



Ressort: Politik

Post-ASEAN Summit Analysis with Ambassador Hendy Assan

Rome, 30.11.2025 [ENA]

His Excellency Hendy Assan, Ambassador of Malaysia to the Holy See granted an interview to the political scientist and journalist Carlo Marino on Post-ASEAN Summit Analysis

1. As Malaysia has been the chair of this summit, what would you single out as the most significant, concrete achievement to come from these meetings?

One of the most significant developments during the recently concluded 47th ASEAN Summit

in Kuala Lumpur was the official admission of Timor-Leste as ASEAN's 11th Member State. This marks a historic milestone in ASEAN's ongoing commitment to inclusivity, solidarity, and shared progress. The admission of Timor-Leste reflects the region's confidence in its role as a partner in building a more integrated and resilient ASEAN Community.

I also wish to highlight the significant progress made in managing tensions between Cambodia and Thailand. The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord between Cambodia and Thailand was formally signed during the ASEAN Summit, in a ceremony witnessed by the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the President of the United States. The Peace Accord builds upon the ceasefire arrangement reached at a Special Meeting on 28

July 2025 in Putrajaya. Malaysia welcomes the commitment shown by both Cambodia and Thailand to resolve their differences peacefully and through diplomatic means.

Beyond these landmark developments, the Summit delivered several long-term structural achievements such as the substantial conclusion of negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), the upgrading of ASEAN Trade In Goods Agreement (ATIGA), and new supply-chain resilience initiatives. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate that ASEAN is able to deliver both political breakthroughs and future-oriented economic reforms.

Also under our Chairmanship in 2025, I wish to highlight ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future which was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders

at the 46th ASEAN Summit held earlier in Kuala Lumpur on 26 May 2025. This Vision is aimed at forging ahead regional community-building agenda for the next two (2) decades and stands as another milestone

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document for ASEAN as it seeks to chart the future of ASEAN within an inclusive, sustainable and future-oriented framework.

2. Malaysia championed the theme of a "People-Centric, People-Oriented" ASEAN. How was this theme tangibly reflected in the final declarations and communiqués, beyond just the rhetoric?

Malaysia assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship at a time of significant geopolitical flux. The region continues to navigate sharpening great-power rivalry, fragmentation of global order, technological bifurcation, and deepening

humanitarian crises. Against this complex backdrop, Malaysia has chosen the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability". The theme reflects our commitment to shared progress, ensuring no one is left behind. It underscores Malaysia's conviction that ASEAN is committed to strengthening regional peace, stability and prosperity within an inclusive, sustainable and future-oriented framework.

This theme was not merely rhetorical; it was actively translated into tangible deliverables and policy direction across the three ASEAN Community pillars. First, inclusivity was demonstrated through declarations that explicitly safeguard the rights and welfare of communities, including the ASEAN Declaration on Promoting the Right to Development

and the Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment. These statements embed rights-based considerations into ASEAN's strategic direction and ensure that development benefits reach rural communities, vulnerable groups, Micro-Small-Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and migrant workers. Initiatives such as the Langkawi Joint Statement on Out-of-School Children and Youth, new checklists on fair recruitment, and improved skills-mobility frameworks further promote equitable access to education, labour protection, and social safety nets.

Second, sustainability was operationalised through the region's climate, energy, and green-economy agenda. The adoption of ASEAN's Joint Statement to COP30, progress on the ASEAN

Climate Change Strategic Action Plan, advancements in the ASEAN Taxonomy for sustainable investment, and the commitment to enhance energy interconnection with the establishment of the ASEAN Power Grid collectively lay the groundwork for a more climate-resilient and environmentally responsible region. Sustainable development was not treated as a standalone topic but was woven throughout ASEAN's economic decisions, from the Digital Economy Framework Agreement and green innovation initiatives to the Actionable Plan for Green Jobs and the region's commitment to a just energy transition.

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Finally, the theme guided ASEAN's approach to narrowing development gaps and ensuring that integration does not disproportionately favour more advanced

economies. The strengthening of the ASEAN Villages Network, digital capacity-building for MSMEs, and enhanced regional frameworks for education, health cooperation, and social protection all demonstrate ASEAN's determination to ensure that no community is left behind as the region moves toward deeper integration.

