

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE
AT THE BANQUET HOSTED IN THE HONOUR OF, THE PRESIDENT
OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN,
H.E. MR. MOHAMMAD ASHRAF GHANI**

RASHTAPATI BHAVAN, NEW DELHI: APRIL 28, 2015

Your Excellency,

Mr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani,

President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome Your Excellency and the distinguished members of your delegation on your first State Visit to India. I am particularly delighted that you have honoured us by staying at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Mr. President,

Although you have travelled here in your previous capacities on a number of occasions, this is a special visit. This time, you are visiting India as a leader of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan, as President of a proud nation with whom India has a cherished history of profound cultural, religious and civilisational bonds. It has always been a matter of pride for us that India is Afghanistan's first Strategic Partner. We are happy that our bilateral co-operation, rooted in the age-old bonds of friendship between our two peoples, has been so constructive and fruitful.

Excellency,

We believe that the enduring trust and mutual understanding between India and Afghanistan goes beyond political and strategic considerations. Our shared history and geography are a compelling factor in nurturing our close ties. Because of this historical reality, there has been strong and sustained support in India for our engagement with Afghanistan in its post-conflict economic reconstruction effort. Over the last fourteen years, India and Afghanistan have effectively implemented a number of projects for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. In 2011, our countries signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement to provide a carefully conceived architecture for our multi-faceted dialogue and collaboration. We are confident that over the next few years, Afghanistan will see a significant transformation across its sectors and in all areas of its social and economic advancement. We look forward to this with all sincerity.

Excellency,

We consider it a privilege to share our capabilities and experience in nation-building and inclusive development with our Afghan brothers. We continue to be fully committed to this – and shall be happy to support their endeavours in every way that you may require. Our engagement with Afghanistan, Your Excellency, has neither an expiry date nor a timeline. As a friend and neighbour, India will always stand firmly beside Afghanistan.

We remain deeply conscious that Afghanistan's unity, independence, security and stability are critical – not only for itself – but also for India and for peace and progress in our entire neighbourhood. To this end, our Strategic Partnership looks to strengthen and diversify our bilateral engagement in the coming years, including by forging a more robust trade and investment relationship between our private sectors. I am confident, Mr. President, that your interactions with our Government during this State Visit will give you a very clear perception of our purpose and commitment.

With these words, Excellency, I once again welcome you to India and to the Rashtrapati Bhavan and wish you and your distinguished delegation a comfortable stay and a very successful visit.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I invite you to please join me in raising a toast:

to the good health of His Excellency, the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,

to peace in Afghanistan and the prosperity of its people and

to the everlasting friendship and co-operation between India and Afghanistan.