

**INAUGURAL ADDRESS AT THE 7<sup>TH</sup> SOUTH ASIA  
CONFERENCE**

**“INDIA & SOUTH ASIA: EXPLORING REGIONAL  
PERCEPTIONS”**

**(October 30-31, 2013)**

**Director General IDSA, Shri Arvind Gupta,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Scholars of IDSA,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

At the outset, I extend a warm welcome to all the delegates and participants representing their nation for the 7<sup>th</sup> South Asia Conference. IDSA's efforts to bring together delegates from different countries in the South Asian region are commendable. The Conference is an occasion to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern at Track II level. Such initiatives have immense potential to generate ideas and concepts that can create a momentum for regional peace and cooperation.

Despite sharing commonalities of history, geography and culture, the South Asian region has lagged in generating impulses for regional cooperation. In fact, it is one of the least integrated regions of the world. Its share in the world economy is quite small. This often leads to misunderstandings.

The share of the South Asian region in global trade is only 1.7 per cent. Intra-regional trade accounts for mere 6 per cent of the total trade for the countries of the region. In comparison, intra-regional trade in the case of NAFTA, EU and ASEAN stands at 62, 58 and 26 per cent respectively. Therefore, it becomes evident that a lot of effort is required to enable regional integration in true sense of the term.

In this context, the theme of this year's conference, "India & South Asia: Exploring Regional Perceptions" is quite meaningful and relevant. As the largest country in the region, India has an important role to play in making regional cooperation possible. It accounts for 80 per cent of the regional GDP and 70 per cent of South Asia's population. The nation's economy has been growing steadily in recent years. India has made conscious efforts to strengthen its relationship with its neighbours. Its bilateral relations with some of the neighbouring countries have also made significant progress.

However, the cumulative effect of all this on regional cooperation is yet to be felt. This requires a careful analysis. The Conference must make an effort to study and analyse regional perceptions about India and its role in South Asia.

In international relations, perceptions often prove to be as important as reality. In regions plagued by conflict and underdevelopment, mistrust has an impact on the behaviour amongst states. In such a scenario, perceptions often get divorced from the reality. Perceptions of countries about each other in the region are not too favourable for regional cooperation. South Asia has been in a state of turmoil for long. Fears, be they real or perceived, can at times, shape policies of State.

India enjoys a unique position in South Asia. As the largest country with a stable democratic system and vast resources, it is often called upon to play a stabilising role in the region. However, India's natural predominance is viewed with concern by some states. Such concerns about Indian intentions are far from real and often misplaced.

Over the years, India has assumed a responsibility to improve its relationship with neighbours. This policy has paid off at bilateral level. India's relationship with some countries has undergone a dramatic transformation. However, its relationship with some other countries continues to be problematic. Nevertheless, India has always remained committed to further and maintain peace and friendly relations with all its neighbours.

India has always tried its best to reach out to all its neighbours and engage them through political, economic, defence and developmental cooperation. India has forged several development-based partnerships across the globe in recent years. Most of India's developmental assistance, which is to the tune of \$1 billion per year, is focused on its immediate neighbourhood. India's efforts in the reconstruction of Afghanistan are well known. It is the fifth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan.

India has also been playing a major role in strengthening regional infrastructure and in supporting efforts aimed at human resource development. India has unilaterally relaxed its visa policies to enable the people of the region to avail of its improved healthcare systems. It offers thousands of scholarships to students from neighbouring countries to receive education in its premier educational institutes.

India continues with its efforts to strive to achieve better economic relationship with all the countries. We expect that an improvement in India's bilateral relationships with the countries of the region will have a beneficial impact on the process of regional integration.

Against this backdrop, perceptions of neighbours about India and the region become quite important. We hope that the perception about India will change gradually, as we make earnest efforts to build trust and mutual confidence. India has to factor in expectations of people from different States, while framing its policy towards the region. In fact, not only India, but all the States of the region will have to deal with mutual perceptions, while conducting their foreign policies towards each other. The issue that we need to focus on is how to make perceptions favourable to bring about a positive change in the region. In this context, think tanks, civil societies, intelligentsia and media have a crucial and a responsible role to play.

As a first step, we should draw inspiration from the common strands of history and culture. At the same time, we must respect cultural differences and emphasise on inter-cultural learning. The soft power that each country has, should be harnessed to bring people together. The entire region has many heritage sites that connect various nations through history. These states are endowed with immense cultural capital. We have to use this capital to build bridges with one another. Recently, India and Bangladesh held joint celebrations of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. It reminded the two countries of their common literary traditions. Such efforts should be strengthened and carried forward.

States should evolve policies that will strengthen people-to-people contacts. They should encourage students to travel across borders, and enable contacts among academics, scientists, journalists, sportsmen, businessmen, poets and writers. Public diplomacy has a major role to play in this regard. Institutions like IDSA must strengthen the linkages with their counterparts in the region and develop collaborative research. Only then can nations think of changing negative perceptions about each other.

Your inputs during the conference will be immensely useful. The basic purpose of this conference should be to cull out the views of the scholars and acquaint ourselves with their concerns, hopes and expectations.

I am sure that the deliberations at the conference will throw up useful and practical ideas for action. These could be strung together as policy inputs for governments in the region. This will go a long way in connecting the various tracks of dialogue. Hopefully, they will be of great value for policymakers in various countries of the region.

I wish all the participants at the Conference and the deliberations all success.

Thank You. Jai Hind!

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