

**Indo-Asia Connectivity for Shared Prosperity
Kolkata, 14-15 December, 2016**

Welcome and Introduction

Good Morning!

On behalf of CUTS International it gives me great pleasure to extend a very warm welcome to all of you and to say how grateful we are to the East West Center, Honolulu, USA and the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Kolkata for their collaboration in this initiative.

I am delighted to see Ambassador Verma and many other senior officials, experts, business persons and media from the region, the United States and other countries here today. I would like to welcome our foreign guests particularly and hope they have a comfortable stay and an engaging experience.

We are very thankful to the U.S. government, particularly its Embassy in New Delhi and Consulate in Kolkata for their support, and hope that they will be happy with the event by the time it is over.

The importance of the timing of this event cannot be stressed enough. All of us are aware of recent political shifts in the United States, United Kingdom and many other countries, and also a rising anti-globalisation sentiment. Given these developments, opportunities such as this to exchange knowledge and deliberate on strategic policy options in a non-academic and business-oriented manner have great value. This is crucial for advancing our common goal of shared prosperity especially, when the glue of globalisation is becoming weak.

Despite all these uncertainties, it is important to understand how the global order will evolve in near future and the role that India, its neighbour and the United States can and should play in the evolving global order.

Here, it is important to note the positive movements that India and the United States have made in the past couple of decades. These include trade, defence cooperation, cultural and educational exchange, to name a few. This will propel our relationship forward in new and exciting ways. This is not only important for the robustness of the Indo-U.S. relations in future, but for the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Keeping this context in mind, let me underline that we are all aware of the fact that domestic consumption is not sufficient enough to feed the needs of growing nations. Thus, cross-border cooperation and trade are essential to reach our common goal of shared prosperity. And, talking about the imperative of cross-border cooperation, there is no doubt that India is a key player in the Indo-Pacific region. Such cooperation is evolving fast and must be harnessed further in areas such as trade, investment, energy, transport and, of course, on security-related matters.

Being the third largest economy in Asia, India offers a great deal to the region in terms of its huge consumer base, skilled labour, and technical knowledge while at the same time understanding the preferential needs of some of its neighbours.

This is why India is an important actor in linking this region through various connectivity initiatives. This will result in important opportunities for better access of goods, services, and investment. It will also lay-down fair and beneficial trade-related rules in emerging areas such as electronic commerce.

In short, comprehensive connectivity will provide opportunities for countries to grow their economies together and raise the level of regulatory standards, which is crucial for attracting and facilitating investments in this region.

Therefore, in this period of uncertainty, India can be seen as a supportive partner for economic and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. In this context, we are encouraged by the recent uptick in the Indian government's investments in improving seaborne and river trade and transportation. Maritime shipping routes are being developed across the Bay of Bengal region with improved access to ports and also allowing foreign liners to carry domestic cargo along our coast line ports.

Inland waterways are also receiving greater attention, where in India a total of 111 rivers were recently converted to National Waterways, which will get linked with major hubs of economic activities. Over time, these should even provide a gateway to maritime connectivity for landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal, and our own landlocked states in the North East and Eastern regions.

Moreover, maritime cooperation between India, our neighbours in the Bay of Bengal region and the United States will be necessary to align our common security interests in ensuring unhindered passage of cargo throughout the region.

Thus, opportunities are galore to explore new markets and for investments in various areas of connectivity, which will have positive multiplier effects on future development of the Bay of Bengal region in particular and the Indo-Pacific region in general.

And, as we reflect on all the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, I would like to take a moment to point out that along with its network of partners in the region CUTS has and will continue to promote connectivity through evidence-based research, policy advocacy, and partnership building.

Our work to promote the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement for ease of vehicular movements across borders, enhancing policy discourse on inland waterways in the BBIN sub-region, and for seamless cargo movements within India demonstrates the diverse initiatives with which we and our partners are engaged in. Though such initiatives, we have realised that along with the development of hard infrastructure we need effective soft infrastructure in place and that is what we are doing and will continue to do in a more coherent manner.

Let me also point out that our experience on connectivity initiatives is not limited to this region. Our three centres in Sub-Saharan Africa are also engaged with various initiatives to build trade and investment connectivity among African regional economic communities and we are contributing to continent-wide arrangements for better connectivity. Thus, there is scope for cross-learning and we are doing that too.

Finally, let me underline that keeping in mind the crucial importance of connectivity for shared prosperity and, at the same time, given the rising protectionist sentiments being witnessed around the world, perhaps now more than ever we need more grounded expertise.

We need to bring balanced pro-trade, pro-equity ideas to centres of influence such as in Geneva, Washington D.C. and elsewhere. We need voices that can bridge the viewpoints of diverse stakeholders from across the Indo-Pacific region on how best to grow and connect together for shared prosperity.

While we have our operations in Geneva since 2008 and it is making significant contributions to the multilateral trade dialogue, it is our firm belief that Washington D.C. will continue to play a strategic role in the world affairs generally, and the Indo-Pacific region specifically.

Given this imperative, I am confident about having our footprints in Washington D.C. soon as we believe that this centre of power needs a pro-trade, pro-equity Southern voice. When we can have U.S. think tanks operating in our part of the world, we visualise that globalisation demands that the trends should also be in the other direction.

I hope to have set the tone of our deliberations over the next two days and, therefore, to conclude, I wish everyone a fruitful exchange of ideas and a very pleasant stay here in Kolkata, which is known as the City of Joy. I assure you that with this initiative our effort to foster connectivity for shared prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region is certainly a milestone in our journey to that endeavour.

I thank you for your attention and invite Mr Craig Hall, U.S. Consul General in Kolkata for his remarks.