

## Final Report

**'The 5<sup>th</sup> High-Level Expert Group (HLEG)  
Meeting on Trade, Investment, and Other  
Related Matters in the ECO Region'**

**(Mode: in person)**

November 24-25, 2025  
Republic of Türkiye, Istanbul

## Report

The 5<sup>th</sup> High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) Meeting on Trade, Investment, and Other Related Matters in the ECO Region' held on November 24-25, 2025 in Istanbul, the Republic of Türkiye. The Meeting was attended by the senior level officials from the Member States including **Afghanistan**, the Republic of **Azerbaijan**, the Islamic Republic of **Iran**, the Republic of **Kazakhstan**, **Kyrgyz Republic**, the Islamic Republic of **Pakistan**, the Republic of **Tajikistan**, the Republic of **Türkiye (host)**, **Turkmenistan**, and the Republic of **Uzbekistan**. The delegations from ECO Observers namely Turkish Cypriot State and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), as well as ECO affiliated organizations/institutions such as ECO Seed Association (ECOSA), ECO Trade Development Bank (ETDB), International Road Transport Union (IRU) and UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) attended the Meeting. The ECO delegation headed by the Deputy Secretary General participated in the meeting. List of participants is attached as Annex-I.

### **Agenda Item No. 1-2**

#### Inauguration of the Meeting/Statement

2. Dr. Behzad Saberi Ansari, ECO Deputy Secretary General for Trade, Investment, Agriculture and Industry while welcoming the participants stated that this 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting will provide us with a vital opportunity to finalize technical preparations for the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade, scheduled for 26 November 2025, recalling the decision taken at the 4<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting that HLEG Meeting is to be organized back-to-back with the ECO Ministerial Meetings on Foreign Trade/Commerce. He invited the participants to share their invaluable insights as a collaborative endeavor to finalize the draft Agenda, the Meeting Report as well as the Istanbul Declaration to be considered and adopted by the 5<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting. Copy of statement is attached Annex-II.

### **Agenda Item No. 3**

#### Election of the Chair

3. In accordance with ECO Rules of Procedure, the head of the Delegation of the Republic of Türkiye (host), Ms. Aylin Bebekoglu, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Trade, the Republic of Türkiye was unanimously elected as the Chair.

4. In her opening remarks, the Chair extended a warm welcome to the esteemed delegates from Member States and expressed sincere appreciation to the ECO Secretariat for their diligent efforts in organizing this important meeting. She expressed confidence that the 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting would be able to finalize the important documents to be presented before the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Trade/Commerce to be held on November 26, 2025. A copy of her statement is attached Annex-III.

5.

**Agenda Item No. 4**

Adoption of the HLEG Agenda

6. The Meeting unanimously adopted the Agenda, which is attached as Annex-IV.

**Agenda Item No. 5**

Appointment of Drafting Committee

7. An open-ended Drafting Committee, composed of delegates from the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Türkiye and the ECO Secretariat was established to prepare the Draft Report of the Meeting.

**Agenda Item No. 6**

Statements by HoD

8. The participants of the 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting extended their heartfelt gratitude to the Republic of Türkiye for its exceptional arrangements and warm hospitality. They underscored the critical need to modernize and digitalize trade infrastructure across the ECO Region, with a focus on enhancing trade facilitation, reducing time and costs, and improving the ease of doing business. The participants reaffirmed their commitment to addressing existing bottlenecks, emphasizing that these collective efforts will pave the way for a more integrated, efficient, and sustainable trade ecosystem in the region. Additionally, delegates provided updates on their national initiatives, policies, and development programs related to trade facilitation, customs cooperation and trade promotion activities. The representatives from ECO affiliated institutions and international organizations also delivered their statements. The shared statements are attached as Annex-V.

**Agenda Item No. 7**

Brief Review of the Status of the Implementation of Resolutions, Decisions and Recommendations of the ECO Summits, the Council of Foreign Ministers related to Trade; previous Ministerial Meetings on Commerce and Foreign Trade, HLEG Meetings and ECOTA Cooperation Council Meetings

9. Under this agenda item, Mr. Mehmet Cetik, Program Officer, the ECO Secretariat provided a brief overview of the various priority areas in trade and the progress recorded on trade-related decisions taken at the previous ECO Summits, Council of Ministers (COM) Meetings, ECOTA Cooperation Councils, and the Council of Heads of Customs Administration (CHCA) Meetings. He also updated the Meeting on the implementation status of decisions of 4<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade held in Kabul in July 2011. He highlighted the substantial progress in intra-ECO trade expansion in the region, however, kindly reminded the importance of the implementation of a revised ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) for furthering trade and development in the region. A copy of his presentation is attached as Annex-VI.

