



2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

President Ashraf Ghani's Keynote Address at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference

24 November 2020, Kabul

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentleman, Colleagues,

It is an honor to be here, virtually, with all of you.

Let me start with words of heartfelt thanks. Thanks firstly to the government of Finland for your exceptional stewardship of this process.

Let me thank the United Nations, His Excellency Guterres for joining us today, Ambassador Lyons for co-chairing and Madam Valovaya for making the conference facilities available.

Let me thank the government of Switzerland, Minister. Cassis, you're your historic and exceptional hospitality.

Mr. Borrell, thank you for honoring us for your presence and for the principled support of the European Union.

A series of principles and values that will guide the world and ensure Afghanistan's stability and prosperity through the peace process.

Thank you Vice-President Saleh, Thank you Vice-President Danish, members of the cabinet, the Supreme Court, Parliament, and Minister Arghandiwal and Minister Atmar for your and your colleagues at the two ministries for preparing the work of this conference to which all Afghan officials and stakeholders have been involved.

On behalf of the Afghan people, I would like to thank the international organizations who have worked with us over the years to advance our development agenda, including the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, the IMF, and the World Bank, and all of the bilateral donors for whom Afghanistan has consistently been among their top priorities, including





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

our foundational partner, the United States, as well as Australia, Canada, Denmark, The European Union, Finland, Germany, Japan, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

To the governments of Germany, the United Kingdom, the EU, France and Japan—thank you for partnering with us over the years to host and convene 12 conferences that have been critical to Afghanistan’s trajectory. Thank you India for the commitment of over 2 billion dollars during these years.

We are also grateful to our NATO partners for your consistent and principled support, and for standing shoulder to shoulder with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in our shared fight against terrorism. Your continued support has never been more critical and we thank you.

We would like to thank all donor countries and bilateral partners—and particularly, your taxpayers. We pay tribute to your sons and daughters who have made the ultimate sacrifice over these 20 years, and their families.

To the millions of veterans who have served in Afghanistan—we thank you not only for your service to our country, but also for your deep understanding and friendship with the Afghan people.

And most importantly, I would like to thank my fellow Afghan citizens. I thank the brave men and women of our national defense and security forces who put their lives on the line every day to protect our hard-won gains. I thank their families for enduring the pain of loss and separation.

I thank our citizens for their courage in the face of suffering; their sense of hope in the face of uncertainty; and their belief and investment in the democratic republic we have built together as a nation. We are here today to honor your sacrifices with the promise of peace.

مننه كوم چي ماته مو دا فرصت راکړ چي ستاسو اول خادم واوسم.

تشکر ازینکه من و همکارانم را فرصت دادید که به حیث خادمین تان از شما نماینده گی کنم

And I would like to thank the First Lady of Afghanistan and all the women of Afghanistan for making history.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

I would like to ask for a moment of silence in honor of victims of conflict, those men and women and children who senselessly been murdered, latest at Kabul University, the center of learning, hope and nurturing of our youth.

[A Moment of silence in honor of victims of conflict]

I hope you receive these words of thanks in the same spirit of sincerity in which I deliver them. We are living in the midst of one of the greatest tragedies of history—the COVID-19 pandemic. We are exceptionally grateful that at a time of such collective suffering and competing domestic priorities—now in the peak of the second wave—your commitment to Afghanistan remains strong.

This conference is the product of a one of the most interactive and collaborative processes to date shared between the government of Afghanistan and our partners.

Our three-pillar approach of peace, state and market-building presented in the second Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework were validated and further enriched through a series of workshops with our partners in a spirit of genuine openness from both sides, to reach common ground. It has set a precedent for collaboration that we would like to maintain and serve as standard for other countries.

The result is a framework that captures our core reform priorities and main development objectives. It is a plan that aligns our strategic principles, actions that are operationally measurable, and indicators that allow us to make fair judgements on progress.

Such a plan is critical in today's world of turbulence, uncertainty and fast-changing realities. It allows us to look ahead.

I have spent the past several years of my presidency in listening-mode. My colleagues and I have traveled 85 times to the provinces where we have met citizens from all walks of life—men, women, and youth, working in all sectors of government and civil society across cities and villages. Prior to Covid-19, we hosted 5,000 Afghan citizens a month at the presidency in Kabul.

