

President's Keynote Address at the inauguration of the 8th Asian Cooperation Dialogue Ministerial Meeting



Foreign Ministers and Heads of Delegation,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Sri Lanka..... We are honoured to have friends from all over the Asian continent gathering here in Colombo on this important occasion.

Asia to which all of us belong has a rich, multi-faceted heritage of which we must be proud. The four major religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, have their origins in Asia. Many civilizations have flourished on its soil at various times in history leaving in their wake, the influences that continue to inspire the destinies of this great continent and its peoples.



In centuries past connectivity was wide-spread throughout Asia, with the legendary Silk Route linking us with one another and with Europe. It is through this route that the flavour of Sri Lanka's spices, for instance, reached Europe, and merchants from the Orient came in search of business to our island. All this headway that Asia had made was later lost due to invasions and conquest by the colonial powers. Therefore, the concept of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue is indeed an important mechanism for restoring the cooperation that once existed among the nations of Asia.

Moreover, the theme for the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, "Spirit of Asia: Global Economic Recovery and Development Prospects", is timely for more reasons than one. Asia accounts for more than sixty percent of the world's population. With a growing middle class, it is increasingly proving to be one of the most lucrative markets in the world. Asia is the largest recipient of global FDI. Its contribution to the global GDP is close to thirty percent. It has an abundance of natural resources and the potential to be the biggest producer of renewable energy in the world. Indeed, the continent holds out great economic promise. It is the promise of new strengths and great achievements.

Yet, despite all this promise, let us also not forget that we are faced with many pressing issues, including the situation of the global economy being in a very serious crisis that has not been seen in the last few decades. Its impact on economies that are dependent on exports for their growth has been particularly strong.

This is a crisis largely imposed on us by those outside the Asian region. Our economies are today facing hardship due to the problems caused by others who should share the burdens of recovery. The countries of Asia, and many others, too, are today carrying the burdens caused by poor regulation and the encouraging of greed in the dominant economies of the West. It is a challenge that seeks new solutions.

We need to turn this challenge into an opportunity by expanding intra-regional trade and the influence of our financial markets. Such measures will not only strengthen our competitiveness but will also help us to build valuable partnerships with other regions, for the purpose of contributing to global economic well-being. This should be an area that should engage the attention of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue.

Another pressing issue confronting our continent is that relating to poverty. A significant portion of our peoples are under-privileged, both economically and socially. As one of the critical objectives of the ACD is to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life, it is our responsibility to tackle this issue, having carefully studied those models that have demonstrated their success at the grass-roots level. We would do well to learn from our own experiences within our Continent. Let us, keep in mind that for instance, the Samurdhi Programme of Sri Lanka is one such example from which we can learn much.

I also want to emphasize in this regard that the understanding and cooperation of the international financial institutions would be critical. Poverty in each country has its own indications and requirements. Though there are certain similarities, there is no one remedy which could be applied across the board. This should be borne in mind by those who seek to assist us.

International financial institutions, that play an increasing role in our region, should be more concerned about the burdens they impose through conditions for assistance. The elimination of poverty should not be held ransom to such conditions. These institutions should recognize the many disadvantages caused by subsidies implemented by the advanced economies, while preaching to the developing countries to move away from subsidies. Similarly, the importance of subsidies in helping the lesser developed countries to face up to the challenges of growth, also deserve serious and positive consideration.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

If I may share Sri Lanka's own experience, The Development Framework of my Government, based on my Manifesto, the "Mahinda Chinthana", when I contested the Presidency in 2005, seeks to address these challenges by integrating the positive attributes of the free market economy with domestic operations. The development of the rural economy and support for small and medium enterprises form the central pillars of our policy ensuring a modern and balanced approach, where domestic enterprises can be supported while encouraging foreign investments.

There are many other fields which we are developing to achieve poverty alleviation. We are investing heavily in infrastructure and information technology, and are moving to empower our rural people, who are the bed-rock of our economy. We are also attentive towards the tourism sector that can provide useful stimulus especially for creating and sustaining employment.

Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

For Sri Lanka, at least for the past two and a half decades and more, a matter of overriding concern has been to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of significant odds. Therefore, ensuring the security of our country and our people required absolute attention. The menace of terrorism which eroded the progress that we had made in various fields since independence in 1948 had to be eradicated, if Sri Lanka were to realize her hope of achieving her true potential. This was an important decision that my Government took no sooner we were elected. But before doing so, we examined in full whatever avenues which appeared to be available for a peaceful solution.

