



## **SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS**

**3rd Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of  
Economic Cooperation Organization (PAECO),**

**Baku - Azerbaijan**

**May 16 - 18, 2022**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The 3rd Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of Economic Cooperation Organization was held in Baku - Azerbaijan from May 16 - 18, 2022 under the overarching theme of “**Cooperation in the Post-Pandemic Period: Challenges and Opportunities for Recovery**”. Hosted by the Honorable Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan, H.E. Ms. Sahiba Gafarova, the event proved another milestone towards institutionalizing the PAECO and providing a framework for enhanced regional cooperation.

The conference aimed to hold focused parliamentary dialogue for guiding respective governments of member states with concrete policy way forwards with regard to prioritized implementation of agreements reached on following key themes:

- i. **Prioritizing regional trade** through overcoming hurdles and challenges in implementation of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA);
- ii. **Drawing a roadmap to maximize connectivity, mobility and accessibility** by making major ECO transport corridors commercially viable and operational and contribute to achieve goals of information society in the region; This ranges from simplified visa regime to development of air, rail and road links, building of bridges; mutual security of all routes as well as implementation of Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) and ICT Connectivity Strategy on priority basis.
- iii. **Formulating a joint strategy for enhancing people to people contacts** in post-pandemic period by advocating respective governments to encourage academic and cultural exchanges, sports as well as promotion of wide ranges of tourism e.g. religious, cultural, health and travel.
- iv. **Optimum utilization and synergizing parliamentary diplomacy** through prioritized interventions of parliamentary friendship groups and cross-party caucuses as means to continue advocacy with their respective government to facilitate implementation of all agreements reached in addition to continued bilateral and multilateral/regional dialogue on imperative issues related to women, youth and cultural affairs.

The Honorable Speakers/Heads of Delegations from the PAECO Member Parliaments, Parliamentarians and staffers participated in the conference. Thematic deliberations in meetings of committees were conducted during the conference to enable joint brainstorming for devising meaningful strategies, policy decisions and concrete recommendations as the way forwards required for mitigating negative effects of the pandemic in the region by reviving enhanced cooperation and economic activity among the member states. The opportunity created by this nonaligned platform of parliamentary leadership came at an absorbing time in history where the global community was endeavoring to create synergies for cooperation by evolving regional interdependence and enhanced dialogue, in the post pandemic period.

In a nutshell, the 3rd General Conference of the PAECO provided a much-needed opportunity for targeted advocacy with respective executive/governments in power to

promote time bound implementation of all agreements reached in the areas cited above. The conference also offered an imperative role to existing forums of parliamentary diplomacy and cross-party caucuses such as the Friendship Groups, Parliamentary Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals and the Young Parliamentarians Forum, to continue robust advocacy with their respective governments to overcome all hurdles and challenges that hinder regional cooperation in addition to promotion of bilateral and multilateral cooperation amongst the PAECO Member States *viz a viz* women, youth and cultural matters.

### **HISTORY:**

The idea of establishing the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO (PAECO) was envisioned by the National Assembly of Pakistan. In order to transform the notion into reality, the National Assembly of Pakistan hosted the meeting of the Drafting Committee to finalize the Charter and Rules of the PAECO in September 2012. The said meeting drafted the Charter and Rules of PAECO and the same were approved by the Speakers / Heads of Delegations during the First Conference of PAECO held in Islamabad in February 2013. The Article 4(c) of the PAECO Charter states that *“The Conference shall meet once a year in one of the Member countries, preferably by rotation in alphabetic order”*. Unfortunately, the PAECO went into dormancy for a period of eight years after its first conference as Afghanistan (being the first in alphabetical order) was unable to host the second conference of PAECO due to obvious reasons. Therefore, the National Assembly of Pakistan, as Secretariat of PAECO, once again took the lead and hosted the Second PAECO Conference in Islamabad in June 2021. Thereby, the Wolesi Jirga of Afghanistan once again offered to host the Third PAECO Conference in Kabul in 2022. However, due to the political upheaval in Afghanistan, Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan was requested to host the Third PAECO Conference in 2022 so that the PAECO may not become dormant once again. The Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan generously accepted the offer and successfully hosted the Third PAECO Conference in Baku from May 16 -18, 2022.

### **ATTENDANCE:**

The meeting was attended by the Speakers of the Parliaments of Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Türkiye, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan whereas Iran, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic were represented at the level of Deputy Speakers of their respective parliaments. Afghanistan and Turkmenistan were unable to participate in the Conference.

## **MEETING OF THE SECRETARIES GENERAL**

The official activities of the Third PAECO Conference commenced on May 17, 2022 at 0930 hours with the Meeting of the Secretaries General. The Secretary National Assembly, in his capacity as Secretary of PAECO, chaired the meeting. The meeting was attended by the Secretaries/officials from the Parliaments of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan.

The PAECO Secretary opened the meeting and welcomed the participants of the meeting. The meeting then took up the agenda items one by one:

**Agenda Item # 1:** Presentation of Report of the 2nd Conference of PAECO.

The Secretary of PAECO informed the meeting that the National Assembly of Pakistan had compiled the report of the Second PAECO Conference which was presented before the meeting of the Secretaries General.

The meeting recommended that the report of the Second PAECO Conference may be presented before the Executive Council.