10. The Meeting further discussed the implementation status of resolutions, decisions, and recommendations of the ECO Summits, Council of Foreign Ministers

(COM), the 4<sup>th</sup> Trade Ministers' Meeting, ECO Cooperation Council, and CHCA meetings. The Meeting appreciated the ECO Secretariat for promoting trade liberalization, and successfully organizing the key meetings, making notable progress in several areas including ECOTA, Trade Facilitation, Customs Cooperation, and Trade Promotion efforts.

11. Mr. Ali Zahedtaleban, the lead researcher of the ECOTA study has made a brief presentation on the main outputs of the research study. He stated that the current impasse can be resolved by amending provisions on tariff reduction modalities (Article 4). He proposed three (3) different tariff reduction scenarios that would generate benefits for all Member States on a more balanced and equitable basis. He mentioned that there is no need to revise the entire agreement - a process, he estimated to be very lengthy and time-consuming. He suggested Member States furthering tariff reductions starting with Scenario 1, and gradually expanding to Scenarios 2 and 3 with a view to achieve free trade area in the region. A copy of his presentation is attached as [Annex-VII](#).

12. The Chair invited the Member States for their views/comments on the ECOTA research study. The representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan inquired about the source of statistical data used for the study. The researcher responded that the data regarding ECO Member States who did not provide their trade data to the ECO Secretariat before the deadline, was taken from the Trade Map, International Trade Center Portal. ([trademap.org](http://trademap.org))

13. The Islamic Republic of Iran, while appreciating the research study, requested to provide an updated copy to the non-signatory Member States as well, so that they may make a better-informed consideration about joining ECOTA. Ms. Amina Batool, Director Trade and Investment, ECO Secretariat informed the meeting that the final research study was provided to all Member States in May 2025, and added that the updated research study shall be accessible also through the official ECO Website at <https://eco.int/trade-and-investments-publications/>; where the first version (March 2021) is already available.

## **Agenda Item No. 8**

### Consideration of Progress on Preferential Trade Regime under ECO

#### a. Implementation of ECOTA and Way Forward

14. Under this agenda item, the Director of Trade and Investment informed the Meeting that following the directions of the 9<sup>th</sup> ECOTA Cooperation Council Meeting, the ECO Secretariat updated the study "*Impediments to the Implementation of the ECO Trade Agreement and Measures to Resolve*" and drafted "ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap" and "ToRs of the Technical Negotiation Committee" (ToRs) with a view to guide the re-negotiation process of ECOTA. Both documents were circulated to all Member States for views/comments; however, no feedback was received. Therefore, she provided a short introductory brief on the draft "*ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap*" and the ToRs.

15. The Chair opened the floor for initial reactions and preliminary exchange of views among Member States, including ECO-affiliated bodies such as ECO-CCI, ECOSA, on the draft ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap. Afghanistan suggested prioritizing the removal or elimination of non-tariff barriers and bottlenecks. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Republic of Türkiye expressed support for revising ECOTA and proposed specific modifications to relevant paragraphs of the draft Negotiation Strategy. A number of proposals were presented and after detailed deliberations, the Meeting finalized/adopted the text of draft “ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap” with limited modifications. Member States also expressed their support for revising the ECOTA text, with the aim of promoting expansion, inclusivity, and fairness among ECO Member States. In this regard, the Meeting recommended to establish a Technical Negotiation Committee (comprising at least three (3) ECOTA Member States) to review/amend ECOTA. The amended ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap (clean text) is attached as Annex-VIII, being final and ready for the approval by the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting. Following the approval of the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting, a Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC) may commence negotiations in the first quarter of 2026.

