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Can Heart of Asia Conference be a New Beginning?

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There are expectations that the Fifth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference (Istanbul Process) in Islamabad will pave the way for the peace process between Afghan government and Taliban. The Conference will start today and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif are expected to jointly inaugurate it. However, the conference was preceded by the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) yesterday. Pakistani Prime Minister's Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, said in a press release: "We are looking forward to the participation of high-ranking delegations from 14 participating states, 17 supporting countries and 12 international and regional organizations. Foreign Ministers from ten countries have confirmed participation in the conference." The Heart of Asia Conference was basically established in 2011 at the initiative of Afghanistan and Turkey. The main objective of the Conference includes fostering efforts for regional cooperation and connectivity so as to promote long-term peace and stability, and progress and development in Afghanistan and the region. Yesterday's SOM Meeting paved the way for the main Conference. Sartaj Aziz, while delivering the opening remarks at the meeting, said, "Pakistan wants durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan is not in our interest. We will, therefore, continue to support all endeavors aiming at strengthening peace and security in Afghanistan.

As Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process is maturing, our focus has to be on strengthening our engagement and collaboration with a view to effectively combating the formidable challenges confronting the region, in the field of security as well as promoting regional economic interaction." It has been one of the most dominating facts that both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been suffering because of the evils of terrorism and religious extremism. They need to

realize that they have a common enemy threatening their stability and security. Both know that they need to sit together to solve the gigantic task of making their countries terrorism free; therefore, it would be very unwise for both of them to keep their memories filled with what had happened in the past and they really need to restart a new phase of better relationships. Unfortunately, the cooperation between both the governments regarding the process has never been long lasting. There have been many episodes in the drama of the peace process but it has never been concluded. To start anew, there has to be a comprehensive trust building strategy. This is a golden time to do the same as Sharif's government seems ready to bring about changes in the way Afghanistan and the region see the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan it is really an important phase of the history. The international troops are to withdraw and there would be great challenges for Afghanistan, both in security and the establishment of strong political setup. It is believed that the regional countries can play a dominant role in the post withdrawal Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's cooperation would make the matters easier. It is also important that the Pakistan must pursue a trust building strategy so as to make the regional countries believe that it is really very positive regarding its role in developing peace and tranquility in Afghanistan. Most of the analysts believe that Pakistan's role in Afghanistan has largely relied on the role of India in Afghanistan and vice versa.

The uneasy relations between the two countries have influenced their relations with Afghanistan. However, Nawaz Sharif has mentioned on several occasions that Pakistan realizes the important role of the regional countries in supporting Afghanistan's progress towards stability and prosperity and stressed that continued engagement by the international community in Afghanistan's economic and social development and reconstruction would be essential in ensuring the long-term security and prosperity of the Afghan people. It is important to see how Pakistan can improve its relations with all the regional countries regarding the improvement of peace process in Afghanistan. On the other hand US also wants to see Afghanistan and Pakistan having healthy relations as it would support in peace building process, which is very much essential before US completely leaves Afghanistan as it would guarantee better possibilities of peace in the country. US President Obama seems to agree that it is in America and Pakistan's interests for Afghanistan to be stable and secure. In the recent meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, he urged Pakistan to take more concrete measures for the development of peace in Afghanistan.

This Conference is of immense importance for it can be a new start for initiation of peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban, which was basically at halt after the talks in Murree. Afghan President showed his concerns regarding Pakistan's effort after it was disclosed that Taliban leader Mullah Omar had died few years earlier. Nonetheless, during the recent meeting in Paris both Afghan and Pakistani leaders promised to start the process anew. It is really vital that the Conference must end with tangible measures regarding the development of peace in Afghanistan and in the region and must not be repetition of promises alone.