

Opening Statement

by



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at

Asian Relations Conference (ARC-V)

on

**“Transitions and Interdependence: India and its
Neighbours”**

at

New Delhi

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Shri Kanwal Sibal, former foreign secretary, Shri Sheel Kant Sharma, former secretary general of SAARC, Prof. S.D.Muni, the doyen among South Asia scholars, Dr. Suba Chandran, Director, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Excellences, distinguished guests from abroad and India, young scholars, ladies and gentlemen,

2. I extend a warm welcome to all of you, especially to our guests who have come from six neighbouring countries. I do so on behalf of the two host institutions – the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS). This is the fifth edition of Asian Relations Conference series. We welcome IPCS as our new partner.

3. Jawaharlal Nehru described the first Asian Relations Conference of March 1947 as “an expression of that deeper urge to the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted inspite of isolationism which grew up during the years of European domination.” We celebrate that spirit of Asia through this continuing series which was launched in 2009. I am confident that the present conference will contribute towards consolidation and deepening of the sense of solidarity in our neighbourhood.

4. We have chosen the theme of the present conference after deep introspection. The concept of “transition” is a favourite intellectual tool for scholars. It enables them to analyse, interpret and extrapolate the continuum comprising the past, present and future. Nevertheless, the choice of term “transitions” in the context of India and its neighbourhood is apt. We all are aware that international politics is in a flux, that a monumental power shift from “the West to the Rest” is in the process of unfolding today. In this context, the transitions in South Asia at present are particularly noteworthy, deserving of collective reflection.

5. The year 2014 has rightly been described as ‘The Year of the Voter’ in South Asia. Between mid-2013 and mid-2014, most countries of the region namely Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and India would have completed their national elections. Afghanistan would not only go through elections but also cope with a new reality, the drawdown or withdrawal of international troops after over a decade. Sri Lanka held important provincial election in September 2013 and would start preparing for national elections in 2015. Myanmar,

traversing on the reform path, too will face national elections in 2015. As an academic put it aptly: “.....in 2014, very little in South Asia can be taken for granted.”

6. Domestic political changes are important *per se*. What is or will be their impact on the concerned country's external relations, and, therefore, on the region's peace, security, stability, cooperation and integration are the issues of immense interest of scholars. What this conference aims to do is to adopt a holistic approach transcending the foreign policy domain, and examine the larger social, economic, political and governance environment in order to determine where South Asia is heading. To seek a satisfactory answer to this vital question, it is inevitable that our deliberations will also encompass the recent dynamics characterizing the great power relations in the region and beyond.

7. You would agree that our timing could not have been better. This conference coincides with the meeting of SAARC Foreign Ministers, which is being held currently in Maldives after a gap of about two and a half years. It is expected that the next SAARC Summit will be held later in 2014. There is some disappointment about SAARC, but it is accompanied by a rising realization about the powerful imperatives for the renewal and consolidation of the SAARC project.

8. It is unnecessary for me to go further in order to articulate the philosophy of our conference today. We have brought for you a special trio – a leading scholar, a former secretary general of SAARC and a most cerebral, former foreign secretary, who will address you on different aspects of the conference theme.

9. I wish all success to the conference and I thank you all for your attention.
