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THE ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO): THE RECENT MEETING IN PAKISTAN AND THE NON-PARTICIPATION OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

In this issue:

- The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): The Recent Meeting in Pakistan and the Non-Participation of the Islamic Emirate 3
- A Brief Introduction to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) 3
- The Tenth ECO Ministerial Meeting in Pakistan 4
- Non-Participation of the Islamic Emirate in the ECO Meeting 5
- Conclusion 7
- Recommendations 8
- References:..... 9



THE ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO): THE RECENT MEETING IN PAKISTAN AND THE NON-PARTICIPATION OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

Introduction

In the context of contemporary international relations and global politics, international and regional organizations provide significant opportunities to strengthen political, security, economic, and scientific–cultural relations among countries. With these objectives in mind, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) operates with the participation of several Central and South Asian countries, including Iran and Turkey, to develop and implement joint strategies in areas such as trade, transit, energy, and disaster risk management, for the benefit of all member states.

In pursuit of these goals, the Tenth Meeting of Ministers of the ECO member states was held on the 21st and 22nd of January in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, over two days. The main objective of the meeting was to address and reduce threats posed by natural disasters. Afghanistan is also a member of this organization and, due to its geographical position, is considered a pivotal country within the ECO framework, as it lies at the crossroads of member states.

However, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan announced in an official statement that it would not participate in the meeting as Afghanistan's representative. This raises several key questions: What benefits does Afghanistan gain from its membership in this organization? What topics were discussed at the meeting? And why did the Islamic Emirate choose not to participate? These questions are explored in this analytical article.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO)

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. This organization was created as the successor to the *Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD)*, which had been founded in 1964 by the same three countries.

In 1992, the membership of the ECO expanded with the accession of seven additional countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. ECO meetings are held annually on a rotating basis in one of the member states. During these meetings, leaders and representatives of member countries participate and present reports on financial and technical cooperation, national economic conditions, and issues related to adopted resolutions. Based on these reports, decisions are made to promote development and expand cooperation among member states.



The member countries of the ECO share many cultural, economic, and social characteristics, as well as abundant natural and mineral resources such as oil, gas, copper, iron, coal, uranium, gold, and precious stones. They also have significant agricultural products, including wheat, barley, sugarcane, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Given these shared features and resources, the member states can enhance economic cooperation more effectively and benefit from coordinated regional efforts. Moreover, to compete with developed economies, ECO members can establish joint economic unions and partnerships based on their common capacities and resource bases.

As its name suggests, the ECO was established primarily to achieve economic objectives. According to its charter, the main goals of the organization include:

- Creating conditions for a stable and advanced regional economy;
- Improving living standards by utilizing the capacities of member states;
- Removing barriers to regional trade and expanding commerce;
- Strengthening scientific and cultural cooperation among member countries.

THE TENTH ECO MINISTERIAL MEETING IN PAKISTAN

The Tenth Ministerial Meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization was held on 21–22 January in Islamabad, Pakistan, and was hosted by Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority. According to Pakistani media reports, representatives from Pakistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan were invited to participate in the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss regional cooperation in disaster risk reduction and enhancing resilience to climate change.

The discussions focused on the use of innovation and technology, improving coordination among member states, harmonizing disaster risk reduction frameworks, and strengthening joint preparedness for climate change and cross-border hazards. Participants also discussed technology-based solutions, information sharing, early warning systems, and innovative approaches to address evolving regional risks.

In recent years, Pakistan has experienced an increase in natural disasters and floods, causing extensive economic damage. As the country is currently facing significant economic challenges and lacks the capacity to respond independently to these disasters, Pakistan is seeking regional support through organizations such as the ECO. Pakistani authorities are aware that failure to address these challenges could lead to increased public criticism of the government.



Other ECO member states are also facing similar natural disasters and are attempting to address them through regional cooperation. For example, during the meeting, Adil Abdullayev, Deputy Minister of Emergency Situations of Azerbaijan, emphasized the importance of strengthening regional coordination to effectively respond to increasingly complex natural hazards. Ernest Jusupov, Deputy Minister of Emergency Situations of Kyrgyzstan, highlighted the need for joint preparedness, capacity building, and stronger early warning systems within the ECO region.

In addition, Suleiman Umar, Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Emergency Situations and Civil Defense of Tajikistan, expressed concern about the growing risks associated with climate change and stressed the need to harmonize regional frameworks and strengthen joint mechanisms for their practical implementation. Ali Hamza Pehlivan, Head of Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority, reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to regional cooperation and discussed joint training programs, simulation exercises, and information sharing related to earthquake preparedness.

NON-PARTICIPATION OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE IN THE ECO MEETING

Afghanistan's membership in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) offers many potential benefits. To fully benefit from these opportunities, Afghan representatives should have participated in the recent meeting. However, there were several reasons for the absence of representatives of the Islamic Emirate. Before discussing these reasons, it is important to clarify the benefits that Afghanistan can gain from the ECO.

The ECO provides Afghanistan with facilities and opportunities in transit and trade with member states. By playing an active role in this organization, Afghanistan can connect energy-rich Central Asia with energy-demanding South Asia. At the same time, Afghanistan can expand its trade with member countries, including Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan. Afghanistan could increase its exports of dried and fresh fruits, grains, precious and semi-precious stones, medicinal plants, and other commodities, and find new markets for these products. This would help Afghanistan move toward a more balanced trade system.

The ECO also works on developing railway networks among member states, such as the Iran–Turkmenistan–Kazakhstan railway project and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan–Afghanistan–Iran railway project. These projects play a key role in regional connectivity and economic growth and provide Afghanistan with opportunities to connect to regional markets and strengthen its role as a transit hub.



