

# 'Regional cohesion vital amid global tensions'

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➤ Asean foreign, economic ministers must move in concert to face challenges and translate unity of grouping into tangible outcomes, says Anwar

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Asean needs to ensure closer alignment between its foreign and economic policy tracks to strengthen regional cohesion amid rising geopolitical and trade tensions, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He said Asean foreign ministers and economic ministers must move in concert to face challenges, adding that such synergy is essential to translate Asean's unity into tangible outcomes.

Highlighting the shifting global landscape, Anwar warned that tools traditionally used to promote growth, including trade and investment, are now increasingly being deployed to exert political pressure and fragment global cooperation.

"This trend is not a passing storm but the new weather of our time," he said when opening the 58th Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting yesterday.

Anwar said power has always shaped trade but today, it increasingly defines it.

He cited the proliferation of tariffs, export restrictions and investment barriers as instruments of geopolitical rivalry.

He said Asean must confront today's realities with "clarity and conviction", ensuring that unity is not only expressed in declarations but also embedded in institutions, strategies and decision-making.

"This imperative is fully aligned with Asean's Vision 2045, which calls for greater synergy across pillars and sectors. We must build habits of coordination that match the realities we confront."

On Monday, United States President Donald Trump began sending out trade letters to foreign governments outlining new tariff rates on exports to the US.

Among Asean member states, Indonesia faces a 32% tariff, Thailand and Cambodia 36% and Malaysia a 25% tariff rate. The highest tariff rate of 40% has been imposed on Laos and Myanmar.

Anwar also called on Asean to strengthen

internal integration by expanding intra-regional trade and investment as well as accelerating sectoral integration to enhance resilience and relevance, Bernama reported.

"To build a stronger, more connected Asean economy is a strategic imperative that will anchor our relevance and resilience for decades to come."

He rejected the notion that Southeast Asia should be subject to external spheres of influence.

"We are a region that charts its course, deliberately, coherently and with purpose. Asean will not be spoken for in absentia."

Anwar said Asean must continue delivering practical cooperation with real impact, citing priorities such as connectivity, food security, digital transformation, education, public health and climate resilience.

He cited the lives of ordinary citizens across the region, from a mother in Battambang to a farmer in Central Luzon and a child in Chiang Rai, to illustrate how Asean's work must ultimately benefit its people.

"From Sittwe to Merauke, from Da Nang to Dili, our region can become more peaceful and more prosperous if we have the courage to see Asean not as nations moving in parallel but as one community moving with purpose."