**Agenda Item # 2:** Discussion on the date and venue of the 4th PAECO Conference.

The PAECO Secretary referred to the Article 4(c) of the PAECO Charter and invited the views of the Islamic Parliament of Iran on hosting the 4th PAECO Conference. The representative from Iran informed that the Islamic Parliament of Iran was willing to host the Fourth PAECO Conference in the second half of 2023. However, the exact timeframe and dates of the event would be communicated to the PAECO Secretariat after internal consultation.

The meeting recommended that the Executive Council may approve the Islamic Parliament of Iran as the host of the Fourth PAECO Conference in 2023.

**Agenda Item # 3:** Discussion on the matters concerning the PAECO Secretariat.

The PAECO Secretary informed that the Executive Council in its meeting held on June 1, 2021 constituted a Working Group comprising the Parliaments of Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Türkiye. The Working Group, after thorough deliberations, had proposed the following documents concerning the establishment of the PAECO Secretariat:

- Organogram of the PAECO Secretariat
- Staff Regulations of the PAECO Secretariat
- Budgetary Mechanism of the PAECO Secretariat
- Scale of Assessment
- Annual Budget of the PAECO Secretariat

The representative from the Islamic Parliament of Iran opined that they required some time to discuss them before approval. Regarding the budget, he highlighted that the scale of assessment and the budget of the PAECO also required review. The officers from the Parliaments of Azerbaijan and Türkiye also seconded the Iranian proposal.

The meeting recommended that the Executive Council may allow one-month time to the PAECO Member Parliaments for proposing amendments to the above documents. In case any amendment is received within the stipulated time, the same may be incorporated and in case of no proposals/ recommendations from the Member Parliaments, the documents proposed by the Working Group will be treated as final and approval of the Executive Council will be sought through circulation.

Agenda Item 4: Discussion on the Rules of the Committees.

The PAECO Secretary said that in order to ensure smooth functioning of the Committees, the Rules of PAECO Committees were required to be approved. The PAECO Secretariat proposed the draft rules for the consideration of the PAECO member parliaments.

The representative from Iran proposed several amendments to the draft rules which were duly incorporated. However, the rest of the Member Parliaments agreed to the rules of the Committees.

The meeting recommended that the amendments proposed to the Rules of Procedure of PAECO-2014 by adding a Chapter titled “Committees of PAECO” and may be referred to the Executive Council for approval.

Agenda Item 5: Discussion on the Baku Declaration.

The Secretary PAECO introduced the agenda item and informed that the Parliaments of Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye had proposed amendments to the draft Baku Declaration.

The Baku Declaration containing the proposed amendments were read paragraph-by-paragraph and the amendments proposed by Pakistan and Türkiye were agreed by the Meeting. However, the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan had reservations over the amendments proposed by the Islamic Parliament of Iran, particularly the amendment relating to the “Zangezur Corridor”.

After thorough deliberations, the meeting proposed various options to the two sides; however, the meeting was unable to create a consensus on the issue.

The meeting referred the matter to the Executive Council without any recommendation on the Iranian proposal.

**MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

The meeting of the Executive Council was also held on May 17, 2022 at 1230 hours immediately after the conclusion of the Secretaries General meeting.

As Chairperson of the Executive Council and President of the PAECO, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, H.E. Raja Pervez Ashraf opened the meeting and welcomed the participants of the meeting. He expressed great satisfaction over the continuity of the PAECO activities and thanked the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan for their active contributions towards the development of the PAECO.

He also presented the progress made by the PAECO during the last year and appreciated the Parliaments of Afghanistan and Azerbaijan for ratifying the PAECO Charter and encouraged the Parliaments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to consider ratifying the PAECO Charter and become active Members of the PAECO. He also urged the Parliaments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic to sign the PAECO Charter in order to set the organization on strong footings.

In accordance with the Article 5 (b) and 4 (e) of the PAECO Charter, the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan was elected as Chairperson of the Executive Council and President of the General Conference of PAECO. The Honorable Speaker National Assembly then passed on the gavel to his Azerbaijani counterpart, H.E. Ms. Sahiba Gafarova and thereafter the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan assumed the Chair of the meeting.

Ms. Sahiba Gafarova thanked the Speaker National Assembly of Pakistan and welcomed the participants of the meeting. Thereafter, the meeting considered the agenda items one by one.

Agenda Item # 3: Presentation of the Report of the 2nd PAECO Conference.

The Chairperson of the Executive Council invited the Secretary of PAECO to present the report of the 2nd PAECO Conference.

The Secretary of PAECO presented the report of the 2nd PAECO Conference containing executive summary and verbatim proceedings of the Conference.

Agenda Item # 4: Approval of the Program of the 3rd PAECO Conference.

The program of the 3rd PAECO Conference was unanimously approved by the Executive Council.

Agenda Item # 5: Approval of the Baku Declaration.

The Chairperson of the Executive Council informed the meeting that the meeting of the Secretaries General had agreed to the contents of the Baku Declaration including the amendments proposed by Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye except Iran's inputs on the paragraph concerning Zangezur Corridor.

After thorough deliberations, it was agreed that the original text of the paragraph on “Zangezur Corridor” may be kept and Iran's reservations may be mentioned in a footnote so that the views of both sides could be reflected in the document.

The Baku Declaration was approved by the Executive Council.

Agenda Item # 6: Approval of matters concerning the PAECO Secretariat.

