

Your Excellency President Ashraf Ghani,

Excellencies,

Distinguished dignitaries from participating and supporting countries and regional and international organizations of Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you to this Conference and wish you an enjoyable stay in Islamabad.

It is indeed an occasion of great pride for Pakistan to co-host with Afghanistan, the fifth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process.

It is an honour for me personally to especially welcome brother Ashraf Ghani, President of Afghanistan, who graciously agreed to visit Islamabad and jointly inaugurate this Conference with me.

Ladies and gentlemen,

More than a century ago, the Poet of the East and Pakistan's national poet, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, described Afghanistan as the Heart of Asia and a pivot for peace, stability and prosperity for the entire region. He said:

"Asia is a body of water and flowers.

Afghanistan is its heart.

If there is instability in Afghanistan, Asia is unstable.

If there is peace in Afghanistan, Asia is peaceful."

In keeping with this vision, Pakistan attaches great importance to the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process as a forum for sustainable peace, progress and development in Afghanistan, our region and beyond.

Excellencies,

Since its inception in 2011, the process is emerging as an important and credible initiative offering immense opportunities for participating and supporting countries in pursuit of our shared objectives.

After the political and security transitions of 2014, we have to intensify efforts to move forward from a conceptual domain to tangible landmarks for the implementation of concrete ideas and projects envisioned in the Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process Declarations.

The theme of today's Conference "Enhanced Cooperation for Countering Security Threats and Promoting Connectivity in the Heart of Asia Region" aptly reflects our desire for promoting regional development, increasing economic and trade linkages, improving quality of life for our peoples and meeting security challenges to achieve these objectives. I am confident that your deliberations and the proposed Islamabad Declaration, will appropriately encompass all these areas.

In my view, the Heart of Asia initiative should not be seen in isolation. This initiative can be linked to several other regional infrastructure and connectivity projects flowing along and across Afghanistan.

Processes like RECCA, based on the concept of building east-west and north-south linkages add to the dimensions of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. Regional projects like CASA-1000, TAPI, Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are a few other mega projects with a promise of changing the economic landscape of the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Working for the achievement of a peaceful neighbourhood is a cardinal principle of Pakistan's foreign policy. We firmly believe that peace is vital for development and development is vital for durable peace. Adhering to these principles, Pakistan remains committed to strengthening its relations with all its neighbours and regional countries, as well as promoting regional cooperation and connectivity.

For us, Afghanistan is more than a neighbour. Our cordial ties are rooted in shared history, common religion, cultural and linguistic affinities and people-to-people relations since times immemorial. Due to these close bonds between our peoples, Pakistan has always stood by Afghanistan.

During the past half a century, external interventions have seriously eroded peace, stability and socio-political cohesion of the Afghan society. It is important that efforts for durable peace and stability should hinge upon respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inherent values of Afghan society.

Excellencies,

Pakistan has always emphasized a holistic approach for bringing lasting peace to Afghanistan. It is our firm belief that a robust and meaningful reconciliation process owned and led by Afghans, is vital for long term peace and stability in Afghanistan.

I would like to reiterate Pakistan's commitment and desire to facilitate the resumption of the stalled reconciliation process. In this regard, Pakistan is ready to extend support to a meaningful process, wherein both the Afghan Government and the Taliban can move forward, in a spirit of accommodation and reconciliation.

We deeply appreciate the support of our friends for the Afghan reconciliation process. We believe that the association of China and the US in the reconciliation process has been instrumental in moving the process forward. Pakistan looks forward to continued engagement in achieving positive results in the reconciliation process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my conviction that without peace and security, countries of our region cannot achieve the desired socio-economic development. The scourge of terrorism that has been plaguing our region for many years requires a firm and coordinated response on the part of all of us.

The Government and the people of Pakistan have demonstrated an unflinching resolve to uproot the menace of terrorism and violent extremism from our soil. The consensus-based military operation "Zarb-e-Azb" and the National Action Plan have been remarkably successful in our campaign against terrorism and extremism. These are delivering desired results.

We are convinced that terrorism and extremism is the common enemy of Pakistan and Afghanistan. We need a collective approach to combat this menace. In our view, finalization of border management SOPs at an early date, will be helpful in containing movement of terrorists across the border.

We believe our efforts for long term stability in Afghanistan should envisage the return and resettlement of Afghan refugees to their homeland, in a dignified manner. Massive cross-border movement of refugees constitutes a security risk and is exploited by the miscreants for their nefarious designs.

Moreover, the emergence of newer and more threatening terrorist groups like Daesh should strengthen our resolve against terrorism. We should envisage collective and coordinated measures on the regional security front, to ensure that the gains in the struggle against terrorism are durable and irreversible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am confident that the Foreign Ministers and the Heads of delegations of the participating and supporting countries will have constructive deliberation to confront the challenges and harness the potential of a well-integrated region.

I am confident that the Islamabad Declaration to be adopted by this Conference will identify a way forward to the participants of the Heart of Asia Process for strengthening regional connectivity, in pursuit of a better future for our peoples.

I wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you.