



2nd CONFERENCE OF
**PARLIAMENTARY
ASSEMBLY
OF THE ECONOMIC
COOPERATION
ORGANIZATION (PAECO)
COUNTRIES**
31st May - 3rd June, 2021, Islamabad - Pakistan



Executive Summary

of the

**2ND GENERAL CONFERENCE
OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY
ASSEMBLY OF ECO COUNTRIES (PAECO)**

Islamabad, Pakistan

May 31 -June 3, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The 2nd General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Countries (PAECO) was held under the chairmanship of the Hon'ble Speaker of the National Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Mr. Asad Qaiser, in Islamabad, Pakistan from May 31, 2021 to June 3, 2021. The Theme of the Conference was: "***Promoting Parliamentary Partnership for Regional Integration***".

The Conference was long due as it could not take place after its founding meeting in 2013, which was also held in Islamabad, Pakistan under the leadership of the then Speaker Dr. Fehmida Mirza. Under her chairpersonship, the idea of a parliamentary forum of the ECO Countries was conceived, crystalized and given a shape. However, a brilliant move to energize the economic potential of the region through parliamentary push nearly lost its usefulness as during the last eight years, the forum of PAECO could not take off owing to numerous hurdles. The credit, therefore, goes to the incumbent Speaker Asad Qaiser for revitalizing PAECO.

ECO AND THE REGION:

The ECO Region comprises of the 10 countries, inhabiting more than 460 million people and covering a landmass of over 8 million square kilometres. ECO is the successor organization of Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), an economic alliance among Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, which remained in existence since 1964 up to 1979. RCD was renamed as ECO in 1985 in Tehran and in 1992, it was expanded to include seven new members, namely: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Republic of Uzbekistan. Headquartered in Tehran, Iran, ECO is an inter-governmental organisation with an overall objective to harness the immense economic potential of the region for the common good of its people. So far, there have been 13 physical and one virtual Heads of Governments Meetings of the ECO.

CHALLENGES OF ECO AND NEED FOR PARLIAMENTARY DIPLOMACY:

Twenty-nine years have passed since the expansion of ECO and despite having on table important documents and agreements like the “ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA), ECO Decade for Enhanced Energy Cooperation and the ECO Vision 2025 to name a few, the potential of the region remains largely untapped. In the absence of a vital force to transform the signed documents into actual plans in action on ground, the fruits of ECO are yet to reach the common man. It is evident from the fact that the entire intra-regional trade is less than 10% of the overall trade volume of the region. The formation of PAECO was seen as a potent forum, capable enough to revisit, influence, help redesign and facilitate in the execution of respective Executive policies for the realisation of ECO ideals. PAECO’s creation, therefore, manifests that parliamentary diplomacy provides an ideal avenue for a free and frank discourse among public representatives, aimed at providing “out-of-box” solutions to the Executive for amicable settlement of issues.

THE 2ND PAECO GENERAL CONFERENCE:

i) Attendance:

The three-day 2nd PAECO General Conference was physically attended by:

1. His Excellency Mir Rahman Rahmani, Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (*along-with Delegation*)
2. Her Excellency Madame Sahiba Gafarova, Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan (*along-with Delegation*)
3. His Excellency Mr. Zokirzoda Mahmadohir, Chairman of the Majlisi Namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli, Republic of Tajikistan (*along-with Delegation*)
4. His Excellency Prof. Dr. Mustafa Şentop, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*along-with Delegation*)
5. His Excellency Mr. Ismailov Nurdinjon Muydinkhonovich, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan (*along-with Delegation*)

In addition, the following represented their respective Parliaments virtually:

1. His Excellency Mr. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran (*along-with Delegation*)
2. Her Excellency Madame Gulshat Mammedova, Chairperson of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan (*along-with Delegation*)

3. Parliamentary Delegation of the Mazhilis, the Lower House of the Parliament of Republic of Kazakhstan

The Secretary General of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), H.E. Dr. Hadi Soleimanpour, also participated in the Conference virtually from Tehran. Hence, of the 10 Member Parliaments, 9 legislatures of the ECO attended the Conference. The Kyrgyz delegation could not attend due to the non-availability of flights due to COVID-19 travel barriers.

