

How does Nationalist Rhetoric Shape Inter-State Relations and Human Rights Outcomes within ASEAN?

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 to foster regional cooperation in Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 2025). In the decades that followed, ASEAN expanded from its five founding members to eleven, with Timor-Leste joining in late October, 2025. Interstate cooperation within the region appears promising, evidenced by the recent 47th summit in Kuala Lumpur. Despite this, longstanding disputes between neighbouring countries persist and are often complicated by strong nationalistic sentiment. The recent conflict along the border of Thailand and Cambodia, and Thailand's management of Burmese refugees in the past few years, illustrate how nationalist rhetoric can escalate tensions between countries and undermine regional stability. Although nationalist sentiment is present in all three countries, this paper focuses on Thailand to show how nationalism has become embedded in policy decisions, with implications on inter-state relations and human rights outcomes within ASEAN.

In the absence of a supranational authority in international politics, interactions between states are often organised through shared norms, institutions, and moral purposes that collectively represent the international system (Dunne, 2009, p. 269). ASEAN reflects many features of such a regional society: its foundational principles of sovereignty, non-interference, consensus-building, and diplomatic restraint constitute a normative framework that allows diverse Southeast Asian states to coexist and cooperate (ASEAN, 2007).

This regional order, however, remains fragile. Nationalistic narratives, reinforced by digital platforms and domestic political discourse, are reshaping how states perceive one another. These narratives, which can translate into foreign policy actions, are influenced by deeply embedded identity construction rooted in historical grievances and cultural hierarchies, and security speech acts by elites to divert from internal political challenges. By examining this issue through Constructivism and Securitisation theory, this paper explores how Thailand's nationalist rhetoric contributes to diplomatic tensions and creates conditions under which human rights principles are neglected, thereby straining the collective norms fostered by ASEAN.

The Constructivist Argument: How Thailand's Self-Image Shapes Its Regional Exchanges

Nationalism can serve as both a unifying and divisive force. More frequently, it is a tool used to establish a unified identity, grounded in intersubjective understandings and expectations about the self (Guzzini and Leander, 2005, p. 32). Constructivist scholars explain that widespread beliefs about the nation are not given but are sustained through institutions, communication, and political authority (Wicke, 2019, p. 143). This perspective is critical because it challenges claims that territorial disputes or hostility between states are unavoidable, instead highlighting how particular constructions of national identity can reinforce hierarchical perceptions and advance perceptions of threat.

Mekhirunsiri and Sathian write that Thai nationalism reflects a top-down structure, influenced by a predominantly royalist-nationalist narrative that is then presented as the truth (Mekhirunsiri and Sathian, 2025, p 12). As the only Southeast Asian nation to have avoided Western colonisation, the image of "Thai exceptionalism" is often invoked by elites to fuel nationalistic sentiment and justify its hierarchical status

in comparison to its neighbouring states (Thananithichot, 2011, p. 6). The royalist-historical argument presents Thailand as an honourable nation with clever diplomats: simultaneously a victim of Western colonial neglect and a rival of both the British and French (Mekhirunsiri and Sathian, 2025, p. 15). This dual narrative can reinforce Thailand's hierarchical self-perception and normalise the notion of a comparatively higher cultural and political standing than neighbouring states. Although it does not reflect the collective position of the Thai state or society, its repeated articulation by influential actors can shape both regional perceptions and Thailand's interaction with ASEAN.

Scholars of Thai nationalism argue that Thailand's military-owned media, particularly its radio stations and state-aligned news outlets, have historically served as preferred channels for promoting messages of Thai discipline and for constructing national "truths". Read through Winichakul's account of 'constructed truths', this can be interpreted as an effort to legitimise the Thai exceptionalist narrative, while portraying certain practices and events in the neighbouring Southeast Asian states as instances to be avoided (Winichakul, 1995, p. 13). As Winichakul argues, what is framed as "moral decline" is often articulated as developments attributed to those states: the Other.

As constructivist theory emphasises, these identities and interests are not fixed, but sustained through repeated interactive processes, as beliefs about value are learned and reproduced (Wendt, 1999, p. 123). As such, Thailand's interactions with its neighbours provide valuable insight into how internal narratives shape its external behaviour. The recent border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand, which began in July 2025 (ABC News, 2025), is an example of how the us/them narrative, foundational to constructivist theory, was invoked to consolidate an of the Thai "self" against the externalised Cambodian "other" (Tange and Jenks, 2023, p. 224). At the time of writing, this border dispute has resulted in 43 deaths and displaced more than 300,000 people, necessitating further analysis into its developments to minimise humanitarian consequences and assess ASEAN's conflict-management role. However, this is a challenging task, as the persistence of an information war between the two countries continues to dominate public sentiment in both countries (Sharma, 2025).

