

Remarks

by



Ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia

Director General, ICWA

at

Inaugural Session of Conference

on

**‘Political Transition in India's Neighbourhood:
Afghanistan and Myanmar’**

organized by

Zakir Husain Delhi College

Delhi

11 April, 2014

It is a privilege to chair the inaugural session of the conference on ‘**Political Transition in India's Neighbourhood: Afghanistan and Myanmar.**’ I bring to you all warm greetings from the Indian Council of World Affairs.

This dialogue involving some of the best known experts as well as young scholars , promises to be a stimulating event, a timely, collective endeavour to analyse and reflect on developments in our region and their implications for our national interests. Given the strategic situation of India, we have no choice but to adopt a 360 degree vision which enables us to look towards the north and the south as well as the east

and the west of our country. Our identity, security and prosperity are deeply intertwined with our immediate neighbours and those in the extended neighbourhood.

I wish to congratulate the Principal of Zakir Husain Delhi College and the conveners of the conference – Dr. Uma Shankar and Dr. Sonu Trivedi – for the initiative to organize this day-long event. The very first question many of us may wish to address: why should one club these two countries together?

A closer look at them, our neighbour in the west and our neighbour in the east, indicates that they have many similarities as well as differences. In this context, I should offer five observations at the outset.

Firstly, both nation-states have gone through long nightmares lasting for half a century or more, which brought conflict, bloodshed, deprivation, poverty and anguish for their peoples.

Secondly, both have been the victims of their peculiar circumstances, shaped by their history, culture, location, geopolitics as well as the internal and external dimensions of their polity. Internally, both have been fractured societies, but their evolution has been different – one moving from monarchy through external invasion, a socialist-style regime, warlordism, jihadi extremism and international terrorism to a decided shift towards normalcy and democracy, and the other struggling with the imperative to define, re-define and then define again the role of the



Dr. M. Aslam Parvaiz, Principal, Zakir Husain Delhi College, welcoming Ambassador Rajiv K Bhatia, DG, ICWA

military in an aspiring democracy, while striving to translate its vision of ‘unity in diversity.’ Externally too, their trajectories have been qualitatively different.

Thirdly, each country has been undergoing a process of multi-dimensional transition. In Afghanistan, it is about political, security and economic change. In Myanmar, it is about national and ethnic reconciliation, administrative reform, economic transformation and a substantive recalibration of its foreign policy. The next decade will be critical for them. Both enjoy immense importance in the region and internationally as evident from the decade-long involvement of the



(L-R) Dr. M. Aslam Parvaiz, Principal, Zakir Husain Delhi College, Professor S. D. Muni, Ambassador Rajiv K Bhatia, DG, ICWA & Shri Siddharth Varadarajan.

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and an array of countries working under the Heart of Asia (HoA) initiative in the case of Afghanistan, and as demonstrated by the enhanced engagement of the West, immediate neighbours, ASEAN and others in the case of Myanmar since its reform era began in 2011. Success or failure of the transition processes will shape the destiny of the region. Will the two countries be bridges and magnets of cooperation or bones of contention in South Asia - Central Asia and South East Asia respectively?

Fourthly, for India, both Afghanistan and Myanmar present tremendous challenges and enticing opportunities. Recognizing this, India's policy accords a high degree of priority to strengthening the two countries' ability to cope with the transition. India's relations with both countries have deepened and diversified in the past decade. Contents and contours of our Afghanistan and Myanmar policies, within the larger framework of our South Asia policy and the changing regional and international power equations, will no doubt receive a critical and objective assessment at this conference.

Finally, being aware of our huge stakes involved in the two countries, the Indian polity, we trust, will support a comprehensive approach encompassing closer G-to-G, B-to-B and P-to-P linkages with Afghanistan and Myanmar. This is an invaluable opportunity for experts assembled here to come up with considered and refreshing advice that will be of practical value to the rulers and policy makers who will be in charge in Delhi after the general elections, currently underway. Let us seize this opportunity.

We now look forward to listening and learning from two distinguished scholars present on the dais.

Thank you very much for your attention.

