

**Address by Ali Ahani,
Iranian Deputy Foreign
Minister for Education
and Research, in the
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the Fourth
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on Asia, Istanbul, May
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**Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It's a pleasure to take part in an event in which the representatives of important continental organizations and entities are attending. I thank Turkey's Asian Center for Strategic Studies (TASAM) for organizing this meeting and for their hospitality. Such an event is expected to help us help find an effective strategy for materializing multilateral cooperation and integration

throughout the ancient continent of Asia.

Asia is the largest continent in terms of geography and the cradle of the most ancient civilizations in terms of history. The continent, due to its striking and sustainable cultural, literary, artistic and scientific resources, has played a decisive role in the history of the world's science, civilization and art.

Despite the diversity of religions, ethnicities, nationalities and languages, Asian civilizations have provided a favorable environment for promoting cultural exchanges, concord and understanding in the continent on the basis of common ideals.

As for economic, trade and industrial fields, the emerging Asian powers,

based on the experience of their Asian models, have taken greater and speedier steps toward enhancing the continent's status in the world. As a result, in addition to their biggest energy resources, Asia has the highest growth rate of investment, services and production, as well as a significant portion of the global GDP and trade.

Consequently, Asia's entry into the geo-economic and geo-political centers of the world would help Asians have a better share in international developments and deals in line with their newfound status. However, one should appreciate the fact that Asia faces challenges and realities, which can only be ignored at the expense of the continent's future. These realities are:

- 1- Absence of a general, multilateral framework for economic, political and security cooperation such as a unified continental system;
- 2- Complex political and security processes in the region resulting from foreign interferences;
- 3- Traditional threats, problems and challenges such as tensions and crises between regional states, as well as non-traditional challenges such as the environment, water shortages, etc; and
- 4- The presence of diverse organizations with disparate structures in Asia

which, despite their positive nature, leads to contradictory decisions, such as ASEAN, ACD, PGCC, ECO, SCO, CICA, SARC and APEC.

Given the above realities, Asia is home to more than half of the world's population. It is a symbol of cultural and language diversity as well as traditional, social, religious and ethical values.

Asia enjoys valuable assets to redefine its cultural, political, social, economic and international identity, and also enter into the age of integration. The Asian identity is shaped by historical and geographical traits, common history, cultural heritage and civilization, as well as economic and political

commonalities. This can form the essence of Asian integration.

To attain Asian integration, it is necessary to pay special attention to the rediscovery of commonalities, ancient links and the traits of Asian identity. Asian countries have inclined toward the West in contemporary times and looked at themselves through the Western mirror. This undermines constructive communication and alienates the Asians. However, we are now witnessing a gradual growth in Asian self-awareness and the redefining of Asian identity.

To reclaim our Asian identity, we must examine the present situation and eliminate factors that hamper integration and exacerbate rivalry, tensions and challenges among Asian

states, some of which are rooted in the interests of trans-continental powers. This way, inspired by our affinities and commonalities, we can prepare the ground for Asian solidarity and ultimately an "Asian Union" in the 21st century.

Convergence is a time-consuming and long process, but it can bring with it lasting achievements and effects as well as new opportunities in all spheres. In this process, the continent will certainly face challenges, difficulties and obstacles.

Some of the most important challenges facing the ancient continent include insecurity, political crises, rivalries among economic powerhouses and Asian political players, as well as the interests, interferences and efforts of trans-regional

powers to influence Asian equations.

All the same, the diversity of cultures, religions, ethnicities and languages, plus various political and historical experiences and economic standings have lent a unique feature to the Asian continent. Therefore, we should not allow these to lead to disintegration; rather we must make efforts to create a cooperative atmosphere to enrich the Asian identity, overcome differences and turn threats into opportunities.

The historical realities of the contemporary world and the experiences of other regions, which have faced longstanding disputes, rivalries, tensions and world wars, also point to the fact that nations and states can to an extent overcome differences in the light of

cooperation, remove factors that result in disintegration and pave the way for integration.

Perhaps, institutionalization is the first and the most important step toward integration in the Asian continent. Political and economic organizations and entities of the region can align their objectives and pursue a unified goal to facilitate integration in the continent. At present, each one of the Asian organizations represents a topical or geographical domain. Therefore, their cooperation and integration could be a precursor to continental integration.

Some of the Asian organizations participating in this meeting symbolize a coalition within the continent but their coalition could facilitate an Asian

coalition and promote development. As a result, the idea of forging understanding, interaction and cooperation is constructive and can lead to continental positions. The establishment of Asian Parliamentary Assembly, for instance, has shown that Asian states have paid attention to the need for forming continental bodies.

Relations between governments are an integral part of the process of Asian integration. Therefore, it is essential for all Asian states to have sustainable dialogue and achieve political, economic and cultural proximity for tackling common challenges and threats in the region and beyond.

Then again, such a process should not be restricted to official domains. Promoting

the spirit of cooperation, strengthening historical commonalities and imbibing the spirit of being an Asian among nations can make the notion of integration more meaningful and widespread, which will effectively institutionalize the notion.

Theorization, dialogue and creating the necessary literature, optimizing diplomatic, cultural and media facilities and capacities in research, scientific, cultural and academic centers, as well as continuation of consultations and cooperation can turn Asian integration into an asset and a geopolitical advantage. This will ultimately create the platform for the establishment of an "Asian Union".

Due to its geostrategic position and political,

cultural and historical status, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been one of the most important powers in Asia. As a pioneer in development and enhancement of cooperation among Asian states, Iran has had an effective presence in regional and trans-regional organizations. It has made cooperation and integration in the ancient continent one of the top priorities and strategic agenda of its foreign policy.

Iran is a member of six Asian organizations, namely Economic Cooperation Organization, ESCAP, Indian Ocean Rim Association of Regional Cooperation, Asian Cooperation and Dialogue (ACD), D8, and Colombo Plan, as well as observer status in Asian Development Bank and

Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In summation, given its historical links to Asia, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported the idea of cooperation among Asian states and Asian integration as a prerequisite for the formation of "Asian Union". To this end, the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to develop and enhance cooperation, broaden relations with Asian states and support the continent's status in the world. As far as the Islamic Republic of Iran is concerned, cooperation and cultural/civilizational integration is a requisite for economic development and integration as well as political stability on the Asian continent.

Thank you for your time and attention.