In the initial days of the conflict, media evidence of Cambodian workers being physically harassed by Thai individuals circulated on the internet, instilling fear amongst the sizable Cambodian migrant community in Thailand. This consequently led to thousands of migrant workers returning to Cambodia, despite their livelihoods being tied to various sectors in Thailand (Lach and Oo, 2025). This wave of returning workers aligns with reports that workplace violence and threats against workers have escalated (Board, 2025). This is further amplified by Thailand's media landscape, which is characterised by strong state influence. Patterns of selective reporting and uneven covering can confirm preexisting notions, thereby reinforcing the construction of a problematic "other" (Sirikupt, 2024, p. 18). Since actors treat other objects according to the meanings they assign to them, identity-based narratives can create perceptions of danger even when evidence of violence, for instance, exists but is disputed (Wendt, 1992, p. 398). Rather than deliberate disinformation by the media, this reflects how deeply embedded identity structures can shape which narratives are deemed credible and which are dismissed in a heightened security context. This also has regional implications, as mistrust narrows the space for regional dialogue, which can be more effective in addressing issues of heightened tensions. In an interview conducted in July 2025, Thailand's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Nikorndej Balankura, reaffirmed Thailand's

preference for bilateral mechanisms and rejected third-party intervention (The Nation Thailand, 2025). This stance continued until the latest ceasefire in December.

Securitisation: How political elites use speech acts to bypass regional norms and order

Identity-based narratives are not merely confined to the societal sphere. They enable political elites to elevate particular issues to “security threat” status, through speech acts, thereby legitimising extraordinary measures and narrowing the scope for regional norms, such as ASEAN’s principle of restraint. In Buzan’s words, politics should ideally “be able to unfold according to routine procedures without this extraordinary elevation of specific “threats” (Buzan, 1998, p. 27). In Thailand, the negative implications of securitisation arise when policies justified on security grounds undermine human rights principles and its normative commitments as an ASEAN member.

According to securitisation theory, powerful elites can invoke references to the nation and its identity to further their respective agendas (Buzan, 1998, p. 123). These elites occupy influential positions, often within the government, and derive power from their superior access to resources for controlling political attention and mobilisation (Slaven, 2021, p. 4). In Thailand’s context, securitisation offers a valuable framework for understanding how the invocation of nationalist rhetoric can help legitimise human rights violations, given the conflict between its royal-backed military and civilian government, which has resulted in numerous coups in the past (Prakoso, 2017, p. 83). This limits the scope for regional cooperation.

Contemporary Thai identity can be traced to King Rama VI, who inherited his father’s modernisation and state-building agenda to construct the notion of “Thainess”, most clearly expressed through the motto ‘nation-religion-monarchy. Throughout the late 20th century, this conception of Thainess was institutionalised through public rituals and celebrations of the royal family’s birthdays, thereby anchoring the monarchy as the emotional and symbolic centre of the nation (Thananithichot, 2011, p. 260). This historical context helps explain why securitising practices by Thai elites have been particularly effective in mobilising the civilian population. “Thainess” is rooted in national symbols such as loyalty to the monarchy. Invoking these ideas carries significant persuasive weight as it increases the likelihood that security claims framed in these terms are accepted by the domestic audience. In democratic systems, extraordinary measures that lead to the evasion of established procedures must be justified at least once in terms of security (Buzan, 1998, p. 28).

In Thailand’s context, political actors can draw on established identity narratives to justify contentious actions, even when they may result in adverse consequences for domestic civilians, and by extension, generate cross-border effects. One recurring example is the Thai government’s treatment of Burmese refugees. During periods of domestic uncertainty or heightened political tension abroad, state officials often turn to migrants as a potential source of instability or risk to public order. This is seen firstly, in the case of Burmese refugees, and second, with Cambodian migrant workers in 2025 (International Labour Organisation, 2025).

The military coup in Myanmar (2021), in particular, clearly illustrates this securitising dynamic. As the humanitarian crisis escalated in Myanmar, over 500,000 refugees turned to Thailand as a safe haven to

avoid being returned to repression and conflict back home (Hardman, 2025). While the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol apply only to those formally recognised as refugees, individuals seeking international protection are nonetheless protected by international law, in particular the principle of non-refoulement, as recognised in customary international law (UNHCR, 1951). However, since Thailand is not a party to either, the government proposed the “National Screening Mechanism (NSM)” to categorise individuals who may qualify as “*Protected Person*” and receive the status (Satayanurug, 2025, p. 89). Since then, there have been numerous reports of mistreatment of Burmese refugees, drawing attention to ongoing risks associated with their legal status and protection (Human Rights Watch, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Despite alleged abuses, Thai nationals have generally been tolerant and, in some cases, supportive of the policies. A report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) highlights that public opinion towards migrants generally leans toward a stronger preference for migrants who come to Thailand seeking employment rather than for migrants seeking protection in the country. Yet, up to 42% of respondents disagreed that migrant workers should receive equal pay or benefits to Thai nationals for the same job (IOM, 2023). Taken together, these attitudes reflect how nationalist rhetoric shapes both public sentiment and decision-making elites in ways that challenge Thailand’s commitments to ASEAN. For instance, Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul’s rejection of a ceasefire call from Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim illustrates selective engagement with ASEAN-initiated diplomatic efforts (Thai PBS World, 2025). In securitisation processes, public opinion is crucial because it determines whether exceptional measures will be accepted (Buzan, 1997, p. 25).

