

PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

**TEXT OF ADDRESS OF UNION FINANCE MINISTER, SHRI PRANAB
MUKHERJEE AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
'CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT, PEACE AND SECURITY IN SOUTH
AND CENTRAL ASIA'**

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Following is the text of the address of Union Finance Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the International Conference on 'Co-operative Development, Peace and Security in South and Central Asia' delivered at Chandigarh today :

“I am happy to be here today at this gathering of experts from South and Central Asia, a region of which we are a part and with which historically we have had friendly ties. I offer my welcome to those who have taken the trouble to be here today, in the quest for closer regional friendship and cooperation.

India has entered a new era of economic progress in the last couple of decades. The foundations so carefully laid by the country's first leaders, and the labour of the early years, have now begun to yield results. When we set out as an independent country, we received the priceless gift of democracy that underpins all else, and at the same time we began acquiring the elements of a modern state: education, technology, economic advancement, an open and free society and several institutions. We all know that the race is only half run and much remains to be done. All the visible signs of progress on every side cannot, and do not, blind us to the harsher realities of poverty and its attendant ills. Yet the overwhelming recent story of India is of a great nation finally coming into its own.

In this interconnected world, no nation, least of all ours, lives in isolation from the rest. India has always been outward looking and has maintained an active engagement in global affairs, driven by the internationalist vision of our first Prime Minister, the great Jawaharlal Nehru. That vision has never faltered. Not the State alone but its children have reached out to lands abroad, in friendly and peaceful association, and today the growing communities of persons of Indian origin living in different parts of the world reinforce India's search for closer international ties.

India's geographical position provides the country with unique opportunities and drives many of our aspirations. From time immemorial we have been in close touch with the lands in our vicinity, and have engaged in the commerce of material goods and, even more so, of ideas, that has brought benefit to all those involved. Developing ties with countries and regions with which we have such old associations is the larger

purpose of this meeting organized by CRRID. It is a task of importance, and the Government attaches high value to it.

A successful quest for accelerated development and making collective efforts in that direction requires a peaceful and tranquil environment. Strengthening of peace is the basic focus of India's external policy. India has always been careful to keep clear of alliances that have any military overtones. We seek cooperation, and just as we reject domination by others, we do not seek domination for ourselves. We do not aspire to establish any sort of regional hegemony. Our military perspective is defensive; we seek to reinforce our own security, not threaten that of others. Our neighbourhood is a troubled one, as we all know. A prolonged war has been waged in our neighbour and friend Afghanistan, and this can have damaging fallout in the entire region. We all have strong interest in bringing to an end the troubles there and in the restoration of peace.

The region represented here today is rich in resources. Most prominent among the regional resources are oil and natural gas which have already drawn the attention of the world. There are others, such as precious metals, rare earths, and other natural endowments that are in demand everywhere. There are also ample resources for agricultural growth to help meet the world's expanding need for food and for other produce.

To live and prosper within the narrow bounds of our respective national domains is obviously not a productive option for any of us. India is very much aware that it must look to the region represented here to meet a good part of its needs as a rapidly developing nation. Among the proposals in this context that have already drawn serious attention is the proposed pipeline to bring natural gas from Turkmenistan to India across Afghanistan and Pakistan, something that offers great benefits to all the parties concerned. Similarly, there is also the possibility of bringing hydro-electric electric power from Central Asia to consumers in South Asia. There could be mutually beneficial engagement in the field of agriculture as well. Such farsighted schemes are now well within our reach. It is within the purpose of this meeting to think creatively and to think big, for that is where the challenge lies.

Today, we see a growing demand among our neighbours for access to Indian medical and educational services. Our progress in these fields is one of the success stories of modern India.

The Government of India has earmarked substantial funds to promote technical cooperation with partners abroad. A fund for Central Asia has been established which should do much to promote economic interchange between the two sides. Our own neighbourhood has been identified as a priority area for technical cooperation. There are however some constraints that inhibit the progress that we all desire. Political inhibitions that remain need to be overcome. There is the matter of connectivity in the region. Not so long ago, there was relatively free and unrestrained movement across the length and breadth of the region. People and goods moved from one end to the other, most evocatively in the traffic associated with the famous Silk Road. But that is no longer the case and there has been a progressive closing down of land routes from and across India. The reasons for and the costs to the countries in the region, of the failure

to address this issue, merits study. I hope this conference will go into this issue and provide encouragement to further liberalization within the region.

India has taken some steps in recent times through the newly developed concord with Bangladesh on connectivity issues. Bold and imaginative statesmanship by both countries has overcome their previous reserve and opened several fresh possibilities of physical access to each other's territory in a manner calculated to bring considerable benefit to both. I would also like to refer to the important decision by Pakistan to trade with India on MFN basis. This is a welcome development and it can be hoped that it will lead before long to the opening of the land access from India to Afghanistan and Central Asia that has been blocked for so many decades. Economic logic has brought about decisions that had for long been held hostage to political considerations. We must try to ensure that becomes the path of the future.

India's 'Look East' policy has driven this country, for twenty years now, to look creatively towards the great expanse of Asia lying to its east. Improved connectivity as it is now taking shape will give an important boost to this dimension of India's foreign policy. China has taken huge strides to establish road, rail, and river communications with South-East Asia. This is something worth studying and perhaps, for India, worth emulating.

Before concluding, I should like to say a few words about the development of maritime routes and the opening up of access across the seas. This process is currently somewhat shadowed by security considerations, notably that of piracy. Collective action to keep the sea lanes open and accessible to all is being taken internationally and all the countries along the Indian Ocean littoral are making their contribution. For commerce to thrive there has to be security of sea transit, so this subject should not be too far removed from the principal concerns of this meeting.

India will play its full part in strengthening ties within its neighbourhood and its region. The watchword for gatherings like the present one is to look to transcend barriers, surmount long standing difficulties, and develop a new vision for the future. We need bold thinking. We need a clear view of what the region must undertake to achieve its true potential. Gatherings of experts like this one can do much to develop initiatives and chart the way ahead.

I wish CRRID all success and I look forward to receiving from the organizers their report on the deliberations of the conference.”

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