In essence, the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability" shaped the Summit's operational outcomes and strategic outlook. It reaffirmed Malaysia's conviction that ASEAN must advance as a community that balances economic dynamism with social equity, and regional ambition with environmental stewardship. These commitments signal ASEAN's readiness to face the challenges of the coming decade with unity, responsibility, and a clear sense

of shared purpose.

3. In the face of global divisions and major power competition, how strong was the consensus within the room? Were there any issues where achieving a unified ASEAN position was particularly challenging?

Despite the sharpening complexities of the international landscape, the Summit demonstrated that ASEAN remains firmly committed to unity, cohesion, and collective discipline. We met at a time when the global order is increasingly polarised, with great-power competition reshaping geopolitical alignments and multilateral cooperation under strain. Of course we were not there to experience it first-hand, but I can imagine that yet within the ASEAN meeting rooms, the consensus was strong on the need to preserve ASEAN's

centrality as a stabilising force in the region.

Based on the Chairman Statement, I can see that Member States shared the conviction that ASEAN must continue to anchor its positions in the principles of dialogue, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for international law. On economic recovery, digital transformation, climate action, and social development, there was broad and substantive alignment. Where consensus required more careful diplomacy particularly regarding maritime issues and external geopolitical rivalries. ASEAN demonstrated its ability to craft balanced, inclusive language that safeguarded unity without isolating any Member State.

The strength of consensus was ultimately reflected in the breadth of deliverables adopted, the unanimity behind key declarations, and the shared understanding that ASEAN's value lies not in uniformity of views

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but in the ability to reconcile differences while maintaining a common strategic direction. The Summit reaffirmed that in an era of global fragmentation, ASEAN unity is not only intact but actively reinforced through dialogue and mutual trust.

4. Progress on the South China Sea Code of Conduct is perennially discussed. Can you point to any specific, measurable advancements made during this summit regarding the timeline or framework of the COC negotiations?

The Summit recorded tangible and measurable progress in the ongoing negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Leaders welcomed the completion of the third reading of the Single Draft COC Negotiating Text (SDNT), which marks a significant shift from preliminary discussions toward a more consolidated and technically refined stage of negotiation. This represents meaningful advancement because each reading of the SDNT involves detailed legal, operational, and diplomatic refinement.

Moreover, the Summit reaffirmed the Guidelines for Accelerating an Early Conclusion of the COC and encouraged continued momentum in a manner consistent with international law, especially UNCLOS. While ASEAN does not prematurely impose artificial

timelines that could compromise the quality and credibility of the agreement, the achievement of this stage demonstrates genuine forward movement and political commitment from all parties involved.

This progress reflects ASEAN's determination to ensure that the South China Sea remains a sea of peace, stability, and cooperation, and that negotiations continue in a constructive, transparent, and legally grounded manner.

5. With continued tensions in the South China Sea, how did the summit address concerns about assertive actions, while simultaneously navigating ASEAN's relationships with both Beijing and Washington? The Summit adopted a balanced, principled, and forward-looking approach in addressing assertive actions in the South China Sea

remains a sea of peace, stability, and cooperation, and that negotiations continue in a constructive, transparent, and legally grounded manner.

5. With continued tensions in the South China Sea, how did the summit address concerns about assertive actions, while simultaneously navigating ASEAN's relationships with both Beijing and Washington? The Summit adopted a balanced, principled, and forward-looking approach in addressing assertive actions in the South China Sea. ASEAN leaders expressed serious concern over activities that undermine trust, increase tensions, and risk miscalculation. We reaffirmed fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation and overflight, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and adherence to international law

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especially UNCLOS.

At the same time, the Summit was guided by the conviction that regional peace cannot be preserved through confrontation. ASEAN therefore continued to engage both China and the United States constructively, strengthening cooperation under ASEAN-led mechanisms while ensuring that major-power rivalry does not erode regional stability. The emphasis was placed on confidence-building measures, open communication channels, and support for risk-reduction mechanisms at sea.

