

Time to strengthen ties and expand

PM: Asean must seize the opportunity to make a bigger global impact

By RAHIMY RAHIM
and TARRENCE TAN
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Stating that Asean's moment is now, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said the regional grouping must expand its global engagement beyond its traditional partners and act with urgency to secure a prosperous future for all.

The Prime Minister said that by diversifying its partnerships, Asean can enhance its economic resilience, tap into new investment opportunities and play a more proactive role in shaping global governance frameworks.

"This is not a time for incrementalism or short-term thinking, but a time for bold decisions, transformative partnerships and a shared commitment to long-term prosperity," he said in his opening address at the China Conference South-East Asia 2025, yesterday.

The Prime Minister said the decision to strengthen ties with China, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and BRICS, as well as other emerging economies was not about choosing sides.

"Rather, it is about ensuring Asean's strategic relevances in a multipolar world," he pointed out.

The next phase of Asean-China economic cooperation, he said, must be driven by strategic technological collaboration, sustainable growth and human capital development.

China has been Asean's most significant economic partner for years and this relationship will continue to be a cornerstone of regional stability, the Prime Minister said.

"As global economic dynamics evolve, Asean's engagement with China must also adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

"This means we must move beyond traditional trade and



Proud moment for all: Anwar arriving at the conference in Kuala Lumpur. — RAJA FAISAL HISHAN/The Star

investment figures and focus on a partnership that is transformational and future-oriented.

"We must embrace and support the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into regional supply chains, to ensure Asean remains at the forefront of the digital economy," he said.

Anwar said Asean's economic resilience will also depend on how effectively the regional grouping navigates three critical challenges - supply chain disruptions and diversification, energy security and sustainability and digital economy and AI.

"Asean must become a reliable hub for global trade and invest-

ment by reducing vulnerabilities to external shocks, and strengthen industrial base through investments in advanced manufacturing, semiconductors and green technologies," he said.

The Asean Energy Grid and renewable energy investments would be central to ensuring economic growth is climate conscious and long-term oriented, while the Asean Digital Economy Framework Agreement must serve as a catalyst for regional transformation by prioritising AI governance, cybersecurity and digital inclusivity, said Anwar.

To ensure that all Asean member states can fully harness the

benefits of technological advancements, Anwar said "we must establish common standards for data protection, facilitate seamless crossborder digital trade and invest in capacity-building initiatives that bridge the digital divide.

"By fostering a secure, innovative and inclusive digital ecosystem, Asean can position itself at the forefront of the global digital economy, driving sustainable growth and shared prosperity for the region," he said.

The conference, organised by the *South China Morning Post*, gathered government officials, experts, and global business leaders to examine the evolving

China-Asean relationship and strategic importance of stronger ties.

Also present at the event were, Investment, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz, Investment, Trade and Industry, deputy minister Liew Chin Tong and Chinese ambassador to Malaysia Ouyang Yujing.