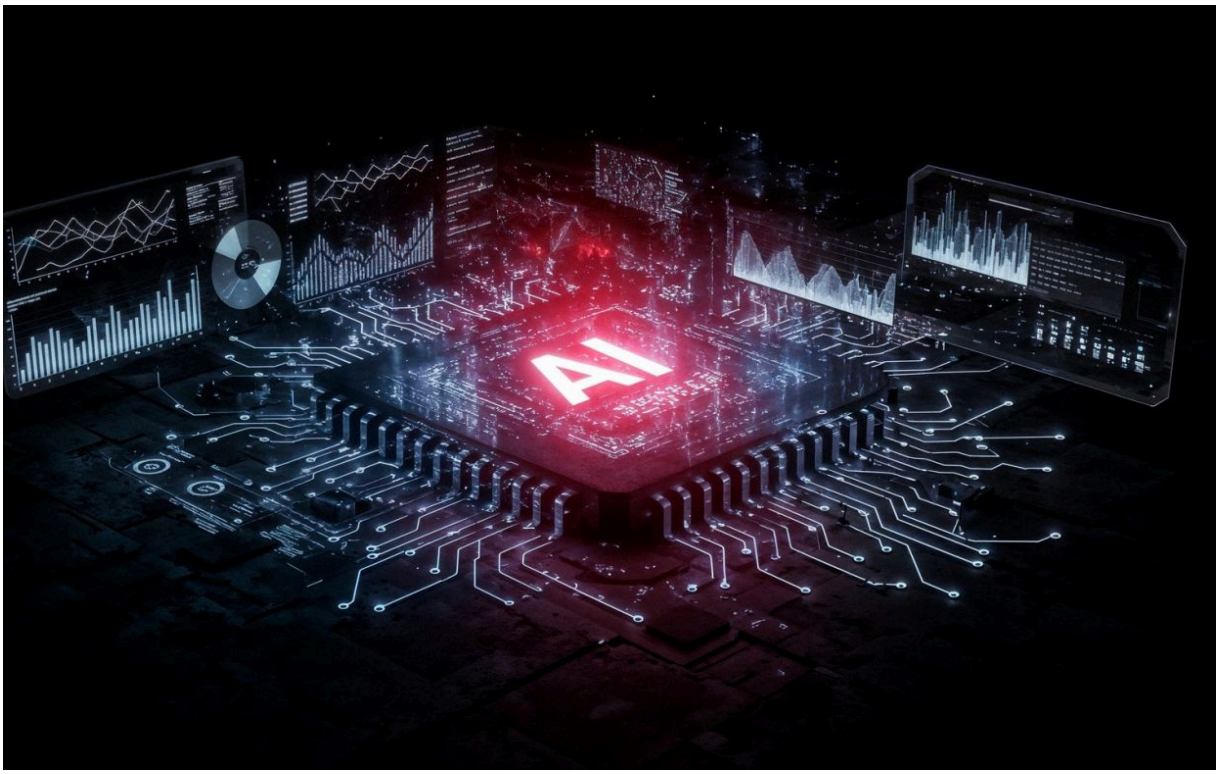
Protecting data key to Malaysia’s AI hub ambitions, say experts

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KUALA LUMPUR: Safeguarding sensitive information disclosed by data centre operators will be key to maintaining investor confidence in Malaysia’s ambitions to become a regional artificial intelligence hub, say experts.

They said that while the disclosure of the graphics processing units (GPUs) used by data centres would not, on its own, enable cyberattacks, the information could help criminals identify high-value facilities and narrow down potential weaknesses.

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Cybersecurity Research Centre of Universiti Sains Malaysia director Prof Dr Selvakumar Manickam said the key question was how effectively Malaysia could protect the information collected from operators.

“The effect can go either way, and it depends largely on how the government handles the information it collects. If the data is handled properly, the signal to investors is positive.

“Clear and predictable rules can reassure global investors and cloud providers that Malaysia is a well-governed jurisdiction,” he said.

However, he said the risk increases when the data is aggregated and such disclosure could tell attackers which sites hold high-value computing resources, which are likely to host AI workloads, that are worth targeting.

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The US government last week issued a rule establishing new restrictions on chip exports to overseas data centres that prevent Chinese companies from accessing advanced AI chips to train their AI models.

It also requires companies in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil to apply for US export licences for the most advanced chips to cut down on them being diverted illegally.

Lawyer Thulasy Suppiah, who specialises in cybersecurity, AI, data centre and emerging technologies, said the disclosure requirement would not necessarily hurt Malaysia’s data centre industry, provided the rules were clear, consistent and did not impose unnecessary burdens on operators.

She said Malaysia’s ambitions to become a regional data centre hub and AI leader would require a balance between regulatory oversight and the needs of industry players.

“The balance is really between having enough oversight to maintain trust and not making it unnecessarily difficult for legitimate operators to do business here.

“They may need to keep better records on where the chips came from, who is using them and whether there are restrictions attached,” she said.

Technology and computational expert Chuah Kee Man said Malaysia’s hopes of becoming a regional AI hub will rest partly on how well it protects operators’ infrastructure and business interests while still keeping proper oversight in place.

He said investors require confidence that they can obtain advanced chips, operate securely and plan their investments under clear rules.

Chuah added that the main worry is whether disclosed information could be leaked and combined with other technical details to help attackers plan their approach.

“The GPU model alone does not give attackers access to a data centre,” he said.

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