

Anwar: Asean must strengthen ties amid rising protectionism

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Asean must have the courage to forge new partnerships and the foresight to deepen existing ones amid rising protectionism and shifting supply chains, said Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

“Asean must not stand still,” he said, emphasising that resilience depends on adaptability.

Anwar, who chairs the 47th Asean Summit, said that the relative peace and prosperity that the regional bloc has enjoyed for nearly six decades are not self-sustaining and must be renewed through cooperation and strengthened by shared purpose.

“That is why Asean is deepening economic linkages, widening trade, and enhancing competitiveness,” he said in his opening remarks when officiating the 47th Asean Summit.

Upholding the theme “Inclusivity and Sustainability” in Asean, Anwar also

announced the upgrade of the Asean Trade in Goods Agreement, to be launched at this summit, which will create a more seamless regional market - unlocking scale, efficiency, and opportunity for our businesses and workers alike.

“We are also advancing the Asean Power Grid (APG). The new APG Financing Facility will help bridge funding gaps and accelerate our transition toward cleaner, more secure energy,” he added.

The APG, which stemmed from early bilateral efforts in the 1970s and was first formalised in 1997, has reached a major milestone with the launch of the US\$10 billion (RM42 billion) APG Financing Initiative in October 2025.

Anwar added that the region is moving forward on the Asean Blue Economy Framework and the Regional Electric Vehicle Ecosystem, building the foundations for sustainable industry and green growth.

“With Asean’s digital economy expected to double to US\$2 trillion (RM8.45 trillion) by 2030, we have agreed to fast-track the Asean Digital Economic Framework Agreement by 2026.

“And to ensure technology remains our servant, not our master, we will establish the Asean AI Safety Network - AI Safe - to embed ethics, safety, and sound governance in the use of artificial intelligence,” he added.

Forging closer ties

Carrying the spirit of closer ties with other economies, Anwar said Malaysia hosted the 2nd Asean-GCC and the Asean-GCC-China Summits earlier this year.

“Tomorrow, we convene the 5th Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Leaders’ Summit - advancing the world’s largest free-trade area toward its full potential.

“We also welcome Brazil and South Africa, Guests of the Chair, to the 20th East Asia Summit — an important step in widening Asean’s engagement with the Brics and the G20 and strengthening our bridge to the Global South,” he added.

Brics is a group of major emerging economies that has expanded to include 10 member countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates.

The G20, or Group of 20, is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 sovereign countries, the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU).

Direction in a changing world

Meanwhile, Anwar said today that Malaysia’s chairing of Asean this year carries a

profound responsibility to not only guide the regional bloc but also renew its sense of purpose and direction in a rapidly changing world.

“Leadership is never a matter of routine; it is a matter of choice: to define priorities, renew Asean’s sense of purpose, and chart a course worthy of our peoples’ hopes,” he said.

This is the fifth time Malaysia has assumed the Asean chair since the bloc’s inception in 1967, with the previous times in 2015, 2005, 1997, and 1977.

Also at the opening ceremony of the 47th Asean Summit and Related Summits in Kuala Lumpur were Thailand Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, Laos Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, and the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

Also attending were United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres, European Council President Antonio Costa, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, South African President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, Timor-Leste Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão and Timor-Leste President José Ramos-Horta.

Understanding and dialogue

Anwar said that 2025 posed new tests for Asean as global uncertainties continue to mount, with shifting geopolitical dynamics and economic disruptions challenging the region's resilience and collective resolve.

"Across regions, we see rising contestation and growing uncertainty. These crosswinds test not only our economies but also our collective resolve to keep faith in cooperation - to believe that understanding and dialogue can still prevail in a divided age," he said.

He said that despite these challenges, Asean's strength lies in its diversity and enduring commitment to respect and reason, values that continue to bind the region together.

Anwar said the Asean Community Vision 2045, adopted in May, represented the bloc's aspirations to strengthen unity and centrality, pursue inclusive and sustainable growth, and safeguard the welfare of future generations.

Anwar said Asean's efforts to advance economic cooperation would continue with the Fifth RCEP Leaders' Summit tomorrow, moving the world's largest free trade area toward its full potential.

He also welcomed the participation of Brazil and South Africa as guests of the chair at the 20th East Asia Summit, describing it as a vital step in expanding Asean's engagement with the Brics and G20 nations and strengthening its bridge to the Global South.

“The future of Asean will not be written by circumstance. It will be written by choice – by the choices we make today,” he added.

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