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Heart of Asia conference begins amid regional tensions

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As the tensions continue to haunt the region, the two-day Heart of Asia Conference on peace and stability in Afghanistan got under way in India's northwestern city of Amritsar on Sunday.

Representatives from about 40 countries and groupings like the European Union are attending the event, which is aimed to explore ways of dealing with the challenges facing Afghanistan.

Revival of the peace process, dealing with an escalating Taliban insurgency and eradicating the menace of terrorism in the region are likely to figure prominently at the meeting of regional and global powers.

A day earlier, senior officials from 14 countries, including India, China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, as well as delegates from 17 supporting nations conferred on issues of common concern like radicalisation and extremism.

Afghanistan's connectivity with regional states to spur trade also came up for discussion at Saturday's meeting, which was co-chaired by India's Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar and Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Ashraf Ghani jointly inaugurated the conference, which is expected to underline the need for adopting a regional counter-terror framework'

Key connectivity initiatives like the Chabahar port, a five-nation railway project and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline will likely come up for discussion.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates are part of the initiative that was launched in 2011.

Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Finland, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the US support the forum. A security blanket has been thrown around the venue, Amritsar.

On Saturday evening, Pakistan's Foreign Security Advisor Sartaj Aziz attended a dinner hosted for visiting dignitaries at the heritage village Sadda Pind on the outskirts of Amritsar. Modi and Ghani attended the dinner hosted by the Punjab chief minister.