?

## AI Brief

- Conflicts in Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia show ASEAN's fragility, but peace is possible through deliberate diplomacy and compromise.
- Malaysia's leadership in ASEAN 2025 promotes civilisational dialogue, aiming to bridge divides and prevent regional fragmentation.
- ASEAN must embrace its cultural diversity to stay relevant, using shared values to build trust and resist great power rivalry and internal discord.

The recent spasms of violence along the [Thai-Cambodian border](#), the persistent [brutality in Myanmar](#), and the [eruptions of discontent in Indonesia](#) remind us that peace in ASEAN has never been automatic. That clashes do occur.

But when stability can prevail, this milieu has always been the result of conscious political choices, difficult compromises, and painstaking institution-building.

If ASEAN is to be more than a fragile mosaic of competing states, it must rise to the challenge of transcending differences and begin sowing the seeds of civilizations that can sustain East Asia's future.

### The Perils of Division

The recent clashes between Thai and Cambodian forces, despite the ceasefire of [July 28 that displaced nearly 300,000 civilians](#), illustrate how quickly national disputes can unravel regional solidarity. Myanmar's military junta persists in its tragic defiance of regional and global calls for reconciliation, deepening its isolation. The [Tatmadaw is not only alienating its own people](#) but also draining [ASEAN's credibility](#) as a community committed to peace. Indonesia, once hailed as ASEAN's democratic anchor, has shaken by waves of [revolt against inequality](#) and privilege, exposing the fragility of its democratic institutions.

Each crisis seems distinct, yet collectively they form a pattern of unresolved fissures that weaken ASEAN's ability to chart a common course. However, a focus on civilizational reconciliation can prevail over such dark historical episodes. When Defense Attaches from ASEAN and East Asian countries were [dispatched to stop the war](#) in Cambodia and Thailand from further ravaging each other, the peace initiative actually worked. No matter imperfectly [Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim](#) has transformed the Group Chair into the good office of laying the foundation of civilizational coexistence.

historically coexisted, often uneasily, but also with a remarkable ability to borrow, adapt, and synthesize. Each is a succinct and meaningful hybrid that inter inspire each other.

From the voyages of [Zheng He to the maritime trade of Malacca](#), from the blending of [Indic and Islamic traditions in Java](#) to the pluralism of Malaysia, the region has demonstrated that civilizational intersections can become sources of strength.

This vision of a “[collective civilization](#)” is not without precedent in intellectual thought.

[Tu Weiming, the Confucian philosopher](#), has argued that civilizations are not closed systems but “dialogical entities” capable of coexisting through mutual learning.

[Seyyed Hossein Nasr](#) has similarly emphasized that Islam’s civilizational ethos has always been one of engagement with the wisdom of others. [Fred Dallmayr](#) has noted that global peace will depend not on a clash of civilizations but on their capacity to build a shared normative horizon.

In the Southeast Asian context, [Professor Wang Gungwu](#) has long argued that the region’s porous frontiers make coexistence not just possible but necessary.

Most saliently, Professor Emeritus [Datuk Osman Bakar](#), as Al-Ghazali Chair of Epistemology and Civilizational Studies and Renewal, has illuminated how dialogue among civilizations can only flourish when rooted in epistemic humility and mutual respect.

His writings demonstrate that ASEAN’s civilizational diversity is not a weakness to be managed, but a strength to be cultivated, offering an epistemological foundation for diplomacy that transcends power politics.

### Malaysia’s Convening and Circumscribed Role

Malaysia’s chairmanship in 2025 offers a rare chance to test this vision. [PM Anwar has invited leaders](#) from BRICS, GCC, and other regional blocs to the ASEAN and East Asia Summits. This is not about mere diplomatic choreography. It is about taking the initiative in a time of chaos, triggered by the [xenophobia](#) of the Global North, against “the Other,” to place the necessary guardrails to prevent the international system from hurtling to disaster.

It is about positioning ASEAN, under Malaysia’s stewardship, [as a hub](#) that dares to bridge divides when others choose confrontation. Therefore, [Kuala Lumpur’s role in brokering the Thai-Cambodian ceasefire](#) demonstrated how effective dialogue and mediation can be when pursued with determination and sincerity. It also showed that even when states are tempted to settle disputes through force, ASEAN has the moral authority to nudge them toward restraint.

### The Civilizational Imperative

The stakes extend beyond ASEAN. East Asia is the cockpit of great power rivalry. The [US-China competition](#) over technology, trade, and security has already unsettled regional supply chains and alliances.

However, Japan and South Korea, while aligned with Washington, are [exploring strategies to engage ASEAN](#) even more comprehensively.

Invariably, while India’s ambitions spill into Southeast Asia through maritime corridors, New Delhi has never tried to intimidate ASEAN. Not unlike China, Japan and South Korea, India is [trying to rekindle its relationship](#) with ASEAN too; to rediscover the roots from the past to connect with the present and future.

But if ASEAN can anchor itself in a civilizational vision—one that emphasizes coexistence, cultural dialogue, and collective resilience—it may yet carve out an independent role.

ASEAN should seize the insights of scholars like Wang Gungwu and Osman Bakar to articulate a model of civilizational diplomacy rooted in mutual respect, diversity, and shared prosperity. Such a model would embody the conviction that civilizations, when seen as interdependent rather than antagonistic, can generate a more stable regional order.

### Choosing Peace Over Inertia

The alternative is grim. If ASEAN fails to act, its silence will become complicity. War may not erupt as conventional interstate conflict, but it will seep in through [insurgencies](#), [refugee flows](#), [cyberattacks](#), and proxy rivalries.

The region could find itself increasingly defined by fragmentation rather than integration, by distrust rather than solidarity.

Peace, on the other hand, is not merely the absence of war. It is the active construction of trust. ASEAN's 2025 [Kuala Lumpur Vision 2045](#) must therefore go beyond declarations and commit to concrete steps: a reinvigorated [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#), where all member states are urged not to use force as an instrument of policy, a humanitarian mechanism that can respond to crises without delay, and a digital framework that secures the region's technological future from being a pawn in the new Cold War.

### Conclusion: A Historic Choice

History rarely gives second chances. ASEAN is now at a crossroads where its ability to transcend internal disputes will determine whether it remains relevant in shaping East Asia's destiny. The seeds of civilization are already present in its pluralism, its traditions of dialogue, and its instinct for consensus.

Scholars from Tu Weiming to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and from Wang Gungwu to Osman Bakar, have shown that civilizations need not clash; they can coexist and flourish collectively. What is needed is the courage to nurture these seeds, even when the soil appears dry and the storms relentless.

War or peace is no longer an abstract choice; it is the daily reality ASEAN must confront. The future of East Asia may well depend on whether ASEAN dares to choose peace—and build it, patiently, as a civilizational project.

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***\*\* The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of Astro AWANI.***