

**Statement by ECO Secretary General
Ambassador Asad M. Khan
at the Plenary Session of the 36th Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning
Council (RPC)
May 17, 2026**

Honourable Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning,

I would like to warmly welcome all distinguished delegations, representing Member States, Observers, Specialized Agencies, Regional Institutions and Affiliated Bodies to this 36th Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council.

Special gratitude is owed to you all for showing flexibility and understanding in joining this meeting and contributing to this important process despite the challenging circumstances we face in the region.

I would particularly like to express appreciation to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for its continued support to the Secretariat and for ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of ECO during this period.

Distinguished Delegates,

At the cost of repeating myself, let me say that RPC is indeed one of the most important institutional processes within ECO. It is not simply a forum for approving our Work Programs and Calendar of Events, but is an exercise aimed at providing direction, assessing progress, reviewing implementation and helping shape the future economic framework and strategy of the Organization consistent with the provisions of the Izmir Treaty.

Frankly speaking, this is perhaps the only forum within ECO where the entire government of every member state comes together through the participation of all relevant line ministries. Economic and development cooperation, as we all are aware, requires a whole of government coordination across various sectors, including transport, trade, finance, tourism, environment, planning among others. The quality of preparations and coordination at the national level would therefore, ultimately reflect in the quality of decisions taken and their implementation at the Organizational level.

Clearly we need to further energize and strengthen this platform. RPC should not just review the work of the Secretariat, but also provide a more critical and substantive appraisal of our performance as an organization, identify implementation gaps and guide future priorities in a practical and realistic manner.

Unfortunately, because of the extraordinary regional and international circumstances we have faced during the past year, we could not sufficiently advance internal discussions on further strengthening and operationalizing

the role of RPC and related reform processes. Nevertheless, I believe this remains an important institutional objective moving forward.

Fortunately, the broader ECO reform process initiated through the High-Level Committee also continues to move ahead parallelly. The recommendations emerging from the first HLC meeting have now been finalized and are ready for consideration by the relevant Working Group which is scheduled to convene on June 8 for development of concrete proposals thereon. I believe this reform track remains important for improving the effectiveness, coordination and overall functioning of the Organization.

Dear Participants,

The ministerial processes held since the last RPC meeting have demonstrated that ECO could serve as an active and relevant platform for regional coordination when there is sufficient political commitment and ownership by Member States.

During 2025, we successfully convened a number of important high-level meetings, including the Transport and Interior Ministerial Meetings in Iran, the Ministerial Meetings on Commerce and Foreign Trade and Tourism in Türkiye, as well as the 17th ECO Summit and ECO Week in Azerbaijan. The meetings on trade and Interior helped revive political engagement in these important sectors after long intervals.

Similarly, during the first half of 2026, we successfully convened the Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction in Pakistan and the Tourism Ministerial Meeting in Shusha. In the second half of 2026, we are also

expecting to convene several important ministerial meetings, including on Environment in Uzbekistan, Industry in Tajikistan, Agriculture in Iran, Transport in Kazakhstan, Interior, ICT and COM in Pakistan, and Energy in Türkiye.

I believe the continuity of these meetings itself reflects the commitment of Member States to sustain ECO's cooperative agenda despite the broader regional and international challenges we continue to face.

Distinguished Representatives,

We are continuing our work on finalizing the Draft Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation 2035, which is intended to serve as the future vision of the Organization for the next decade. Our objective is to develop a more focused, realistic and implementation-oriented framework aligned with present regional realities and the aspirations of ECO leadership.

In addition, the new two-year Chairmanship with Pakistan in the lead as the first Chair under this new arrangement also provides us with a stronger basis for continuity, impact, follow-up and institutional coherence. I believe this improvement can help make ECO's work more predictable, practical and outcome-oriented.

Dear Delegates,

We are living through a period of significant geopolitical and economic uncertainty. Multilateralism itself is under pressure and regional

organizations are increasingly being tested on their relevance and effectiveness.

This we believe is ECO's moment to prove its relevance, utility and importance in the changed regional and global geo-political environment given the geographic, historic, cultural, linguistic, and economic overlaps that we enjoy in the ECO region. Our success as an organization would ultimately depend on collective ownership, active participation and sustained political commitment by whole membership. What we do and decide at this RPC in terms of drawing up the work plan for the organization will be a reflection of our national and collective political will to energize and strengthen this organization.

