

*Presidents,
Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of the ECO Member States,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen*

On behalf of the people and the Government of Pakistan, I have the privilege to welcome our distinguished guests to this springtime of political and economic rebirth in Islamabad. May the colors and fragrance of the season be your special welcome from our people, our city and our Nation.

In the tapestry of history, our strong cultural and trading ties, our religious bonds, our mutual goals and objectives have woven us together in to a rich communal cloth. Our poetry, our literature, our songs our dances, our legends reflect the community of our Nations, the brotherhood of our people.

This common heritage has given us the collective political will and the modus operandi for further regional cooperation and integration amongst our ten countries.

Excellencies,

The cleansing winds of economic liberalization and free trade are sweeping through the World.

We stand at the threshold of a rapidly changing post Cold War order, a post-modern political era of textual complexity that has replaced the simplistic polarities of the East West confrontation.

Powerful regional organizations for economic cooperation like the European Community, the North Atlantic Free Trade Association, ASEAN and APEC are replacing NATO and the Warsaw Pact as the defining operationalizations of the new millennium.

Markets have replaced missiles as the measure of might.

The ten nations of the ECO need to take full advantage of the new, worldwide economic trends by maximizing regional economic cooperation.

Our natural resource potential will only be realized when we work together to develop economic competitiveness in the world marketplace.

Even more important, we must educate and train our people so that they will have the skills in the modern marketplace, to provide for their children and end the cycle of poverty that plagues us in the developing world.

Together our populations comprise over 300 million people. Together we live on an enormous land mass spanning 7 million square kilometers. We are an economic force to be

reckoned with in the post Cold War era. By realizing the full potential mutualities of our economies, we can, Inshallah, turn our peoples' hopes into substantive achievements in the emerging economic order.

Excellencies,

Just two years ago, we took the historic decision to enlarge the membership of ECO to include Afghanistan and the six newly independent states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In these two years, we have drawn up promising plans in the form of the Istanbul Declaration and the Quetta Plan of Action for the development of infrastructure in the region. We are exploring joint ventures for intra and inter-regional trade.

Progress towards the realization of these goals may be slow. But we must be sure they are steady and keep heading in the right direction – first steps in a long and arduous journey towards closer cooperation.

On the eve of our momentous meeting, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan made an agreement in Islamabad opening the Karakorum highway, the original silk route for trade with the outside world. With this agreement, an era of much contested search for warm waters was brought to a peaceful denouement.

During our summit meeting, we have to sign an agreement for facilitating transit trade throughout the ECO region. Integrated plans always take some time to reach fruition. However, our national development plans already reflect the higher priority accorded to the development of infrastructural links within the ECO region.

The Peoples Party Government of Pakistan has already allocated Rs.500 million for upgrading the Karakorum Highway into a modern, all-weather road. In anticipation of the inevitable stabilization of Afghanistan, we have drawn up plans for reconstruction of its highway system as well as the creation of a railway link integrating Pakistan's rail network with that of Central Asia.

These measures are aimed at providing the shortest and most economical outlets to the sea for our Central Asian neighbours. We understand that similar measures are currently underway in Iran and Turkey which would help boost the regional southward trade traffic considerably.

Simultaneously, these infrastructural links will promote people-to-people contacts essential for joint ventures and increase awareness of trading opportunities.

For us in Pakistan, there has been a dramatic growth in regional aviation links. Regular air services are now available to virtually most ECO capitals. Air travel has become simple and safe.

Unfortunately, prospects for economic development are often being overshadowed by conflict and turbulence. Our region manifests human tragedy – the suffering of the people of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kashmir and Tajikistan. This continuing human tragedy is an avoidable impediment to the process of development, promotion of trade and investment in our region.

It stands between our region and full integration into the new technology of the new century, the modern miracle of the third millennium.

Pakistan seeks peaceful and cooperative relations with all its neighbours. We are still burdened with the lingering legacy of colonialism, the baggage of the aborted agenda of autonomy, which continues to bedevil our relations with India.

For over four years, an indigenous uprising has erupted in Indian-occupied Kashmir. It is an intifada for the basic and universal right of self-determination. This struggle for freedom has evoked a draconian response from New Delhi, making a mockery of human rights.

Pakistan is a direct party to the Kashmir dispute, as recognized by the United Nations. Our people feel strongly about the on-going plight of their Kashmiri brethren. We have tried, so far unsuccessfully, to convince India to allow the international community to implement Security Council resolutions, guaranteeing the right of the people of Kashmir and Jammu to decide, like all other states on the subcontinent in 1947 and 1948 to accede to the Muslim state of Pakistan or the Hindu majority state of India. Until the basic right of self-determination is implemented, genuine peace in South Asia will be beyond our grasp.