The Executive Council decided that one-month time should be given to the PAECO Member Parliaments to come up with their proposals regarding the PAECO Secretariat. In case any proposal/amendment is received within 30 days, the same may be incorporated in the documents proposed by the Working Group. However, in case no

proposal/input is received from any Member Parliament, the documents proposed by the Working Group will be treated as final and approval of the Executive Council will be sought through circulation.

Agenda Item # 7: Approval of amendments to the Rules of PAECO.

The Executive Council approved the amendments proposed to the Rules of Procedure of PAECO-2014 by incorporating a chapter titled the “Committees of the PAECO”.

Agenda Item # 8: Consideration of the date and venue of the 4th PAECO Conference.

The Executive Council approved the offer of the Islamic Parliament of Iran to host the 4th PAECO Conference in Tehran in 2023 in accordance with the Article 4(c) of the PAECO Charter.

Agenda Item # 9: Nomination of the Vice-President of the PAECO.

In accordance with the Article 4(f) of the PAECO Charter, the Executive Council nominated the Speaker of the Islamic Parliament of Iran as the Vice-President of the PAECO.

Upon conclusion of the agenda of the Executive Council, the Chairperson of the Executive Council congratulated the participants of the meeting.

### **MEETINGS OF THE PAECO COMMITTEES**

Another milestone achieved during the 3rd PAECO Conference was the holding of Inaugural Meetings of the three PAECO Committees i.e. Committee on Trade & ECOTA; Committee on Communications & Connectivity and the Committee on Women, Youth & Cultural Affairs.

#### **COMMITTEE ON TRADE & ECOTA:**

The inaugural meeting of the Committee on Trade & ECOTA was held during the Third PAECO Conference. The meeting held in-depth discussions and the participants delivered statements concerning the role of parliaments in enhancing intra-regional trade and the implementation of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA). The important highlights of the statements delivered by the participants follow:

As the host of the 3rd PAECO Conference and Inaugural meetings of the PAECO Committees, the Member of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan, Mr. Tahir Mirkishili chaired the meeting of the Committee on Trade & ECOTA. He welcomed the participants of the meeting and stated that COVID-19 started as a health emergency and led to an economic crisis. He highlighted Azerbaijan’s socio-economic incentives to reduce the economic effects of the global pandemic. He opined that the post-crisis period will be a strong motivation triggering innovation for companies and countries. While highlighting the importance of scientific knowledge and relevant experts to cope with the challenges, he added that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic surprised the global community and those challenges could only be encountered through prudence and collective efforts.

Mr. Mojtaba Tavangar, Member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran stated that the ECO region had a unique capacity and capital for economic development and increasing the welfare of the people. Despite recent efforts, there was still a gap between the achievements and the goals and objectives of the ECO Vision 2025, he added. In order to fill that gap, he proposed that cooperation, participation and the implementation of commitments by members in the field of development of intra-regional trade and development of cooperation in various fields could play a key role in achieving the goals of ECO. He stresses on expediting the ratification and finalization process of some agreements, such as the Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment among ECO Member States (APPI), the Agreement on Establishment and Operation of ECO Smuggling and Customs Offenses, the ECO trade facilitation strategy, and also the formation of ECO Clearing Union.

The Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, Rao Muhammad Ajmal Khan said that the ECO region was situated on the crossroads of the important regions and had both the potential and the capacity to function as a bridge between North and South, Europe and Asia. He opined that cooperation among parliaments was imperative for regional socio-economic development. He further said that trade and connectivity could play a central role in ensuring consistent and unified regional progress, prosperity, and development. He expressed disappointment on the fact that the region had enormous potential and accounted for 16% of the world's population whereas it generated only 2% of the world's trade. He lauded the ECO's initiatives towards viable regional integration through an open trade market within the region; an easy visa regime; promotion of advanced communication, connectivity, and transport, that could lead to the enhancement of trade in the region. He emphasized that the current regional and global strategic environment made ECO countries more lucrative markets for Pakistan and desired to further enhance relations through an ever-increasing trade relationship.

The delegate from the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, Mr. Bülent Kusoglu called for close regional cooperation among ECO Member States with a view to enhancing economic integration and trade activities. He termed ECOTA as a key instrument to give a momentum to economic integration of the region and the most effective way to achieve tangible results in the area of trade and investment. He lauded the role of PAECO in providing political support to the relevant authorities to hasten ECOTA's implementation. He underscored the importance of enhancing the scope of ECOTA from preferential trade to Free Trade Agreement according to the ECO Vision 2025. He also emphasized that the countries desirous of amending the ECOTA should furnish their detailed suggestions in order to provide concrete ground for negotiations. He encouraged the ECO Member States who are not signatories to ECOTA to consider becoming a party for the development and prosperity of the whole region.

### **COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS & CONNECTIVITY:**

The inaugural meeting of the Committee on Communications & Connectivity also took place on the margins of the Third PAECO Conference. The committee deliberated on the importance of communications and connectivity in the digital era particularly in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The salient points of the statements delivered by the participants follow:



The delegate from Azerbaijan, as host of the Conference, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. He highlighted the initiatives of Azerbaijan towards liberalization of the ECO economy. He also stressed upon the importance of the modern transportation system towards political and economic stability and stated that Azerbaijan's infrastructure projects were aimed at making it one of the most important transport and logistics centers in Eurasia. Talking about the development work in the newly liberated territories, he said that Azerbaijan's main focus was on the development of a modern transportation system in those areas in order to connect them with the outside world. The establishment of Fuzuli Airport in only eight months and commissioning of Zangilan International Airports reflected the importance attached by Azerbaijan towards the development of the newly liberated areas. He urged the international community, including the ECO, to make maximum efforts to realize the vision of peace, security and cooperation opened up with the end of the armed conflict.

