

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI
PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE DELEGATION LEVEL TALKS WITH
PRIME MINISTER OF BELGIUM**

Brussels, Belgium: 03-10-2013

Your Excellency Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo,

I thank you for your warm words of welcome. It is indeed a pleasure to visit Brussels and to have the opportunity to interact with you.

I thank you for the overview of India-Belgium relations. I deeply appreciate your gracious hospitality and the excellent arrangements made by your Government for the State visit. Allow me to introduce the members of my delegation.

Excellency,

We appreciate your personal commitment to the relations between India and Belgium. Our bilateral relations have acquired a degree of focus and purpose, in particular, in the recent years. We appreciate your role and contribution. I am confident that under your leadership and able guidance, India-Belgium relations will reach new heights.

There is a new dynamism in our relationship. I am confident that both countries will devote full attention to taking the partnership forward in all the areas in which we are engaged.

Excellency,

We fondly recall your visit to India in 1998 as Minister for Economy and Foreign Trade, accompanying the then Crown Prince on an economic mission.

Excellency,

We highly value our friendly and very cordial relationship with Belgium, which is one of our closest partners in the European Union. India-Belgium relations, based on our shared values and interests, such as the rule-of law, freedom of press, protection of human rights and independence of judiciary, have grown considerably in recent years. Our two countries are open, multi-lingual and pluralistic societies. These provide the basic foundation on which we can seek to build our relations.

High level visits between India and Belgium have provided the much needed impetus to strengthen our overall bilateral relations. We have had the opportunity to receive His Majesty King Albert II in November 2008 and the then Crown Prince in March 2010. Prime Minister of India, too, visited Brussels in December 2010 for a bilateral summit meeting. These visits have successfully advanced our common agenda in a number of areas. Within a short span of less than two years, after the formation of your Government, the Foreign Ministers of both our countries have exchanged visits. A high level business delegation led by Princess Astrid is scheduled to visit India in November this year.

Cultural exchanges between India and Belgium have increased in the recent times. We deeply appreciate the support extended by the Government of Belgium and by the Royal family for organization of Indian cultural festivals. I am happy to jointly inaugurate Europalia.India festival with the King of Belgians. This festival will be the largest Indian festival outside India. These festivals greatly help to expand understanding and cooperation between our two countries and would be a catalyst for enhanced people-to-people contacts.

Excellency,

The last few years have seen a difficult economic environment in Europe and elsewhere. While the momentum in bilateral trade

could not be sustained in 2012, we hope that it will regain momentum in 2013 and that we will be able to achieve the target that we set for ourselves - to double our bilateral trade from € 8.8 billion in 2008 in the next five years.

Excellency, if I may elaborate,

In 2012, our trade was € 12.15 billion making Belgium our second largest trade partner in goods sector within the EU, behind Germany. However, this is much below the potential.

I am also happy to note that the Indian nationals engaged in diamond trade in Antwerp are contributing significantly to the Belgian economy. The diamond sector is the largest component of our bilateral trade. However, we need to continue our efforts to both increase and diversify our trade and investment relationship. There is potential for diversification into areas such as life sciences, green technology, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure development and information and communication technology. Belgium with its proven expertise in these fields can become an important partner. Cooperation in these areas must be intensified in the coming years.

I am happy to note that we have reinstated the regular meeting of the India - Belgium and Luxembourg Economic Union (BLEU) Joint Commission. It is an excellent forum for exchange of views on various areas of bilateral economic cooperation, and we should strive to hold its meetings in regular periodicity.

It is also our hope that an early finalisation of the India-EU Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement will, in turn, give further impetus to bilateral trade and investment, which is all the more pertinent in the context of current global economic challenges. We look forward to Belgium's support for bringing the negotiations to an early conclusion.

Excellency,

India and Belgium cooperate very closely in international institutions. I thank you for your support for India's candidature to a permanent seat of an expanded United Nations Security Council.

I would also like to acknowledge Belgium's upfront support for creating an exception for India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to enable us to enter into international cooperation in the area of civilian nuclear energy.

I hope that Belgium will continue its constructive approach and will support us in our efforts to become a full member of the four arms control regimes - NSG, MTCR, Wassenaar Arrangement and Australia Group. A clear public stance by Belgium on this issue would be in line with our excellent cooperation.

Excellency,

Belgium has well-recognized expertise in certain areas of Science and Technology and we feel that there are immense possibilities for cooperation in these spheres.

Excellency,

Cooperation in education has to emerge as one of the important pillars of our partnership. We should explore the possibilities of increasing academic exchanges between Belgian universities and renowned universities of India. I am happy that some MoUs will be signed between India and Belgian Universities today.

We should encourage greater people-to-people contacts between our countries as it will facilitate business and cultural exchanges between our likeminded countries and deepen our relationship.

Excellency,

India views European Union as one of its principal partners with whom we have developed an intensive and multifaceted relationship. We are having annual summits since 2000 and the relationship was elevated to the level of strategic partnership in 2004.

Before I conclude, let me reiterate that we attach high priority to our relationship with Belgium. Our shared values make us natural partners. We need to progress by taking concrete actions which bring direct benefits to our citizens. This is the only way we can widen the base of our partnership and impart it greater sustainability. It is in this light that we need to define our future interactions.

Excellency, I very much look forward to continuing our exchanges.

Thank you