

**Remarks by Ambassador Asad M. Khan  
At the International Conference on "The Role of Cultural  
Diplomacy in Economic Development of the Maku Free Trade &  
Industrial Zone"  
(December 17, 2024)**

**Excellencies,  
Distinguished Participants,**

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ  
Good Day,

I thank Mr. Fereydoun Bagheri, Secretary General of the Conference for inviting and giving me the opportunity to speak to this distinguished gathering on the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering economic development.

**Distinguished Guests,**

Iran's largest Free Trade Zone, Maku offers vast potential for regional economic integration. Spanning 400,000 hectares and strategically positioned between Turkey and Azerbaijan, it is an ideal hub for investments in logistics, agriculture, mining and tourism. Enhanced infrastructure, including a planned rail link to Turkey, will further augment Maku's attractiveness to global investors.

**Dear Participants,**

ECO region, comprising 10 countries from South, West and Central Asia and the Caucasus, contributes around 4.3% to global trade. This is underwhelming and, among others, due to the lack of business networking opportunities and insufficient regional integration, which increases trade costs and limits economic collaboration.

We consider that this conference represents a vital opportunity to address these challenges. By linking cultural diplomacy with economic development and connectivity, we can forge stronger incentives for collaboration and create a more conducive environment for trade.

Our region's rich cultural heritage supported by Persian, Indus Valley and the Gandhara civilizations, as well as the bequeathed cultural legacy of the Ottoman and Mughal Empires provide us with shared values, traditions and common histories, offers an attractive incentive to people to travel to our region from across the globe; thus serving as powerful catalysts for trade and business collaboration for our people.

**Excellencies,**

Cultural diplomacy is not only about fostering mutual understanding by rediscovering and renewing centuries old people-to-people links,

but also about creating the enabling environment for facilitating businesses and trade, opening new economic avenues. When we engage in cultural exchanges, we pave the way for deeper cooperation and build people-to-people level connections and trust, so necessary for stronger economic ties. The commonalities in our traditions, languages and values, whether hospitality, shared festivals or cuisine provide a good reason and a strong foundation for successful economic engagement.

Culture also highlights the all important nexus between trade and tourism. By revitalizing ancient trade routes like the Silk Road, a significant economic corridor and celebrated cultural icon for our part of the world, we can revive the connections that once linked the East to the West, and fostered cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Sharing a common past built around trade, connectivity and culture through the rich legacy of the Silk Route, we have a duty and obligation to renew and refresh those centuries-old linkages. This is our best bet to connect our shared history to a future of growth, development and prosperity in the ECO region.

Cultural diplomacy, in this context, becomes the key to fostering business partnerships that can enhance trade, innovation and investment.

The Maku Free Zone stands to benefit from this approach that we have embraced under the ECO banner, with a number of initiatives like, the ECO Trade Agreement, ECO Visa Facilitation Agreement, ECO Border Trade Zones initiative, ECO Investment Protection Agreement, and efforts to set up ECO Clearing Union that seek to facilitate the movement of goods, people and money across the region. Moreover, our efforts in regional transport and trade facilitation, along with improving infrastructure, will help reduce trade costs and unlock new markets for regional products.

**Dear Participants,**

This conference offers a platform not only for cultural exchange but also for creating business networks that can drive economic growth across our region. ECO Secretariat is committed to supporting these efforts and working with stakeholders to create high-value industrial sectors and improve connectivity.

I wish this conference a great success and hope it leads to valuable outcomes for the development of the ECO region and beyond.

Thank you.