A Member of the Parliament from Iran, Mr. Mostafa Taheri said that the developments in the current world had removed connectivity and transportation capacities from the limited window of national policy-making and turned them into a multifaceted approach with positive and constructive effects. He underlined the strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the ECO, which was focused on the increasing strengthening of transportation networks between ECO member countries on one hand and between the ECO region and the surrounding areas. He urged the ECO Member States for a correct understanding of the new realities in the regional and international arenas, as well as to take advantage of economic opportunities for ECO to play a role in the field of transport, on the issue of regional transport synergy. Through the activation of multidimensional transportation networks in order to form complementary transportation networks with the surrounding areas, focus on ECO and work to strengthen and achieve this important goal.

Engr. Sabir Hussain Qaimkhani, Member National Assembly of Pakistan emphasized the importance of connectivity for the development of the region. He stressed upon manifestation of all the facets of the economy as well as a society like trade and transport connectivity; ICT connectivity; energy connectivity and people-to-people connectivity. Full implementation of the Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) must be ensured and the lost opportunities of the bygone years must be capitalized on now in order to achieve the collective ascent of our region and its people, he added. Highlighting the importance of peaceful coexistence and cooperative multilateralism in the region, he said that durable peace and development in the region hinged on the peaceful settlement of the longstanding Kashmir dispute. In order to enhance the regional economic cooperation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, he stressed upon mobilizing national and international resources and building resilient health care systems to respond to such crisis in future. He also proposed the development of an integrated transport network to facilitate both intra-ECO trade and serve as the pathway for trade with other economies.

The Member of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, Mr. Yavuz Ergun said that the COVID-19 outbreak led to significant disruptions in economic activity and had a severe impact on the region, having pushed consumers and businesses to adopt digital services and technologies. He appreciated the role played by Pakistan at the ECO Working Group on ICT as its Chair. He also lauded the achievements of the ECO towards connectivity and termed the revival of the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad Cargo train as a milestone

achievement. He added that the majority of the ECO Member countries were landlocked except Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye and encouraged the landlocked countries to utilize the logistic infrastructure of these three countries for reaching out to the world markets. Highlighting the importance of smooth and effective operationalization of transport corridors, he also emphasized the harmonization, standardization and liberalization of procedures for transport and border crossing for the elimination of non-physical barriers.

### **Committee on Women, Youth & Cultural Affairs:**

The inaugural meeting of the Committee on Women, Youth & Cultural Affairs was also held during the Third PAECO Conference. In line with the spirit of Article 4(e) and 5(b) of the PAECO Charter, the meeting was chaired by the Member of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan, Ms. Konul Nurullayeva. The statements by the participants of the committee targeted possible ways and means to enhance intra-regional people-to-people linkages, women and youth participation in political, social, and cultural spheres of life, and cultural connectivity.

Ms. Konul Nurullayeva, Member of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan welcomed the participants of the meeting. In her remarks, she said that the women all over the world remained the primary victims of the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at the same time, people's knowledge and skills in the field of IT began to increase, women entrepreneurs increased their ability to use electronic resources, found a market for their products, and developed their knowledge of advertising. She also highlighted the importance of gender equality and women's rights for overcoming the pandemic together, to recover faster, and to build back better for everyone. While sharing the experiences of Azerbaijan, she said that the Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan held public hearings on Socio-psychological provision of a family and existing problems and as a result, a number of important changes were made in the field of entrepreneurship and tax legislation to address the consequences of the pandemic. Talking about the youth, she said that the pandemic left a strong influence on the hearts and minds of the youth. The youth, particularly the fresh university graduates, were quite uncertain about their academic and professional careers. However, they also had the capability to align their behaviors and lifestyles with the new realities. Highlighting the negative impacts of the pandemic in the cultural spheres of the society, she said that the sharp declines in the incomes of the people associated with the creative and non-creative sectors also risked their financial sustainability.

The delegate from the Islamic Parliament of Iran, Ms. Fatemeh Mohammad Beigi, in her statement, said that the ECO Member States were blessed with the youth capital which was an undeniable resource for growth and economic development together with increasing internal cooperation within the organization. She emphasized that young people were the valuable assets of the current era of ECO and assured full support to all efforts of ECO members in providing space for the effective and increasing role of young people in strengthening intra-group cooperation and promoting socio-economic growth and development of member countries. Regarding women issues, she highlighted the developments made by Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in the fields of education and research including increasing literacy and reducing the literacy gap

between the rural and urban women, health including increasing life expectancy as well as reducing maternal mortality. Cultural cooperation in ECO was another important and significant issue among member countries and it was necessary for more institutional cooperation and synergy between member countries, she added. While reiterating the support of Iran towards strengthening and promoting cultural cooperation within the ECO region, she urged the ECO member countries that have not entered the ECO Cultural Institute to establish and strengthen cultural relations between member countries as soon as possible to witness the growing prosperity of ECO in terms of cultural cooperation.