16. Subsequently, the ECO Secretariat provided a brief review of the draft Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC). The Meeting identified several areas of overlaps or repetitions with the draft ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap. Accordingly, the Chair suggested retaining the ToRs draft only as a background paper, and recommended a process for its revision under the ECO Rules and Procedures. The ECO Legal Advisor summarized the procedure where the establishment of the TNC could be approved by the Ministerial Meeting, where TNC may convene with a quorum consisting of at least three (3) ECOTA Parties, while the ToRs and modalities for the functioning of the TNC would be deferred to a later stage, and subsequently considered and formulated by the TNC itself with the assistance of the ECO Secretariat.

17. The Meeting endorsed the ECO Secretariat’s suggestion and decided to seek Ministerial approval for establishing the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC). The TNC will operate under the ECO Rules of Procedure and is mandated to develop its own Terms of Reference (ToRs), which will be submitted to the Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) for adoption by the Council of Ministers (COM) through silence procedure.

**8b. Draft Multi-Dimensional Trade and Investment Strategy and Prospects of Establishing a Free Trade Area in the Region**

18. The Secretariat recalled that the 4<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade mandated the establishment of the Joint Working Group (JWG) to finalize the draft “Multi-Dimensional Trade and Investment Strategy and Prospects of Establishing a Free Trade Area in the Region” (ECO-MDTIS). Despite several efforts,

the first JWG meeting to discuss the draft Strategy could not convene since 2011. Given this prolonged inactivity, the Meeting recommended that the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade may transfer this work on ECO-MDTIS to the ECOTA Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC).

19. The Chair invited the views/comments of Member States. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Türkiye supported the transfer decision. Accordingly, the Meeting decided with consensus to transfer the work on ECO-MDTIS to the ECOTA Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC).

### **Agenda Item No. 9**

#### Consideration of Progress on Trade Facilitation Process under ECO

##### a. Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy

20. The Secretariat updated the Meeting on the progress made by the Joint Working Group (JWG) established by the 4th Ministerial Meeting to finalize the ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy and the draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement. The final text of the Strategy was adopted on May 28, 2025 at the 10<sup>th</sup> CHCA Meeting in Tehran, and became approval-ready by the Trade Ministers.

21. The 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting, while appreciating the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Uzbekistan for hosting successful Meetings, recommended that the Trade Facilitation Strategy may be submitted to the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting for final approval.

22. The delegate of the Republic of Azerbaijan introduced technical comments on the Trade Facilitation Strategy, as follows: deleting sub-paragraphs (d) and (e), under the second paragraph of Section E; and subsequently introduce the following wording *“exploring opportunities for the establishment of a one-stop border post and the conduct of joint controls”* to replace the sub-paragraph (d) and (e).

23. The Secretariat responded that similar comments were already discussed in trade facilitation working group meetings before the finalization of the Strategy. In addition, the Secretariat kindly reminded the Meeting that ECO Member States are to form an ECO Trade Facilitation Committee to meet annually every November according to the Strategy. The Secretariat recommended the early activation of this Committee where such opinions can be better elaborated with a view to discuss any related areas for cooperation, and the possible implementation of the Strategy.

##### **9b. Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement**

24. The Secretariat updated the Meeting on the latest status of the Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> JWG Meeting where significant progress was recorded in advancing the negotiations on the Draft Trade Facilitation Agreement, and appreciated the Republic of Uzbekistan for hosting the 3<sup>rd</sup> JWG Meeting in Tashkent on May 22, 2025.

25. In this regard, the HLEG Meeting formally invited interested Member States to host the next Joint Working Group (JWG) Meeting, and to consider establishing a target date for concluding negotiations on the remaining provisions of the draft Agreement.

**9c. "ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters"**

26. The Secretariat informed the HLEG Meeting that the report of the 6<sup>th</sup> ECCC along with final text of the "*ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters*" was adopted by the 10<sup>th</sup> CHCA Meeting held on May 28, 2025, and in accordance with ECO Rules and Procedures, the CPR's silence procedure was conducted from May 30 to June 5, 2025, with no objections received. Subsequently, a two-week silence procedure for Council of Ministers (COM) approval was initiated between June 6 and 24, 2025. As no comments were received within the set time, the Agreement is deemed "Approved" by the COM, and ready for signature/ratification by the Member States, effective June 25, 2025. A copy of approved Agreement is attached as Annex-IX.

27. The Chair, while appreciating Member States for their constructive engagement in the finalization of the Agreement, asked the Meeting which Member States would be ready to attend the Treaty Event for signing the Agreement.

