

## **Dr Paras Kharel**

The chair of this session, Prof. Rehman Sobhan, founding chairman of CPD and eminent champion of regional cooperation in South Asia, distinguished speakers, the special guest, the chief guest, fellow co-organisers, and Dr Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director of CPD, the lead organiser, and ladies and gentlemen

It's a pleasure to be back in Bangladesh as a co-organiser of SAES in its 14th edition. But for the unavoidable disruption caused by COVID, SAES has served as a consistently reliable forum for meaningful discussions of interest to the development aspirations of a region that is still basically a poor region although with a vast potential, bringing together the private sector, policymakers, lawmakers, politicians, researchers, academics, civil society of the region. It's an inclusive South Asian forum where the best attempts are made to ensure the contribution of representatives of ALL (emphasis added) South Asian countries. And when on Bangladeshi soil and speaking in a civil society-led premier platform on the South Asian cooperation agenda, it would be remiss of me not to note the seminal role played by Bangladesh, in coordination with Nepal, to create an official forum for regional cooperation (SAARC) almost four decades ago - which was at that time, lest we forget a watershed moment. The inception of SAES in 2008 was partly to complement the official process: after all, "Economic Integration in South Asia: SAFTA and Beyond" was the overarching theme of the first SAES in Colombo, when hopes ran high about SAFTA's potential to advance regional integration, SAFTA having come into force in 2006.

SAES has evolved over the years; the themes and issues covered, and the focus has kept pace with new developments, but importantly, without losing sight of the overriding goal of identifying constructive avenues of regional cooperation. Besides, it is as much about understanding each other and knowledge sharing as the publications that have emerged from the deliberations in SAES attest to.

It is a testimony to SAES being ever cognizant of new developments and changing contexts that this year, under CPD's leadership, the summit seeks to generate ideas for reframing and, shall I say, re-understanding South Asian regional cooperation at a time when, notably, geopolitical contests primarily between countries outside the region but also between the countries in the region and those in the immediate neighbourhood are potentially pulling South Asian countries in different directions. If, in the past, bilateral tensions among South Asian nations had to be always factored in when discussing prospects of regional cooperation, now an additional factor has to be taken into account: the spillovers of shifting global geopolitical moods and alignments onto South Asia. As the programme schedule for this summit shows, traditional yet important issues such as cross-border energy trade, FDI, value chains and logistics, and climate change (to be discussed in parallel sessions) are complemented by an explicit search in the plenary sessions for new avenues and ideas of cooperation, and an understanding of challenges.

I wish us all all success in this long-overdue search. SAWTEE is proud to be part of this initiative,

Thank you.