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Issue Brief

13th ECO Summit: A Comparative Analysis

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The 13th ECO summit held on March 1, 2017 in Islamabad is being perceived as a success because of its focus on connectivity for regional prosperity. Delegates from nine countries met in Islamabad to confer and review the performance of the regions falling under ECO.¹ It was unfortunate that the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani nor his foreign minister chose to attend the summit. Though the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal was present at the event, the huge rift could still be felt. Along with the ECO members, a special guest from China Mr. Zhang Yesui (the vice minister) was also part of the event.² Focusing on the pros of the summit, President of Pakistan Mr. Mamnoon Hussain in his inaugural address said that “ECO is a gateway towards success and this particular summit will enhance trade and strengthen the ties between all the members of ECO.”³

At the summit Mr. Nawaz Sharif presented the leitmotif of the 13th ECO summit which was “Connectivity for Regional Prosperity.” During his welcome speech Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that:

“The ECO can be an example of a regional association, which touches upon and enriches the lives of our people. What makes the theme of connectivity for regional prosperity especially relevant is that more countries in this region are already investing largely in connectivity projects.”⁴

This theme of regional connectivity is significant in the backdrop of the mega project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which was presented as a successful cooperation of connectivity at the summit. Apart from this, the theme displays systematic ways for economic integration highlighting the entire ECO region as an engine of growth. The Prime Minister also expressed his desire for true economic development so that it can be turned into win- win collaboration for all.

In the proceedings of the summit 2017, all the heads of the states viewed the performance and the progress of ECO since the last summit in Baku 2012. The Secretary General of ECO Mr. Halil Ibrahim Akca in his report to the summit summarized the performance of the organization since the 12th ECO summit

¹ http://www.ecosecretariat.org/Upcomming_Meetings/2017/upcoming_events2.htm

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.brecorder.com>

⁴ <http://www.pid.gov.pk/?p=35656>

held in Baku, 2012. If one scrutinizes the reports, it can be seen that the share of ECO's aggregate GDP, when compared to the performance and figures after the last summit in 2012, has not increased significantly. With respect to trade, ECO till now has had a modest performance. The change in intra-regional trade is also not very impressive- (8.7%) against 5.3% in the year 2000.⁵ The targeted level for it is 20%.

On the brighter side, the activity of ECO in transport has been quite good. Under the transport framework agreement, important initiative has been taken in partnership with Islamic Development Bank (IDB) which includes approval of road and rail corridors. Keeping this in view, there is a need of urgency to boost up trade and agricultural projects, so that Pakistan can reach the targeted level of improvement in the future.

The participants of the Summit stressed on mutual cooperation, association and transportation for the prosperity of the ECO. Islamophobia was condemned by Mr. Aliyev. Simultaneously he also thanked Pakistan for its support on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan also laid emphasis on the need to bolster human resource capital of ECO and swift completion of ECO reforms. The probabilities and challenges lying ahead were also highlighted.

The 13th Summit is being perceived in a much better light than its predecessor because of its focus on connectivity for regional prosperity.

In his speech, the Iranian President Hasan Rouhani stated that:

“Most of the ECO members are neighboring countries to Iran and strengthening multilateral cooperation is important for the future of the region.”⁶ He also said that ECO countries should also be hooked up through highways and this promotion can contribute to the prosperity of Asia. Other representatives insisted on socio-economic coalition in areas of trade, infrastructure and technology. The President of Turkmenistan said that the construction work on Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline has been started and application of this project is being realized by the participation of ECO members. This keenness of the representatives for mutual collaboration and rapid acceleration of the

⁵ <https://timesofislamabad.com/13th-eco-summit-pm-nawaz-sharif-speech/2017/03/01/>

⁶ <http://nation.com.pk/national/25-Feb-2017/pakistan-to-host-13th-eco-summit>

projects to some extent reflects the seriousness of the summit but nothing can be said until projects under ECO acquire a practical form.⁷

This year's summit ended up on a rather optimistic and hopeful note. This summit became a success story across the globe. In contrast to 12th ECO summit, it was well-organized and garnered immense enthusiasm among the Pakistanis. The core agenda of the summit too seemed to be more profound and comprehensive. If all these projects are given a push and substantial measures are taken, perhaps this summit will prove to be a real and practical success.

