

# **Draft Statement**

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Asad M. Khan  
Secretary General of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)  
5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade  
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**Your Excellencies,**

**Honourable Ministers,**

**Distinguished Delegates,**

It is a great honour and privilege to welcome you all to the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade, graciously hosted by the Republic of Türkiye in the historic city of Istanbul, where the spirit of regional connectivity has shaped civilizations for centuries.

Allow me, at the outset, to express our deep appreciation to the Government and Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Türkiye for their warm hospitality, excellent arrangements, and **to Minister Omer BOLAT** for his close personal interest and unwavering support for **advancing ECO Trade Integration agenda**.

Today's Ministerial Meeting marks a defining moment in our shared efforts to revitalize and modernize the ECO trade architecture. After a span of 14 years since the last Ministerial gathering of this nature, we meet again with enriched technical preparation, and a stronger regional determination to move from deliberation to implementation.

**Excellencies,**

Over the past two days, senior officials convened in the High-Level Experts Group (HLEG) Meeting, where extensive technical work took place on matters that are now before you for Ministerial guidance. I wish to commend all Member States for their constructive participation and the professionalism demonstrated throughout the preparatory process.

Allow me to highlight several key achievements and developments that bring us to this important juncture:

## **ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA)**

At the centre of our agenda lies the **vitalization** of the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), a goal that has been consistently reaffirmed by our Heads of State and Government, Ministers, and senior officials across several years.

ECOTA was signed in 2003 and it is legally in force since 2008 among 5 Contracting Parties. ECOTA embodies our region's aspiration for a preferential, predictable, and rules-based trading regime. Yet, despite its promise, ECOTA has not achieved the level of implementation and impact that our region so urgently needs.

The trajectory of our regional trade over the past two decades offers both encouragement and caution. On the positive side, total intra-ECO trade has increased 4.5 times, rising from 23 billion USD to more than 100 billion USD. Our overall trade volume with the world has likewise tripled, growing from 400 billion USD to almost 1.2 trillion USD. These figures demonstrate the dynamism, scale, and resilience of our economies.

However, persistent structural challenges remain. For most of the last 20 years, the ECO region has carried a negative trade balance with the world – except for just four years (2008, 2010, 2011, and 2012). Since 2021, this deficit has been widening, signalling a risk of declining competitiveness if timely corrective measures are not taken.

Recognizing these structural challenges, the ECO Secretariat has undertaken a comprehensive diagnostic assessment to identify impediments to ECOTA's implementation. The study, shared earlier with all Member States, confirms that while challenges are real, they are by no means insurmountable. Rather, they represent clear opportunities for modernization, and renewed commitment.

**The full operationalization of ECOTA will also pave the way for the remaining ECO Member States to join this foundational agreement, strengthening economic integration across the ECO region. It is very encouraging to see all ECO member states not only join this important meeting but also to make active contributions.**

As part of our broader commitment to regional and multilateral integration, I also take this opportunity to reaffirm ECO's full support for the early and

successful conclusion of the WTO accession bids of our aspiring Member States.

Accession will not only deepen global integration but also complement ECOTA modernization by enhancing transparency, predictability, and rules-based trade.

### **Honourable Ministers,**

The Strategy and Roadmap prepared by the Secretariat, and examined by the HLEG, now provides a practical, inclusive, and time-bound framework for re-negotiating ECOTA with the objective of making it simpler, more balanced, and fully operational.

In this context, the establishment of the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC), subject to your approval today, may commence its work in early 2026. The TNC is envisaged to function as the central engine of our collaborative efforts, enabling transparent, sequential, and technically robust negotiations. Member States shall strive to conclude these negotiations by the third quarter of 2027, guided throughout by data-driven analysis, constructive dialogue, and balanced concessions. **We are confident that all the ECO member states will join the negotiation process to both contribute and benefit from it.**

And beyond ECOTA modernization, and in line with our broader mandate to advance the ECO trade agenda, I am pleased to present to Your Excellencies three key ECO instruments today:

As adopted at the 10th Meeting of the Heads of Customs Administrations, on May 28, 2025, in Tehran, I am pleased to present the **ECO trade Facilitation Strategy for your final approval.**

This Strategy, together with the ongoing work on the draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement, constitutes a major step forward in harmonizing and simplifying our procedures, and strengthening border efficiency across our region.

