

Asean centrality is the solution

THE STAR 10 JUL 2025 pg. 4

PM calls for deeper regional cohesion amid geopolitical uncertainty

KUALA LUMPUR: As trade becomes a battleground for geopolitical influence, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim says Asean faces the urgent task of harmonising its foreign and economic policies.

The Prime Minister said strategic cooperation is no longer optional – it's the region's best defence in a world where economic tools are increasingly politicised.

"I, therefore, urge even closer alignment between Asean's foreign and economic policy tracks.

"Our foreign and economic ministers must move in concert in facing challenges," Anwar said in his opening remarks at the 58th Asean Foreign Ministers (AMM) meeting here yesterday.

Trade barriers are now being used as instruments to pressure and isolate certain countries, he added.

"Across the world, tools once



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2025**

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used to generate growth are now wielded to pressure, isolate and contain.

"Tariffs, exports, restrictions and investment barriers have now become the sharpened instruments of geopolitical rivalry," he said.

To move forward, Asean must confront this new reality with clarity and conviction, Anwar said.

"Our cohesion must not end at declarations. It must be built into our institutions, our strategies and our economic decisions," he said.

As Asean navigates these new external pressures, the region has

to strengthen its foundations by trading and investing more in one another, he added.

"We must also reject the idea that the world can be carved into spheres of influence and that decisions about our region can be made elsewhere.

"We are a region that charts its own course – deliberately, coherently and with purpose.

"Asean will not be spoken for in absentia," he said.

The AMM is taking place just days after US President Donald Trump announced a slew of import tariffs on many of the region's member countries.

Imports from Malaysia, which holds the Asean chairmanship this year, to the United States have been slapped with 25% tariffs, while Indonesia was hit by 32%, Cambodia and Thailand 36%, and Laos and Myanmar 40%.

The Prime Minister also said assumptions that once underpinned global peace are now collapsing.

"This meeting takes place amid the unravelling of assumptions, where power unsettles principle, and calm can no longer be taken for granted. The global order is fraying.

"Asean centrality must be our North Star, as reflected in the continuous strengthening and innovation of Asean-led institutions," he said.

He cited the protracted suffering in Gaza and Palestine, the continuing war in Ukraine, spiralling violence in parts of Africa and the unresolved crisis in Myanmar as evidence of this global deterioration.

Anwar also raised concerns over escalating tensions in the Middle East, warning of the potential for a wider regional conflict

with far-reaching consequences.

"The actions of one state against its neighbours threaten to spark a wider regional conflagration.

"The risks are profound – for energy security, global stability and the integrity of international law," he added.

Prior to the opening ceremony, Anwar received a courtesy call from Asean foreign ministers.

Among those present at the meeting were Brunei's Second Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Setia Erywan Yusof, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, and Indonesia's Foreign Minister Sugiono.

The 58th AMM will take place until tomorrow and among notable leaders to attend are US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.