

Statement of Bolat Nurgaliyev, Chairman of the Board of the Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the online conference “Central and South Asia Interconnectivity: Challenges and Opportunities”, August 18, 2021

Dear ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to present my views to such a distinguished audience. Unfortunately, due to a positive PCR test, I could not avail the opportunity to accept a kind invitation of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov, to attend the offline conference in Tashkent on July 15-16. So it is a great privilege to make presentation at today's event hosted by my former colleague in the Washington ambassadors corps the First Deputy Chairman of the Senat of Oliy Majilis of Uzbekistan the Honorable Sadyk Safojev.

Having read the statement of President Shavkat Mirziyev and presentations of the heads of delegation and other participants, I totally subscribe to the view that now more than ever is actual the need for realization of enormous potential to connect the entire Eurasian land mass by means of direct highways, railroads and new links of trade and transportation of hydrocarbon resources and hydroelectric power. Thus, by restoring mutual connectivity between Central and South Asia we will be able to promote cooperation, dialogue and trust which, in the words of President Shavkat Mirziyev, are the drivers of ensuring stability, sustainable development and wellbeing of the peoples inhabiting our two regions. That is why the convening of the international conference is so timely and the reasons prompting the Uzbekistan leadership to initiate this event found unconditional support in the statements of representatives of Central, South Asian and other countries.

It is absolutely essential to assess the potential role of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as one of key links of practical interconnectivity in the region. Recent events there cause concern about the prospects of potential integration of Afghanistan in regional projects. Of course, we all hope that the parties involved in internal conflict will strive to reach a political settlement, but nevertheless, we should get ready for a scenario when interconnectivity between Central and South Asia has to be developed under conditions when Afghanistan's ability to play an active role of a regional bridge will be limited. We should be alert to the possibility that a failure to form an inclusive government of national unity will seriously jeopardize security environment in the region and therefore undermine goodwill and mutual trust without which expansion of trade and transportation cooperation between Central and South Asia is very difficult to arrange.

While working out a strategy for fostering trade and transportation ties with neighboring states, Kazakhstan focuses on promoting compatibility of our national infrastructure program “Nurly Jol” with the Chinese “Belt and Road” strategic initiative. I believe it is important to combine our efforts in underlining through different channels beneficial effect of the BRI on sustainable economic development of all countries involved, taking into consideration different myths and speculative assessments popular among those who are hostile to anything coming from Beijing.

In 2007 the Washington based Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in collaboration with the Silk Road Studies Program produced a monograph “The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia”. My good friend, Dr Frederick Starr wrote in his introduction, I quote “Overall, the opening of the great continental trade routes linking China, India, Europe,

Russia and the Middle East will have a stunning impact on all countries of Greater Central Asia that these routes traverse. It will affect each country differently. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both stand to benefit from the expansion of north-south routes linking northern Europe and Russia with the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. Producers of gas and oil in the Caspian region are already discovering the benefits to both their economies and security that arise from multiple pipelines. New long-distance electric lines will soon enable Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, potentially among the largest world's producers of hydroelectric energy, to gain access to eager markets in Pakistan. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan will be able to export their most valuable crop, cotton, directly to nearby markets in South Asia, rather than exclusively through Russia and the Baltic, 7000 km away. Afghanistan, like all countries in the region, will benefit from the payment of transit fees and duties. And the reopening of ancient east-west trade corridors across Pakistan and the expansion of new ones coming south from China will break the isolation that has been Pakistan's fate since its founding and return the Indus valley to its ancient status as an ant repot for trade in all directions".

It is a rather long quote, but I decided to share it with you so that you would judge yourselves which of the 14-year old expectations of a leading American expert on Central Asia materialized and which of them seem to have remained unfulfilled, or came true only partially. There is an ocean of possible explanations why a process of interconnectivity is not moving forward with adequate speed and effectiveness. One of the practical results of the Tashkent conference could be determining retarding and inhibiting factors so as to better deal with them in a long-term perspective.

In this light I would like to call your attention to the suggestion that was made by the Foreign Affairs Minister of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tileuberdy in Tashkent on July, 16 to work out a Program of promoting interconnectivity between Central and South Asia, which will serve as a road-map.

While drafting new approaches and initiatives in the field of regional interconnectivity we should involve the constructive potential of existing international and regional organizations specializing in promoting security and stability, economic and social development among the member-states, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the Eurasian Economic Union. Practically all countries of Central and South Asia are members of the CICA which throughout 25 years since its establishment continues to make effective contribution to peace, security, stability and sustainable development in Asia. Similarly, the SCO has a great potential to promote interconnectivity among its members, observer states and partners-in-dialogue. Specific economic projects are designated for achieving this particular aim and concentration of adequate resources will definitely bring desired results.

From my personal experience of working in the two leading South Asian countries – Pakistan and India, I would state that our two regions have all necessary instruments to become an example of constructive cooperation. It's imperative to arrange and maintain appropriate level of mutually beneficial ties of Central Asia with South Asia and its neighbors in investment, transport-logistical, food-processing, environmental, educational, health-care and humanitarian fields.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of today's event and wish all the participants good health and prosperity. Stay well and safe.

Thank you for your kind attention.