

Asean centrality above all

Anwar: Region will engage freely to strengthen autonomy

SINGAPORE: Deeply concerned about the potential escalation among South China Sea claimants, Malaysia has called for restraint and dialogue in dealing with disputes over the area, says Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia does not want to see tensions spiral into confrontation, least of all in waters so critical to regional security and prosperity.

“That is why we will continue to engage all parties calmly, directly and consistently.

“We will urge restraint, encourage dialogue and work to preserve the stability on which this region depends.

“Above all, we remain steadfast in our principled insistence that all parties uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” he said at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue.

The Prime Minister also touched on the importance of maintaining stability in the region, adding that as Asean Chair this year, Malaysia is committed to defending the association’s stance on centrality and active non-alignment.

Anwar said that Asean, through decades of consensus-building, was built to foster stability in a region where peace is sustained, freedom is protected and neutrality is respected.

While welcoming a strong and enduring US presence in the region, the Prime Minister stressed the importance of maintaining firm and vibrant ties with China, as well as strengthening partnerships across Asia, Europe and the Global South.

“We will engage all who are willing; major powers and middle powers alike, not to set one against the other but to maximise



Upholding neutrality: Anwar delivering his speech at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. - Bernama

our own strategic space.

“What South-East Asia needs is a dynamic equilibrium that enables cooperation without coercion and balance without bloc politics.

“For Malaysia, this is deliberate and strategic posture: to help preserve an open region, to assert our sovereignty and to make our own choices, on our own terms,” he said.

He cautioned against a new orthodoxy that not only affects how diplomacy is viewed but also how security will be structured, risking the fragmentation of the regional architecture and undermining South-East Asia’s strategic autonomy.

“Preserving our autonomy is not about resisting others. It is about strengthening ourselves. This, in essence, is what Asean centrality is about.

“We do not object to like-

minded partners talking among themselves.

“But coalitions that build walls instead of bridges, stoke arms competition or undermine the legitimacy of multilateralism should give us pause.

“A stable region is not one braced for conflict but one grounded in openness, transparency and habit-forming cooperation,” he said.

On the issue of Myanmar, the Prime Minister stressed that Asean is not passive in addressing the crisis happening in the member state.

He said while the grouping does not aim to dictate the country’s political outcome, it remains firm on the expectations outlined in the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar.

“Myanmar’s nationhood must be forged through inclusion, not erasure,” Anwar added.

The Prime Minister has also urged the international community to act decisively and consistently in response to the genocide in Gaza.

He said the scale of devastation blatant disregard for humanitarian norms and the failure of global institutions to effectively address the conflict demand more than expressions of sympathy.

“We must not allow selective outrage or strategic fatigue to dull our moral clarity.

“Indeed, the genocide in Gaza is a test of our collective conscience,” Anwar said.

On the sidelines of the Dialogue the Prime Minister received a courtesy call from US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth.

In a Facebook post, Anwar said the meeting touched on efforts to enhance bilateral cooperation in the fields of defence and many time security.