The previous ECO summit was held in Baku on October 6, 2012. The meeting was presided over by H.E Mr. Ilham Aliyev and was attended by all the other nine ECO member countries. Former President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari also attended the summit.

The host of the 12th summit, President Ilham Aliyev said that his country is dedicated to the goals of the organization. Another key event of that summit was that Afghan President Hamid Karzai attended the summit and actively participated in it. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were fairly good then. Apart from this, the Baku declaration was unanimously adopted at the 12th summit.⁸ This declaration provided recommendations to the organization in the all spheres of ECO's activity, and focused on economic cooperation, conflicts between ECO regions, enhancing trade and agriculture.⁹ Also, it was announced that 21st council of ministers (COM) meeting will be held in Dushanbe 2013. Later the 21st COM was held in Tehran on November 26, 2013. In that meeting, the foreign minister of Iran Javad Zarif called for a broader and deeper collaboration between the member states.¹⁰

The agenda of 12th ECO summit was to speed up progress in the sectors of trade, industry, energy and agriculture. The then foreign minister of Pakistan Hina Rabbani Khar in 12th ECO on November 28, 2012 said:

"While we celebrate the Organization's achievements, we must take this opportunity and reflect on the challenges still facing the ECO regions."¹¹

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <http://www.ecosecretariat.org/>

⁹ http://www.ecosecretariat.org/ftproot/Press_RIs/2012/sum12.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.pid.gov.pk/?p=35656>

¹¹ www.dawn.com/news/757007

Those challenges remain even bigger challenges still. As the statistics show, the GDP growth and increase in intra regional trade is modest and unsubstantial. In the 12th ECO summit, mega projects like Iran Pakistan gasline, Taftan-Quetta power transmission line, 100Mw Gawadar project and construction of Noshki Dalbandin section of Quetta-Taftan and upgrading of Quetta-Taftan Railway track were stressed for early implementations. It can be said that ECO still has a long way to go to enhance cooperation among the member states.¹²

If the 12th and 13th ECO conferences are critically scrutinized, on the surface both the summits may appear quite similar. But deep within, the 13th summit has already served one of the most significant purposes. In this crucial period of India and Afghan unrest, Pakistan has proved that it has strong economic and strategic ties. Afghanistan's downgrading of its position in the summit might take a bad shape and it might be a decision which President Ashraf Ghani (Afghan) may regret. Pakistan has made it clear that it will not be entangled in this web of conspiracies created by India. This summit has served the purpose of bridging the gap between ECO nations by bringing them together for pleasant and productive dialogues. Apart from this, the vision 2025 presented at the current summit is an adept and well-structured roadmap for the coming years. It lays down three priorities: development of transport and communication infrastructure; facilitation of trade and investment; and effective use of the region's vast energy resources. Besides, there is concrete evidence about the mediocrity of the 12th ECO summit. The well-structured and long-term plan of the 13th ECO summit, if implemented, holds the promise of increase and enhanced trade, infrastructure development, energy, and food security among ECO members. If Iran Pakistan gas pipeline is completed, the project holds the potential of becoming a peace and prosperity pipeline. Even China is interested now in financing the IP gas pipeline so it can be extended north towards its own regions.

All in all, if the promises made at the 13th summit, if given practical form, will make this summit an immense success. Hopefully, some action will be given to the proposals forwarded at the summit and the stratagems adopted to make ECO a success in regional cooperation. There is a little doubt that there is a lot riding on the hope that the promises made will be the promises kept!

¹² <https://tribune.com.pk> › World