

Statement by Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister
at the 28th Meeting of ECO Council of Ministers (COM)
(Mashhad Iran, 03 December 2024)

H.E. Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the current Chairman of the ECO,

H.E. Jeyhun Bayramov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the 27th Chairman of the ECO,

H.E. Murat Nurtleu, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the upcoming 29th Chairman of the ECO for 2025,

His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Asad Majeed Khan, Secretary General (ECO),

Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies,

Honourable delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalam-o-Alaikum,

It is an honour for me to represent Pakistan at the Twenty Eighth ECO Council of Ministers Meeting in the sacred and the holy city of Iran, Mashhad, the city of Hazrat Emam Reza A.S. may Allah's blessings be upon him and his noble family.

2. On behalf of the Pakistan delegation and on my own behalf, I would like to convey our profound gratitude to the Government of

the Islamic Republic of Iran and Governorate of Mashhad for extending such a warm hospitality and hosting the event in a befitting manner.

3. I would like to express our deepest appreciation to the distinguished Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, H.E. Syed Abbas Araghchi, the current Chair, for having ably led this body during his tenure, under the very apt and relevant theme of "Enhanced and Resilient ECO Region through expansion of Intra-Regional Trade" - emphasizing the true spirit of basis of cooperation of this organization.

4. Though he has joined this organization fairly recently, I would also like to extend , my appreciation to Ambassador Dr. Asad Majeed Khan, the Secretary General of the ECO, and a very able diplomat, for his commitment to infuse a renewed vigor and spirit in this Organization.

Mr. Chairman,

5. At the outset, I would like to convey our strongest condemnation over the Israeli genocide in Gaza and its aggression in Lebanon. We are concerned over the escalating hostilities in the Middle East, wherein Israel has endangered regional peace and security. The people of Palestine, Lebanon and the wider region deserve to live free from fear and violence. Pakistan reiterates its call to uphold peace and

security in the region, safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty and put an end to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine.

Mr. Chairman,

6. Pakistan views ECO as a vital and invaluable platform for our regional countries, owing to shared history, cultural and linguistic affinities, common values and, subsequently, a mutual destiny.

7. ECO was founded with high hopes and great ambitions. The Treaty of Izmir envisaged a closely knit fraternity of member states, in an integrated, interconnected and prosperous region. Congruity of the member states provides an excellent opportunity to advance our collective interests in a befitting manner.

8. We are thankful to the Almighty for blessing our countries and the region with enormous resources. However, regrettably, we have a yet long way to *go to* realize the spirit and objectives of the Treaty of Izmir, by harnessing its full potential and bring tangible benefits to the ECO community.

Excellencies,

9. As suggested by the Islamic Republic of Iran, the theme of the year 2024 "Enhanced and Resilient ECO Region through expansion of Intra-Regional Trade" is not only a theme but a guiding principle for all of us that the progress and prosperity of the ECO region is hinged upon expansion of Intra-Regional Trade.

10. However, It is a matter of great concern that the ECO region, comprising an area of 8 million square kilometers and half a billion population - roughly 15% of the World population, has intra-regional trade of, unfortunately, less than 8%¹ of region's aggregate, and only about 2 % in global trade, which is in stark contrast to other regional groupings such as the EU where the intra-regional trade stands above 70%, and the ASEAN, where it is around 23%.

Excellencies,

11. ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) is a landmark intra-regional preferential trade agreement, which was conceptualized exactly in line with the founding and fundamental goals of the organization; to create amenable and conducive conditions for promotion of sustainable economic development of the region, aiming at joint welfare and well-being of member states.

12. ECOTA that primarily aims to lower tariffs in our region over an agreed timeframe provides an excellent platform for the promotion of our region's economic interests by trade promotion and facilitation. Despite a considerable period since its inception, it is yet to see day light of implementation. So far, only five member states have signed the agreement².

¹ Study conducted by ECO "Leveraging Economic Potential of the ECO Region"

² Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkiye and Tajikistan have signed the ECOTA.

13. As the coordinating country on ECOTA, Pakistan attaches great importance to its early implementation. We would urge all member states to take a broader and more holistic view of the matter and join us in the earliest implementation of ECOTA.

Mr. Chairman,

14. “ECO Vision 2025”, adopted during the 13th ECO Summit in Islamabad in 2017 is a key document that guides us towards increasing intra-regional trade; strengthening regional connectivity; operationalizing the major ECO transport corridors; coordinating efforts to achieve energy security and sustainability; increasing inter-regional trade including increasing contribution of ECO countries in the global trade, and finally promoting tourism.

15. We need to assess our progress with reference to ECO Vision 2025 and redefine our targets and priorities keeping in view the evolving regional and World Order. Now that we are at the cusp of welcoming 2025, we should also give due importance to Uzbekistan’s proposal of 2035 Strategic Objectives, which has the potential to contribute to the Organization’s goals.

Mr. Chairman,

16. The geo-political significance of our region cannot be overstated. We stand at the crossroads of North-South and East-West hemispheres. The key to unlock the geo-economic potential of the

ECO region lies in greater connectivity, through development of road and rail corridors, liberalization of visa regimes and simplification of border procedures. This approach will enable us to act as a bridge and create mutual interdependencies for sustainable growth while allowing us to devise better strategy for efficient use of energy resources.

17. Promotion of trade and investment is a key strategy to strengthen our security. Greater economic cooperation among us will bring peace and stability in the region.

18. A significant development that happened during recent times, is the operationalization of Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad (ITI) road corridor. Moreover, under TIR system, trucks of National Logistical Cell of Pakistan have been successfully transiting cargo through Iran.

19. It is imperative that more Border Crossing Points in the ECO region are notified as TIR Stations so that the trade operations are similarly facilitated.

20. Pakistan, for its part, is upgrading its rail and road infrastructure to facilitate further smooth flow of goods with our neighbours and beyond.

21. It is important to create functional, interlinked region-wide transit corridors to facilitate an enabling environment for promoting intra-regional connectivity in its true spirit.

Mr. Chairman,

22. ECO's specialized agencies and regional institutes in many Member States, could play a critical role in advancement of the objectives and ideals of our organization, through greater engagement and people to people contact. However, I believe that these institutions or specialized agencies will not be able to deliver unless all the members complete the due formalities for membership with active contribution.

23. It is necessary that all the ECO Members should join these specialized agencies, ratify the respective charters and lend their full material and active support to enable them to function effectively.

Mr. Chairman,

24. As one of the founding members of ECO, Pakistan has been, and will remain the active participant in shaping ECO's agenda. We shall remain fully committed to helping ECO fulfill it. We will continue working with all ECO Member States to closely coordinate our policies to enhance regional trade and connectivity.

25. We wish to see the ECO Region transforming into a prosperous trading bloc that stimulates and promotes industrial growth, reduces and eventually eliminates tariff and non-tariff barriers, to promote free trade within the region and becomes a factor of global peace, stability and prosperity.

Mr. Chairman,

26. I am confident that, with our collective and coordinated efforts from the platform of ECO, we can realize the true potential of the ECO region.

27. Pakistan reiterates its firm belief in ECO's founding values and its commitment to ECO Vision 2025 and the Treaty of Izmir. I firmly believe that through our collaborative approach, ECO would serve as an ideal platform to achieve the vision set forth by our predecessors and make ECO an organization, which becomes a source of inspiration for others to follow.

I thank you!