During the statement delivered by Dr. Shazia Sobia Soomro, Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, she highlighted some of the common problems faced by the women including patriarchal structures and conservative attitudes, limited social and financial support for women, limited access to political networks, lack of contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as business groups, civil society organizations and parliamentarians as well as the absence of a well-developed education and training system to promote women's leadership and their orientation. Underlining the initiatives and policies of Pakistan with regard to women and youth empowerment, she said that the Parliament of Pakistan had passed numerous laws and amendments including the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women, Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, Criminal Law Acts relating to offences in the name or pretext of Honor and offences Relating to Rape and National Plan of Action on Human Rights. Besides, the local commitments also included Gender Equality Policy Frameworks and Women's Empowerment Packages and Initiatives. She emphasized the importance of introducing comprehensive supportive mechanisms and addressing the factors perpetuating gender inequality in public and private life in order to ensure adequate young women's representation in society and to make their participation effective and sustainable.

Mrs. Ceyda Bolumnez Cankiri, Member of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, in her speech, said that the world was adapting to new habits, new methods and new techniques in almost all fields of life including education, health, economy, culture, sports and tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the poor or marginalized segments of the society became more vulnerable and the situation increased their risk of evil such as violence and abuse. She proposed the allocation of increased resources for policies aimed at women, youth and other vulnerable groups, which was also necessary to increase the number of women managers and decision makers. She called for collaboration with the local governments, civil society and the media raising awareness through awareness studies, campaigns and advertisements. Emphasizing the need for collective and comprehensive measures for building back better, she urged for strengthening cooperation instead of competition while designing the future with the normalization process. Highlighting the importance of culture and art, she said that it was one of the main tools of social development in this crisis at the global level. Referring to the potential and added value of cultural economy, she urged the state institutions and the private sector to work hand in hand to invest in artists and open up space for them. She also called for establishing structures to strengthen the exchange of information, ensuring the effective collection, evaluation, analysis and policy making of data and developing global cooperation for a visible improvement in the air quality observed during the pandemic, for the continuity of important human

values such as sharing, cooperation and compassion, and for the continuity of processes such as the situation of non-armed conflict.

## **THE GENERAL CONFERENCE**

The General Conference of the 3rd PAECO Conference was held in the afternoon of May 17, 2022 with the President of PAECO, Madame Sahiba Gafarova in the Chair. The Secretary PAECO, Mr. Tahir Hussain called the meeting to order and read out the recommendatory decisions of the Executive Council for the approval of the General Conference. **All the decisions of the Executive Council were endorsed by the General Conference.**

The Secretary PAECO then invited the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan for her remarks before the General Conference and subsequently, the rest of the Speakers/Heads of Delegation as well as Special Guests (ECO Secretary General & TurkPA Secretary General) delivered their statements in alphabetical order.

The Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan, H.E. Ms. Sahiba Gafarova, in her remarks, highlighted the importance of PAECO and the commitment of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan towards strengthening the PAECO through enhancing cooperation between its Member Parliaments during her presidency. She noted that the PAECO not only provided a platform for supporting the realization of the goals and objectives of the ECO but also contributed towards strengthening the relations between parliaments and bringing the people closer to each other. She called the member parliaments, yet to sign and ratify the PAECO Charter, to do so in order to further expand relations between our member parliaments and set the organization on strong footings. Talking about the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, she underlined the need for mobilizing global efforts to combat the pandemic and eliminate its negative consequences. While highlighting the successful initiatives of Azerbaijan during the pandemic times, she referred to the Special Session of the UN General Assembly dedicated to combating the COVID-19 pandemic held in December 2020 on the initiative of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Emphasizing the importance of recovery in the post-pandemic period, she also flagged the establishment of UN High-Level Panel on Global Recovery from COVID-19, on the initiative of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in order to develop concrete recommendations on global measures in the post-pandemic period.

The President of PAECO also stressed on the important role of parliamentary diplomacy towards supporting the multilateral efforts of the regional countries through exchange of views and experiences and sharing best practices. She also emphasized the importance of diversification of transport and communication lines and transit routes for restoration of previous levels of economic and trade relations between the ECO countries. She also drew attention towards the opportunities offered by Azerbaijan in terms of its geographical proximity and modern transport and logistical infrastructure.

While signifying to the importance of peace and stability in the region for recovery in the post-pandemic period, she referred to the historic victory of Azerbaijan in the 44-days Patriotic War, which ensured the implementation of the four UNSC resolutions adopted in 1993, calling for immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian

forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. She also apprised the General Conference on the restoration and reconstruction work in the liberated territories and regretted the limited international support in demining activities in the liberated areas, which posed a great threat to the lives of civilians and military personnel. Talking about Azerbaijan's efforts for ensuring lasting peace and stability in the region, she said that Azerbaijan had already made a proposal to Armenia on mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity of each other, initiation of the process of delimitation and demarcation of borders, restoration of all communications in the region and the signing of a peace agreement would lead to normalization of relations. She also noted that in the post-conflict period, new realities and new opportunities for cooperation had emerged in the South Caucasus. The Zangezur Corridor, a new transport infrastructure to be opened in accordance with the agreements reached, would become an important part of the East-West and North-South corridors for the benefit of the entire ECO fraternity.

