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Looking to ourselves

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In a globalised world where risks expand and multiply, energy security looms as a critical factor for economic development and national security.

ALL countries need to shield themselves from the ravages of war, including the conflicts they have no part in.

Damage to legitimate national interests are far more dispersed in a globalised world where gains and losses are widely shared. Failure to recognise such risks can amount to serious threats to national security.

The Ukraine war involves Russia, Ukraine plus 43 other countries in Europe, nations on the continental cusp such as Turkiye, others in border regions like Belarus, as well as the US and its allies. A conflict that might have once seemed "easy to fix" still has no end in sight.

The war that the US and Israel launched on Iran in the midst of negotiations is even more messy and challenging. Its motivations derive from deeply incompatible interests: Iran's need to survive, Israel's wish to destroy Iran, and the US desire to portray Donald Trump as a heroic winner.

There is little hope and no trust between Iran and the US-Israel tag team. The confidence needed even to continue with talks is absent, only pessimism that things are likely to get worse.

The losses suffered are so vast as to undermine the interests of countries worldwide. South-East Asia must be forewarned of the dangers to be forearmed to pro-



Behind the headlines

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tect its national interests.

The Iran war concerns more than just disruptions to energy supplies and international shipping. Enormous as the implications of these challenges already are, the war is also about the sovereign rights of nation states, meddling in the internal affairs of other nations, and the legitimacy or otherwise of initiating war, forcible interdictions of seaborne ves-



Energy security: The APG should also reduce dependency on fossil fuels for geopolitical and environmental reasons.

sels, and blocking worldwide shipping in international waters.

Just when Iran's closure of the Hormuz Straits was being questioned, US forces launched a naval blockade. This "if you cannot beat them, join them" approach is a race to the bottom rather than a solution.

Singapore rebuffed Iran's closure of the Hormuz Straits for allegedly contravening shipping provisions provided under international law. On principle, the US blockade needs to be rebuffed equally since there are no UN resolutions against buying Iranian oil.

Many countries are keenly watching the legal and political implications of such realities. Faced with policy failures and blowbacks, US desperation has resulted in waivers on its own sanctions against Russian oil purchases following global shortages.

Ending the US waivers for countries like India did not mean Washington had achieved anything, but rather an admission that even the waivers had failed. India has countered that US sanctions did not prevent it from continuing to buy Russian oil in the first place.

For the US and Israel, losing the plot serves as a prelude to losing the war. If escalating the conflict also means escalating potential losses for countries like Malaysia,

urgent multilateral action is needed now.

Despite sustaining enormous damage from US and Israeli attacks, Iran has prevailed by not surrendering. It has proven more resilient than US and Israeli policymakers had bargained for.

This was clear enough even before Feb 28 when Iran came under attack. The war is a foul existential attack for Tehran which it must resist to survive.

This has meant the war may continue indefinitely – or until Israel or the US succumbs – because Iran's pain threshold is higher. What Trump thought would end in four or five weeks, then in just two or three, may continue for the rest of the year or beyond.

The main implication from this is the urgency with which regions and countries must work to become more self-reliant and better coordinated. Far from any contradiction between national needs and regional priorities, it means the consolidation of regional community building.

For Malaysia, this primarily means optimising Asean community-building efforts. It underscores the urgency of fully and swiftly realising the Asean Power Grid (APG) within two decades.

The APG's immediate priorities are regulatory reform to facilitate cross-border trade, advancing

clean energy with hydro, solar and clean coal sources, and completing more interconnection projects. Some of these efforts will continue to develop as they may never be fully done as energy needs grow.

The APG should also reduce dependency on fossil fuels for geopolitical and environmental reasons, secure financing for energy infrastructure, harmonise regulatory standards between countries, maximise the share of renewable energy in the overall energy mix, enable multilateral energy trade between member nations, and achieve better energy security overall.

Threats to trade, economies and national security can come from undue tariffs, trade wars or disrupted energy supplies. Since energy is a staple for a host of industries, it is always a critical commodity.

With Malaysia's many aspirations including being a major regional data centre hub, energy is a core resource. While it is already doing better than some neighbours like Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines, there is never room for energy complacency.

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