This national dialogue has been a participatory process, where we have understood our people's expectations and tried to balance them with the realities we are facing today and the resources available to us. And we have also made significant time to include our international partners in this dialogue.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

Our aim with this new framework was to distill that vast experience into three pillars that could be understood and effectively acted upon.

What did we hear during those consultations? What is the main priority of the Afghan people?

A demand for peace.

Today, we—the Afghan people, government and the international community—share a vision of a sovereign, unified, democratic Afghanistan at peace with itself, the region and the world, capable of preserving and expanding the gains of the past two decades.

This is not just the ultimate objective of our negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, but more importantly, it is also the ultimate goal of the work we do every day within the halls of government to meet our development objectives.

There are two channels we must simultaneously nurture in order to create peace—one is peace-making and one is peace-building.

In Doha, our negotiation team is working on *making* peace, and responsibility for ushering the peace-making process forward is now in the hands of the two negotiating teams at the table.

But before the negotiators got to the table, the Afghan government made huge contributions to furthering the peace-making process.

In February 2018, I made an unconditional offer to the Taliban, introducing the question of peace into the national and international dialogue. The Afghan people had not dared to think of peace as a possibility until the unprecedented 3-day ceasefire of June 2018. In 2019, the Loya Jirga on Peace created a framework and a mandate for negotiations, and this August, we hosted another Loya Jirga which allowed our people a say in deciding the future of the 400 contested Taliban prisoners.

Over the past two years, Afghans created a national consensus on the need to achieve an enduring peace via political settlement with the Taliban—a peace that is in line with the values of our Constitution and international standards of human rights.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

We have shown commitment, courage and conviction. We have maintained our defensive positions on the battlefield, even in the face of a surge in violence against our people since February. We agreed to the release of over 5,000 Taliban prisoners, some of them guilty of crimes against humanity.

We have made sacrifices over and over again.

Despite our suffering, I want to be very clear that our commitment to negotiations with the Taliban remains firm. Our negotiating team remains steadfast in their commitment to talks in Doha. We must bring an end to the violence that is haunting our lives and robbing our children of the joys of childhood.

We once again repeat the call of His Excellency the Secretary General [of the UN], High Representative Borrell for an immediate ceasefire.

The peace-making process will, inshallah God Willing, result in an agreement on paper.

But peace-building is a multi-dimensional, cross-sectoral, long-term process that will allow us to actually implement the components of any peace agreement on paper.

That is our work. We—as a government, a civil society, and a people—along with you, our international partners—must now focus on implementing components of peace-building. The ANPDF II is a framework that shows us how to peace-build in the context of today's Afghanistan.

We must create conditions of well-being. We must also create rules of the game, so that we do not find ourselves pulled backwards by vacuums of governance in which destructive forces can thrive, such as corruption, unequal distribution of resources, and internal conflict.

Poverty reduction, and the development of livelihoods, jobs and prosperity, are critical deliverables for sustaining a peace agreement.

Establishing rule of law and security, and providing services that build citizen's trust in their government, is equally critical for sustaining a peace agreement.

In this way, market-building and state-building are inextricably linked to peace-building.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

Our credibility comes from our citizen's ability to trust their government, and that comes from rule of law. Thus, our state-building deliverables will continue to reform core state functions and institutions systematically, step up the fight against corruption, reform our courts, and make sure that ordinary citizens can exert their constitutional rights with confidence.

But the state alone cannot ensure well-being for our citizens. It needs a dynamic market to provide jobs and opportunities for the 400,000 Afghan youths who enter the labor market each year. Our market-building approach merges private sector collaboration, with the creation of freedoms, laws, institutions, and values to create predictability needed for markets to emerge and thrive.

Afghanistan's goal of self-reliance is even more urgent in today's context of having to do more with less. Amidst a pandemic, insecurity, and uncertainty, the critical goal for our market-building agenda will be to map our capitals and capabilities and galvanize them and attract national, regional and international investment.

And though that will be a great challenge, the pay-offs for Afghanistan and our people will be immense. We should not underestimate the exponential value of the assets that we have and the potential, if managed properly and strategically, to completely transform our market capital—those include immense renewable energy sources such as wind, power, solar and water; unmatched reserves of metals and minerals; and huge potential in the sectors of reforestation and sustainable agriculture, and green industry and dynamic cities.

There is a key platform and also a key mechanism for unlocking the potential.