28. The Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Türkiye stated that they are ready to sign the "*ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters*" during the Treaty Event. The Republic of Tajikistan stated that the internal procedures are completed, however, they will sign subsequently through established diplomatic channels.

**d. Brief review of the 10<sup>th</sup> CHCA ECO Smuggling and Customs Offences' Databank**

29. The representative of the Republic of Türkiye updated the Meeting on the progress achieved since the first technical test meeting, held online on 12 May 2025. The Meeting appreciated the Republic of Türkiye for the successful hosting of the Databank.

30. The Meeting called on all signatory Member States to complete their internal technical procedures for the Databank's full operationalization, and urged Afghanistan to share the original instrument of ratification, and the Republic of Tajikistan to ratify and share the instrument of ratification with the ECO Secretariat, and invited the remaining Member States to consider signing/ratifying the ECO Agreement on Customs Offences' and Smuggling Data Bank.

31. Under this Agenda item, the ECO Secretariat further informed the Meeting about progress on EDI and electronic data sharing and highlighted opportunities and challenges regarding EDI, paperless cross-border trade and requested the Member States to nominate dedicated EDI focal points for efficient coordination.

32. The Republic of Azerbaijan mentioned that they have been experiencing technical problems to upload data to the Databank. While updating the Meeting on the latest achievement of Azerbaijani Customs seizure of heroin with the total amount of 456,800kg, the delegate emphasized that the full implementation of the Databank is important due the geographical position of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and customs

smuggling risks. The Republic of Türkiye informed that they have been working on such technical problems on uploading data with a view to be fixed by January 2026. The Meeting recommended the ECO Secretariat to organize an additional meeting to deal with such technical issues in coordination with the host Member State of the Databank.

### **Agenda Item No. 10**

#### **Consideration of Progress on Trade Promotion in the ECO Region**

##### **a. "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States" (MoU on Trade Promotion)**

33. The Secretariat provided a brief review of the decisions of the 4<sup>th</sup> TPOs Forum, May 6, 2025, Karachi, including the background of the approval process of the *"Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States"* by the Council of Ministers (COM), effective as of June 25, 2025.

34. The Legal Advisor of the ECO Secretariat informed the Meeting of the legal status of the *"Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States"* (the MoU on Trade Promotion), as being ready and open for signature during the Treaty Event on November 26, 2025. It was noted that Member States who are not ready to attend the Treaty Event may consider signing/ratifying subsequently, through diplomatic channels.

35. The Chair asked the about the latest status of Member States' participation in the Treaty Event. Accordingly, the responses from the Member States are as follows:

- The Republic of Azerbaijan informed that the text is under internal procedure and waiting for final approval, and the same will be shared through diplomatic channel. At this stage, the Republic of Azerbaijan is not ready to sign.
- The Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to sign.
- The Republic of Kazakhstan is not ready to sign.
- Kyrgyz Republic is ready to sign.
- The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is ready to sign.
- The Republic of Tajikistan has been pursuing the completion of the required internal procedures.
- The Republic of Türkiye is ready to sign.
- The Republic of Uzbekistan conducted internal procedures regarding the MoU on Trade Promotion; however, they are not ready to sign due to the completion of certain procedures.

36. Additionally, the Legal Advisor proposed the Meeting to seek the approval of the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Trade Ministers' Meeting regarding the MoU on Trade Promotion, with the understanding that the MoU shall be considered as a non-binding legal document, in response to the additional revision requests raised by the Republic of Azerbaijan,

the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Republic of Azerbaijan provided their consent to this new proposal. The Republic of Kazakhstan stated that they will discuss the new proposal with their relevant authorities and respond later through diplomatic channels. The Meeting took note of comments of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Kazakhstan, and instructed the ECO Secretariat to follow-up the issues at a later stage.

37. The Meeting decided that the Ministers may take note and acknowledge that the signing the MoU on Trade Promotion shall not generate a legally binding status, and the MoU on Trade Promotion is rather a general framework of cooperation.

**b. Joint Trade Promotional Activities by TPOs of Member States**

38. The Secretariat briefed on the key outcomes under this agenda item. The Secretariat proposed that for the future activities, each Member State may organize a trade fair during its tenure as the ECO Chair. The ECO Trade Promotion Organizations (TPOs) Forum may convene at least annually for the timely decision implementation and enhanced activities on trade promotion.

