

## **Statement by SRSG Natalia Gherman at the conference “Importance of the Great Silk Road: Present and Future Development”**

**ASHGABAT, 6 DECEMBER 2018**

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Turkmen side with this initiative and excellent organization of the Conference on the importance of the Silk Road.

Ashgabat is an auspicious place to host such a meeting, since this year is proclaimed “Turkmenistan – Heart of the Great Silk Road.”

And while the heritage and culture of the ancient Silk Road remains palpable in Turkmenistan, this country is also taking strong steps to ensure that its place as a crossroads of continents remains a vital part of its national identity.

All of us, representatives of the United Nations, are honored to be your partners in organizing this Conference, aimed at promoting our shared values enshrined in relevant international law provisions.

In December 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 67/104 encouraging the Member states to promote respect, tolerance, inter cultural dialogue, providing for sustainable economic growth and ownership of development processes. It also proclaimed the International Decade for Rapprochement of Cultures 2013-2022.

Furtheron, on December 2015, the UN General Assembly stipulated that culture is an enabler of sustainable development and that policies responsive to cultural contexts can yield inclusive and equitable outcomes. It is also important to recall, that the General Assembly reaffirmed that sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security and that culture can contribute to conflict prevention and resolution as well as reconciliation and recovery.

Along these lines, the development of connectivity among the Silk Road countries will be always supported by the United Nations. Turkmenistan has emerged as a champion of the General Assembly Resolution 72/212 on “Strengthening the links between all modes of transport to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals” which was adopted in December 2017.

Last year in Ashgabat, 5 Silk Road states signed Lapis Lazuli transport corridor Agreement, that was an example of fostering regional connectivity in the spirit of the Silk Road. Only a few days ago here, in Ashgabat, the Ministers of the signatory countries reconfirmed their commitment to this project in a dedicated Conference.

The Silk Road sites inscribed on the World Heritage List and UNESCO’s current project on developing an Interactive Atlas of Cultural Interactions along the Silk Road serve important academic and heritage roles but also help to raise awareness around the world of this important history.

This should result in renewed interest that can help the countries realize the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. It will also facilitate increased and enhanced people-to-people contacts between Central Asian citizens and visitors from around the world. I encourage each of the countries of the region to fully take advantage of these important opportunities for developing touristic routes that will also generate new incomes for the economies of the Silk Road states.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, that I lead, was the first United Nations political mission set up with a specific mandate for preventive diplomacy. We work with Turkmenistan and its neighbours on a range of issues, helping and supporting their efforts to maintain peace and stability in Central Asia and beyond.

One of the most important things that we do, I believe, is working to build trust among the leaders and peoples of the five countries of the region. This we achieve by creating opportunities for cooperation and people-to-people contacts, not only among high-ranking leaders but also civil servants, civil society, women, youth and others.

Building trust remains an absolute priority for all of us. Let me recall, that opening the 73rd General Assembly Session UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the world was suffering from a bad case of “trust deficit disorder”, with people losing faith in political establishments amid rising polarization and populism. In this context, the initiative of the President of Turkmenistan H.E. Mr. Berdimuhamedov to hold the year 2019 under the sign of Peace and Trust resonates with the priorities of the United Nations, globally, and with UN’s activities here, in the region.

Increasing cooperation and human contacts were also a hallmark of the Great Silk Road, which stretched from eastern Asia to western Europe and beyond. In this sense, I like to think that even our regional political mission, which is based in Turkmenistan, is contributing to keeping the spirit of the Silk Road alive.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is truly an exciting time to be here in Central Asia. The scope and scale of bilateral and regional cooperation has been broadening and deepening at a truly amazing speed in recent years. The countries of Central Asia have taken impressive efforts to increase intra-regional trade and connectivity. These efforts are bearing fruit that will benefit the people of the region and beyond.

At the most basic level, people’s lives are improving thanks to the swiftly expanding network of intra-regional transportation links, including rail, bus, air travel and potentially cruise ships on the Caspian Sea. The countries of the region are resolving disputes over their international borders and opening new crossing points. They are also easing visa restrictions and there is even talk of creating a new “Silk Road” visa, giving travelers easy access to several countries of the region.

My office is pleased to support these processes and encourage them even further.

These trends are expanding to include Afghanistan as well. Each of the Central Asian countries is extending their trade, transportation, cultural and humanitarian linkages to Afghanistan, which is a significant contribution to fostering stability and development there. The United Nations, and UNRCCA in particular, strongly supports this.

For several years, we have made a point of inviting Afghan delegations to participate in our events on topics ranging from regional water management to counter-terrorism and inter-parliamentary interaction and we will enhance this cooperation.

Today, we all shall support these positive developments, thereby enhancing intra-regional trust and understanding.

These steps demonstrate the Central Asians' commitment to paying homage to the Silk Road traditions of their forebears. And by promoting regional cooperation, including by convening today's event, our host country, Turkmenistan, is indeed continuing its tradition as the Heart of the Great Silk Road.

I cannot express enough support for such initiatives and the United Nations will continue to strive to be an effective and trusted partner to Turkmenistan and to all the countries representing this strong community, to revitalize the ancient Silk Road in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thank you.