

From 'neighbourhood first' to 'neighbourhood fast' for accelerated regional integration in South Asia: Lekhi

New Delhi, 19-20 April 2022

Minister of State for External Affairs and Culture of India Ms Meenakshi Lekhi on Tuesday called for closer cooperation between South Asian countries for greater and accelerated regional integration.

Speaking at the 13th South Asia Economic Summit organized by RIS along with the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS), the Minister stressed the need for a shift from 'neighborhood first' to 'neighborhood fast' to help achieve faster and closer integration of the region that is currently facing multiple challenges.

Her comments assume significance in the backdrop of Ms Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director, IMF, praising India for its vaccination programme as well as for the timely help extended to South Asia including to Sri Lanka during the economic crisis.

Ms Lekhi said it was important for the South Asian countries to scale the summit of economic cooperation to overcome the various crisis situations, including those related to health and supply chain. Citing data showing that South Asia was the world's least connected region and with the lowest levels of intra-regional trade, the Minister called for improving the situation through sharing of best practices in capacity building and integration of knowledge-based systems. She said measures need to be taken to strengthen regional multi-modal connectivity as well as digital and financial connectivity.

Referring to the region being data generators and producers, the Minister urged the South Asian countries to cooperate in norm-setting including at the multilateral level for protection against 'data imperialism' by the Big Tech who are 'data controllers'.

Pointing to the foundation of South Asia's historical cultural ties and the 'civilizational connect', she said the two-day long event should be a watershed moment for the nations to take decisions on closer regional integration by leveraging their strengths including huge natural resources and a large population of the youth. India's foreign policy, including for the region, is based on the principles of respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity, she said.

Speaking on the occasion, Professor Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, RIS, referred to the growing challenges in South Asia including those related to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, political crisis in Pakistan, Balance-of-Payment crisis in Sri Lanka, and the brewing foreign exchange crisis in Nepal, and said economists and the think tank community in the region will have to take the lead in the integration process.

Ambassador (Dr) Mohan Kumar, Chairman, RIS, said it was important for the countries to build resilient regional value chains and stronger connectivity, and work towards sustainable development in the post-pandemic situation to achieve the SDGs. The outcome of the Summit will feed into India's preparations for the G20 Presidency in 2023, he said. Dr Dushni

Weerakoon, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka also spoke on the occasion.

The plenary session of the two-day event was on ‘post-pandemic development imperatives: issues for regional cooperation’. The session saw discussions on the G20 Indian Presidency in 2023, evolving value chains and trade integration for addressing inequalities and employment generation, as well as mechanisms to enable economic growth and stable macro-economy, accelerate SDGs and finance developmental projects.

Participants in the Summit include subject experts from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The discussions on Wednesday will be on ‘trade cooperation and localization of value chains’ where experts will address the potential for regional and resilient value chains, trade costs and competitiveness with special reference to MSMEs, multilateral and regional contours of digital trade and issues in trade in services.

There will also be deliberations on the ‘future of regional connectivity’ where the focus will be on building/improving connectivity for economic corridors and employment, inland-waterways and port-led development, boosting digital connectivity infrastructure as well as financing sustainable and resilient infrastructure for enhanced connectivity in the region. The event will also feature a special lecture on digitalization and financial sector cooperation in South Asia by Ms Smita Sharma, Director, International Department, RBI.

Further, the event will see talks on developing/strengthening the institutional ecosystem for food systems and value realisation covering nutrition related interventions, empowerment of communities and SHGs for local value realization, usage of sustainable practices and role of digital technologies and the development of low cost sustainable technologies and farm mechanisation. There will also be discussions on digital health initiatives including policies to support digital public goods in health, universal health coverage, ethics in public health and traditional medicine systems. Deliberations on energy connectivity for sustainable transitions will cover power transmission connectivity, energy trade and regulations, ideas to leverage technologies in the energy sector (in generation and transmission) as well as issues related to the financing of new initiatives. The closing plenary will be on the opportunities and challenges in enabling sustainable transition through a sustainable lifestyle.

The event is being organized in collaboration with the UNESCAP, South Asia Network on the SDGs, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal. (ENDS).

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