39. The Meeting while appreciating the efforts of the Member States requested them to actively pursue the outcomes of the 4<sup>th</sup> TPOs Forum, held on May 6, 2025 in Karachi, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and requested the TDAP, Islamic Republic of Pakistan to share further details and/or a concept note to organize "ECO Regional Partnership Forum" as offered during the 4<sup>th</sup> TPOs Forum, in coordination with the ECO Secretariat and ECO-TDB.

**Agenda Item No. 11**

Network of the Special Economic/Free Trade Zones (SEZs/FTZs) of the ECO Member States

40. The Secretariat provided a brief background information about the development of the ECO SEZ/FTZ Network, and requested remaining Member States to share their nominations for the Permanent Standing Committee and Joint Commission.

41. The Meeting requested Member States to share their inputs with the Secretariat about the draft *Project Proposal and ToRs for a Study on Guidelines and Joint Action Plan for an ECO SEZs/FTZs Network*, and tasked the Secretariat to endeavor to conduct the study and share its outcome for feedback. The Secretariat requested a voluntary Member State to host the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of Heads of SEZs/FTZs. No response was noted.

**Agenda Item No. 12**

Trade-related Capacity Building Projects and Funding Facilities under ECO

42. The ECO Secretariat updated the Meeting on capacity-building initiatives, including training programs that are offered by the Republic of Azerbaijan, the

Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Türkiye. In this regard, the Secretariat further informed that the Republic of Azerbaijan has announced to host an experience sharing workshop on textile materials on December 4, 2025, and another online experience sharing event on EDI on December 16, 2025, and the Republic of Türkiye has also announced to organize workshops in the area of customs cooperation, paperless trade, and e-commerce in the next year.

43. Mr. Giorgi TODUA, Industrial Development Expert from UNIDO, presented an overview of UNIDO's structure, capabilities, particularly the achievements of its Global Quality and Standards Program (GQSP), as well as its overall approach to quality infrastructure projects, providing the Meeting with a comprehensive understanding of the organization's related work. Mr. TODUA informed the meeting that the Global Quality and Standards Program (GQSP) could be successfully replicated for the ECO Region with a view to achieve meaningful progress in the ECO Quality Infrastructure. A copy of his presentation is attached as Annex-X.

44. ECO-TDB provided an updated presentation on the banks' operational capacity, structure, challenges, notable achievements, and strategic plans, and extended an invitation to the remaining Member States to join the Bank. A copy of his presentation is attached as Annex-XI.

### **12c. ECO Quality Infrastructure**

45. Mr. Mehmet Cetik, Program Officer, the ECO Secretariat provided an overview of ongoing projects, including small-scale and large-scale initiatives developed by the ECO Secretariat. Considering the success of the training on international standardization, he noted that two further projects, namely, (i) Sustainability Reporting and (ii) Accreditation, could not be realized for budgetary reasons in 2025, however, they will be re-considered for year 2026.

46. Mr. Cetik informed the Meeting that the ECO-UNIDO Trade Capacity Building Project Phase IV has been pending since 2017, and recently, significant steps, including the preparation of a new Project Proposal by the ECO Secretariat, have been recorded to revive the project in close coordination with UNIDO. He informed the Meeting that the ECO-TDB has approved the allocation of USD50,000 to this important project, as of October 2025, which can be effectively utilized since the project proposal of the ECO Secretariat is in a modular structure. The Secretariat added that as already mentioned in the recent ECO-UNIDO Project Proposal, the Secretariat has also been considering to support the project through additional funds from its own resources.

47. The Secretariat, while referring to the consensus achieved during the 9<sup>th</sup> ECOTA Cooperation Council Meeting regarding the execution of the preliminary ECO Quality Infrastructure Survey, recalled that particularly ECOTA Signatory Member States are kindly invited to volunteer to have the survey conducted by the

ECO Secretariat, reminding that the survey is only of informative character. The Secretariat noted that no responses have been received so far.

#### **12 d. ECOTA Implementation Fund**

48. The Secretariat provided a brief on the function and importance of ECOTA Implementation Fund. The decision to establish the ECOTA Implementation Fund was taken in the 2<sup>nd</sup>ECOTA Cooperation Council Meeting (CCM), held at the ECO Secretariat in Tehran on 21-22 April 2011, and the Fund was formally launched during the 3rd ECOTA CCM, convened in Ankara on 2-3 October 2012. The primary objective of the Fund is to support the provision of technical assistance, and to facilitate the organization of seminars, trade fairs, exhibitions, and other promotional activities related to the implementation of ECOTA.