ASEAN's approach is neither confrontational nor passive; it is strategic, principled, and inclusive. The goal is to maintain a regional environment where disputes are managed peacefully, international law is upheld, and ASEAN remains an honest broker .

6. The situation in Myanmar remains a deep wound for ASEAN. Has the "Five-Point Consensus" reached a dead end? What new strategies, if any, were discussed to break the impasse and initiate a meaningful political dialogue?

The situation in Myanmar remains one of ASEAN's most complex and painful challenges. The Summit reaffirmed unequivocally that the Five-Point Consensus remains the primary reference for ASEAN's collective response. While implementation has been slow and difficult, ASEAN has not abandoned the framework. Instead, the Summit undertook a candid and detailed review of its progress and explored ways to strengthen the mechanisms that support it.

ASEAN welcomed the continued engagement of the Special Envoy, emphasising the need

for inclusive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. The Summit also reinforced humanitarian channels through the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre and encouraged Member States to expand support for life-saving assistance to affected communities. Importantly, the Leaders discussed a possible longer-term or more sustained mandate for ASEAN's facilitation role, demonstrating that ASEAN is willing to adapt its approach while preserving unity of purpose.

This is not a dead end; it is a long, difficult path requiring persistence, humanity, and principled diplomacy. ASEAN remains committed to alleviating the humanitarian crisis and encouraging a credible political process that leads to a durable peaceful solution.

7. In a world of supply chain disruptions and potential recessions, what specific initiatives were agreed upon to strengthen regional economic integration and ensure ASEAN remains a competitive global hub? ASEAN's economic agenda at the Summit was shaped by the need to strengthen resilience in an era of supply chain disruption, inflationary pressures, and uncertain global demand. The region delivered several concrete outcomes that deepen integration and enhance long-term competitiveness.

The Upgraded ATIGA is a key milestone, expanding tariff liberalisation, addressing non-tariff barriers, and

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improving trade facilitation. The adoption of the AEC Strategic Plan 2026–2030, with clear priority areas, quick wins, and measurable indicators,

ensures greater accountability and implementation discipline. The re-establishment in principle of the ASEAN Swap Arrangement and the completion of Local Currency Transaction (LCT) Guidelines reduce vulnerability to global financial volatility.

Moreover, ASEAN strengthened its position in global value chains through the Integrated Semiconductor Supply Chain Framework (AFISS), commitments on digital payments, and the expansion of cross-border e-commerce.

These initiatives collectively demonstrate ASEAN’s determination to remain a competitive global economic hub, grounded in openness, resilience, and rules-based integration.

8. The digital economy is critical for ASEAN's youth. What concrete steps were taken to harmonize digital trade rules, cross-border data flows, and bridge the digital divide between member states?

ASEAN made landmark progress in digital integration at the Summit. The substantial conclusion of negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) is the centrepiece achievement, laying the foundation for a harmonised regional digital market. DEFA will govern digital trade rules, cross-border data flows, cybersecurity, AI standards, and digital identity interoperability. In parallel, ASEAN advanced several practical tools including the Digital Trade Standards Roadmap, the implementation of ASEAN Single Window 2.0, the

digital market. DEFA will govern digital trade rules, cross-border data flows, cybersecurity, AI standards, and digital identity interoperability.

In parallel, ASEAN advanced several practical tools including the Digital Trade Standards Roadmap, the implementation of ASEAN Single Window 2.0, the regional CERT integration framework and the ASEAN AI Safety Network (AI SAFE) guiding principles.

Bridging the digital divide was a core priority. Initiatives supporting MSME digital adoption, rural digitalisation, and cybersecurity capacity-building ensure that no Member State or community is left behind as ASEAN transitions into a fully integrated digital economy.

This combination of rule-making, capacity-building, and infrastructure

coordination embodies Malaysia’s Chairmanship theme: integration that is both inclusive and sustainable.

9. Climate change is an existential threat. Did the summit produce a clear, coordinated regional strategy for climate action, renewable energy transition, and sustainable financing?

