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## Issue Brief

# 13<sup>th</sup> Economic Cooperation Organization Summit: Harbinger for Regional Connectivity

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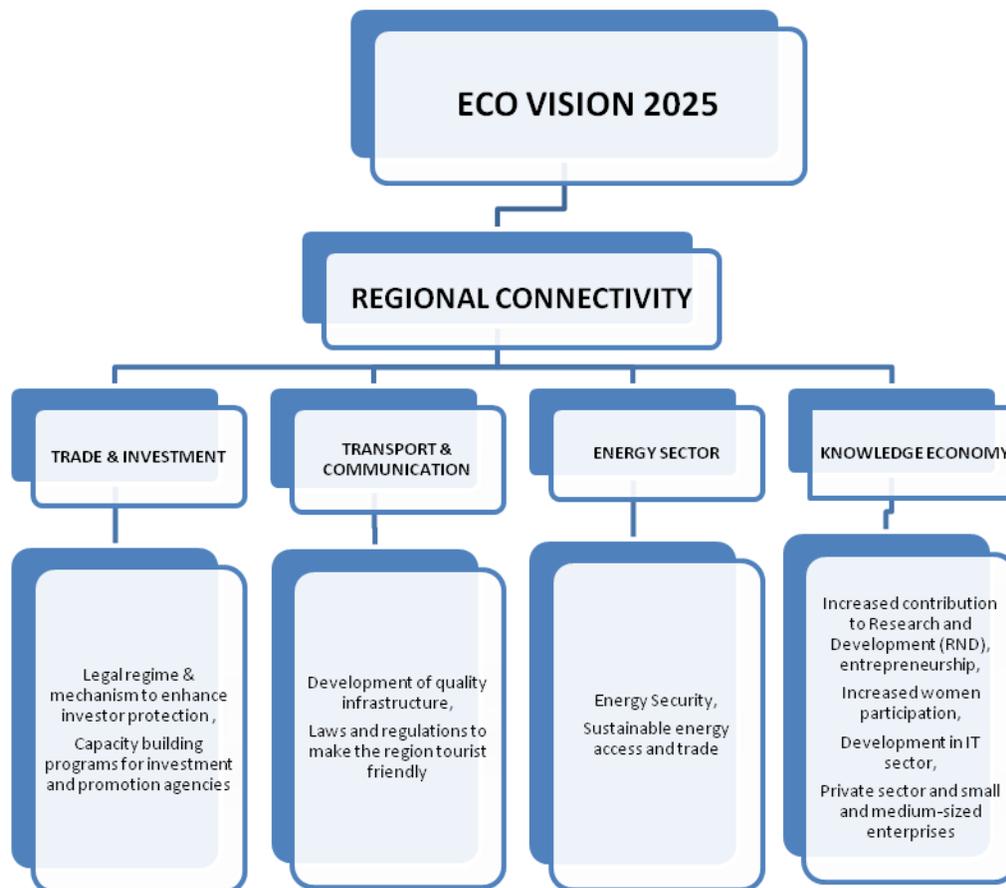
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**The 13<sup>th</sup> Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) Summit meeting was held in Islamabad on March 1, 2017 under the theme of “Connectivity for Regional Prosperity” at the invitation of the Government of Pakistan. The summit was attended by all ten members of the ECO, as well as by a special guest from China, the Chinese vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui and observers. Other representatives from the ECO member states included President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Bakytzhan Sagintayev, Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Ulugbak Rozukulov and Afghanistan's Ambassador to Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal.<sup>1</sup>**

The ECO was set up in 1985 as the successor of Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), which was founded in 1963 by Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, the ECO was expanded in 1992 when six Central Asian states joined it. Later on, it was also joined by Afghanistan.

The ECO summit takes place every five years. The recent summit focused on regional connectivity with primary focus on energy, infrastructure trade and transport. The Islamabad Declaration issued after the conference aims at increasing participation in areas of trade, energy, transport, tourism, connectivity, economic growth and productivity, social welfare and environment.<sup>2</sup>

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was especially welcomed by the members of the Summit. To help broaden economic prosperity in the region, the Summit also adopted a Vision 2025 document. This initiative is a roadmap for the next decade for economic integration among member states. The Vision contains several salient features which puts emphasis on increased cooperation among the ECO member states to enhance connectivity in trade, transport and energy sector. The Vision also includes expansion of regional trade. It is expected to help double the current level of intra-ECO trade in the next five years through implementation of ECO Trade Agreement ECOTA and other trade related agreements.



