

Assistant Secretary Blake's Remarks
to the Asian University for Women
Chittagong, Bangladesh, February 15, 2012, 4:35 p.m.,
20 minutes

Thank you to Vice Chancellor Ahmed for such a warm introduction. I would also like to thank members of the University staff and the many impressive students in the audience with whom I've had the pleasure of speaking this morning.

For me, it's a real treat travel to Chittagong for the first time, a bustling, multi-cultural city that exemplifies the dynamism and potential of all of South Asia. With this city's globally competitive economic zone, its seaport evolving into a transit hub for the entire region, and of course all of you, intrepid and well-educated women, I really do see South Asia's unlimited potential. And that's what I'd like to speak with you all about today.

First, I'd like to spend a bit of time discussing a priority subject for both this university and the United States: the empowerment of women. Then I'd like to briefly discuss Secretary Clinton's vision for a New Silk Road, which seeks to establish energy, trade, transit, and people-to-people linkages throughout this entire region. Finally, I'd like to turn to economic developments and opportunities in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia regions. Of course if we have time left, I would happily take questions.

The Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh

As someone whose job it is to pay attention to politics in other countries, and to work with foreign governments, I've noticed something about Bangladesh: You have no shortage of impressive, trail-blazing female leaders. I have no doubt that right now I'm speaking to women who will take their places as leaders not just here in Bangladesh, but in all of the countries represented in AUW's student body, including Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka.

By leveraging this rich diversity, AUW plays a unique and vital role in shaping the future of this region and the world. That's exactly why I wanted to come here and speak with you today – to explain to Asia's future business executives, politicians, scientists, journalists, and activists what the United States is doing to support women, and to promote economic integration and opportunity in your neighborhood.

To unlock the full potential of women requires their inclusion and full participation in the political, economic, and social life of a country. This is something the United States works to support through policy initiatives and projects focusing on strengthening women's social and economic empowerment, building capacity for self-help groups, encouraging political participation of women in the region, preventing violence against women, and promoting early childhood education.

We also strongly support micro finance programs, which, I might add, were practically invented in Bangladesh and continue to play an important and positive role in improving the lives of women and families here, and around the world. Just look at Bangladesh's own Grameen Bank and BRAC, whose pioneering work has helped millions of poor people, mostly women, pull themselves and their families out of poverty.

Of course, Bangladesh has made women's empowerment a national priority, resulting in steep drops in maternal and infant mortality, and more girls attending and graduating from schools. Like Bangladesh, the United States supports activities that empower women, because it is impossible for a country to realize its full potential, to advance or develop, if half of the population is excluded from meaningful participation in political or economic life.

By preparing women to be skilled professionals, innovators, and service-oriented leaders, AUW is the standard bearer in the region's effort to modernize and help women achieve their full potential. The United States is proud to serve as a partner with AUW on programs that advance these objectives.

One way the State Department is helping women meet their full potential is through the Women's Empowerment Dialogue. Through this program, we are working hard to develop a regional political and leadership training program for female grassroots

activists from South Asia, to help enable them to be better leaders and advocates in their chosen field.

The training will provide the opportunity for women to develop networks, and share experiences and best practices. And that training will take place right here at the Asian University for Women. Given our interest in developing women entrepreneurs and AUW's increasingly important role in the region, we hope to find additional ways in which we might accomplish even more together. Perhaps some of you have some ideas!

Increasing Opportunity Through Trade

I know that each of you is not only focused on political and grassroots leadership—you are all keenly interested in increasing economic opportunities, not only for yourselves, but for women and society as a whole. As you leave the halls of this university, you will want to put to use in the workplace all of the skills you acquired here. The skills you have learned will help you to find a meaningful job, and the higher your level of education, the greater your opportunities for economic advancement.

Economic opportunity is important to everyone, and one of the best ways to increase economic opportunity and development for all is through greater cooperation and trade between countries. Trade with neighbors makes good economic sense – just look at the United States, where two of our top three trading partners – Canada and Mexico – are on our borders, and account for almost thirty percent of our total trade value.

In contrast, trade among the countries of South and Central Asia is shockingly low. Only about five percent of the trade in the region is between South Asian countries. The silver lining, however, is that the countries of the region share a vast, untapped economic potential. We understand that change will not take place overnight, but a number of recent positive developments across South Asia offer reason for significant hope for increased trade, which will lead to greater economic opportunities and mutual prosperity.

The United States is extremely encouraged by the positive recent steps taken by the Governments of India and Pakistan to initiate closer trade and commercial ties, and to de-link talks on economic normalization from other lingering political issues. Increased economic linkages between India and Pakistan will create a natural foundation for a stronger bilateral relationship and – most importantly – yield dividends for citizens from both countries.

We were also pleased by the historic transit trade agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and look forward to its full implementation. On the open border between India and Nepal, the free flow of goods, information, and people has been a positive development for both countries, and is increasing in volume every day. Many aspects of this freedom of movement can and should act as a model for the rest of the region.

Sheikh Hasina's landmark visit to New Delhi in January 2010 and Prime Minister Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011 are but two visible examples of recent efforts to put aside longstanding differences, enhance trade, and build new bridges, presenting a credible model for regional cooperation throughout South Asia. Just last year, Bangladesh's annual exports to India grew more than 60 percent – and that was before the tariff reductions announced by Indian Prime Minister Singh during his visit. In a promising sign that this growth is likely to continue, by some estimates quadruple, over the next two years, a Bangladesh trade delegation to India returned with \$90 million in orders shortly after India announced the tariff reductions.

