



***BETWEEN GAZA AND MYANMAR,
ASEAN'S PERFORMATIVE DIPLOMACY
CONTINUES***

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ASEAN foreign ministers [praised](#) President Donald Trump's [Gaza peace](#) plan in October even as Myanmar's junta entered its fifth year of ignoring ASEAN's [Five-Point Consensus](#). The contrast is striking. ASEAN issued statements on a Middle Eastern agreement in which the organization played no mediation role. Meanwhile, it takes no action on the crisis in its own backyard, involving a member state and over 2.3 million internally displaced persons. This pattern reflects what can be termed performative diplomacy. The term refers to the diplomatic statements designed primarily for symbolic effect rather than practical outcomes. Unlike strategic silence or genuine mediation, performative acts prioritize visibility over impact, issuing declarations where the organization has neither leverage nor responsibility, while avoiding situations that demand costly action. ASEAN demonstrates this tendency repeatedly, speaking on distant conflicts where such statements carry minimal consequences while maintaining silence when action would require real commitment.

The Myanmar mirror and similar pattern

Myanmar provides the clearest evidence of this pattern. When the military staged a coup in 2021, ASEAN produced its [Five-Point Consensus](#) within months, calling for an immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, humanitarian assistance, a special envoy, and a visit by the envoy to Myanmar. Four years later, the junta has implemented none of these provisions. Over 2.3 million people remain displaced, according to UNHCR data, and the death toll exceeds 4,500 civilians. ASEAN has neither enforced its consensus nor imposed consequences for non-compliance.

The calculation behind ASEAN's inaction becomes apparent when examining the stakes. Myanmar shares borders, trade routes, and refugee burdens with multiple ASEAN members. The junta possesses retaliatory capacity. It can increase refugee flows across borders, disrupt bilateral trade agreements worth billions annually, or exploit competing member state interests in access to Myanmar's natural resources. Thailand and Cambodia maintain economic ties with the junta, while Indonesia and Malaysia face domestic pressure to take stronger stances. These conflicting interests create paralysis. In comparison, neither Israel nor Hamas depends on ASEAN's approval, making statements on Gaza essentially cost-free in terms of immediate retaliation or internal division.

This approach predates recent headlines. During the Rohingya crisis that escalated in 2017, producing over 700,000 refugees into ASEAN member Bangladesh, the organization [issued](#) cautious statements while avoiding pressure on Myanmar. The humanitarian emergency occurred within ASEAN's geographic responsibility, yet the bloc deferred to bilateral diplomacy rather than collective action. Similarly, when [South China Sea](#) tensions involving member states' territorial claims intensified over the past decade, ASEAN's statements remained deliberately ambiguous, refusing to name parties or take positions despite direct regional stakes. Even the 2004 tsunami response, though ultimately successful in coordination, revealed initial hesitation in ASEAN's mechanisms for rapid collective action. Thus, the

pattern suggests a consistent preference indicating that ASEAN engages most readily where its statements cannot be tested by implementation demands.

Why Gaza now?

Several factors explain ASEAN's statement on Gaza, though none reflect enhanced diplomatic capacity.

First, domestic political pressure matters. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei have substantial Muslim populations whose governments must demonstrate solidarity with Palestinians. In [Indonesia](#), demonstrations urged the government to take firmer positions on Palestinian statehood. However, President Prabowo's [contradictory stance](#), pledging to recognize Palestine while promising to preserve Israel's security, reflects the complexity of balancing domestic constituencies with broader diplomatic relationships. This duality extends to ASEAN's institutional approach: member states want to be seen supporting Palestinian statehood without committing to actions that might complicate relations with major powers.

Second, ASEAN tends to endorse frameworks once success appears likely. By October 2025, the Trump administration had already secured initial agreements between parties. ASEAN's statement came after, not during, the negotiation process. This reflects a pattern of bandwagoning in international relations, where smaller actors align with emerging successful outcomes to claim association without bearing implementation risks. This pattern suggests that with the endorsement of an existing framework, ASEAN positioned itself alongside diplomatic success while others had already undertaken the difficult negotiation work.

ASEAN's choice

The [achievements](#) ASEAN has secured in facilitating trade agreements and coordinating regional dialogue among economically diverse members remain significant. These successes demonstrate the organization's capacity for patient consensus-building on issues where member interests align. However, crisis diplomacy requires different mechanisms than

trade negotiation. The Myanmar case reveals that ASEAN currently lacks both the institutional tools and political will to enforce agreements when member states resist compliance.

When ASEAN issues statements on distant conflicts while remaining unable to address Myanmar, it undermines the credibility necessary for effective regional crisis management. If the Gaza peace process falters, ASEAN's October statement will appear premature. More significantly, the organization's long record of symbolic diplomacy weakens its capacity to demand unified action when regional crises require genuine coordination.

A path forward exists, though it requires political will currently absent. First, ASEAN could establish graduated responses for members who violate consensus agreements, short of expulsion but beyond symbolic criticism. These might include suspension from specific ASEAN bodies or restrictions on participation in certain cooperative programs. Second, the organization could designate a standing mediator role with authority to act between summit cycles, reducing the delays inherent in consensus-based decision making during crises. Third, member states could adopt flexible consensus mechanisms for humanitarian emergencies, allowing action without unanimous approval when responding to immediate threats to civilian populations.

None of these reforms threaten ASEAN's existence or require abandoning sovereignty principles entirely. Each would, however, require member states to accept that regional credibility depends on the capacity to enforce collective agreements. The Myanmar crisis has already cost the organization four years of credibility. The question facing ASEAN is whether member states value the institutional reputation they claim to uphold enough to accept modest limits on absolute sovereignty protection. Until that calculation shifts, statements on distant conflicts will continue to highlight, rather than mask, the gap between ASEAN's words abroad and its capacity for action at home.

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