ii) Meeting of the Secretaries

The Conference opened in the morning of June 1, 2021 with the Meeting of the Secretaries to finalise the agenda of the Conference. The meeting was chaired by the Secretary of the National Assembly of Pakistan, Mr. Tahir Hussain, who is also the Secretary of PAECO. The approved agenda of the Conference is placed as Annex-A.

iii) Executive Council

Soon after the Meeting of the Secretaries, the Executive Council of the PAECO met. In accordance with sub clause of Article 5 of the PAECO Charter, the Hon'ble Speaker of Afghanistan proposed the name of the host Speaker Asad Qaiser as the Chairman of the Executive Council. His motion was seconded by the Hon'ble Speaker of Turkey, which was unanimously endorsed by the Council.

The Speaker National Assembly took his chair as the Chairman of the Executive Council and thanked the distinguished Members for his election.

The following decisions were taken by the Executive Council, which were recommended to the PAECO General Conference for its approval.

DECISIONS:

- 1) Report of the 1st PAECO Conference was placed for record of the General Conference.
- 2) The Hon'ble Speakers of Azerbaijan and Afghanistan informed about their respective Parliaments' decision to ratify the Charter of PAECO.
- 3) The Speaker of Uzbekistan signed the Charter of PAECO.

- 4) The Rules of Business of PAECO were approved by the Executive Council after 9 years of negotiations and sent to the General Conference for its endorsement of the Rules of Business.
- 5) In accordance with Article 4(h) of the PAECO Charter, General Conference was also asked to approve of the formation of THREE Committees, namely:
 - a) Committee on Trade and ECOTA
 - b) Committee on Communication and Connectivity
 - c) Committee on Women, Youth and Cultural Affairs. (*The Hon'ble Speaker of Azerbaijan graciously agreed to head and host this important Committee*).
- 6) The General Fund of PAECO was created in accordance with Article 7 of the PAECO Charter and a Working Group, comprising Pakistan, Turkey and Azerbaijan was assigned to recommend a working proposal in this regard.
- 7) The PAECO Branches in all the Member Parliaments were formed with identified Focal Persons in order to bring effective cooperation on PAECO matters among the Member Parliaments.
- 8) The Speakers of PAECO unanimously approved "ISLAMABAD DECLARATION", which was signed during the Closing Session of the General Conference.
- 9) Lastly, in accordance with Article 5(b)(iv), the Executive Council accepted the offer of Afghanistan to host the 3rd PAECO General Conference in 2022. Therefore, His Excellency Mir Rahman Rahmani, Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga of Afghanistan was elected as the Vice-President of PAECO.

iv) 2nd PAECO General Conference – Inaugural Session

The inaugural session of the 2nd PAECO General Conference was held in an impressive ceremony, graced by the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, His Excellency Dr. Arif Alvi.

While inaugurating the Conference as Chief Guest, President Dr. Arif Alvi, expressed his deep pleasure in welcoming the ECO Parliamentary Delegations. He noted that trade and connectivity could play a central role in ensuring consistent and unified regional progress, prosperity and development, adding that the inter-regional economic integration had gained momentum in the past few decades, becoming priority of the governments to improve the quality of their peoples' lives. Dr. Alvi considered that despite some key initiatives like ECO Vision – 2025, the intra-regional trade of the region stood approximately at US\$ 53 billion. With eight million square

kilometre of land and 500 million inhabitants as well as composing 6% of the global population, the ECO region has an ample potential to become the regional economic power through institutionalized trade policy reforms where the member nations would formulate trade policies with mutual consensus, whereas their economic block would attract enhanced domestic and foreign investments, the President underscored. He felicitated the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan on gathering the respectable members of the ECO parliaments to explore various facets of the imperative theme of the conference.

In his welcome address after his election as the President of the General Conference, Speaker Asad Qaiser stressed on the crucial role of the ECO Parliaments, noting that the aim of this Conference was to help and push the governments of the member countries to further strengthen their economic and trade relations and boost people-to-people contacts.