Number one, the key platform is the region in which we are located. If there is any short cut to bringing peace, prosperity and stability to Afghanistan, it would be through regional connectivity. Central Asia is looking south, and South Asia is looking north, East Asia is looking west and West Asia is looking east. This allows Afghanistan to play the role of a hub and intersection for four main forms of connectivity — transport, energy, industry and trade, and digital.

Regional connectivity is not only a key to our market and state building agenda, with major dividends for all of our neighbors, but also a key to our peace-building agenda. We need to create a strong regional consensus for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Regional guarantees of the peace agreement would be crucial.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

Number 2, the key mechanism for this framework is the national priority program. The NPPs are our tool for implementation, for making the reforms a reality and delivering on the expectations of our citizens.

Our national priority programs link our development priorities to the national budget, are national in scope, and are subject to a 360-degree monitoring and evaluation process.

Our on-going dialogue with you, our partners, is around these NPPs.

———pause———

I want to go back for a moment to the consultations that informed this framework.

We developed it based on the expectations of the Afghan people. It's important to note that those expectations are of a changed society—a society that is completely different and totally transformed from the remnants of the broken nation that the Taliban left behind as their legacy in 2001.

Last week, I myself was pleasantly surprised when I read the latest demographic statistics published by our National Statistics and Information Authority. Today, 74.6% of Afghans are under 30 years of age; and a staggering 48.5% are under the age of 15.

Almost half of our entire population has been born and raised in a young democracy. They have overcome the past divisions of older generations and have found unity of voice and purpose in our democracy.

Our youth have embraced freedom of expression to build one of the most free presses in the region; our youth have validated our electoral democracy with their individual votes; our youth have embraced entrepreneurship, education and creativity and taken active part in rebuilding our society. Our youth and women are changing history.

A new Afghanistan has emerged over the past two decades and with it, an entirely new set of expectations from our citizens.

Our vibrant Afghan civil society also has an important role to play here. The government is totally committed to continuing to create an enabling environment for civil society to operate and be part of our policy-making processes, but it must be based on lessons-learned from other countries on the ideal regulation of CSOs and NGOs.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

I also would like to remind of the established Afghan forms of civil society—the networks and values that have kept us bound together as a nation for decades and centuries, even in the face of war and deprivation. These are families, households, friendships, and communities. The Ulama are a pillar of our society and one of the strongest voluntary networks in our country. We are not mere individuals, we are linked through these systems of support that keep us united and provide during times of hardship.

And that is why I have come back over the years to listen also to these more traditional forms of civil society, particularly in the provinces.

Because above all, the overarching expectations of our people is that national unity is preserved and enhanced.

Peace,

Preservation of our democracy and Constitution,

Security,

Accountability and services,

National unity—

Regional connectivity

These are the expectations, and thus goals, in front of us.

But given that Afghanistan is a country with very limited, and declining, resources, and we are also in the middle of a war and a pandemic, it will be a huge challenge for us to deliver on these expectations.

The main theme of our development agenda is to meet these new expectations by doing much more with much less, in the face of daunting challenges. We need to deliver with quality, speed and efficiency, and this will require a very open dialogue with you, our partners, to ensure that when and if the context changes, we can adjust.

What is today's context? What are the main challenges?





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

First of all, corruption. It's a huge, systemic problem, on multiple levels.

We've made some progress over the past five years—all benchmarks, except for one that requires international cooperation have been met. This is of the current anti-corruption strategy have been met. The anti-corruption commission has been formed. We are working collaboratively on a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy to take us through 2024.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown us all into a state of global uncertainty. We were forced to back-bench development priorities and reallocate already limited resources to fighting the pandemic here. And we are still in the throes of it—a second wave, and potentially a third, could set us back again and again.

Third is poverty. Though recent figures from the NISA show that poverty has reduced by 7% during the last four years, it's still a huge challenge that nearly half of Afghans deal with on a daily basis. And it's further exacerbated by climate change and insecurity. We have had success with some programs, namely the Citizens' Charter and the national meal program during the COVID-19 pandemic, but poverty will continue to be a cross-cutting goal and a major challenge.

And finally, of course, is conflict and uncertainty. Since February of this year, levels of violence have sky-rocketed across the country. Plans to achieve peace did not materialize as imagined. Suffering and killing continues to plague Afghans on a daily basis. It is unbearable. It is untenable. The uncertainty it has bred is tangible. We as partners need to confront this uncertainty, particularly in the light of a future political settlement with the Taliban. That agreement must be condition-based.

