

Opening Address by Amb. Shyam Saran

International Conference on Cross-Border Connectivity **Claridges Hotel, New Delhi,** **May 12, 2014**

1. I wish to extend a very warm welcome to all participants; a special welcome to those who have come from several friendly countries and from international financial institutions. We deeply appreciate your positive response to our invitation.
2. Cross-border connectivity is of special significance to India and its neighbours. We have to look at borders as “connectors” and not as walls which separate us. We have embraced the concept of connectivity across borders, but the “connectors” in the shape of road, rail, waterways and digital linkages are either missing or need urgent upgradation. The immigration, customs and other controls at the border need to be upgraded. This requires improved border infrastructure in the shape of modern integrated checkpoints but also more efficient “at the border” processes, to enable the smooth flow of goods and people, consistent with security requirements.

3. At this Conference, we will focus to India's North-East, which will play a critical role in connecting India to its vast and economically dynamic neighbourhood to the East, including Bangladesh and South-East Asia. ASEAN has unveiled an ambitious ASEAN Connectivity Project, which aims to expand both intra-ASEAN connectivity but also ASEAN's connectivity with other countries. It is our conviction that by putting in place a dense network of transport links between India and ASEAN, traversing the country's North-East, will promote a significant increase in regional trade and investment, as well as help expand tourism. The development of modern border infrastructure and road, rail, waterways and digital links, in India that could align with ASEAN's own Connectivity Plan, would be of mutual benefit.

4. Connectivity projects not only promote cross-border trade and traffic, but could also become catalysts for promoting economic development in the regions through which they traverse. Transport corridors must result in the creation of economic corridor, bringing opportunities for agricultural and industrial

development. The regions of traverse must be full participants in cross-border connectivity and not serve merely as transit. Economic corridors need to be planned side by side with transport corridors.

5. Cross-border connectivity projects need to pursue in parallel with backend linkages. For example, India's North-East can only realize the full benefit of the connectivity projects, if equal attention is paid to crating back-end links to the rest of India. The same is true of our neighbouring countries.

6. It will be apparent that to create the kind of comprehensive border infrastructure and transport and investment corridors we have in mind, we will need to work closely together with our neighbours. India is already engaged in building integrated checkpoints on its borders with both Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is also assisting with road and rail projects in these countries. However, our resources are limited while there is a certain urgency to the realization of these projects. Friendly countries like Japan and the U.S. have shown interest in participating in these projects. International financial institutions like the World

Bank and the ADB are already assisting some of the projects currently underway. It is our belief that by working together with governments of our neighbouring states and with a wider circle of partners and stakeholders, we could achieve better, faster and more significant result. The proposed projects would also create significant business opportunities.

7. RIS has been involved in cross-border connectivity studies for quite some time. It has produced several reports and papers on this theme. We conceived this conference as a platform where we could bring together all the key Ministers and agencies, which are stakeholders in promoting cross-border connectivity together with our regional and international partners. We intend to brief you on our approach to cross-border connectivity, the projects on the anvil, the areas where we need capacity building and, above all, the scale of financing and the possible sources which could be mobilized. Our objective is to explore partnerships through which we could achieve the best results.

8. I wish to thank the Ministry of External Affairs, in particular Shri Anil Wadhwa, Secretary (East) and senior colleagues from

MEA, for their constant support and encouragement. I would also wish to thank my colleagues in the RIS, Vice Chairman, Ambassador V.S. Seshadri, Director General, Dr. Biswajit Dhar and Prof. Prabir De, Coordinator, ASEAN-India Centre, in particular, for making all the arrangements for the Conference and assisting in its preparation. I wish the Conference every success.
