**ECO role in trade:**

Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), a successor of Regional Cooperation Development (RCD), has not been able to create any major impact at domestic, regional or global economies so far. The ECO member countries house 16 per cent of global population yet contribute only 2.5 per cent to the global GDP. The intra-regional trade among the ECO member states is currently eight per cent of their cumulative external trade.

It is in this context, economic analysts had low expectations from the 13th ECO summit held in Islamabad (Pakistan) on March 1, 2017. However, in geo-political terms, the summit brought a win-win situation for all the member states. Platforms like ECO, Shanghai Cooperation Agreement (SCO), and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are also important for Pakistan as India has successfully formed a mini Saarc comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN). Signed on June 15, 2016 in Bhutan, the BBIN “Agreement on Motor Vehicles” is an example of Pakistan getting effectively excluded from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc). In that context, Pakistan was successful in bringing nine heads of states/governments to Islamabad. Although Afghanistan’s representation was at the ambassadorial level, the mere fact that Afghanistan did not boycott the summit (as it did during Saarc summit) was a diplomatic success for Pakistan.

**Mending ties with Iran:**

The summit also provided Pakistan an opportunity to mend its ties with Iran. The last visit of Iranian president was marred by the news of arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav, an alleged RAW official captured by the Pakistani agencies on charges of committing terrorism in Balochistan on his way through Iran. The diplomatic ties between the two countries are also affected by the perception that Pakistan is tilted towards Iran’s regional competitor Saudi Arabia. It was being anticipated that the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani would not attend the summit. However, Aziz-Zarif* chemistry clicked. Resultantly, President Rouhani not only joined the summit, but also managed to seek solidarity from the ECO members against the US travel restrictions and economic sanctions (without naming the US though). “(We) express concern over the attempts by certain quarters to threaten democracy, discriminatory immigration policies by some states and use of unilateral economic sanctions and coercions by some states,” the final declaration says.

However, only Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was named in the declaration. Kashmir issue was a glaring omission, although highlighting the latest phase of uprising in the occupied valley has been the singular focus of Pakistan’s diplomacy since last July.
US under fire in Summit:

Turkey has been quite vocal in criticizing the US authorities for their alleged role in the recent coup d’état against President Tayyip Erdogan’s government. Its concern also find place in the ECO declaration where members acknowledged the need for supporting measures to immediately address the threats to democratic governments, including coup d’état and foreign occupation of the territories of the member states.

The meeting between President Rouhani and President Erdogan on the sidelines of the summit was another positive output, especially because Tehran and Ankara support opposite sides in the conflict in Syria. Both leaders agreed to defuse tension, improve ties, and cooperate in fight against terrorism.

Pak-Turkey Cooperation

By the end of February 2017, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Ankara to attend the 5th meeting of Pakistan-Turkey’s High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC). Similarly, President Erdogan was in Pakistan in the first week of March 2017. The reciprocal visits in quick succession would improve the follow-up of 9-plus agreements and MoUs signed during HLSCC. Another positive development was that the two countries would sign a Free Trade Agreement by May-June 2017, paving the way for Pakistani textile exports to Turkey.

Afghan border closure

Afghanistan was represented at a lower level by its special envoy Umar Zakhiwal, who remained active not only by candidly protesting the closure of border crossings by host Pakistan, but also in ensuring that Afghanistan’s importance for the stability of the region is duly recognized by other ECO members. Thus, the final declaration called for renewing the ECO’s strong desire for a secure, prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan and resolving to turn “ECO Special Conference on Afghanistan” (to be held in May 2017 in Kabul) a success.

CPEC and Regional Connectivit:

The theme of the summit, “Connectivity for Regional Prosperity” had made the CPEC very relevant for the summit. China, OIC, and the UN attended the summit as observers. Chinese executive vice-foreign minister was successful in selling the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and One Belt One Road as major tools to materialize an increased regional cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, infrastructure, energy, etc.

It is widely believed that the CPEC’s full potential cannot be explored until Pakistan-Afghanistan political and transit problems are solved. Mindful of the fact that these problems may not be resolved in the near future, China is working to connect Kashgar to Kazakhstan via Kyrgyzstan. A land/rail route from Kashgar to Kirgizia and from further to Almaty is not the matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’. In this context, the meetings between Pakistani, Kyrgyz, and Kazak leadership were quite important and substantial.

Pledge to face challenges collectively:

The ECO member countries are confronted by multiple challenges of terrorism, drug-trafficking, and extremism. Instead of singling out any country for being responsible for these problems, the leaders vowed to collectively face these challenges for making the region a “zone of peace and prosperity”.

Showing concern over the ongoing conflicts in the region, the ECO members called for their early resolution based on norms and principles of international law and respect to sovereignty and territorial integrity of the affected states. However, only Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was named in the declaration. Kashmir was a glaring omission, although highlighting the latest phase of uprising in the occupied valley has been the singular focus of Pakistan’s diplomacy since last July.
ECO Vision 2025:

The summit also adopted the ECO Vision 2025 which underscores sustainability, integration, and conducive environment for promoting cooperation in the areas of trade, transport, connectivity, energy, tourism, economic growth, economic productivity, social welfare, and environment. The mention of Post-2015 Development Agenda (Sustainable Development Goals) in the summit declaration and combined efforts to achieve these goals especially caught the attention of many observers. Most of the ECO member states are facing water scarcity. It was heartening to note that they showed a resolve to work on the UN General Assembly’s resolution on water, i.e. “International Decade of Action 2018-2028: Water for Sustainable Development”.

Political will for collective action:

These were the tangible geopolitical outcomes of the summit. However, when it comes to “economic cooperation”, the declaration is full of clichés. For instance, it calls for the development of transport and communication infrastructure, facilitation of trade and investment, promotion of connectivity with other regions, effective use of energy resources and undertaking measures for making the ECO effective and efficient.

The term cliché implies a lot needs to mobilize the political will of the members towards a collective action. For instance, the declaration envisages doubling of the current level of intra-ECO trade in the next three to five years through the implementation of the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) and other ECO arrangements. However, the ECOTA, which was signed in July 2003, has not been implemented as yet because half of the members are still to accede to it.

According to the declaration, the leaders have realized the flaws and envisioned a more efficient and effective ECO equipped with required capabilities and resources to better serve the noble objectives of the organization. They have also tasked the ECO secretariat and permanent representatives of the member states to introduce reforms in the organization.

However, they have failed to discern the lack of political will and understanding of political economy of the issues that are hampering ECO to move forward — the capability and resources of the organization.

Coping with threats to democracy:

“(We) further acknowledge the need for supporting measures to immediately address the threats to democratic governments, including coups d’etat aimed at overthrowing the democratically-elected governments and constitutional orders of the member countries, and the foreign occupation of territories of the member states, including economic strangulation, which undermine the role of legitimate democratic governments in pursuing their socio-economic development and programmes,” the declaration says.

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