In their respective statements, the participating Speakers of the ECO region welcomed Pakistan National Assembly and its Speaker's initiative to revive the dormant platform of PAECO.

His Excellency Mir Rahman Rahmani, Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga of Afghanistan stated that Afghanistan had a central role in the geographical connection between the member countries, and as part of the new Silk Road, it offered great potential and opportunities for regional investment and trade. However, peace remained a pre-requisite to progress, the Afghan Speaker added.

Her Excellency Madame Sahiba Gafarova, the Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan termed the Economic Cooperation Organization as an umbrella bringing countries of geopolitically important regions together. Strengthening of integration processes between ECO countries, said Speaker Gafarova, would allow more efficient use of the rich natural resources, transport opportunities and intellectual potential of these regions. According to her, enhanced economic activity in the Region would promote peace, stability, security, dialogue and progress, while also enabling ECO countries to adopt common position on modern challenges such as COVID-19 pandemic.

In his virtual address to the PAECO 2nd General Conference, Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Islamic Republic of Iran, His Excellency Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf noted that the ECO Parliamentary Assembly had given the representatives of the people of the Member States, the opportunity to assist their respective

governments in achieving the ECO's lofty goals with effective legal and regulatory support. He also expressed the Iranian Parliament's opposition to unilateralism and support for multilateralism, calling for collective efforts by the ECO members for the establishment of a fair and non-discriminatory international economic system for the achievement of economic growth and balanced development.

His Excellency Mr. Zokirzoda Mahmadohir, Chairman of the Majlisi Namoyandagon of the Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan also joined his fellow Speakers in congratulating his Pakistani counterpart for infusing new life into PAECO and called for more concerted steps towards harnessing the untapped potential of the region.

Touching upon the Kashmir issue, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey His Excellency Prof. Dr. Mustafa Şentop in his speech, said, "The Kashmir issue, which has been alive for nearly 74 years, threatens the peace in the region. It must be resolved through dialogue, on the basis of respect for human rights and international law, on the basis of relevant United Nations (UN) resolutions, and by taking into account the expectations of our Kashmiri brothers." He further remarked that in a COVID effected world, it was important for Parliaments to guide their people towards common prosperity through "trade and connectivity", "improvement of tourism in poverty reduction and development". "These issues can only be achieved through strong regional solidarity," said Speaker Sentop.

Her Excellency Madame Gulshat Mammedova, Chairperson of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan in her virtual address from the Turkmen Capital city of Ashgabat welcomed the revival of PAECO and noted that the initiatives of the Honorable President of Turkmenistan at the Islamabad Summit of the Organization of Economic Cooperation in 2017 are currently being implemented. She stressed for parliamentary role in early completion of stalled projects like TAPI Gas Pipeline.

The Secretary General of the ECO Dr. Hadi Soleimanpour, while participating virtually from Tehran, underscored the significance of PAECO as an important ECO pillar. He briefed the Conference about some recent activities and engagements of the Organization, especially in the six prioritized areas of mutual cooperation, including trade, connectivity, energy, tourism, economic growth and sustainable development. While acknowledging the fundamental role of PAECO to support and push the ECO's agenda of regional development, Dr. Soleimanpour particularly sought the parliamentarians' assistance to expedite the institutionalization of regional parliamentary cooperation, speeding up the ratification process of the PAECO's

Charter as well as some core ECO Agreements and Protocols, including Agreement on Protection and Promotion of Investment (APPI), ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) and Visa Simplification Agreement (VSA).

The Inaugural Ceremony of the General Conference was followed by two break-out Session, namely:

i. Meeting of Women Parliamentarians on:

Session-I: Women in Leadership Roles: Leading the Agenda of Regional Connectivity

Session-II: Impact of Climate Change on Women: Affirmative Actions by Regional Parliaments

ii. Panel Discussion on the Impact of COVID-19 on SDGs implementation in the Region

The day-two of the Conference followed by additional two break-out sessions on the following issues:

iii. Session on the role of Parliaments in enhancing Trade & Connectivity

iv. Special Session on Advancing Tourism for Development and Poverty Alleviation

A brief review of each session is as follows:

Meeting of Women Parliamentarians

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) in the Parliament of Pakistan led two sessions at the Second General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of Economic Cooperation Organization on June 1, 2021. The titles of the sessions are as under:

- 1) Women in Leadership Roles: Leading the Agenda of Regional Connectivity
- 2) Impact of Climate Change on Women - Affirmative Actions by Regional Parliaments.