During the remarks of the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, H.E. Raja Pervez Ashraf, he congratulated the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan on successfully hosting the 3rd PAECO Conference and lauded her government's and parliament's commitment towards the ideals and progress of the ECO and PAECO. He expressed satisfaction over the steady progress made by the PAECO and emphasized on its institutionalization by agreeing to its financial and administrative infrastructure. He added that the ECO region shared common history, ethno-cultural similarities and linguistic links, and its societies were closely knitted to each other as its people had a lot in common. Such commonalities were the strength of the region. He regretted that despite plenty of resources, talent and potential, the region looked outwards for the solution of its challenges. In spite of riches in terms of crude oil, natural gas and coal as well as cotton and wheat production in the ECO countries, the intra-regional trade in the ECO region was mere 7.5%. He emphasized on the role of parliaments in seeking comprehensive answers to the agony of their people and in creating consensus for opening up a new era of regional cooperation.

He also called for fostering mutual cooperation and utilizing collective wisdom for responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to the theme of the Conference "Cooperation in Post Pandemic period; Challenges and Opportunities for Recovery", he added that the lethal outbreak also underscored the underlying drivers of our vulnerability such as poverty, limited social safety nets, weak health systems, social exclusion, and structural gender inequality. The Speaker underlined that the lessons learned and the insights from the pandemic made a strong case for a risk-informed decision approach – and a broader recognition that addressing disaster risk must be holistic at the systems level.

Talking about the importance of freedom for economic progress, he paid tributes to the brave people of the Karabakh region and also highlighted the plight of the people of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir and said that the regional cooperation for development would remain elusive while innocent Kashmiri people are subjected to continued torture, discrimination and denial of their birth-right of self-determination. He also missed Afghanistan at the Conference and hoped for their participation in the future PAECO activities as an active and important member of the PAECO. He termed peace in Afghanistan imperative for regional peace and reiterated Pakistan's principled

policy stance that there was no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and urged all sides to re-engage in talks for lasting peace.

At the conclusion of his statement, the Speaker expressed his belief that PAECO will grow from strength-to-strength under the leadership of its new President. He also urged the PAECO Member Parliaments to build a stronger partnership of interdependence, resource sharing, institution-building and mutual facilitation in diverse areas for ensuring collective growth, development and prosperity as one people sharing common destiny.

Addressing the General Conference, the Speaker of the House of Representatives of Tajikistan, H.E. Mr. Zokirzoda Mahmadohir congratulated the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan and its Speaker, Ms. Sahiba Gafarova, on successfully holding the Conference and making excellent arrangements. He also expressed gratitude to the National Assembly of Pakistan for its voluntary contributions as Secretariat of PAECO and reviving the work of PAECO by holding a successful presidency in its previous session. He emphasized the importance of ECO as an effective platform for responding to emerging challenges and to overcome the political, social, trade and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Highlighting the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on socioeconomic development, he underscored the need for close interaction and collective measures for overcoming the consequences of the pandemic at the regional and global levels.

In order to increase trade cooperation between the ECO countries, he proposed to take measures for removing the quarantine transport and transit restrictions introduced due to the pandemic, as well as tariff and non-tariff trade barriers. He expressed disappointment over the non-operationalization of ECOTA and urged the member states to develop a joint plan for the effective implementation of the trade potential of the ECO region. Highlighting the importance of enhancing the transport and transit potential of the Organization, he stressed on expanding and deepening cooperation in the financial, investment, industrial, energy, agricultural fields, including through the development and implementation of joint programs and projects. He also stressed upon the need for enhanced cooperation in the right direction by following the legal base and specialized mechanisms of ECO in order to overcome the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic. He renewed Tajikistan's interest in developing cooperation with the ECO member nations for further strengthening collaboration in the trade and economic sphere in accordance with the new realities of cooperation in the post-pandemic period.

The 3rd PAECO Conference was a manifestation of the commitment of its Member Parliaments towards the philosophy of open development and building a community based on shared responsibility for solving problems that were beyond the capabilities of one country or region but required political wisdom and efforts of the entire international community, he opined. He hoped that the Baku Declaration would also provide basis to further deepening regional cooperation, ensuring the effective operation of our Assembly and raising interaction within the ECO Parliamentary Assembly to a qualitatively new level.

While addressing the General Conference, the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, H.E. Prof. Dr. Mustafa Şentop congratulated the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan on the smooth and successful organization of the event. He also emphasized the importance of parliamentary diplomacy towards regional stability and development and vowed Türkiye's support for regional stability, sustainable economic and social development and economic integration in the region. Underlining the importance of multilateralism for actions against the pandemic, he said that the challenges affecting the well-being of mankind were common and common solutions could be offered for them based on a shared perspective. Talking about the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic globally, the Türkiye's Speaker said that migration, unemployment, extreme poverty, and hunger had turned into threats whereas injustice and inequalities had also been exacerbated during the pandemic. The Russia-Ukraine war further deteriorated the situation and the world now faced food insecurity and soaring energy prices as a major risk. In order to mitigate these negative impacts, he proposed to keep the supply chains going, maintain the transportation and shipping operations as part of actions against poverty and hunger, facilitate the trade, build the infrastructure to do so and take more decisive actions for secure and stable integration across the region.

