

# Asean seeks progress in sea dispute

## Leaders call for collaborative efforts to ease tensions

**VIENTIANE:** Asean has called for an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea in the wake of China's continued presence at the disputed waterway

Several member states took the opportunity to raise the issue, which has become a common concern among them at the annual Asean-China Summit, calling for progress in preparing the Code of Conduct.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said that Asean reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea.

"This is in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (UNCLOS)," he said at the 27th Asean-China Summit.

Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said that substantive progress needed to be made and that all parties must "be earnestly open to seriously managing differences" and reducing tension.

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"There should be more urgency in the pace of negotiations of the Asean-China COC.

"It is regrettable that the overall situation in the South China Sea remains tense and unchanged.

"We continue to be subjected to harassment and intimidation," Marcos told the meeting, according to a statement from his office.

Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong also expressed concern that escalating tensions at the disputed waterway could lead to a bigger crisis.

"The South China Sea is a live and immediate issue, with real risks of an accident spiralling into conflict," he told his fellow leaders at the summit, according to AFP.

Thailand Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra stressed the



**Boosting ties:** Anwar with Paetongtarn (second from right) during a bilateral meeting between Malaysia and Thailand during the 44th and 45th Asean Summits and Related Summits in Vientiane. With him are (from left) Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan and Investment, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz. — Bernama

importance of resolving disputes in the South China Sea through peaceful diplomacy and fostering mutual trust.

She also pointed out that Asean-China relations is the cornerstone for regional peace and prosperity

The South China Sea has been a contentious issue because China claims nearly the entire region, despite overlapping maritime claims by Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei.

In March, it was reported that the second reading of the COC was completed and it is now into the third reading.

However, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, who was present at the summit, did not mention the South

China Sea issue in his speech.

He was reported to have said that intensifying trade relations and creating an "ultra large-scale market" were keys to economic prosperity.

"The global economy is still seeing a sluggish recovery, protectionism is rising and geopolitical turbulence has brought instability and uncertainty to our development.

"Strengthening market coordination is an important direction for our further cooperation," he said.

Anwar, who read the Asean Statement at the summit, said the regional bloc welcomed China's support for energy transition efforts and encourages collabora-

tion in emerging technologies like robotics and artificial intelligence.

"Asean also welcomes the joint statement on deepening cooperation in people-to-people exchanges," he added.

China has been Asean's largest trading partner since 2009, with bilateral trade volume reaching US\$546.6bil (RM2.3 trillion at current rates) in the first seven months of this year.

Among the 10 Asean member countries, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia were China's top trading partners, with a turnover of up to 13.7%, 24.1% and 4.1%, respectively, according to statistics by the Chinese General Administration of Customs.