

**Policy Speech on ASEAN by  
the Honourable Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia  
ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, 29 July 2025**

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His Excellency Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN,  
Members of the Diplomatic Community,  
Representatives of ASEAN Entities,  
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon, *Selamat sore*.

It is my great privilege to be here at the ASEAN Secretariat, for the first time as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. To do so in a year where Malaysia is the Chair of ASEAN is particularly meaningful.

I sincerely thank His Excellency Dr Kao Kim Hourn for his kind invitation. For me, this visit is not just a customary engagement by the ASEAN Chair, but one that reflects Malaysia's unwavering commitment to ASEAN's ideals and its agenda.

I recall that my good friend and the former Secretary-General of ASEAN, the late Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, once remarked that the Secretariat is the 'heart of all other ASEAN Organs', one which represents an 'exclusively ASEAN character' and the 'collective interests of ASEAN'.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over nearly six decades, ASEAN has built a region that is, for the most part, peaceful, stable, and economically vibrant. This achievement rests on a foundation of trust, dialogue, and consensus-building that has allowed us to manage differences and prevent disputes from escalating. It is these shared habits of cooperation that continue to anchor our stability, even when challenges arise.

Just yesterday, in our capacity as ASEAN Chair, Malaysia was entrusted with the responsibility of hosting the leaders of Cambodia and Thailand at a time when tensions on their border had become a cause for grave concern to us all. I believed that, despite the dangerous and escalating situation, it was both vital and possible to bring the two sides to the negotiating table. In the lead-up to the meeting, I spoke to both leaders, took care to listen to their perspectives, and urged them to find common ground in the interest of ensuring no more lives were lost. With the participation of the United States and China, both sides agreed to an immediate and unconditional ceasefire. This reflects not only the strength of ASEAN's convening power, but also the constructive engagement of our partners in safeguarding regional stability.

I commend Prime Minister Hun Manet and Acting Prime Minister Phumtham for their statesmanship, as well as President Trump and the Chinese leadership for their constructive engagement. The presence and cooperation of all parties reaffirm that peace is best achieved through dialogue, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to stability.

This episode has served as a vital reaffirmation of the values that have served our region well. By continuing to uphold the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, we can strengthen the peace dividend, ensuring ASEAN remains a community of trust, cooperation, and shared prosperity for generations to come.

It also reminds us that the qualities which have kept our region at peace – patience, trust, and steady diplomacy – are the same qualities that give meaning to our centrality and unity today.

I have consistently underscored that ASEAN's centrality, unity and autonomy should remain the compass in our collective journey ahead. However, we must be cognisant that these ethos's are not a right, but a privilege we must work hard to sustain in the face of shifting regional and global dynamics. In a fragmented world, our centrality and unity matter more than ever.

The existing international order is not just under strain – it is facing unprecedented levels of fragmentation. Characterised by major power rivalries, geo-economic competition and fraying multilateralism, the world now is increasingly more complex, chaotic and contradictory.

ASEAN must confront this sobering reality with clarity of purpose and vision. As we navigate an uncertain strategic landscape, we must continue to be a voice of reason, and a resilient community committed to peace and shared prosperity.

ASEAN's commitment to regionalism and multilateralism remains the anchor of the region's collective stability and progress. It is imperative that ASEAN continues to stand for rules, even when others choose retreat. ASEAN must be an agent of change – one that has the capacity to shape the global rules and norms to remain open, inclusive, and firmly rooted in the principle of justice.

As an outward-looking organisation in a multipolar world, ASEAN must continue to punch above its weight by broadening its global partnerships. Deepening ties and strategic links with diverse partners is not a choice – it is a strategic imperative. But we should engage as equals. And above all, we must be the speakers and not the spoken for.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In facing today's global economic headwinds, it is imperative that we focus our energies inward, towards building a more integrated and resilient ASEAN economy. Our region is home to a vast and vibrant market of 660 million people. The potential is undeniable, but to realise it fully, we must narrow the existing development gaps and forge stronger, more equitable economic linkages across member states.

At the 47<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, we will once again demonstrate our collective commitment towards improving the unimpeded flow of goods within our region. Through renewed efforts to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers, we are taking meaningful steps towards creating a more seamless and dynamic ASEAN economic community that works for all, not just for some.

ASEAN's extensive network of free trade agreements has long served as a cornerstone of our economic resilience. But in an era marked by rising protectionism and shifting supply chains, we cannot afford to be complacent. We must remain committed to openness and reform, even as we adapt to a more complex geo-economic landscape. It is only through sustained liberalisation and cooperation that we can safeguard jobs, preserve growth, and consolidate our position in the global economy.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is central to this vision. As the world's largest trade agreement, it reinforces ASEAN's role as the linchpin of regional economic architecture. We expect the 5<sup>th</sup> RCEP Leaders' Meeting to also take place at the sidelines of the 47<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, thus presenting an opportunity for us to ensure that RCEP delivers tangible benefits for our businesses, workers, and communities.

As we look to strengthen ASEAN's position in an increasingly competitive global economy, we must also do more to ensure that businesses can operate with confidence and clarity across our borders. The success of the ASEAN-GCC-China Summit is a clear signal that ASEAN is ready to build new bridges and unlock new partnerships. It also reaffirms our shared determination to shape a future based on mutual respect, shared growth, and strategic cooperation.

Digital economy will be a key driver of ASEAN's next phase of growth. That is why we are advancing efforts to conclude the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, while modernising our existing trade agreements with strategic partners including China, India, and the

Republic of Korea. These efforts reflect ASEAN's readiness to embrace change and position ourselves at the forefront of digital transformation.

Business as usual is no longer an option. As ASEAN charts its path forward, we must embed sustainability at the heart of our economic agenda. Accelerating the ASEAN Power Grid is one such priority. It will not only advance our green energy transition, but also attract new investments, create quality jobs, and enhance the region's long-term energy security. A just and sustainable future for ASEAN is within reach, if we are bold enough to act now.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We cannot afford an ASEAN that is weak, fragmented or in conflict with each other – our national fortunes rise or fall with the region. In these increasingly polarised times, ASEAN must continue to harness its convening power to advance dialogue, diplomacy, and strategic trust, while fostering space for meaningful cooperation.

The journey ahead will be fraught with challenges. ASEAN needs to do more to ensure its cohesiveness in both articulation and action as a clear manifestation of centrality. We must also uphold our time-honoured geostrategic construct of ZOPFAN, double down on ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Three and ASEAN Regional Forum.

ASEAN cannot control the global currents, nor can we dictate terms to the world. Nonetheless, we can chart our own future for the better with courage, foresight and determination. In doing so, we will ensure that the benefits of ASEAN integration are truly realised, bringing value to our people and future generations.

Thank you. *Terima kasih.*