Highlighting the importance of effective, well-balanced, multilateral and inclusive actions against the regional and global threats, he emphasized the need for close contact and coordination among the PAECO Member Parliaments in order to adopt a fairer and more humane perspective towards the modern-day challenges. He, therefore, called for strengthening regional organizations to take actions against the regional challenges instead of relying on global actors. Talking about the situation in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Palestine, Syria, Arakan and Kashmir, the Türkiye's Speaker stressed on offering remedy to the humanitarian crisis and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. He also congratulated the President, the government, parliament and the people of Azerbaijan on their glorious victory against Armenia and liberation of their lands from Armenian illegal occupation. He also vowed Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan under any circumstances and championed their just cause. Criticizing the role of international organizations particularly in relation to the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute, he said that the IOs adopted the way of aggravating the problems rather than resolving them and termed the Armenian occupation beyond their regional frontiers a risk for peace and stability. He, therefore, called for a reasonable and just agreement for lasting peace and stability in the region.

The Türkiye's Speaker also drew attention towards the phenomenon of global migration and urged for adopting a global approach to offer just and lasting solutions to the challenges such as forced migration and refugee crisis. He added that Türkiye paid ultimate attention to the issue of migration and strived to place humanitarian diplomacy, international cooperation and sustainable solutions at the heart of addressing this issue. He seized the opportunity and invited the speakers and parliamentarians of the 3rd PAECO conference to participate in the Global Parliamentary Conference on Migration organized by the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye from June 20 - 21, 2022 in Istanbul, which was one of the initiatives of Türkiye to address the migration crisis. While concluding his remarks, he hoped that the results of the conference would lead towards untapping the great potential of the region for achieving regional development in all aspects as well as stability, peace and prosperity of the peoples.

The Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, H.E. Mr. Nurdinjon Ismoilov congratulated the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan on the smooth and successful organization of the Conference. He also paid tributes to the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan on making PAECO an effective and vibrant platform during his tenure as President of PAECO. He appreciated the great potential of the ECO and its increasing influence towards the implementation of major regional integration initiatives. The people of the region shared common history, religion, customs and traditions and had long been closely linked with trade and cultural ties, he added.

He stressed on utilizing the potential of the region in trade and investment by eliminating trade barriers, digitalizing customs procedures, and promoting e-commerce. The world was still facing the consequences of the pandemic and it was not clear what trends would be observed for the development of the world economy. He, therefore, called for implementation of the priorities identified at the ECO Summits and taking measures for bringing inter-parliamentary cooperation to a new level. He also emphasized the effective use of existing and new transport corridors within the region, as reflected in the final Baku Declaration, and vowed Uzbekistan's support in this regard. He highlighted the importance of resumption of tourism exchanges and requested the Member States to support the practical initiatives put forward by Uzbekistan on the matter. He also apprised the conference on the presidential elections held in Uzbekistan last year and said that the new development strategy of Uzbekistan was focused on expanding relations with the countries of the region and its traditional partners.

He also lauded the construction work carried out by Azerbaijan in the liberated territories and appreciated its role as an active member of the ECO by enhancing mutually beneficial and mutually respectful cooperation with partner organizations. He also reaffirmed the commitment to ensure peace and security in the lives of the people of those liberated territories.

H.E. Mr. Ali Nikzad, First Deputy Speaker of the Islamic Parliament of Iran, during his remarks, congratulated the Speaker and the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan on the successful organization of the Conference. He also appreciated the National Assembly of Pakistan for successfully hosting the two previous sessions of the ECO Parliamentary Assembly and the contributions towards its Secretariat. He said that the ownership of one-third of the world's energy resources, unique transport position, young, motivated and powerful workforce, and deep religious, historical, cultural and civilizational roots among the people provided unparalleled capacity and capital for sustainable economic growth and improving the welfare of the people of the region. Emphasizing the importance of ECO Goals and the realization of its Vision 2025, he stressed upon the crucial role of parliaments in providing legal and institutional framework to their governments for taking collective measures in this regard. While reaffirming Iran's commitment towards the major decisions and frameworks agreed by the ECO, he called for active participation in consolidating and strengthening economic relations and cooperation among member states, especially streamlining the existing ECO institutions.

Recalling the initiatives approved by the 15th ECO Summit in Ashgabat, he stressed on paving the way for the implementation of those initiatives by creating the necessary infrastructure and legislations, if necessary. He also reassured the support of Islamic



Parliament of Iran towards the development of relations and cooperation with ECO member states with all its legislative capacities and to take active steps for making the PAECO as effective as possible. He highlighted the importance of the tourism industry in sustainable economic development and the need to facilitate intra-regional tourism by streamlining tourist and commercial travel, including through facilitating visa issuance and building the necessary infrastructure.

He highlighted the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy and thanked the conference organizers for providing an opportunity for exchange of views on the role of parliaments in the economic recovery of the countries. He also proposed establishing an "ECO parliamentary support committee for post-pandemic economic recovery" and expressed readiness of his parliament to host the first meeting of this committee in the near future.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, H.E. Ms. Balaim Kessebayeva, in her remarks, congratulated the Parliament of Azerbaijan and the Speaker Madame Sahiba Gafarova on successfully hosting the Conference. She said that the year marked the 30th Anniversary of the establishment of ECO and during this period, the organization has tremendously acceded and successfully conducted its activities and continued to work actively. The growing importance and influence of ECO was evident from its two consecutive summits during the last year; however, its true potential for further was still untapped, she opined. She expressed hope that the ECO would become an effective multilateral platform for special contribution towards the development of its member countries. She also referred to the initiatives proposed by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan during the ECO Summits held in 2021 in the areas of transport and logistics, communications, food security and in the trade and economic sphere.