Moving forward, we will have to do more, meet higher expectations, and face challenges, but with much less.

But we know this is possible. We have done it before. We are doing it now. I would like to provide a few illustrations.

On the security front—When international forces reduced from 150,000 in 2011, to below 10,000 today, the ANDSF successfully took over responsibility for security and counter-terrorism operations in 2015. We have held the front line in the global fight against terrorism. We held our provinces. When the Taliban managed to take some districts, we took most of them back quickly.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

We continue to scenario plan for multiple situations, and we have continuously pushed back Taliban advances over the past few months in Helmand, Kandahar, Badakhshan, and other parts of the country. Today, the ANDSF are independently carrying out 96% of operations.

On the economic development and regional connectivity front—

We initiated dialogue with a range of world-class firms and signed MOUs on renewable energy generation, and investments in transmission lines and mining. The TAPI project will commence construction in Herat province of Afghanistan in 2021. A 1.3 billion USD investment in a 500-megawatt transmission line from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan will complete its first phase again in the southwest and other regional projects are underway.

With our central Asian neighbors, we are pursuing a plan to build railways that link us with Pakistan and India and Iran. The air corridor that started as an idea to get our fruits exported during a shutdown of our borders a few years ago is now connecting us to over 50 foreign export markets. The Port of Chabahar is now fully utilized for Afghanistan's imports and exports as marked by the delivery of 176,000 tonnes of Indian wheat assistance coming through Zarang, center of Nimruz province.

On public financial management—We have managed to increase budget performance to the 90th percentile. The process of budget allocation is now focused on needs of the citizens across provinces, and is a reflection of core national priorities.

We are now focusing on replicating self-reliance measures in the sectors of education, urban development, energy and infrastructure. All of these key sectors are low-hanging fruits for increasing efficiency and output relatively quickly by implementing cost-cutting measures and deflating bloated bureaucracies.

We ask you, our international partners, to *help* us do more with less.

Over the past several years, our population has changed; the capabilities and capacities of our people have developed; our challenges have changed; our access to resources have changed—so, too, the approach to our partnerships must evolve.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

Financial resources—aid—will continue to be critical to our growth for the foreseeable future, even as we have balanced that dependency markedly over the past six years by substantially increasing government revenues that now constitutes around 15 percent of the GDP. We are grateful for your continued support and partnership.

Aside from conventional aid pledges, we are also focused on securing forms of financial insurances and guarantees that would help actualize our regional connectivity agenda, particularly in the energy and transport sectors.

But there are so many other ways that you can partner with us that do not require aid money, but instead creativity on how we can collaborate with your intellectual and technological assets; for example, we can leverage the connectivity that technology offers us to partner on internship, mentorship and other educational and knowledge-sharing programs.

We welcome technical assistance and partnerships with international research centers, think tanks, and organizations on data collection and research to better analyze the challenges and think through tested solutions; as well as to help us produce international-standard plans and offer guidance on best practice and lessons-learned.

We have two examples now of working with world-class technical firms—Sasaki, based in Boston, led on designs for our urban renewal programs and this was all done virtually. Siemens has partnered with us on energy production and distribution.

This shows that online communities have become a much more effective form of cooperation in our current context and we encourage more collaborations such as these. And the fields for partnership are endless—education, governance, design, economic development, trade and industry, energy, culture, health and telemedicine.

Lastly, I would like to once again thank you for your collaboration on this framework and the mutually-agreed upon outcomes. The Afghan government's job now moving forward is to create the processes and deliver the outcomes. Our job now is to *lead* this agenda and deliver.

What we ask of you is support, technical assistance, as needed, that helps us improve efficiency; and a constructive, collaborative relationship that is focused on the outcomes.

I said at the beginning of my remarks today, that we are living in the midst of a tragic period in our history.





2020 AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE, 23–24 NOVEMBER, GENEVA
PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

The real test of the strength of our partnership and the virtue of our shared vision is if we are able to avoid an even greater tragedy of our shared history. We must not let history repeat her tragedies here in Afghanistan.

The ultimate result of our work moving forward, and the ultimate benefit of our committed partnership, comes when we move past the war, the poverty, and the pandemic. I am confident that through our combined efforts, we will be able to manifest a positive, prosperous, peaceful future for Afghanistan.

I close by once again expressing my gratitude to you and your fellow countrymen and women for your continued principled commitment, support and your belief in a peaceful Afghanistan.

Thank you and God Bless

