

International Conference: *India-Eurasia Endeavour:*

Rediscoveries and Reformulations

Remarks by MOS(PK)

29 September 2011, IIC, New Delhi

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Ladies & Gentlemen,

1. Let me begin by congratulating the Global India Foundation and its partners, the Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies and the India-Central Asia Foundation for this initiative of focussing on the very critical region of Eurasia. It is heartening that you will be providing a platform to academics, scholars and policy makers to discuss India's relations with Eurasia with a constructive and futuristic perspective.
2. However, I am inclined to question one premise of the theme of the Conference. Our strategy in the Eurasian region goes much

beyond being a mere “endeavour”. We have today in place a conscious, deliberate and longstanding policy of forging strong partnerships with each of the nations in this region. We do not look at our engagement here as a ‘game’ or adventure but as an important pillar of our foreign policy matrix. Nevertheless there is always room to fine-tune this policy and we in the government are keen to listen and learn from the experts. We do feel that the policy on the extent and nature of our engagement with Eurasia can benefit from a rigorous debate and discussion, but there are no grey areas when we look at the direction of our future interactions – to deepen and strengthen our engagement in this extended neighbourhood.

3. The geo-political importance of this region is indeed immense. Historically, the Eurasian heartland has been considered a central strategic area of our planet, much of the dramatic events of history have in fact unravelled in this political and economic space. For the purposes of this conference, our focus is of course on the former Soviet space. For decades, India had deep political, economic and emotional ties with the Soviet Union, which were symbolised by the 1971 Treaty of Peace and

Friendship, of which we recently celebrated the 40th anniversary.

4. Our deep engagement with the USSR, after its dissolution in 1991, translated into a solid, abiding and multifarious strategic partnership with Russia, which has been elevated since December 2010, to a special and privileged status. We have developed over the years strong political relationships with all the other states which arose in the former Soviet space. Eurasian countries have valued India's emergence in the global stage even as their own trajectories of growth moved upward and our relationships have benefited from mutually advantageous cooperation.
5. With the independence of these countries in 1991, India was one of the first neighbours to open Embassies in most Eurasian countries, host their leaders and initiate a robust program of political contacts, development partnership and capacity building.
6. Russia has been our time-tested and durable strategic partner. Our deep ties in the field of defence are well-known. The nature

of our relationship has changed from one of buyer-seller to that of joint production and design. Russia is also a reliable partner for our nuclear programme. We are aware of ONGC Videsh's foray into Sakhalin-1 way back in 2001. Since then, we have made substantial progress in deeper partnership in their hydrocarbon market. In the field of S&T, both sides have achieved considerable progress in scientific projects especially in the advanced fields of nano-technology and bio-technology. These are just a few examples of our multifarious interactions with Russia. Our ties with Russia were and remain a central element of our Eurasian policy.

7. We have also developed strong political and commercially growing relationships with Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Caucasian and Baltic countries.

8. Let me dwell a little more on our relationship with Central Asia. We have strong civilisational and historical links with this extended neighbourhood, which have translated now into abiding political and economic ties.

9. Recent times have seen a strong thrust in our relations with Central Asia. The State Visit of President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan to India in January 2009 as the Chief Guest in the Republic Day celebrations elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership and demonstrated the significance we attach to the Central Asian region. Our President's visit to Tajikistan in the same year, our Prime Minister's visit to Kazakhstan in April 2011 and the Uzbek President's visit in May 2011, again underlined our deep bonds with the region.

10. Another crucial factor since 2001 has been the turmoil in Afghanistan, which has caused us all concern. We are all stakeholders in the stability of Afghanistan, which in many ways, is a strategic geopolitical bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. India has a keen interest in the development and stability of the region. We are in fact as keen as the Central Asian leaders that fundamentalism and religious extremism do not find ground here. We are also concerned about use of the region for transit by narco-traffickers. The Joint Working Group mechanism on counter-terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan provides us opportunities to meet on a regular

basis and to share information, concerns and perceptions on this important subject.

11. We are pleased that the geo-strategic and economic salience of the region has grown with the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves. This has happily translated into significant prosperity for several countries in the region. India no doubt wishes to be a long term energy partner of Eurasia. The Central Asian Region by virtue of its geographical location and vast natural resources, including energy reserves in the Caspian Basin is of special interest to India as one of the largest global consumers of energy. The Indian PSUs – ONGC, OVL and GAIL – are in discussion with state-controlled Gas & Oil Agencies in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan for upstream, mid-stream and down-stream activities in the petroleum and natural gas sector. We have recently acquired an equity stake in the Satpaev Exploration Block in Kazakhstan. India has also joined the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project, which would be the first major energy link between Central and South Asia.

12. Notwithstanding several advantages we have with the Central Asian region like our ancient cultural, commercial and political links, the absence of animosity and the historical goodwill, our current economic relationship is below its actual potential. Of course, the single biggest obstacle to closer contacts with Central Asia remains the absence of direct surface transport routes. We are working on routes through Iran and hope to develop a cost-effective multi-modal route through the Iranian ports.

13. We believe that to create a long-term and meaningful economic partnership with the region, we must go beyond the energy relationship, by diversifying our common economic interests and widening the scope of cooperation to other areas. Enormous cooperation possibilities also exist in areas which require minimal land or sea connectivity and movement of heavy equipment; such as IT, pharmaceuticals and management contracts. Due to the fundamental transportation constraints, trade volumes cannot be expected to rise dramatically. Our focus therefore is on technology, investments and training.

14. India contributes to capacity building and human resources development of the region in a small way, with a number of popular short term courses. We also have a successful development partnership programme for the region. Government funded IT Centres are functional in Tashkent, Bishkek and Dushanbe and similar projects are coming up in Ashgabat and in Astana.

15. Many of the countries in the Eurasian region are currently celebrating the 20th anniversary of their independence. India's own experiences as a developing country and as the world's largest democracy have been sought by many of these countries. These areas of interest range from training of personnel to running of democratic institutions, IT and e-governance projects.

16. The Eurasian economy holds tremendous scope and potential. Unfortunately, our levels of engagement in this area are less than optimal. At the Governmental level, we have regular bilateral mechanisms where issues and new opportunities are deliberated and explored. The Governments are committed to creating a facilitating environment for our

private sector to forge commercial links while assuming reasonable commercial risks. We are confident that our entrepreneurs and businesses will rise to the challenge.

17. Our age-old cultural and historical links have helped make that special connection with the peoples of the region. The Indian cultural centres in Astana, Dushanbe and Tashkent have seen increased interest from the local population. The Jawaharlal Nehru Cultural Centre in Moscow has been functioning for well over 50 years. The Festival of India in Russia, which concluded recently, received rave reviews in the local media there. Indian performing arts, films, literature, Indian studies and yoga are of special interest. In the years to come, India's culture shall be an asset on our side when deepening our links with the people of the region.

18. Much of the Eurasian region lies in our extended neighbourhood. We look forward to bolstering our traditional links and responding to the many challenges of the future. The deliberations of this conference should give us much food for thought.

19. I thank you for this opportunity to share these ideas with you.