

ASEAN's SECOND RENAISSANCE IS NOW BY ANWAR IBRAHIM
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The COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly volatile global environment have highlighted supply-chain vulnerabilities that could jeopardize ASEAN's economic outlook. To reduce these risks, the group, under Malaysia's chairmanship next year, must diversify its supply sources, invest in infrastructure, and adopt digital solutions.

KUALA LUMPUR – Next year heralds a pivotal chapter for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with Malaysia assuming the chair. In a world increasingly divided into competing blocs, Malaysia is advancing the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, a strategic long-term plan that aims to guide the region's growth and prosperity over the next two decades. This framework aspires to forge a future of inclusivity and resilience – one that will anchor peace and prosperity throughout Southeast Asia.

When ASEAN was founded in Bangkok in 1967, the region was a Cold War battleground, enmeshed in ideological confrontation. Today, Southeast Asians find themselves once again poised at the edge of great-power rivalries. Yet, the mission that defined ASEAN from the start – fostering peace, stability, and development – remains impressively relevant. Now comprising 10 member states and over 660 million people, the bloc's economies, despite varying political landscapes, rank among the world's most dynamic.

Malaysia's upcoming chairmanship is built around a vision of shared progress, guided by the theme of ASEAN 2025: Inclusivity and Sustainability. It seeks to combine economic pragmatism with human-centered values to leave no one behind. The vision includes a pledge to create a rules-based regional order – one that not only safeguards prosperity but also enhances Southeast Asia's stability while navigating tensions between great powers.

The admission of Timor-Leste as a full ASEAN member represents a significant step, expanding the community to encompass the entirety of geographical Southeast Asia while giving Timor-Leste a much-needed platform to pursue its development and, like other members, preserve its strategic autonomy.

As global tensions intensify – from strategic competition to climate disruption – ASEAN's collaborative spirit has never been more crucial. The choice is stark: ASEAN must move forward in unity or face the divisive forces gathering momentum across Asia and beyond.

The ambition is not merely to uphold stability but to shape a just regional order. This vision also includes a commitment to ending the turmoil in Myanmar, a test that ASEAN's collective conscience must pass if it is to maintain its credibility.

The region's approach to development deliberately distances itself from the excesses of unchecked capitalism. It resists the distorting influence of state-subsidized trade from outside powers. Instead, ASEAN espouses a model that marries growth with human welfare, prioritizing education, health care, and

poverty reduction. Sustainable economic progress is understood not only in terms of productivity but also as the promise of decent living conditions and investment in human capital.

Malaysia's stewardship of ASEAN also aims to bolster outward-facing alliances. Engaging more deeply with ASEAN+ partners – China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand – as well as emergent global groupings like BRICS+, is essential. Upcoming engagements, including a summit with the Gulf Cooperation Council and China, signal ASEAN's intent to expand economic and strategic networks beyond its immediate borders.

These partnerships promise to attract foreign investment, expand market access, and improve infrastructure – an agenda that aligns with Malaysia's New Industrial Master Plan 2030, aimed at boosting manufacturing and logistics. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed just how vulnerable global supply chains can be, underscoring the need for ASEAN to mitigate these risks by strengthening its own resilience and diversifying its partnerships.

To address these vulnerabilities, ASEAN must invest in infrastructure, improve connectivity, and diminish the risks of trade disruptions. Diversifying production bases and trade routes alongside active engagement with ASEAN+ and BRICS+ countries will help secure the region's position in essential global supply networks. Investing in infrastructure – ports, railways, roads – is vital to cementing ASEAN's place as a key node in international trade, particularly in high-impact industries like electronics and agriculture.

A critical component of ASEAN's strategy for resilience is digital transformation. By adopting advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and big-data analytics, the region seeks to improve supply-chain transparency and risk management. Such digital infrastructure will be instrumental in fostering economic stability in a volatile global environment.

Three decades ago, I penned *The Asian Renaissance*, a book that envisioned an intellectual, cultural, and socio-political revival for Asia. Today, Southeast Asia is on the brink of another transformation, one that is underpinned by ethical governance and shared progress. The values of compassion, justice, and integrity must be woven into the fabric of ASEAN's future if the region is to achieve a second renaissance that benefits all.

ASEAN refuses to be a mere participant in the global economy. Instead, it aims to influence it – shaping governance, economic models, and cultural narratives. Southeast Asia's ambition reaches beyond its borders, striving to be a force for positive change on the global stage. ASEAN's rise must deliver tangible results – advancing peace, justice, and prosperity.

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