

**SPEECH BY AMBASSADOR PAUL BEKKERS, DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF
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BRUSSELS CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN, 04-05 October 2016

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was born and grew up in the Netherlands which is known for its famous artists. The period of the 17th century is referred to as the Dutch Golden Age and is associated with hundreds of masterpieces. Portraits, landscapes and still lifes with vivid natural colors marked my understanding of art and human genius from early childhood. One such painting, a great example of this period, is “Meisje met de parel”, “Girl with a Pearl Earring”, a beautiful portrait of a young girl wearing a blue and gold headscarf. It was painted in 1665 by Johan Vermeer who, insisting on natural colors, would produce ultramarine color by meticulously crushing costly lapis lazuli stones imported from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is indeed closer to Europe than we think. And the way the color blue was indispensable to a renaissance artist’s palette, the same way stability in Afghanistan remains of utmost significance to and inseparable from the security in the Eurasian continent.

The joint *Communique* of today’s conference states that “Development and security are interconnected challenges for Afghanistan’s state-building process, and need to be underpinned by genuine political support at the regional level.” This is precisely where we see our role. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe comprises 57 participating States and nine partner countries. Afghanistan has been an OSCE Partner for Co-operation since 2003. We started building our close relationship by focusing our commitment on strengthening the security and management of borders between the Central Asian States and Afghanistan. We gradually expanded our assistance to combating terrorism and trafficking in small arms, illicit drugs and human beings, to areas which would emerge from meaningful cross-border co-operation such as environmental issues and water

management, empowerment of women and youth, and promotion of education and capacity building.

Let me elaborate on three areas in which we are particularly active:

1. *Borders*. Our Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, provides expert-level training for border and customs. Since the establishment of this institution in 2009, we have trained 850 Afghans. We also teach courses on tactical patrolling in our field presence in Tajikistan. Only last week we trained a group of 13 Afghan border police officers in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.
2. *Education and capacity building*. This is one of the UN Sustainable Goals and it is also a key area of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework for 2017-2021. Every year, in the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, we enroll up to eight Afghan students, who obtain Master's degrees in political science and economic development. We invite Afghan young diplomats and junior professionals to our headquarters in Vienna to enhance their skills and help become a true asset for the future of their country.
3. *Empowerment of women and youth*. We continue to actively promote the participation of youth in our education projects. In the framework of the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, we involve Afghan high-level female politicians, decision makers and a civil society representatives into our activities.

Many of our Afghanistan related activities benefit from the OSCE's presence in all five Central Asian participating States, which allows us to include Afghanistan in our well-established efforts to promote regional security and co-operation. In this context, we have taken note of the strong emphasis on regional co-operation contained in the **EU's 2016 Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy**. We welcome today's meeting as a further opportunity to reflect on developing innovative approaches to offer more targeted support to Afghanistan within a regional perspective.

Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Each of the OSCE participating States has a different level of partnership with Afghanistan but we share one common vision: a stable and prosperous Afghanistan in a stable and prosperous region. I wish that our partnership with Afghanistan will contribute to a more secure future for all of us, a future in which Afghans can feel secure and one in which visitors will once again feel safe to leave their vehicles, take a leisurely stroll through the bazaars and meet ordinary people on the street. When that happens, I would want to talk them about art, the presence of lapis lazuli in our famous paintings and show them Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" on my smart phone.

Thank you.