However, for effective and complete implementation of ECO Vision 2025, a proper legal framework needs to be applied.

Addressing the Summit, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated that the main aim of the meeting was “to build up collaboration to exploit enormous potential of ECO to turn the region into a citadel of peace, progress and prosperity”.<sup>3</sup> The Prime Minister also emphasised on the theme of the meeting, stating that the “theme of ECO is evident of our commitment towards the regional prosperity.”<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also emphasised on the importance of cooperation among the member states, stressing on the fact that meaningful trade cannot take place without cooperation on transport, infrastructure and connectivity among the member states. He stated that it is the right time for ECO to make significant progress for practical implementation of the theme of the summit “Connectivity for Regional Integration”. Furthermore, this year’s theme is symbolic since most countries of the region are already engaged in huge investments in connectivity projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–

India Pipeline (TAPI), Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA 1000).

The Prime Minister also pointed out that “no other project better symbolises Pakistan’s conception of win-win cooperation through connectivity than China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).”<sup>5</sup> CPEC has emerged as a catalyst for energy, infrastructure, transport, connectivity and trade in the whole of South, West and Central Asia. Besides this, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also pointed out that the successful holding of the summit is a demonstration of the desire and commitment of the member states to transform ECO into a vibrant regional block. He said it is proof of Pakistan’s commitment to act as a sign of positive changes and meaningful development in the region. He hoped that the member states would continue to work in harmony for the continued collective prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

Other representatives in the Summit also highlighted their views. Addressing the Summit, Halil Ibrahim the ECO Secretary General in his speech pointed out that ECO continues to implement programmes and plans decided by its decision making bodies. He applauded the importance being given to economic corridors as these would offer access to the ECO landlocked countries.<sup>7</sup>

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also stressed on enhancing economic cooperation among the ECO member states. “Connectivity will help development and prosperity in the region.” He also called for restructuring the ECO to make it more effective.<sup>8</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stressed on the promotion of intra-regional trade in the region: “We have to take steps to increase intra-trade among member states. Activating the ECO trade agreement is an important means for liberalisation of trade among us”.<sup>9</sup>

Turkmenistan President said construction work on Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI) has been started and implementation of this project is being realised with the participation of ECO member states.<sup>10</sup> .”

Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Bakytzhan Sagintayev advised that the organisation should give priority to communication and infrastructure projects. He said Kazakhstan is also implementing huge projects that would link the country with Europe and the Chinese project of One Belt One Road.<sup>11</sup>

Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Ulugbak Rozukulov proposed joint projects in transport, energy and communication sectors. He said Uzbekistan is working on a number of infrastructure development

projects in collaboration with other neighbouring countries including Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman corridor. Addressing the Summit, Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal reiterated that his country is committed to the realisation of aims and objectives of ECO.<sup>12</sup>

The leaders tasked ECO secretariat and permanent representatives of member states to introduce reforms in the organisation.

The successful organisation of the Summit is a welcoming sign for Pakistan. All the member states attended the Summit to share their vision and which represents their commitment towards making ECO a successful organisation. It was a reaffirmation of Pakistan's importance in the region and beyond, which proved the ineffectiveness of Indian policy of isolating Pakistan.

More intensified public and private partnerships and follow ups will decide if the 13th ECO Summit was a mere 'talk shop' or the first crucial step towards a credible geo-economic institutional framework.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there is also a need to arrange ECO summits on an annual basis rather than after five years. By doing so on a regular basis, this economic bloc can be able to create an impact that SAARC has so far failed to do. ECO countries should utilise their unique geo-strategic location and importance which provides them the shortest trade and transit route to Europe and Africa. A strong and stable determination bolstered by focused efforts is required by ECO states to translate words into actions.

The Summit was also a big opportunity for Afghanistan to bridge the gap between Kabul and Islamabad by setting aside all diplomatic differences and focusing solely on economic development. By forgoing such a chance, President Ashraf Ghani only damaged his image in the region.

In the post-ECO summit scenario, the presidents and prime ministers of the members states need to exert influence on the ECO secretariat for an early implementation of Islamabad declaration. This is the right time to turn paper declarations into living breathing socio-economic regional realities. The ECO is a unique opportunity to turn words into actions.

## Notes and References

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