

**Valedictory Address**

**by**

**Hon'ble Shri E. Ahamed**

Minister of State for External Affairs, India

**at**

**Asian Relations Conference**

**“Transforming South Asia: Imperatives for Action”**

**at**

**Sapru House, New Delhi**

**March 10, 2012**

Honorable Deputy Speaker of Afghan Parliament  
Honorable Former Ministers of Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan  
Parliamentarians, Distinguished guests,  
Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs Shri Sudhir Devare  
Prof Swaran Singh, President, AAS  
and dear friends

It is indeed an honour for me to be here among this august gathering and to be part of this important initiative of the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Association of Asia Scholars. I must first congratulate the ICWA for reviving the process which was initiated way back in March 1947 in form of the first Asian Relations Conference organized under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who then headed a provisional government that was preparing for India's independence. The Asian Relations Conference of 1947 brought together many leaders of the independence movements in Asia and represented a first attempt to forge an Asian unity and also to address the problems of common concern to the people of the region, to focus attention on social, economic and cultural problems of the different countries of Asia, and to foster mutual contact and understanding. All these issues remain extremely relevant even today and in this context this new series of the Asian Relations Conference by the ICWA is really a commendable effort.

2. Over the past two days this august gathering of the parliamentarians, thinkers and leaders from the Asian Countries have mulled over a wide range of issues like commonalities and convergences, issues of economic integrations and social and cultural exchanges. I am sure the Conference will succeed in evolving a blue print of action to achieve these goals as it is important that the efforts of the governments go hand in hand with the efforts of the groups such as this.

3. India's approach towards its neighbours is predicated upon the need to develop mutually beneficial relationships to ensure a peaceful, secure and stable neighbourhood. India's growth has a beneficial impact on the region, and we are trying to build closer connectivity in physical and communication infrastructure to facilitate trade and communication links and enhance people-to-people interaction with the countries of the region. We are at a historic moment where expectations of the peoples of South Asia have risen to a new high and leveraging our capacity to reach the level of the expectations of the peoples of South Asia is an imperative and a challenge in front of all of us. We are convinced that vibrant regional cooperation is good for each one of our countries.

4. In the context of regional cooperation and engagement SAARC remains the driving force as it seeks to address the needs for regional economic cooperation, trade, infrastructure development, social development and in the further development of a South Asian identity. It is therefore India is consciously pursuing its transformational

role in changing SAARC into a more effective organization and has chosen the path of asymmetrical contributions to propel SAARC beyond its declaratory phase of the past to a phase of decisive and result oriented future.

5. During the recently concluded 17<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit held in Addu City, Maldives from 9-11 November 2011 important Agreements were signed including one each to establish rapid response mechanism for natural disasters in the region and to create a SAARC Seed Bank. During the Summit, India announced several measures to help build regional cooperation, most significant of which was the virtual elimination of India's Sensitive List for items exported to India by the five States considered to be Least Developed Countries (LDCs) within SAARC, namely Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives. In doing so, we have reduced our Sensitive List from 480 tariff lines to 25 tariff lines, for SAARC LDCs. Zero Basic Customs Duty access has been given to all items removed. These measures will certainly boost the cause of the SAFTA where significant progress has been made in past three years. Even though intra-SAARC trade has crossed US \$ 1.1 billion in 2010, a considerable jump from the previous three years, it still remains well-below potential as compared with other blocs such as ASEAN and EU. However we remain committed to take whatever initiative necessary to realise the full potential. We hope that our desire and commitment is shared by our friends in SAARC.

6. India has also undertaken several other regional projects in the fields of tele-medicine, tele-education, solar rural electrification, rainwater harvesting, seed testing laboratories and shuttle breeding of pulses using a hub-and-spokes approach. The projects are in various stages of implementation in different SAARC member countries. India will continue to take the lead in pushing for greater integration of our economies to achieve the objective of a South Asian Economic Union.

7. On the non-economic side, South Asian University and the South Asia Forum are two other important mechanisms which seek to further our goals of integration and people to people contact.

8. The South Asian University, which was established on the basis of an Inter-Governmental Agreement concluded in 2007, is gaining momentum. The first academic session of the South Asian University commenced in August 2010. The University is currently offering six courses to about 200 students. India offered 50 "SAARC Silver-Jubilee Scholarships" for meritorious students from SAARC LDC countries for the South Asian University. During the 17<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, India announced 100 more scholarships for the University. India also announced scholarships at Forest Research Institute, Dehradun and suggested initiatives to enhance connectivity in the region including conclusion of a Regional Air Service Agreement, Conclave of Tour Operators to boost tourism exchanges and enhance people to people ties, such as a travelling exhibition on the ancient history of the Indian people and by developing a regional

telecommunications infrastructure to improve the quality of connectivity among SAARC countries.

9. 'South Asia Forum' was established at the 16<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, for the generation of debate, discussion and the exchange of ideas on South Asia and its future development. The first meeting of the Forum was held in New Delhi on 7-9 September 2011. We are hopeful that this mechanism will bring in new ideas and new initiatives to forge a better understanding between our societies.

10. In the end, I would like to say that the Government of India will do whatever is within its capabilities to enhance cooperation in South Asia to deliver on its vision of common peace, shared prosperity and cooperation. However, there is a need for the private sector and other stakeholders to show greater involvement to contribute in diverse ways. The stencil of engagement should comprise more and more of the interactive agenda so that gains are visualized and felt across the board and in immediate term.

Thank You