President, China Institute of International Studies,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

I wish to thank China Institute of International Studies for inviting me to participate in this Round-Table on Asian Regional Cooperation Organizations. I also wish to thank the Institute for warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to us since our arrival in this beautiful city of Boao.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

As you are aware, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises eight Member States. Established in 1985, it is a people-centric organization aimed at promoting welfare of the peoples of South Asia and improving their quality of life through accelerated economic growth and social progress. SAARC has made considerable progress in the attainment of these objectives.

The institution of a number of legal instruments in diverse fields demonstrates the political will of the Member States to promote regional cooperation. In the areas of trade and economy, the signing of the Agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) should be seen as a logical progression toward a free trade area from the previous preferential trading arrangement. The signing of the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services is another milestone achievement. We are also actively pursuing the Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments.

With nearly a quarter of the global population and abundant natural resources, South Asia has a vast potential for economic integration. Therefore, as envisioned by the SAARC leaders, our ultimate goal is to create South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a phased and planned manner through a Free Trade Area, a Customs Union, a Common Market, and a Common Economic and Monetary Union.

The SAARC Social Charter identifies a number of targets to be achieved in a number of areas, including the promotion of health, empowerment of women, development of youth and protection of children, especially the girl child. Other regional instruments that supplement regional cooperation in the social sector include the Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia; and Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women & Children for Prostitution. A SAARC Youth Charter and A SAARC Widows’ Charter are under consideration.

Besides, SAARC has introduced several other conventions to promote regional cooperation in Agriculture, Environment, Climate Change and Natural Disasters, Terrorism and Drugs Trafficking; and Energy.
Poverty Alleviation has been declared as the over-arching goal of SAARC. Having observed 2006-2015 as the SAARC Decade on Poverty Alleviation, a Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation is being pursued vigorously to reduce the incidence of poverty across the region. A Ministerial-level mechanism on Poverty Alleviation reviews the progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action. Success stories and best practices in poverty alleviation are disseminated through SAARC Development Report.

Improved intra-regional connectivity is the sine qua non for effective regional integration. SAARC’s quest for strengthening connectivity is manifest in the declaration of 2010-2020, as the ‘SAARC Decade of Intraregional Connectivity’. Regional agreements on Motor Vehicles, Railways and Air Services are under consideration. The Indian Ocean Cargo and Passenger Ferry Service will be operational soon. Moreover, in order to link South Asia with contiguous regions, we are working with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to conduct a Study to explore possible avenues for connecting South Asia with Central Asia and South East Asia.

Endowed with vast hydropower, natural gas, solar, wind and bio-fuel resources, South Asia offers tremendous potential for regional cooperation in energy generation, transmission and trade. We are vigorously pursuing the concept of SAARC Energy Ring. The SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation has been signed. In addition, we are working to identify regional and sub-regional projects in the areas of power generation, transmission and trade with a view to meeting the increasing demand for power in the region.

Representing vast agrarian economies, SAARC attaches high priority to regional collaboration in agriculture. Our collective efforts in ensuring food and nutrition security for the region draw inspiration from SAARC Agriculture Vision-2020, supplemented by regional mechanisms as the SAARC Food Bank and the SAARC Seed Bank. Our project-based collaboration with other organizations covers areas as ensuring food and nutrition security, controlling trans-boundary animal diseases, enhancing livelihood of small farmers, and scaling up Climate-Smart Agriculture.

As women constitute almost 50% of South Asia’s population, bringing women into the mainstream of development is a high priority for SAARC, paying focused attention to their economic empowerment and skill development. To achieve this end, besides the mechanism of Ministerial Meeting on Women, a Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children, and a SAARC Gender Policy Advocacy Group have been activated. Our focus has been on promoting women’s education; protecting their rights; ensuring that they are free from all sorts of discrimination; and above all, empowering them economically.

In order to pursue effective regional cooperation in specialized areas, SAARC has established four Specialized Bodies, namely, SAARC Development Fund (SDF); South Asian University (SAU); SAARC Regional Standards Organization (SARSO); and SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO).

The SAARC Development Fund is a funding mechanism for promoting project-based regional collaboration. A number of sub-regional and regional projects in social, economic and infrastructure fields have either been implemented or are being implemented under the Fund.

Likewise, the establishment of the South Asian University is a remarkable achievement of SAARC. The University provides quality education to South Asian and foreign students and
researchers in a number of disciplines. A new modern University Campus is being built in New Delhi on 100 acres of land.

SAARC has four Regional Centres: (i) Agriculture Centre, Dhaka; (ii) Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre, Kathmandu; (iii) Cultural Centre, Colombo; and (iv) Energy Centre, Islamabad. These Centres of Excellence have been actively pursuing project-based regional cooperation in their respective area. An Interim Unit of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre is operational in Gujrat, India.

A SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme has been instituted that enables entitled persons to travel across the region without visa.

Bestowed with fascinating natural beauty and cultural diversity, South Asia offers huge potential for regional cooperation to promote both intra-regional and international tourism. Our collaborative efforts are geared toward making South Asia an attractive common tourist destination.

Besides being an Observer at the United Nations, SAARC has formal collaborative arrangements with a number of regional and international organizations, with particular emphasis on project-based collaboration. SAARC has also been actively participating in the RECCA Process and the Heart of Asia/Istanbul Process to support the overall development, and enhancement of economic and trade ties among Afghanistan and its neighbours.

SAARC has nine Observers, including the European Union. We are working with the Observers to promote productive, demand-driven and objective project-based cooperation in seven prioritized areas, namely, Communication; Connectivity; Agriculture; Public Health; Energy; Environment; and Economic Cooperation.

In order to promote people-to-people contacts and to engage civil society in the attainment of its objectives, SAARC has granted affiliation to a number of civil society groups.

In concluding my remarks, I wish to state that the events like this Round-Table are useful in learning from each other’s experience in regional cooperation. These exchanges also provide inputs for benefitting from best practices as well as solutions to the challenges faced by regional organizations.

My delegation and I look forward to benefitting from the discourse during this Round-Table.

I thank you.