On the multilateral side in South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has charted a path for increasing regional trade, and provides the region with a platform for discussing the technical agreements that will allow regional commerce to fulfill its potential. Through SAARC, we see the South Asian Free Trade Area as an important avenue for fostering increased trade flows and prosperity throughout the region, and look forward to its full implementation.

We see these types of developing trade relationships as win-win for all countries involved, and we are working hard to support them. Ultimately, we believe these

regional trade ties will unlock economic potential, and make countries wealthier and more secure by opening opportunities for all citizens, including future university graduates like you.

Reviving the Grand Trunk Road

As we look at the world today, we understand that the geopolitical realities of the 21st century require cooperation and collaboration between states and economies like never before. During her trip to the region last summer, Secretary Clinton outlined a vision of regional economic cooperation, trade liberalization, and increased trade flows in this region, calling for the creation of a 'New Silk Road.'

In essence, this New Silk Road vision seeks to strengthen regional economic integration and promote economic opportunity between South and Central Asia through two primary means: First, through energy and infrastructure – which includes roads, bridges, electrical transmission grids, railways and pipelines – *to connect* goods, services, and people. And second, through trade liberalization – which includes the reduction of non-tariff trade barriers, improved regulatory regimes, transparent border clearance procedures, and coordinated policies – *to accelerate the flow* of goods, services, and people throughout the region.

The idea is a simple one: by maximizing the use of transportation and energy infrastructure and actively promoting cross-border collaboration and trade, Central and South Asia can once again become a bustling hub for global commerce.

The economic potential of a more open and integrated region – home to over one-fifth of the world's population – is virtually unlimited. As the New Silk Road vision becomes a reality, I can imagine goods produced here in Bangladesh making their way to neighboring markets in India, and beyond into Afghanistan and Central Asia, much like the historic Grand Trunk Road. Success, of course, will require fully including the talent of women, because female entrepreneurs and policy makers are critical engines of economic growth.

Bangladesh: Bridging South and East Asia

Bangladesh's future is not only about the future of South Asia, but about its growing relationship with East Asia and the rest of the world. Just last year, President Obama announced a renewed focus on American engagement with East Asia. The region already generates more than half of global output and nearly half of global trade.

By virtue of its geography – linking South Asia and East Asia – Bangladesh is poised not just to take advantage of increased trade and economic opportunities with neighbors like India as part of the New Silk Road vision, but to tap into the substantial East Asian markets as well. And as the site of a port which handles 80 percent of all Bangladeshi imports and exports, Chittagong is a crucial link in the economic development of landlocked southern Asia, including Northeast India, Bhutan, Nepal, and parts of Southern China and Burma.

As a consistent advocate for greater regional integration and cooperation, Bangladesh has demonstrated that it understands the potential that lies to the east. Regional organizations such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, or BIMSTEC, which seek to promote collaboration and economic links between South and Southeast Asia, and in which Bangladesh plays a prominent role, will gain increasing importance as countries seek to grow their economies. Never has the potential for collaboration been greater or more important.

Next door to Bangladesh, unfolding events in Burma represent an opportunity for greater regional cooperation. Burma has begun to undertake a series of positive political and economic reforms, which have the potential to open a new chapter for the Burmese people and for Burma's standing in the international community. In December, Secretary Clinton reiterated the United States' commitment to principled engagement with the Government of Burma as well as our intention to match "action-for-action" to demonstrate support for the reform process. In January, in response to the release of a substantial number of high-profile political prisoners, Secretary Clinton announced that we would start the process of exchanging ambassadors, and identify a

candidate to serve as U.S. Ambassador, for the first time since 1990, and to strengthen and deepen our ties with both the people and the government.

This is a lengthy process, and it will, of course, depend on continuing progress and change. But an American Ambassador in Burma will help strengthen our efforts to support the historic and promising steps that are now unfolding. Secretary Clinton has also instructed the State Department to identify further steps the United States could take in conjunction with our friends and allies to support the reforms underway in Burma.

Should the nascent political and economic opening continue in Burma, Bangladesh is positioned to be one of biggest beneficiaries of increased regional integration. If land trade between India and Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, and the “Seven Sisters” of India increases, much of that trade would transit Bangladesh, reducing significantly the time and cost associated with shipping goods -- and generating jobs and revenue here. Proposed rail or other transport corridors, linked with existing railroads in China to Burma, would provide a land route for South Asian goods destined for the Chinese market and elsewhere in East Asia.

Conclusion

The United States continues to look toward a future where the countries of Central and South Asia, and East Asia, work together and with the international community to achieve greater economic integration, and the prosperity that will come with it. Although the pace of change is often slow and the challenges substantial, U.S. engagement can and will focus on long-term, meaningful results.

For South Asia to capitalize on the exceptional growth of recent years, we must all work together to more effectively engage governments and the private sector to increase the number of women entrepreneurs, and management positions, ease women’s entry into business, ensure access to capital for women, and create more economic opportunities for women across the board.

We will look to leaders like you as partners in this process.

Now I'd be happy to take your questions.