Scholars such as Boonyapatano note that these circumstances could have escalated as a result of Thai authorities reinforcing a nationalistic ideology rooted in historical grievances, given the two nations’ long-standing conflict (Boonyapatano, 2015; The Straits Times, 2025). While such narratives do not always translate into hostility, they constrain policy discourse surrounding migrant protection, while allowing securitising claims to gain ready credibility. In its most recent statement regarding the situation in Myanmar, ASEAN reaffirmed its position as a neutral facilitator for a peaceful resolution, reiterating the five-point consensus, which includes: (1) an immediate end to violence, (2) dialogue among all parties, (3) the appointment of a special envoy, (4) humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, (5) and the special envoy’s visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties (ASEAN, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2022). This framework shows ASEAN’s normative emphasis on humanitarian relief and de-escalatory motives. However, Thailand’s security-oriented framing of refugee inflows diverges from this regional approach.

Policy Recommendations

By assessing the development of national rhetoric in Thailand and showing how it is used to escalate tensions in its interactions with Cambodia and Myanmar, this paper highlights the constraints ASEAN faces in managing interstate conflict and suggests ways to overcome them. ASEAN already possesses existing mechanisms for managing interstate conflict. The first is the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), a legally binding code for interstate relations in the region (ASEAN, 1976). Article 2, TAC emphasises the principles of respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful settlement of disputes, which is further enhanced by the informal ‘ASEAN-Way’ of settling disputes (Jones, 2024). Although it appears to constrain ASEAN’s intervention in conflicts, particularly in

territorial disputes such as the one between Thailand and Cambodia, it remains the core mechanism binding Southeast Asian states to cooperation (Jones, 2024).

Effective use of such mechanisms ultimately depends on the willingness of member states to foster a stronger collective identity. In contrast to nationalism, constructivists such as Amitav Acharya posit that a shared identity is key to building a community (Acharya, 2017, p. 24). Only then can existing platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' collective action (Baviera, 2017, p. 11) be considered. This aside, there already exists a recognised mechanism for specifically addressing conflict: the ASEAN High Council. Nonetheless, they have yet to be used as intended, resulting instead in the adoption of bilateral mechanisms or external institutions such as the ICJ (Schochet, 2025). Hence, ASEAN members should advocate the operationalisation of the High Council, particularly in the early stages of the conflict or when humanitarian concerns are evident. The border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, which reached a final ceasefire in late December, reveals this limitation, as it was sustained more by bilateral diplomacy and external pressure from the US and China than by domestic factors (Regencia, 2025).

Malaysia, as the chair during the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, and overlooking the conditions of Burmese refugees over the years, has attempted to intervene when possible. Still, mistrust of an overarching regional body or third party, especially by Thailand, hinders efforts. Although it was not the sole reason behind the eventual ceasefire, ASEAN Chair, Malaysia's role in conflict resolution for the first Thai-Cambodia ceasefire shows that regional diplomacy continues to play a vital role in delivering credible outcomes, despite the absence of a judicial court such as the supranational court in the EU, by comparison (Kadir and Luah, 2025). Furthermore, ASEAN could establish an information verification system which monitors evolving conflicts, such as the Thai-Cambodia territorial dispute or the status of Burmese refugees, to minimise misinformation and ensure policy discussions are grounded in a shared narrative. By strengthening its conflict-resolution mechanisms, ASEAN can serve as a framework for resolving conflicts among its member states.

Conclusion

Nationalistic rhetoric significantly shapes inter-state relations and human rights outcomes within ASEAN. The border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, along with Thailand's securitised practices towards Burmese refugees, demonstrates how a nationalistic narrative can influence foreign policy decisions in a manner which narrows diplomatic space and heightens perceptions of threat from neighbouring states. In such contexts, conflict can create fertile ground for disinformation and weaken interstate cooperation that is central to ASEAN's long-term aims. Addressing these issues requires strategies that manage nationalistic pressures without compromising human rights or regional cooperation. This paper recommends the following main solutions: fostering a stronger regional identity to ensure consistent and effective use of ASEAN's existing dispute settlement mechanisms; and enhancing cross-border information verification to prevent disinformation during periods of heightened tension. Together, these measures guide ASEAN member states toward a centralised approach to diplomacy that withstands nationalist impulses.

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