49. The Meeting recommended the reactivation and enhancement of the ECOTA Implementation Fund, as an integral part of the implementation of ECOTA, as well as, in order to fund the organization of related meetings during the renegotiation process, and recommended the Secretariat to revise the modalities of Fund as needed with a view to its effective use.

#### **12e. Cooperation with National and International Development Agencies**

50. The Chair invited delegates to share their views on the potential role of national development agencies in providing financial or technical support to ECO capacity building projects in the area of trade and investment, whether initiated by the Secretariat or Member States. Mr. Cetik, Programme Officer, the ECO Secretariat asked the Meeting whether the national development agencies could also be utilized to support any ECO events or related ECO-technical capacity building projects on trade and customs.

51. The Republic of Türkiye offered to share their experiences through hosting a technical assistance workshop next year on customs cooperation, paperless trade, and e-commerce, and informed that the details will be shared through diplomatic channel. The Republic of Kazakhstan also offered to host experience-sharing workshops on ECO trade agenda, including quality infrastructure.

#### **Agenda Item No. 13**

#### **Recommendations on Strengthening Private Sector Cooperation in the Region**

52. Under this agenda item, the Secretariat updated the Meeting on recent initiatives to enhance private sector engagement in the ECO region, a key stakeholder in regional trade and economic cooperation. The Meeting recommended the following measures to strengthen cooperation with the private sector:

- The ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ECO-CCI) may proactively contribute to promoting regional trade, for instance, through the regular

organization of ECO Business Forums as stand-alone events, possibly in addition to similar events at the margin of ECO Summits.

- The Meeting encouraged Member States to consider proposals to enhance the institutional effectiveness of ECO-CCI, including options for a permanent secretariat, and to submit views to the Secretariat.
- Non-Member States may consider joining the ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECO-TDB) to support its financial strength and regional impact.
- The ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECO-TDB) and Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) may coordinate to finalize the details for the organization of the "ECO Regional Forum", as offered by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan during the 4<sup>th</sup>TPOs Forum.
- Each Member State may organize a trade fair or a similar trade promotion event during its tenure as the ECO Chair.
- The Meeting welcomed the offer of Afghanistan, regarding hosting an ECO Joint Exhibition with the private sector, and invited Member States to coordinate with the Secretariat on possible modalities and timing.
- The Secretariat, in coordination with Member States, may draft a joint "*ECO Calendar of Trade Promotion Events*", to be updated annually for timely execution and enhanced coordination for the organization of joint events on trade promotion.

#### **Agenda Item No. 14**

##### **ECO Vision 2025 and Beyond**

53. The Secretariat provided a brief update on the transition from the current ECO Vision 2025 to the forthcoming "Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation 2035 - SGEC 2035", as mandated by the 28<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers.

54. The Meeting duly noted that the formulation of SGEC 2035 is expected to reflect a diverse range of stakeholders, including the private sector, academia, youth, and women's organizations.

55. The Secretariat informed that the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Türkiye already communicated their comments/amendment suggestions for the SGEC 2035. The Secretariat encouraged remaining Member States to provide their comments with the Secretariat not later than June 2026.

#### **Agenda Item No. 15**

##### **Consideration/Finalization of the Draft Istanbul Declaration**

56. The 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting thoroughly reviewed the Draft Istanbul Declaration and approved the text, incorporating additional remarks from Member States, for the adoption by the 5<sup>th</sup>ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade. A copy of final text is attached as Annex-XII.

#### **Agenda Item No.16**

##### **Consideration/Finalization of the Agenda and Report of the Ministers' Meeting**

57. The Meeting discussed and finalized the draft Agenda and Report of the 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting for the consideration of the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade. A copy of draft Agenda of 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade is attached as Annex-XIII.

