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Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and a very good evening.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute for inviting me to deliver the Summary and the Closing Address to the Asean Leadership Forum – "Leadership Challenges in 21st Century Southeast Asia: Regional Integration, Competitiveness & Community Building". The convening of this inaugural Forum is indeed a laudable effort on the part of the organizers to bring together business and government leaders, strategic thinkers and thought leaders to foster interaction, discussion and debate on the economic, political, social and security issues impacting on the region as a whole as well as to deliberate on the way ahead for ASEAN.

2. Let me begin this closing address by putting across this question to you, the esteemed audience – has ASEAN indeed outlived its usefulness, that here lies an organization that no longer exists in the present? It would appear that many from outside of ASEAN have predicted that to be the case – that the so-called "demise" of the organization was inevitable after the departure of the likes of Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Dr. Mahathir, President Suharto and several others from the scene. But this prediction, I believe, has been proven to be wide off the mark. It is true that these great leaders may have left the scene, but the fact remains that ASEAN is still very much alive and is, in fact, gaining strength.

3. I had posed those questions in order to point out that ASEAN, since its establishment in 1967, had not only stood the test of time but had, in reality, expanded and been further strengthened. Many of its leaders have come and gone, but those that fill their place have been equally charismatic and visionary. The noble ideals of ASEAN's founding fathers continue to be the driving force of the organisation and the economic success of the last quarter century demonstrate the strength and conviction of the new leaderships and of the peoples of South East Asia to move forward in the pursuit of development and prosperity.

4. In this connection, it is clear that the foresight of ASEAN's founding fathers has proven to be correct – that the pre-condition for development is peace, harmony and stability among the countries of the region. Lest we forget, almost all nations in South East Asia were experiencing internal strife or territorial dispute with one another back in the 1960s. For as long as the focus of the newly-independent ASEAN governments was on quelling political instability, there cannot be serious efforts made to push for economic development. The birth of ASEAN, therefore, was indeed a landmark decision that has shaped our common destiny.

5. Let it not be mistaken that the world of today is so different from that of a hundred or even fifty years ago. Indeed, the last 25 years or so have seen Asia-Pacific countries, including ASEAN member states, living up to their true potentials. The region led the world in economic growth at rates that were unmatched by countries anywhere else. From the dragons of China and South Korea, down to the tigers of Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia, Asia-Pacific countries pursued development strategies with vigour and single-mindedness that may have worried and intimidated many.

6. Since its establishment, ASEAN has attentively developed and refined various mechanisms and arrangements to encourage trade, investment and industry. Much of ASEAN credibility and attraction to the outside world was built on the economic success of its members and their potential for greater growth. And, as ASEAN and the rest of the world confront various challenges including international terrorism, global economic slowdown, as well as the SARS and bird-flu epidemic, the rapid consolidation of our economic recovery appears to have borne fruits with investors now taking a renewed interest in the region. The emergence of new economic competitors such as the Latin American region and others in Asia, especially China and India, has made it that more critical for ASEAN to have its own vision and strategies as to the way forward.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. We cannot turn back the tide of globalisation. And it would be short-sightedness, indeed reckless, on our part to expect that the process will bring about equality for all nations. The level playing field that developing countries are seeking continues to be as elusive as the case had been from the beginning. But, to remain at the margins while others surge powerfully ahead would be suicidal. There is no doubting that ASEAN has what it takes to become a very important player in the world economic scene. Our countries place a premium on our region's continued development, and we intend to achieve this by making our respective countries competitive and attractive to investors. In this information age, we need to keep pace with the changing technological advancement. Information technology and telecommunications have brought the peoples of the world closer together and the advances enable us to complete our work more quickly and efficiently. This, in turn, will see a rise in our productivity. Investing more on education and human resources development, therefore, is imperative as it will help us prepare for the challenging times ahead. I must admit that the potential benefits are aplenty if ASEAN forges strategic international alliances including enhancing South-South cooperation and at the same time working on a stronger North-South dialogue, both of which are critical

if we are to manouvre our way to the point when we are more ready and capable of competing openly with the developed nations.

8. Clearly, among the challenges for ASEAN in this 21st century would be to address the coming to the fore of a host of non-state actors ranging from non-governmental organizations to multinational corporations, all seeking to further their particular concerns, in the conduct of international affairs.

9. At the same time, we have to recognise that ASEAN's future is inextricably linked to North East Asia or the Plus 3 countries namely China, Korea and Japan. Beijing's admission into the World Trade Organisation underlines further the need to have enhanced cooperation with the Plus 3 countries as we seek to safeguard ASEAN's economic interests. With the emergence of new competitors not only do we have to hasten the region's integration, we must also take necessary measures to retain ASEAN's attractiveness to foreign investors. ASEAN should, therefore, not only expand ASEAN+3 cooperation but to also begin its move towards building an East Asian community with ASEAN at its core as a natural complement to the efforts at building an ASEAN Community.

10. ASEAN Member States, with their rich history and proud culture, must muster the political will necessary to make sure that the newer members stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the older members as we march towards attaining developed country status as envisaged in ASEAN Vision 2020. There has to be the meeting of minds where the small and irrelevant issues are left at the peripheral, with focus firmly placed on the bigger picture and battle in mind. Competition need not be viewed as necessarily bad. Member States have their respective strengths and one should not fear the other making progress. Which is precisely why confidence building measures must be continuously in place for there to be comfort and trust in one another. As neighbours, ASEAN countries must recognize and accept that their future lies very much on the same path and is closely inter-twined with one another.

11. ASEAN, therefore, must reaffirm the fundamental principles which bind its Member States together including the continued preservation of ASEAN unity and cohesion; the reaffirmation of principles of international law and inter state relations as enshrined in the UN Charter; the peaceful resolution of all unresolved problems between Member States as well as the commitment to reduce the development gap between the older and newer members.

12. On that note, the signing of the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II at the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali in October 2003 is clearly a significant and historic event for the peoples of ASEAN. It is my fervent hope and desire to see Member States push ahead towards creating an ASEAN Community by the year 2020 – a community of nations at peace with one another and at peace with the rest of the world, where all people enjoy equitable access to opportunities for total human development. As you are aware, the framework to achieve the ASEAN Community will be through three pillars namely political and security cooperation, economic cooperation and social and cultural cooperation. All the three pillars would be guided by the implementation of the respective Plans of Action that will be in place in the near future.

13. Its almost 37 years of existence has taught ASEAN a lot as to its shortcomings and areas of potential. Despite Member States having to grapple with the traces of colonial legacy, border disputes, territorial claims and the seeking of the balance between the principle of non-interference and the upholding of certain values and practices, one fact remains crystal clear - ASEAN has proven itself to be one of the most successful regional organizations and it would be safe to put that down to the ability of our leaders to be pragmatic and forward-looking. The realisation that complete integration and by making the region attractive to investors as we work towards building a caring community of nations will put us in good stead for the new century. ASEAN now needs to continuously re-assess itself, to position and to align the organisation to meet the challenges that the world at large brings. Only then can there be in place an ASEAN that lives up to its ideals and goals.

Thank you.

Wasalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.