One of the key objectives of the ECO is energy transfer among member states. Major projects in this area include TAPI and CASA-1000. TAPI is a gas pipeline project that transfers natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan. CASA-1000 is an electricity transmission project that connects Central Asia with South Asia and is supported within the ECO framework. A large portion of these projects (around 70 percent) is located in Afghanistan, and they are expected to be completed by 2026. Active participation in the ECO would facilitate the full implementation of these projects. Once completed, they could help address Afghanistan's electricity shortages and contribute to industrial development.

ECO member states also participate in the ECO Trade and Transit Corridor, which was established to develop transport and trade networks, reduce transit costs, and strengthen transportation systems. This corridor is particularly important for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian countries in terms of trade and transit.

The ECO provides a platform for attracting foreign investment and financing economic projects, which is crucial for economic growth and poverty reduction in Afghanistan. Through this organization, Afghanistan can attract investments from member states in large-scale development, industrial, and transport projects. The Islamic Emirate has formulated a national development strategy and economic policy focusing on coordinating available resources, supporting industry and the private sector, reducing unemployment, and rebuilding infrastructure, which signals opportunities for ECO member states to invest in Afghanistan.

The ECO also has a joint body for chambers of commerce and industrial unions of member states, aimed at increasing trade and investment, strengthening relations among business actors, implementing joint projects, organizing exhibitions, creating employment opportunities, supporting private sector cooperation, and promoting regional economic coordination. Afghanistan can achieve significant economic gains through this mechanism.

In addition, the ECO promotes cultural exchanges, scientific cooperation, and educational programs among member states, such as workshops and scholarships for students and researchers. ECO member states are advancing in regional cooperation and have relatively high educational standards. Afghanistan can use this platform to provide educational opportunities for Afghan youth and attract technical cooperation. The ECO also implements projects in water management, climate change adaptation, and sustainable agriculture. Afghanistan can benefit from cooperation in combating climate change and drought, promoting alternative livelihoods to narcotics cultivation, and improving water management.

Despite these advantages, the question remains: why did the representatives of the Islamic Emirate not attend the meeting? Achieving these benefits would be most effective if



representatives of the Islamic Emirate directly engaged with member states in such meetings and negotiated for necessary concessions.

1. The Islamic Emirate does not have a problem with the ECO as an organization. Last year, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar represented the Islamic Emirate at the ECO meeting in Azerbaijan. However, this meeting was held in Pakistan, and due to tense Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, Afghanistan chose not to participate as a form of political pressure.
2. Afghanistan seeks recognition from regional countries. Afghanistan's geographical position within the ECO region is crucial for regional economic integration, coordination, and trade. Afghanistan's presence in regional meetings demonstrates its importance to member states. This gap can only be effectively filled when the Islamic Emirate is recognized, and the organization's objectives are properly implemented.
3. Pakistan, as one of the founding members of the ECO, has repeatedly closed Afghanistan's trade routes as a means of political pressure, acting contrary to the organization's goals. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate considers meetings held in Pakistan to be ineffective and chose not to attend.
4. The main goal of Central Asian countries in joining the ECO is to connect to global free trade through Afghanistan, bypassing dependence on Pakistan and India. Afghanistan's absence from the meeting exposes the negative impact of Pakistan's policies. In the future, Central Asian states may reconsider their relations with Pakistan or pressure Islamabad not to use Afghanistan's trade routes as a political tool.
5. Moreover, participation in the meeting would have allowed the Islamic Emirate to engage directly with ECO member states, strengthen bilateral relations, gain support, and discuss Pakistan's trade restrictions. It could have demonstrated that such policies contradict the ECO's objectives of regional economic integration and trade development. In that case, member states might have paid more attention to Pakistan's negative policies toward Afghanistan and played a supportive role in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations.

CONCLUSION

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was established to strengthen regional coordination, promote free trade, support regional economic development, and enhance scientific and cultural exchanges. Holding the recent ECO meeting in Pakistan, with the participation of all member states except Afghanistan, indicates that Pakistan is viewed as an



important economic partner by other member countries and enjoys a significant level of regional trust. Hosting such meetings also increases Pakistan's visibility and influence in the region.

Pakistan, which is currently facing serious economic and security challenges, is trying to gain regional support to prevent domestic criticism of the government. Therefore, it considers regional organizations as platforms to host such meetings and demonstrate its regional relevance.

The non-participation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan creates serious challenges for the country. Afghanistan's lack of engagement within the ECO framework raises concerns among member states, especially Central Asian countries, and may lead them to doubt their economic and trade relations with Pakistan. As a result, their trust in Pakistan's role in regional trade could be weakened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that the Islamic Emirate discuss the objectives of the ECO and Pakistan's policies toward Afghanistan with other member states, especially Central Asian countries, in regional and international forums.
2. In line with its mandate, the ECO should pressure Pakistan to adopt policies toward Afghanistan that facilitate regional economic integration and strengthen trade relations.
3. Member states should understand that Afghanistan's lack of active participation in the ECO does not mean Afghanistan's political isolation; rather, it poses economic and security challenges for the entire region. Therefore, engagement should be prioritized over isolation.
4. The Islamic Emirate should take advantage of such opportunities to directly communicate Afghanistan's realities—particularly Afghanistan–Pakistan relations—to regional countries and the international community.
5. Afghanistan cannot ignore its problems with Pakistan, as Pakistan is a neighboring country, and geography cannot be changed. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate needs to take necessary steps to improve relations with Pakistan to avoid missing such opportunities in the future.



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