On May 18th, 2009, we achieved a signal victory over terrorism, that quite a few belonging to the international community had declared to be impossible. But this achievement was not based on victory at all costs. We ensured the safety and welfare of innocent civilians behind whom terrorists took cover, while using them as human shields.

As a democratically elected Government, we had a noble duty to secure the freedom of these civilians from the clutches of the terrorists. This called for a patient and long drawn out campaign. But that was a conscious decision I took, for my firm commitment has always been that my Government must treat equally each and every Sri Lankan, irrespective of ethnicity, language or religious belief. It is for this reason that even when the menace of terrorism was at its most serious, we ensured the safety and welfare of the civilian population, during the humanitarian military operations against the LTTE.

The end of the conflict situation that affected parts of the country has been a catalyst for optimism in our Motherland. My Government is now engaged in rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by terrorism and stimulating economic development. We are also continuing, to ensure the further strengthening of the human rights and other fundamental freedoms that our people have long enjoyed.

Democracy in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka was severely damaged by terrorism. I am proud to state that my Government has re-introduced to those parts of our country, this fundamental entitlement. We have had elections in both the North and the East. Former militants have entered the democratic process, choosing the ballot over the bullet, and now serve in the legislatures at both provincial and national levels.

Friends

The speedy resettlement of internally displaced persons once affected by terrorism is engaging our utmost attention. It is a significantly more difficult task than most would

imagine. For a democratic government, the key objective is for the internally displaced to be enabled to depart from the temporary facilities where they are at present accommodated, to their homes, at the earliest possible opportunity. But resettlement has to be approached with care. Large areas where people lived or used for economic activity, such as agriculture, have been extensively mined by the terrorists. Those mines have to be removed, but de-mining takes time as it has to be done with great care and attention, leaving no margin for error.

The approach that is being followed by us in dealing with the aftermath of terrorism draws inspiration from our 2500 years of recorded history. The civilization of this country is built on the bedrock of the Buddhist values of compassion and tolerance that extends to all beings. Sri Lanka respects all ethnic and religious identities. Standing as we now do in an era free of terrorism, our Government is working with the support we draw from the entire nation, for speedy rehabilitation and reconciliation.

At the same time, we believe that our defeat of terrorism could be an encouraging example, to the rest of the international community. While we had the political support of many friendly nations, success came mainly through our own effort. The conclusion to be drawn is perhaps, that the problems of a country can only be resolved by those who know best its ground realities, namely, by its own people.

I would like to invite ACD member countries gathered here today to become stakeholders and beneficiaries in the promising opportunities resulting from the post-conflict phase in which Sri Lanka stands. As in every human endeavour, we in Asia should have as our vision, a future of peace and prosperity, achieved by the combined efforts of all our nations and peoples. Asia should focus on our inherent strengths, which are considerable and can point the way to the future we seek.

Over the last 7 years, the ACD has made important advances in terms of identifying 20 areas of cooperation. Now there needs to be more of a focus on follow up on decisions made. This will reinforce the belief of our people that the ACD is moving in a very desirable direction. Here, I would like to conclude with some thoughts which you may consider in your deliberations.

* The ACD, after being in existence for 7 years, deserves a formal structure..... and having one will significantly assist in translating our vision into reality. These would include successfully mitigating the impact of climate change, protecting the environment and ensuring sustainable development; generating employment and food security while reducing poverty, expanding literacy and ensuring gender equality.

Let me emphasize that we should direct the greatest attention to the threatening issues

of climate change and food security that affect all people across the globe.

* And finally, there is the need to infuse the ACD process with a greater political vision. Therefore, I would propose that we seriously consider meeting at Heads of State or Governmental level.

Asia should strive to regain its independence that is challenged on many fronts and across many borders. The countries of Asia can succeed in rebuilding our continent by greater reliance of our own bonds of unity, strengths of history, and capabilities of our own people.

The Twentieth Century saw Asia regaining her freedom, due to the efforts of the earlier generation of patriots who helped our continent to get out of colonial and foreign influence. It now falls on us, to build on the achievements of our fore-fathers by working in unison to ensure in the current era, the resurgence of our continent. If we do so, history will surely record this 21st Century, as that of Asia.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the Member States of the ACD for the confidence and trust in Sri Lanka as Chair for the coming year. We shall do our utmost to meet the objectives we mutually decide upon, and we will do so in a spirit of consultation and cooperation. I wish your deliberations all success.

May the Blessings of the Noble Triple Gem be with you.