

It is an honor to join all the distinguished participants at this year's Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference. On behalf of President Obama and Secretary Kerry, I want to express our appreciation for your continued support to Afghanistan and the Heart of Asia Process.

I also thank the Government of India for hosting today's Ministerial. India is a generous friend to Afghanistan, and an important leader in this region.

As this conference demonstrates, Afghanistan continues to enjoy extraordinary support from the international community. This support was likewise reinforced at the Warsaw Summit in July, where the United States and our NATO allies and partners agreed to sustain the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016 and to provide financial support for Afghan security forces through 2020. In October, at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, the United States and many of the other countries here pledged to continue development assistance through 2020 on the basis of the Self-Reliance Through Mutual Accountability Framework. Government under the Self-Reliance Through Mutual Accountability Framework.

While the support of the international community broadly remains essential, what is just as important – and arguably more important over the long run – is the support and partnership of Afghanistan's neighbors. Establishing enduring security and self-sustaining economic development within Afghanistan requires a common regional effort. By the same token, security and economic progress in Afghanistan will benefit the entire region.

I know that security remains a grave concern for all of us as indicated by many of the previous speakers. The threat of terrorism remains very real in Afghanistan and throughout the region.

In this second year since Afghan forces assumed full security responsibility for their country, they have performed admirably in combating a determined enemy. In the coming year, it will be critical for the Afghan National Defense and Security

Forces to continue improving their capabilities, with international support, and using those capabilities to their full extent.

It is also essential that we support the Afghan Government as it strives to create the conditions for a durable peace. An Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process is the surest way to end the conflict and bring stability to Afghanistan. The United States strongly and without reservations supports such a process. We commend the Afghan Government for concluding a peace agreement with Hizb-e Islami, and believe that successful implementation of the agreement can send an important message to other militant groups. We encourage all countries of the region to support the Afghan Government in seeking a much broader peace and to take every opportunity to make it clear to the Taliban first that a negotiated settlement of the conflict is a necessity and second that the Taliban has a genuine opportunity to participate in a peace process. The door to negotiations is open; the Taliban must be pressed, and must choose, to walk through that door.

Importantly, even in difficult circumstances, the Afghan Government is on the right path in meeting its commitments to the Afghan people to improve governance and social well-being. We welcome the recent appointment of new elections commissioners, the successful prosecutions of officials for corruption, and the initiation of five new National Priority Programs including the wide-ranging Citizens Charter and the National Women's Economic Empowerment Plan.

Finally, we encourage the Heart of Asia countries to increase economic and energy connectivity to bring greater prosperity to Afghanistan and the region. All regional and international initiatives that aim to develop linkages among the economies of the region deserve our collective support.

We know the participants in this discussion today share an understanding that the security, political stability, and economic prosperity of Afghanistan and the region are inextricably intertwined. We commend our partners here for their contributions

to Afghanistan, and for cooperation within this forum that helps promote our common goal of stronger regional integration. The United States remains resolute in the pursuit of the goals of the Heart of Asia.

Thank you.