Women parliamentarians from several political parties as well as representatives from the government, media fraternity and civil society also participated in the event.

Hon. Speaker National Assembly, Mr. Asad Qaiser graced the event. Secretary WPC Ms. Munaza Hassan gave the welcome remarks at the event. Women Parliamentarians including Hon. MNA Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Hon. MNA Ms. Andleeb Abbas, Hon. MNA Ms. Shazia Marri, Hon. MNA Sajida Begum, Hon. MNA Ms. Naureen Ibrahim and Minister of State for Climate Change Hon. Ms. Zartaj Gul participated in the sessions. Speakers H.E. Ms. Sahiba Gafarova, Speaker Milli Majlis Republic of Azerbaijan and H.E. Prof. Dr. Mustafa Şentop, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly, Republic of Turkey addressed the event that was attended by parliamentarians, representatives of the government, women achievers, civil society and media, both virtually and in-person at the event.

The first session discussed role of women legislators in enhancing regional trade and cooperation. It was highlighted that cooperation on ideas and best practices signified harmony, tolerance and respect for diversity. Pakistan was sincerely committed to the Charter of ECO, and believed that durable peace and progress in the region are in the interest of all. It was discussed that parliamentarians had a unique opportunity and constitutional responsibility to play a significant role in promoting peoples' voices and safeguarding their interests. Women at the decision-making table were a pre-requisite for lasting peace and stability in our region. It was agreed that women parliamentarians should play an active role to establish a forum for bilateral and multilateral exchanges on issues of women economic, political and cultural participation.

During the second session on climate change, the work of National Assembly Standing Committee on Climate Change was presented as a regional best practice. It was highlighted that in order to responsibly hold government departments and regulatory bodies accountable on climate action, it was necessary to ensure participatory public policy. It was agreed that a sustained mechanism for regional exchange of experiences and ideas be established.

Panel Discussion on the Impact of COVID-19 on SDGs implementation in the Region

The SDGs Secretariat of the National Assembly of Pakistan hosted a Panel Discussion Session on “Impact of COVID-19 on the Implementation of SDGs in the Region.”

The Breakout Session of the Second General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Economic Cooperation Organization (PAECO) was held on 1st June 2021 and chaired by Hon. Mr. Riaz Fatyana, MNA / Convener National Parliamentary Taskforce on SDGs and was Co-Chaired by key Members of the Taskforce. The aim of the session was to promote Parliamentary partnerships for regional integration and to accelerate working on global agenda in times of the ongoing pandemic.

The session included three thematic discussion sessions, namely;

- 1) The Race for COVID-19 Vaccination, which was chaired by Hon. Dr. Nausheen Hamid, Parliamentary Secretary for National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination / Convener Sub-Group on SDG 3.
- 2) Open Data for a More Effective Covid-19 Response and SDGs Implementation, which was chaired by Hon. Dr. Aisha Ghaus Pasha, MNA / Convener Sub-Group on SDGs Scorecard Development; and
- 3) What can Parliaments do to Achieve SDGs, which was chaired by Hon. Dr. Nafisa Shah, MNA / Member National Parliamentary Taskforce on SDGs.

The Session was attended by Parliamentary Delegates from; Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran (Virtual), Kazakhstan (Virtual), and Turkey.

Main suggestions, takeaways and way forward from the session deliberations were as under:

- It was discussed that in light of the on-going novel pandemic, the Parliamentary functioning and business had suffered to a great extent but it was essential to remember that Parliamentarians were at the forefront of the fight to slow the spread, ensure SOPs and mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on society and economy. To successfully carry out these responsibilities, legislators must engage with those whom they represent by understanding and moderating public concerns by ensuring delivery of resources to those in need across regions.

