

H.E. Hossain Toufique IMAM Opening speech

Hon'ble Adviser (Cabinet Minister) to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for Public Administration Affairs

Distinguished Chairman of TASAM, Hon'ble Ministers, HRH Princess Basmah Bint Saud Bin Abdul Aziz, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to attend the 6th International Turkish-Asian Congress in this beautiful historic city of Istanbul. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to this Forum and congratulate you for the excellent arrangement of this event. I am confident that your skilful conduct of the Congress would result in concrete recommendations for formation of eventual Asian Union where all our countries can share their experiences and aspirations in the areas of politics, security, economic cooperation and integration as well as common cultural heritage.

Mr. Chairman,

Today we are talking about Asian Union like European Union. Is it a feasible proposition or a theoretical discussion? Many argue that it is feasible and ought to be achievable. Many would disagree. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that Asia is rising! It is gaining importance in the world not only of economics, but the areas of politics, culture, technology and information as well. On the other hand many Asian countries are facing with challenges of poverty, human rights, rule of law, democracy, ethnic and religious intolerance, human security, diseases and terrorist activities. Despite all of these Asia is emerging!

Asia no doubt is in the centre of historic transformation. If it continuous it's present trajectory, by 2050 its per capita income could rise six fold in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms to reach European levels of today. It would make some 3 billion additional Asians affluent current standard. By nearly doubling its global gross domestic product (GDP) to 52 percent of 2050, Asia would regain the dominant economic position it held some 300 years ago, before the industrial revolution.

We know that for a future *Asian Union*, regional cooperation including economic integration is critical. Regional integration is vital in respect of many reasons:

- a. It will cement the region's hard-won economic gains in the face of vulnerabilities to global shocks;
- b. It could be an important bridge between individual Asian countries and the rest of the world;
- c. It can help those Asian countries that rebalancing economic growth toward "internal" demand to fully open their markets to neighbours in the region;
- d. With development assistance it can help reduce cross-country disparities in income and opportunities;
- e. It can be a stepping stone for poorer countries to move up the value chain and maximize their growth potential;

- f. In technological development, energy security and disaster preparedness, it can help respond better to global challenges and yield significant synergies and positive impacts;
- g. Through managing the regional commons, it can contribute to Asia's long-term stability and peace.

Mr, Chairman,

Asian regional groupings such as ASEAN, OPEC AND SAARC etc. were established with the primary aim of improving regional trade relations with the ultimate goal of creating free trade areas. Today we can see significant developments towards those objectives, particularly in the ASEAN region.

SAARC (South Asian Association for Economic Cooperation), where Bangladesh is a founding member, is also moving forward with many programmes and activities. SAARC has become a vibrant regional body which is manifested by the growing interests of many countries outside the South Asia region to join the SAARC as observes including China, Japan, USA, EU and Turkey! Over 2 and half decades, SAARC is now poised to reap the benefit of improving trade relations and regional connectivity. Leaders of the SAARC embraced the vision of the South Asian economic Union by 2020. Two nuclear rivals have to put aside their rivalry for the sake of economic, cultural and social prosperity of not only their own peoples, but also for the entire South Asia region. Bangladesh is committed to regional connectivity through SAARC Regional Multinational Transport network, as well as with East Asia and beyond through Asian Highway Network. Bangladesh has accessed to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network in 2009.

You all know there have been some attempts towards dialogue among Asian countries through formation of *Asia Cooperation Dialogue* in 2002. Since its inception, the ACD has rapidly developed in two dimensions, namely dialogue and projects. On the dialogue dimension, ACD ministers have been meeting annually at the ACD Ministerial Meetings to discuss ACD developments, issues of regional cooperation and ways to enhance and solidify Asian unity. On the projects dimension, many countries have become prime powers in 20 priority areas of cooperation, such as energy, biotechnology, agriculture, tourism, poverty alleviation, IT development, education and financial cooperation.

In the Far East, China, Japan and Korea have a greater role in shaping an Asian Union as they are heavily engaged with all other Asian countries as well as with the EU and the USA. Cross straits relations between China and Taiwan as well as relations between two Koreas are significant security threats in Asia. Here Western powers, particularly US can play a pivotal role in balancing relations among the East Asian Countries.

Mr. Chairman, The Government of Bangladesh under the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been pursuing a dynamic and forward-looking foreign policy based on the values of Bangladesh's War of Liberation. Bangladesh has been recognised by the international community for her high and sustained contribution towards UN peace-keeping and received many international awards including the South-South Award and the UN-MDG award. The UN adopted a resolution on the "People's empowerment Model"

proposed by Bangladesh Prime Minister, which advocates inclusive empowerment of people for attaining sustainable peace and security. Bangladesh has been playing an effective role in the activities of SAARC, BIMSTEC, Asian Regional Forum (ARF), ACD and D-8 with a view of widening and deepening regional and sub-regional cooperation. Bilateral relations in the international arena have further cemented, particularly with neighbouring countries India, China, and Myanmar as well as with other Asian countries.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to emphasise the need for concerted efforts by all countries towards closer cooperation among Asian countries. Here I would refer to few overriding elements that would shape Asia's long-term destiny as argued by many scholars:

- I. **First**, the ability of Asia's leaders to persevere during the inevitable ups and downs and to focus on the long term;
- II. **Second**, the willingness and ability of Asia to emulate the success of East Asia to adopt a pragmatic rather than ideological approach to policy formulation and to keep a laser-like focus on results;
- III. **Third**, Asia's success in building much greater trust and confidence among its major economies, which is vital for economic cooperation; and,
- IV. **Fourth**, the commitment and the ability of Asian leaders to modernize governance and retool institutions, while enhancing transparency and accountability at all levels.

Many of these elements have long gestation periods that may extend over many decades. Yet, their impact must be felt within the next few decades to allow Asia to continue on its path to prosperity. Asia's leaders must act collectively with new vigour and sense of urgency so that the prospect of the Asian Century can be realized.

Mr. Chairman, Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (TASAM) deserves our accolade for doing a very commendable job in organizing the forum thereby providing a platform for scholars and researchers to come together to deliberate on issues of politics, security, economy and culture of their respective countries for making grounds for an Asian Union-however remote such a Union might now look like. I congratulate them for their effort and also wish them all the success. I am very hopeful that they will continue organizing this kind of forum in the future so that scholars from all over Asia can come together to discuss different aspects of an *Asian Union* in the making.

I thank you all.