The **ECO Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters**, has already been opened for signatures, and I am pleased to remind that it is ready for signature today.

The Agreement will provide our customs administrations with a modern, legally robust foundation for cooperation, complementing our wider trade liberalization and economic integration objectives.

The Memorandum of Understanding on **Joint Trade Promotion Activities** is similarly placed before Your Excellencies today. With your signatures, this MoU will enable our private sectors to collaborate more effectively, reflecting the growing demand for coordinated export promotion, business matchmaking, and sectoral outreach across the ECO region.

### **Honorable Ministers**

**With these agreements and undertakings** ECO has now entered a new phase of maturity, where the technical groundwork is sufficiently advanced to support higher-level political decisions.

The parallel progress of customs and trade agendas is particularly encouraging. With the rapid evolution of global supply chains, digital trade, and cross-border logistics, the alignment of customs reforms with trade liberalization efforts becomes not only desirable, but essential.

Equally important is our joint collaboration with UNIDO on strengthening the quality infrastructure of the ECO region. These complementary efforts must continue to inspire deeper coordination and collective action at the regional level.

### **Excellencies,**

As we deepen regional integration, allow me also to emphasize the crucial role of our private sector.

Businesses, exporters, entrepreneurs, and logistics operators are the true drivers of regional commerce. A modernized ECOTA, coupled with streamlined border procedures, will give them the confidence, predictability, and incentives they need to invest in cross-border trade.

**ECO looks to redouble its efforts to create networking opportunities, capacity building, awareness activities in close coordination with ECO CCI, national trade and investment promotion agencies, international organizations and development partners.**

This broad coalition is essential for turning policy into tangible economic results.

## **Excellencies,**

As we have been revising the ECO Vision 2025 toward the Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation 2035, we see clearly the important nexus between trade, transport and tourism. These three sectors reinforce one another as drivers of employment, mobility, regional value chains, and sustainable development.

We remain determined to advance progress on all these fronts to secure deeper trade integration and economic connectivity across the ECO region.

Businesses, entrepreneurs, logistics operators, and investors remain the true engines of regional cooperation. Their dynamism will determine the success not only of ECOTA's implementation, but also of our wider agenda, including trade facilitation reforms, digital customs initiatives, coordinated trade promotion efforts, and our joint efforts to build an integrated regional marketplace.

In this regard, allow me to underline additional areas requiring strengthened institutional capacity:

- Strengthening the ECO Trade and Development Bank (ETDB) **to effectively advice on trade transactions.**
- Operationalizing the ECO Re-Insurance Company
- Developing secure, seamless, and modern regional payment systems **without which we cannot achieve regional trade integration.**

These measures will significantly bolster our trade expansion agenda by providing financial security, investment tools, and smoother commercial transactions.

## **Honourable Ministers,**

Today's meeting is also about reaffirming the political will of our Member States to implement what has been collectively developed over the years. Successful implementation will depend on the active involvement of all Member States and on sustained commitment to the timelines and mechanisms that you may approve today.

In this spirit, I also encourage Member States to consider hosting future meetings of the ECOTA Cooperation Council, the Technical Negotiation Committee, and expert groups on trade, as a demonstration of shared ownership and continued support for our regional objectives. **Most importantly we will need constant ministerial guidance and support in advancing trade integration agenda. For this to happen we must not wait for another fourteen (14) years to have our next trade ministerial meeting.**

**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

Before concluding, I once again extend heartfelt appreciation to the Republic of Türkiye for hosting this long-awaited Ministerial Meeting and for its generous hospitality extended to all delegations.

It is my hope that Istanbul will be remembered as the place where ECOTA was revived, where our region renewed its commitment to trade liberalization, customs modernization, and deeper regional cooperation.

The ECO Secretariat remains fully committed to facilitating the decisions you may adopt today and to assisting Member States at every stage of this important process.

Thank you.