After a decade long miraculous fight against repression and occupation by the communist superpower, peace still eludes the tragic people of Afghanistan. The continuing fratricide is an on-going cause of concern to all of us. We continue to work with the UN and with the OIC to achieve peaceful reconciliation in Afghanistan.

We fully support the process of bring about peace and stability in Tajikistan through the good offices of the UN Secretary General. The aggression on Azerbaijan needs to be reversed and is causing sympathy and concern in Islamabad, as elsewhere in the ECO region. All such efforts and measures would, we hope, promote peace and stability in the region.

Our region has been blessed by Allah with an abundance of resources – oil, gas, coal, hydro-electricity, various minerals, as well as industrial and agricultural goods. There is indeed a vast untapped potential for development, beside the proven ability to absorb and utilize new technology.

Our economies must generate adequate investment funds, acquire managerial skills geared to the market economy and, in case of our new member-states, develop alternative routes of access to world markets.

We have taken some steps to meet these challenges within the region. Commensurate with our relatively modest resources, Pakistan has offered training facilities at our training institutions. We have provided supplier credits to our ECO partners. However, we need to develop a more coherent approach to resolving these problems, including joint efforts to secure capital resources from international institutions and private sector investors.

I may recall here that the new trading regime under W.T.O. envisages flow of services just like the flow of other commodities. We, therefore, need to focus on the services in our joint deliberations, in our planning for regional integration.

The entire ECO region is in a swirl of systematic transition. We need to pool our material

and human resources to overcome the strains of this transition. Clearly, we are in different stages of development, both economic and political. But we are all undergoing rapid change, a remarkable transformation. There is much we must do individually, and some of that restructuring is difficult, many of our economic decisions are painful. Nevertheless, we must proceed with the market agenda of the new millennium, and proceed on the regional integration of our economies.

Through this period we need a lot less preaching and a lot more learning. We must sharpen our focus. With the increased involvement of the private sector in development activity, our governments need to go forth to redefine regulatory functions, to simplifying procedures, to provide necessary economic information and generally to produce an environment conducive to regional cooperation.

Pakistan fully recognizes the merits of the South-South Cooperation and world-wide regionalization of economies in EC, ASEAN, NAFTA and APEC.

We are aware that regional economic development is a necessary prerequisite to peace and stability. We are equally mindful that economic development and political development must proceed together, that we must never have to chose between them.

The imperatives of regional cooperation have never been greater and more challenging than in the rapidly changing regional and international economic environment of today. The establishment of a Group of Eminent Persons for enhancing the effectiveness of ECO is a very welcome step.

I would like to compliment the ECO Ministers and Senior Officials for their contribution at the meetings of the Council of Ministers and Senior Officials. Important decisions were taken to facilitate the finalization of regional projects.

It is our hope that at the Islamabad Summit, major agreements on Simplification of Visa Procedures for the Businessmen of ECO countries, ECO Trade and Development Bank, ECO Shipping Company and ECO Air will be signed to build an institutional basis for economic collaboration. The Treaty of Izmir also envisages the establishment of a Re-insurance Company. We expect to arrive at a decision about the establishment of the ECO Re-insurance Company at Karachi.

This organization has also forged closer links with various international bodies on the one hand and Regional Groupings on the other. I express our appreciation to the Secretary General of ECO for his dedication and contribution to the work of the Organization.

Following the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, global trade has entered a new phase. The ECO countries need to evaluate the implementation of this development with particular reference to the World Trade Organization and the newly liberalized trading environment in which the ECO member states will have to operate and compete.

Excellencies,

I have no doubt in my mind that our region is capable of taking a quantum leap into an uncharted future – a future of unlimited opportunity, a future of infinite hope.

We have already enshrined the political will and vision for this extraordinary new era in the Istanbul Declaration and Quetta Plan of Action.

We now need to mobilize – jointly and individually – financial resources as well as managerial and technical skills to secure timely implementation of our common objectives.

The task before us is not easy. But this is a remarkable time of transition and transformation, and the decisions we take now can effect the lives of our people, and the very futures of our nations, as we cross into a new millennium. The times demand innovation, the times demand boldness, the times demand courage.

As it was said long ago,

“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith”.

Thank you, distinguished friends.

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