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India and West Asian Security

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Government of India

Shri. Arvind Gupta, Director IDSA,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to speak at the annual Asian Security Conference organized by the IDSA. The Conference, like the IDSA, has developed a formidable reputation for excellence in terms of content and participation. You have also chosen a very topical theme.

There is today no region which impinges on India's security with as much immediacy as West Asia. This is not surprising or new. For centuries our extended neighbourhood in West Asia has been a part of our lives in India, beginning with the four thousand year old trading relationships evidenced by sailing ships on Indus Valley seals found in archaeological sites in Iraq. These are truly historical, cultural, linguistic, religious and civilizational links.

The strong Indian interest in West Asia continues to this day. You know the facts. Over 6.5 million Indians live in the region, the largest concentration of the Indian diaspora abroad. In several countries they constitute the largest expatriate group. The diaspora in West Asia remit home over US\$ 35 billion every year. India's trade and economic ties with the region of about US\$ 160 billion are growing, as is our dependence for energy. About 60% of our oil and gas is imported from the region. It is also a factor in our food security as a major source of phosphate and other fertilizers. Major maritime lines of communication carrying our westward trade and our energy supplies pass through the region. We share common cause with the people of the region in fighting extremism and terrorism.

In sum, India's interest lies in a peaceful and balanced strategic environment in West Asia which is such an important part of our extended periphery. (Notice that I do not say stability. This is even though it has become a mantra in Delhi that stability in the region is vital to India's national interest. I am not sure that obstructing or preventing change is practical or sensible policy, though helping or nudging change in the right direction might be. But that is something for you to discuss.)

India's contribution

It is in the quest for regional peace and security that India has sought to contribute to West Asian security within the limits of her capacities.

We have done so politically, encouraging the solution of the region's conflicts and differences through dialogue and by peaceful means. On the Arab-Israeli conflict our support for peace in the Middle East has been principled and consistent. India was the first non-Arab country to recognize the state of Palestine.

We have opposed the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems in the region. For instance, we have recognized Iran's right to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy while urging that the international community be convinced that she is fulfilling her international commitments, and arguing that the only effective way to do so is through dialogue and by using the IAEA's expertise.

We have contributed to anti-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa and developed maritime cooperation with the countries of the Gulf to protect the sea-lanes that are vital to our trade and energy flows.

We have worked to promote defence cooperation with the countries of the region, bilaterally and through cooperation among the Indian Ocean rim countries. Our first defence cooperation agreement with a Gulf country was signed with Qatar during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 2008 visit.

We have built effective partnerships within the region to combat terrorism and extremism, working with our partners against terrorist groups which are increasingly interlinked across South and West Asia.

We have sought to build energy security through long term arrangements and mutual investments, both upstream and downstream, in the energy industry of the region and India, building the mutual inter-linkages that assure both producers and consumers of stability.

While the list is long, it is our hope that it could and should grow in time, in accordance with our mutual interests, as our countries develop their capabilities.

The situation today

The immediate question, however, is how recent dramatic developments and changes in West Asia will impact on our security and on what we have been trying to achieve with the countries of the region.

It seems to me that the turbulence in the region poses short term challenges but also opens up longer term opportunities in terms of our security.

The challenges are well known. They include the space that domestic changes in several countries have opened up for extremist groups to pursue their agendas. They include the possible regional instability and the sectarian divide that seems to be opening up. They include the disruptions and dislocations that accompany processes of fundamental change in the way these societies and nations are run.

The opportunities are less easily evident. But in the long run, what we are seeing could result in the people of West Asia taking control of their own destinies and choosing their futures and leaders. We in India have strongly supported the democratic aspirations of the people, but have not supported externally enforced change. We have called for restraint in the use of coercive measures against the people. But we are clear that societies cannot be reordered from the outside through military force. As recent experience shows, external interventions have uncertain and unstable outcomes. We only have to look at the instability radiating out of Libya into the Sahel region and the prolonged conflict in Syria, with spill over effects in Mali and the wider region.

Beyond specific situations in individual countries, we are witnessing deeper and longer term changes with profound security implications. The changes in the world energy scenario, for instance, and its geopolitical effects in terms of great power interests in the region. What political and security effects will the West's diminished dependence on Middle East oil have? Demographics, communications, the political role of religion, and cultural factors are all changing rapidly and in ways that affect the politics of West Asia very deeply. But these factors have yet to work themselves out and their implications are still far from clear.

For practitioners, the issue is how to navigate the short term with its challenges to arrive at a more positive long term future. Frankly speaking, we had all got comfortable dealing with West Asia in ways set by habit. That is no longer possible. I do hope that your deliberations will map the uncharted territory that we have entered. We are in a time when scholarship and increased engagement with the region is needed more than ever before. Your discussions could help us to see where we are and what we should do.

I wish you success in your deliberations.

Note: Special Address at the 15th Asian Security Conference on *Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications*, 13 February 2013.

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