- The need to increase Parliamentary ties was highlighted and it was proposed that ECO countries should waive off visa restrictions for parliamentarians, as it could increase regional cooperation and strengthen PAECO Assembly.
- One of the key suggestions was to develop a regular distribution mechanism for vaccine in the region and address the issues concerning the spread of negative propaganda against the vaccine, as these myths and misinformation had been causing unacceptability towards getting vaccinated.
- Moreover, it was emphasized that joint efforts at regional level should be made to ensure regular distribution network and to scale-up the production and sharing of vaccine at regional level through public-private partnerships.
- Resource constrained countries needed policy prioritization in the times of COVID-19. It was recommended that the developed countries should have a larger heart in not just vaccination sharing but also in promoting SDGs (*which was also in-line with SDG 17*).
- Experience sharing, integration of systems amongst ECO Parliaments and the need of constituency wise data especially in COVID times was highlighted by majority of participants. This would help understand the threat of the disease and its possible solutions, identify most affected segments and devise a tailor-made multi-pronged approach to facilitate effective redressal at regional level.
- It was discussed that SDGs should be the priority for every state to uplift the local population. Parliaments have to approve legislations and budgets to the effect, in order to translate the global agenda into national vision. People centric policies must be formed to ensure that no one is left behind. Invoking parliamentary diplomacy and using digitalization as a tool to regulate the regional integration process was the way forward.
- It was proposed that a separate PAECO Committee on SDGs should be constituted and it was agreed that the same may be taken up by the Executive Council Meeting during the next General Conference of PAECO. Alternatively, the scope/ToRs of Committee on Women, Youth and Cultural Affairs may be expanded to include the SDGs.
- The participating delegates offered vote of thanks to the Chair and for the exceptional hospitality by Pakistan.

Session on the Role of Parliaments in Enhancing Trade & Connectivity

Principal session of 2nd General Conference of PAECO was held under the title of “Role of Parliament in promoting Trade & Connectivity” on June 2, 2021 from 10:00AM to 1:00 PM at Shamadan Hall-III, Serena Hotel, Islamabad.

The session was attended by parliamentary delegates from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Uzbekistan in person, while parliamentary leaders from Iran, Turkmenistan and Secretary, ECO secretariat made their valuable contributions virtually.

Session contemplated upon matters relating to enhancement of trade & connectivity among ECO member states. Given the prevailing economic milieu, it was a much needed endeavor, as intra-regional trade presently accounts for less than ten percent of the global trade of the ECO, despite of its beauties and bounties. Such a situation warranted deep introspection of existing trade and connectivity arrangements using parliamentary platforms as is being done successfully in Europe.

Thematic Discussions

In order to undertake specific considerations for promotion of regional integration through parliamentary action, the session mulled over three sub-themes:

1. Promoting Regional Trade and prospects for fully realized ECOTA
2. Facilitating Transit Trade
3. Promotion of People-to-People Contacts

Recommendations of Thematic Discussions

Parliamentary representatives made substantial interventions during thematic discussions which resulted in number of valuable and pragmatic proposals to further this parliamentary cooperation in effective, decisive & timely manner. Suggestions ensued the discussions were as under:

1. Formulation of common parliamentary legislation
2. Formalizing arrangements for establishment of parliamentary contact groups through nominations of focal points and establishment of PAECO branches in member states
3. Devising mechanism for periodic review of trade and economic policies by regional parliaments
4. Frequent exchange of ideas among MPs of regional states through holding quarterly meeting
5. Infrastructure development to enhance connectivity by ensuring timely implementation of agreed arrangements particularly ECOTA & Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA)
6. 24/7 operationalization of borders
7. Visa liberalization to ensure free & frequent movement of goods and people