Talking about Afghanistan, she said that Afghanistan was going through a difficult period and Kazakhstan will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people in the form of food, medical supplies and basic necessities. She also informed about the special educational grants allocated to the Afghan students who were pursuing their academic careers in Kazakhstan. She also flagged the reforms being implemented in Kazakhstan aimed at strengthening powers of the parliament, improving the electoral system, developing local self-government, the party system, the judicial and law enforcement systems. Such reforms would provide a basis for further economic growth and increased political stability in Kazakhstan, she added. She hoped that the ECO will continue playing its role for the development and prosperity of the region in light of the latest geopolitical trends occurring in the world.

The Deputy Speaker of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic, H.E. Mr. Primov Ulan welcomed the participants of the Conference and congratulated the Speaker and the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan on hosting the Conference. He said that the subject of the Conference was important for the entire region as during the past years not only the ECO countries but the entire world suffered significant economic losses due to the pandemic and related restrictive measures. Let alone the developing countries, even the world's major powers were not able to counter the pandemic. It proved that without combined efforts and collective wisdom, the world could not overcome the economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Highlighting the consequences of the global economic crisis, he added that the ECO countries must be better prepared to

meet new challenges by expanding project-based economic activities, developing and strengthening its institutions and playing an active role in the realization of the organization's future goals.

He urged the ECO countries to implement enhanced regional cooperation, economic growth and development by devising economic strategies in the areas of trade, transport, communications, energy, tourism and the environment. He also emphasized the importance of cooperation in the transport sector in the ECOregion and said that the new railway projects between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to China was of great strategic importance. Talking about the importance of expanding energy trade between the ECO countries, he lauded the launch of the CASA-1000 project aimed at creating an inter-regional electricity market for Central Asia and South Asia, thereby developing electricity trade across the continent. He also highlighted the potential of tourism in the ECO Member countries and assured the contribution of Kyrgyz Republic towards further development of cooperation in the promising areas of tourism in the region. While concluding his statement, he hoped that with the combined efforts and collective wisdom of the ECO Member States and their parliaments, the region would become one of the worthy and important players in the world economic system.

The Secretary General of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) also participated in the Conference as a Special Guest. During his remarks at the General Conference, he emphasized the increasing role of parliaments in the regional and global relations as well as the growing significance of parliamentary diplomacy worldwide. He termed the establishment of PAECO as one of the most remarkable developments in the historic journey of ECO. The ECO SG also highlighted the targets set forth in the ECO Vision 2025 which led the Organization to make focussed and concerted efforts in some priority areas of mutual cooperation for making accelerated progress to achieve shared socioeconomic development and prosperity in the entire ECO region. He also briefed the conference on some significant activities and initiatives of the Organization including trade liberation through a preferential trade framework to create trade flows and increase intra-regional trade and contribution to the global trade, especially exports; trade facilitation to reduce the cost and time of doing business to meet the targets of trade expansion and; trade promotion through focused activities aimed at boosting the region's trade profile. He also lauded the collaboration among the ECO member states towards smooth implementation of some agreed and relevant legal and institutional frameworks, such as ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), ECO Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment (APPI), Agreement on the Establishment and Operation of ECO Smuggling and Customs Offenses Data Bank, Agreement on Simplification of Visa Procedures for Businessmen of the region, ECO Re-Insurance Company and some other important mechanisms.

Emphasizing the importance of connectivity for regional integration, the ECO Secretary General said that the ECO placed transport on top of its regional development agenda and was focused to expedite several transport projects including the finalization of commercialization of KTI Corridor; operationalization of ITI Cargo Train; implementation of some parts of KTAI Corridor and; operationalization of ECO-ITI Road Corridor. He called for enhanced cooperation in order to normalize, maintain and accelerate regional trade and related activities as well as to overcome its impediments in the aftermath of the pandemic. Signifying the role of parliaments in ECO's roadmap

of cooperation for greater regional integration, he urged for speeding up and finalizing the signing and ratification process in regard to several important ECO legal frameworks which required immediate conclusions. He also stressed on an early and full-fledged operationalization of the PAECO for ensuring expedited execution of the ECO agenda of mutual cooperation and development in the region. He encouraged the PAECO Member Parliaments, yet to sign and ratify its Charter, to seize the opportunity for the larger interest of the region.

## **CONCLUSION**

The successful holding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> PAECO Conference and the overwhelming participation of Member Parliaments will not only pave the way for overcoming the economic stress in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic but will also facilitate member states to move forward towards regional integration while focusing on promoting the socio-economic development of member states including transport corridors, energy corridors, and communication networks via enhancing regional trade, connectivity, people to people contacts, tourism and taking joint actions to recover from the pandemic.

Moreover, conducting dialogues on imperative issues relating to trade, communications, connectivity, women, youth and cultural affairs were also the center of attention at this conference.

The Baku Declaration, signed by the Speakers/Heads of Delegations of Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan speaks volumes of the common will of the parliaments of the Region to solve all outstanding disputes through dialogue, giving peace and progress a chance to bring change in the lives of the people.

In order to set the PAECO on strong footings, the remaining Member Parliaments must sign and ratify the PAECO Charter. Besides, the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat of PAECO may also be prioritized in order to make this organization more efficient and effective and to fulfill the commitment to the principles and objectives of the PAECO Charter.