Dear Participants,

Following this plenary session, the nine sectoral committee meetings within the RPC framework will commence their work to review and finalize the ECO Work Programme and Calendar of Events for 2026. While we have already passed almost half of the year working on the basis of an interim list of activities endorsed by the CPR and the Council of Ministers, the RPC remains very important for bringing greater structure, coordination and collective ownership to the Organization's activities for the year.

I hope this RPC will therefore not only finalize a work programme and calendar of events, but also contribute to a more focused discussion on the future direction, functioning and effectiveness of our Organization.

I remain confident that, with continued commitment and cooperation, ECO can further strengthen its role as a practical platform for regional connectivity, economic cooperation and shared prosperity.

Thank you.

Chairmanship's Statement
by the Head of Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan
Dr. Muhammad Ali Talpur
at the opening plenary session
of the 36th Meeting of the ECO
Regional Planning Council (RPC)
May 17, 2026

His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Asad Majeed Khan, Secretary General of ECO,
Excellencies, Honorable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalam-o-Alaikum and a very good morning.

Mr. Chairman!

It is an honor and a privilege for me to represent Pakistan at the head of its delegation and to chair this esteemed Regional Planning Council.

I extend my profound gratitude to the Republic of Kazakhstan for its chairmanship of the ECO Regional Planning Council in 2025, during which it ably led the organization.

I would like to convey my sincere appreciation to the ECO Secretariat, and especially to the Secretary General of ECO, H.E. Dr. Asad M. Khan, for his efforts in ensuring that the Organization continues to function effectively despite the prevailing challenges.

I would also like to acknowledge the valuable work of the ECO Secretariat in preparing the comprehensive Working Papers for this 36th RPC Meeting, with each issue clearly supported by relevant background, expected outcomes, and well-articulated conclusions.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to the Islamic Republic of Iran and to the Iranian officials serving at the ECO Secretariat for their efforts in keeping the Secretariat operational through challenging circumstances.

I am fully confident that through our collective and coordinated efforts, we will be better able to harness our resources for the mutual benefit of our region.

Excellencies,

The share of the ECO region in intra-regional and international trade, does not commensurate with its true potential, notwithstanding its abundant endowments in natural and human resources. We must fully realize the immense potential of our region through the effective implementation of ECOTA

The 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade, held in Istanbul, Republic of Türkiye, in November 2025, has provided a valuable window of opportunity for the full implementation and possible expansion of ECOTA in the coming years. The various legal instruments adopted, signed, and approved at the Meeting, along with the establishment of the Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC), the ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy, and the ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap, mark important progress in this regard. It is expected that the ECOTA Contracting Parties will hold regular meetings of the Technical Negotiation Committee to deliberate on proposed amendments to ECOTA.

Excellencies,

We must approach regional trade integration with the urgency of a national priority. Let us commit to removing tariff and non-tariff barriers, harmonizing customs procedures, and investing in cross-border infrastructure. We must operationalize trade corridors, streamline logistics, and prioritize digital trade facilitation to unlock the true potential of our markets.

Pakistan attaches great importance to the early implementation of the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) and urges all Member States to adopt a broader and more holistic approach to this matter and with a view to ensuring its earliest possible implementation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting is being held against the backdrop of rapidly evolving global and regional geopolitical shifts, alongside technological advancements that are transforming the landscape of regional cooperation. In today's climate of uncertainty, the need to work together to address shared challenges, bridge economic gaps, and unlock opportunities for collective prosperity has never been greater.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pakistan's strategic location, connecting South Asia with Central Asia, the Middle East, and China, makes it a natural hub for regional connectivity. Our vision is to build seamless linkages through road, rail, air, maritime, energy, and digital corridors, turning geography into opportunity.

In this context, the Honourable Prime Minister of Pakistan, while addressing the the Regional Transport Ministers' Conference (RTMC) 2025 ,emphasized that Pakistan's long coastline makes its ports key transit points on the Maritime Silk Road. This presents a valuable opportunity to develop a maritime section of the historic Silk Road that once connected Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula and Africa, and Europe.

Pakistan's high-speed motorways and national highways form the backbone of regional and domestic connectivity, linking key border crossings to the ports of Karachi and Gwadar. Integrated border and maritime systems enable faster transit, reduce costs, and strengthen Pakistan's role as a vital trade and transit corridor.