8. Improving trade facilitation through streamlined payment settlement systems and improved insurance mechanisms
9. Establishment of regional business chambers
- 10.Reduction of time taken by the goods to traverse transit states
- 11.Digitalization of border management systems
- 12.Expanding role of PAECO Secretariat to oversee the initiatives taken for improvement in trade
- 13.Formulation of parliamentary groups to explore new avenues and monitor progress
- 14.Making extensive economic gains by linking ports of member countries including Pakistani (Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar Port), Iranian (Chabahar and Bandar Abbas) and Turkish Ports (Izmir, Istanbul, Mersia and Antalya)
- 15.Member countries of ECO may share their traditions and cultures with one another to create strong bond between their people. Modern means, including social media, may be used for this purpose, grant of scholarships to the students, cooperation in scientific researches, sharing of culture through film, television and radio co-production may help in improving regional people-to-people contacts
- 16.Cooperation among member states in customs, mobilizing financial resources to increase trade and connectivity, reinforcing ECO trade and development bank and introduction of a common currency to increase trade volume
- 17.Utilization of geo-strategic location of Azerbaijan for intra-connectivity by utilizing its East-West and North-South transport corridors.

Special Session on Advancing Tourism for Development and Poverty Alleviation

As part of the Second General Conference of PAECO, the National Assembly of Pakistan and the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS) jointly organized the special session on “Advancing Tourism for Development and Poverty Alleviation” on Wednesday, June 02, 2021.

The session was attended by around 50 participants including parliamentary delegates and experts from PAECO member countries and the National Parliament. The session was organized to draw a joint strategy for enhancing intra-regional tourism amongst the ECO member states for development and poverty alleviation of the local communities. The aim of session was to ponder upon the much-needed development of infrastructure such as transport, roads, hotels and resorts as well as tourist spots in addition to capacity building of local communities to make ECO a preferred international tourist destination.

Hon. Senator Dr. Sania Nishtar, Prime Minister’s Special Assistant on Poverty Alleviation, welcomed the participants on behalf of Hon. Asad Qaiser, Speaker, National Assembly of Pakistan. As the keynote speaker for the session, she reiterated that tourism must be prioritized as an engine of growth and development by all ECO member states. The Hon. Member of Parliaments from the ECO countries including; Ms. Shinakai Karokhail, Member of the Wolessi Jirga (Afghanistan), Ms. Malahat Ibrahimgizi, Deputy Chair of the Committee on Labor and Social Policy (Azerbaijan), Dr. Syed Ehsan Khandouzi, Vice Chairman of the Economic Committee (Iran), Mr. G. Rozyyev, Chairman of the Committee on Science, Education, Culture & Youth Policy (Turkmenistan), Mrs. Ceyda BÖLÜNMEZ ÇANKIRI, Member of Parliament (Turkey) and Mr. Zohidov Erkin Azamovich, Chairman of the Committee on Science, Education, Culture and Sports (Uzbekistan), participated in the detailed discussion. The session was chaired by the Honorable Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Fawad Chaudhry. Worthy delegates from the ECO countries shared their insights with the participants of the special session. They highlighted the importance of the ECO region and the benefits that can result from close collaboration among member countries.

Key Recommendations: After detailed deliberations by the Honorable Parliamentarians from the ECO member states, a joint declaration comprising of following key recommendations was adopted as a way forward aimed at advancing tourism for development and poverty alleviation in the region:

- i. We recognize the fact that our common heritage viz a viz the historical Silk Route and the beautiful geography gives the ECO region enormous potential as an international tourist destination.
- ii. ECO country governments must cooperate in all forms of Tourism, which remains as a great driver of sustainable development and poverty alleviation. We must pool our resources to build the capacity of local communities through education and training of our population especially in livelihoods connected to tourism.
- iii. ECO states must promote religious, cultural and health tourism, which will be possible through enhanced connectivity and development of infrastructure and institutions in the tourist industry of all member states.
- iv. Elimination of terrorism is key to ensuring security in our region, which is vital to attract and develop our tourist industries.
- v. Promotion of tourism in all its legal forms should remain the core focus, both of our national policies on promoting tourism locally as well as regionally within the ECO region, to make it a preferred choice of international tourists.
- vi. All member states also reiterated the importance of sustainable eco-tourism, which is both a powerful source of perpetual poverty alleviation as well as environmental conservation for our coming generations.
- vii. We urge and call upon the Executive Council of PAECO to formulate a **JOINT WORKING GROUP/ COMMITTEE** of Members of Parliament so that an institutional arrangement can be established for the joint sharing of resources of the PAECO member states, in the next one year, in the overall context of ***Advancing Tourism for Development and Poverty Alleviation.***