**Agenda Item No. 17**

**Any Other Business**

58. Under this agenda item, no issue was discussed.

**Outcome/Recommendations:**

59. The outcome/recommendations of the 5<sup>th</sup> HLEG Meeting is as follows:

- i). The Meeting recommended the Ministerial meeting to approve the establishment of the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC). The TNC will operate under the ECO Rules of Procedure, and is mandated to prepare its own Terms of Reference (ToRs) with the assistance of the ECO Secretariat, as the TORs will be submitted to the Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) with a view to their adoption by the Council of Ministers (COM) through silence procedure. TNC may convene with a quorum consisting of at least three (3) ECOTA Parties, subject to the approval of the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade.
- ii). The TNC will commence its first session in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2026 (hybrid format), including initial discussions on proposed revisions to the ECOTA and its annexes.
- iii). The Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Türkiye informed the Meeting that they are ready to sign both the "*ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters*" and the "*Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States*" during the 5<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting.
- iv). The Meeting encouraged remaining Member States to sign both the "*ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters*" and the "*Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States*" after the completion of relevant national procedures.
- v). The Meeting agreed that the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade may acknowledge that "*Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Joint Trade Promotion Activities among ECO Member States*" is not a legally binding document, as it rather establishes a general framework for cooperation.
- vi). The Meeting recommended that the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade may transfer the working of the JWG on "*Multi-Dimensional Trade and Investment Strategy and Prospects of Establishing a Free Trade Area in the Region*" (ECO-MDTIS) under the ECOTA TNC referred to sub-paragraph (i) above.

- vii). The Meeting invited Member States to host the next Joint Working Group (JWG) on Trade Facilitation to continue the technical negotiations on the *Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement*, and recommended setting a target date to conclude negotiations;
- viii). The Meeting requested Member States to share their inputs with the Secretariat about the draft Project Proposal and ToR for a Study on Guidelines and Joint Action Plan for an ECO SEZs/FTZs Network, and asked a voluntary Member State to host the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of Heads of SEZs/FTZs;
- ix). The Meeting appreciated the active engagement of the Republic of Azerbaijan to host training workshops on customs (classification of textile materials, and EDI), and requested Member States to actively participate in and contribute to such initiatives;
- x). The Meeting requested Member States to nominate national EDI focal points and recommended that future ECCC meetings may allocate a dedicated session to EDI and digital trade facilitation, with outcomes to be reported to the CHCA;
- xi). The Meeting welcomed the offers of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Türkiye to host capacity building events in the field of customs cooperation, as mentioned in the annotated agenda, and invited the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Türkiye to notify the Secretariat of any possible dates and related hospitality arrangements, and requested Member States to actively participate in and contribute to such initiatives;
- xii). The Meeting encouraged primarily the ECOTA Signatory Member States to volunteer for the execution of the *ECO Survey on Quality Infrastructure*, and actively contribute to such an informative study as a preliminary step for further meaningful actions for the reduction of non-tariff barriers to trade in the ECO region, and recommended the use of ECOTA Implementation Fund for the execution of the Survey.
- xiii). The Meeting recommended the reactivation and enhancement of the ECOTA Implementation Fund, as an integral part of the implementation of ECOTA, as well as, in order to fund the organization of related meetings during the renegotiation process, and recommended the Secretariat to revise the modalities of Fund as needed with a view to its effective use.
- xiv). The Meeting invited the Non-Signatory Member States to consider joining the ECO-Trade and Development Bank(ECO-TDB) to support its operations;
- xv). The Meeting requested the Secretariat of the TDAP (the Islamic Republic of Pakistan)and the ECO-TDB to coordinate closer regarding the organization of the "ECO Regional Partnership Forum", as hosting was offered by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan during the 4<sup>th</sup> TPOsForum in Karachi;
- xvi). The Meeting recommended each Member State to organize a "Trade Fair" or a similar trade promotion activity during their tenure as the ECO Chair.

#### **18. Date/Venue of the Next Meeting and Closing**

60. The Meeting recalled the Republic of Uzbekistan's offer to host the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce & Foreign Trade, as proposed by the President of Uzbekistan during the 17<sup>th</sup> ECO Summit in Shusha. Accordingly, the Meeting kindly

requested the Republic of Uzbekistan or other Member States to consider hosting the 6<sup>th</sup>ECO Ministerial Meeting. The ECO Secretariat will coordinate the exact date and venue in consultation with the host country through diplomatic channels.

61. The 5<sup>th</sup>HLEG Meeting concluded with the vote of thanks. The participants expressed their heartfelt gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Türkiye for their commitment and excellent arrangements for organizing this meeting and extended profound gratitude to the ECO Secretariat for the successful arrangements for this important meeting.

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