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The Summit produced a comprehensive suite of climate and sustainability outcomes that together form a coherent regional strategy. ASEAN adopted its Joint Statement to COP30, reaffirming collective commitment to global climate action. Significant progress was made on the ASEAN Climate Change Strategic Action Plan (ACCSAP), which will guide regional adaptation, resilience, and mitigation. ASEAN also strengthened its green-finance architecture through the

updated ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance (Version 4), which provides unified criteria for classifying environmentally sustainable activities. Progress on the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and the APG Financing Initiative further advanced the region's commitment to renewable energy integration.

These initiatives demonstrate ASEAN's recognition that climate action is integral to long-term stability, human wellbeing, and economic viability. The region is taking a holistic, structured approach that links policy, finance, and infrastructure development.

10. The summit's theme emphasizes the people. What tangible policies were advanced to protect migrant workers, promote human rights, and address issues of trafficking and forced labor across the region?

The Summit delivered concrete advancements in labour protection and human rights. ASEAN welcomed the progress in implementing the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, including the completion of the Checklist of the Vientiane Declaration on Skills Mobility, Recognition, and Development for Migrant Workers, as well as the Checklist for ASEAN Member State Governments, Labour Recruiters, and Employers of Migrant Workers on Fair Recruitment and Decent Employment Practices.

These mechanisms promote ethical recruitment practices, reduce exploitation risks, and harmonise standards across Member States.

ASEAN also advanced its Roadmap for the Prevention of Child Labour Including the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2035 and strengthened human rights cooperation through the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) Five-Year Work Plans. Efforts to combat trafficking and forced labour were reaffirmed through improved cross-border coordination, data sharing, and victim-protection frameworks.

These steps reinforce ASEAN's belief that regional integration must protect workers, families,

and vulnerable communities, ensuring that economic progress is matched by human dignity and social justice.

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11. How was the voice of ASEAN's civil society and its massive youth population formally incorporated into the summit's deliberations and outcomes?

The Summit placed strong emphasis on broadening participation beyond governments. ASEAN incorporated multi-stakeholder perspectives through forums such as the ASEAN Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Sustainability, which brought together civil society, experts, and development partners.

Youth voices were formally included through the ASEAN Youth Statement, prepared during extensive regional consultations. Initiatives like the ASEAN Startup Year, the Startup ASEAN platform,

and the ASEAN Villages Network further ensured that rural communities, entrepreneurs, and young innovators played an active role in shaping ASEAN's priorities.

These mechanisms reflect ASEAN's growing commitment to inclusive governance and the recognition that civil society and youth are indispensable partners in shaping a peaceful, sustainable, and people-centred region.

12. ASEAN is often criticized for having a "vision-implementation gap." What specific mechanisms have been put in place to ensure the agreements made here in Kuala Lumpur are actually acted upon before the gavel passes to the next chair?

ASEAN addressed longstanding concerns about implementation by embedding stronger monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms into its new plans. For example, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Strategic Plan 2026–2030 includes quick wins, consolidated priority activities, and measurable outcome indicators. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Results Framework similarly ties commitments to concrete deliverables and timelines.

13. As we conclude, what is your one overriding message to the Holy See and European Countries about what this summit means for security, prosperity, and the future?

My overarching message to the Holy See and European partners is that the Kuala Lumpur Summit reaffirmed ASEAN's role as a stabilising, constructive, and forward-looking regional organisation. In a period marked by division and uncertainty, ASEAN has chosen a path defined by inclusivity, sustainability, dialogue, and shared prosperity.

The outcomes of this Summit, from Timor-Leste's historic admission, to regional peace initiatives, to ambitious economic and digital frameworks, to climate and social protections reflect ASEAN's belief that

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security and development must go

hand in hand with human dignity, environmental stewardship, and intercultural understanding.

For Europe and the Holy See, ASEAN offers a reliable, neutral, moderate, and principled partner, one deeply committed to peace building, humanitarian cooperation, sustainable development, education, and inter-religious dialogue. We welcome deeper partnerships that reinforce these shared values and contribute to a more stable, compassionate, and cooperative global order.

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