Honorable Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Fawad Chaudhry shared his concluding remarks and thanked the parliamentarians of the ECO countries for their joint resolve to promote tourism for sustainable development and poverty alleviation in the region. The session ended with vote of thanks.

v) 2nd PAECO General Conference – Closing Session

The closing session of the 2nd PAECO General Conference was held in the afternoon of June 2, 2021 with the President of PAECO Speaker Asad Qaiser 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 decisions were endorsed by the General Conference.**

He then invited the Speakers of PAECO to sign the **Islamabad Declaration**. The signing of the Declaration was indeed a hallmark of the Conference. Besides giving a clear path ahead for PAECO, the Islamabad Declaration expressed complete solidarity with the people of **Jammu and Kashmir and Palestine** and unanimously condemned the gross human rights violations against them. The copy of the Islamabad Declaration is placed as Annex-B.

All heads of the delegations then made their closing statements, appreciating the efforts of Pakistan's Speaker and the National Assembly for the successful holding of the Conference. Detailed text of the statements has been recorded separately.

Closing Ceremony

The three-day 2nd General Conference of PAECO came to its conclusion in the presence of the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, H.E. Mr. Imran Khan, who paid his rich tributes to the Speaker Asad Qaiser for his untiring efforts in organising the Conference during the challenging times of COVID-19. In his address, the Prime Minister accentuated that parliamentary dialogue amongst the ECO Parliaments would help bring the most desirable issues to the forefront of discussions. He expressed optimism that PAECO's conference would prove to be defining moment towards making this parliamentary forum fully operational by ratifying its Charter, identifying a viable roadmap for the respective governments of all the ECO Member States. The honourable Premier emphasized on collective efforts of the Member States for an accelerated regional development, noting that the region will become a powerhouse if regional issues were successfully resolved. He was glad to witness the event's weight on regional trade and connectivity that he considered essential to push the socioeconomic progress in the region. Expressing his deep concerns over the disastrous environmental issues, he urged the ECO Member States to take concrete decisions to contain adverse effects of the climate change to preclude any difficulties in the future.

The President of PAECO Speaker Asad Qaiser thanked the Prime Minister and informed him about the key decisions of the Conference. He also presented a copy of “Islamabad Declaration” to the Prime Minister.

CONCLUSION

The successful holding of the 2nd PAECO General Conference and the overwhelming participation of Member States despite the challenging COVID situation is indeed a great achievement in its own right. Not only has it completely dispelled any ill-conceived notions of Pakistan’s isolation but in fact has amply demonstrated to the world, the ECO Region’s 10 countries’ unwavering support to Pakistan on its principled stand on Kashmir. This reiterates the need, importance and utility of parliamentary diplomacy.

The Islamabad Declaration, signed by the Speakers of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, and endorsed by the Speakers of Iran and Turkmenistan reflects 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.

The amicable settlement of long-pending organisational matters, such as Charter signing and Ratification, agreement on Rule of Business of the Organisation and creation of a permanent Secretariat in Islamabad are yet another great achievements of Islamabad Conference of PAECO, which will go a long way in the strengthening and stability of the organisation. Moreover, the general agreement on the creation of General Fund and formation of PAECO Branches in all Member Parliaments are also crucial decisions, giving solid footings to PAECO.

The General Conference’s decision to promote continued dialogue and encourage regular contacts among the PAECO Parliamentarians through the constitution of Committees on Trade and ECOTA, Connectivity and Communications and Women, Youth and Cultural Affairs will not only enable the parliamentarians to engage into constructive discussions on ECO’s critical areas but will also help finding workable solutions through effective people-to-people contacts.

The overwhelming success of 2nd PAECO General Conference, hence re-establishes Islamabad not only as the birthplace of PAECO in 2013 but also its Launchpad in 2021.