Pakistan is aligning its transport systems with those of other ECO member states to ensure seamless regional integration. Pakistan appreciates ECO Secretariat's new initiative "ECO-IRU-China Road Transport Study - Identify and address bottlenecks on Pakistan-China-Europe TIR route" and has formally requested to include Pakistan in this proposed study.

Pakistan is investing in digital infrastructure to ensure that we are adequately equipped to catch up with the fourth industrial revolution around the globe. In this regard, the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on ICT scheduled to be held in Islamabad will be a cornerstone towards digitalization of infrastructure in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pakistan is committed to being part of the solution to our shared climate crisis. I would like to highlight that the 10th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) held in Islamabad earlier this adopted the Islamabad Declaration on Disaster Risk Reduction, reaffirming the collective commitment of ECO Member States to strengthen regional cooperation, disaster resilience and coordinated action against disasters. These commitments are aligned with the Izmir Treaty, ECO Vision 2025, and the Sendai Framework. A key outcome of the Meeting was that Pakistan's offer to utilize the NDMA's National Emergencies Operation Center (NEOC) as an ECO Hub for disaster risk reduction planning, multilateral training simulations, joint assessments, shared analytical products and proactive disaster management approaches to Member States.

Pakistan appreciates the practice of designating an ECO Tourism Capital each year to highlight the rich tourism and cultural potentials of Member States and increase public awareness across the region. Pakistan acknowledges the support of the ECO countries during 6th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, held in Erzurum in April, 2025 where Lahore was officially designated as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2027.

Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Turkmenistan for hosting the 1st ECO Forum on Sustainable Development, held in April 2024 in the Smart City of Arkadag, Turkmenistan. The Forum marked an important step in fostering deliberation and collaboration aimed at addressing key challenges and exploring innovative solutions for sustainable development in the region. During the Forum, Pakistan proposed the certain regional initiatives like ECO-Pakistan SDG Collaboration Taskforce, ECO SDG Accelerator Labs – to design cross-border solutions to common regional challenges, ECO SDGs Performance Index – a benchmarking mechanism, supported by Pakistan, to encourage data-driven reforms and transparent reporting, showcased via an ECO Dashboard. It is expected the ECO Secretariat will consider these proposals for furthering the agenda of sustainable development in the region.

Excellencies,

Pakistan strongly supports the formulation of the new ECO Vision, '*Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation 2026–2035*,' and believes that this Vision should include a comprehensive review of progress made under the ECO Vision 2025, highlighting both its achievements and its shortcomings. The new vision should also be aligned with the national plans of ECO Member States, including development priorities set forth under URAAN Pakistan. Pakistan remains committed to working closely with Member States in finalizing the new vision document.

Distinguished Participants!

The progress of the Regional Planning Council requires a firm and forward-looking approach aimed at creating robust linkages among Member States. I would like to take this opportunity to share a few observations for the consideration of distinguished participants as key takeaways from the 36th RPC Meeting:

- **First**, the ECOTA Negotiation Strategy and Roadmap will help facilitate the necessary amendments required to promote regional trade more effectively.
- **Second**, the finalization of the new ECO Vision 2026–2035 is essential to unlocking the region’s vast potential.
- **Third**, Pakistan appreciates the proposal to host the first ECO Conference on “Sustainable Clean Water and Sanitation in the ECO Region,” aimed at promoting regional dialogue and strengthening cooperation in support of Sustainable Development Goal 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation, as well as other related regional priorities. This is also an important expected outcome of our deliberations.
- **Fourth**, Pakistan stands ready to coordinate transport plans, enhance cross-border facilitation, mobilize joint investments, and strengthen regional value chains. Every country has a vital role to play in this shared journey toward greater connectivity and prosperity.
- **Fifth**, we must promote labour and capital mobility, improve connectivity, and simplify visa and movement procedures in order to advance regional integration and cooperation.

Excellencies,

Pakistan stands ready to work with ECO members to double intra-regional trade within the next five years. Let us treat this forum with the same resolve and coordination we bring to national security or climate response.

In the end, I would once again like to place on record my profound thanks to the host for the excellent arrangements for the meeting.

I hope that the deliberations in the coming days would help move towards achieving the desired outcome for the benefit of the people of the ECO region.

Thank you.