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Q: Discuss the Pakistan's historic role in Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and under the framework of regional integration; what are the future prospects of ECO for Pakistan?

Introduction:

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is a regional intergovernmental organization founded in 1985 by Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. It expanded in 1992 to include seven new members from Central Asia, increasing its significance. Pakistan has played a pivotal role in ECO, contributing to the promotion of economic collaboration among its member states and serving as a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia.

“The ECO region has immense potential for trade and investment. Pakistan sees the ECO as a significant mechanism for regional growth and prosperity.”

(Navaz Sharif)
Former PM of Pakistan.

II. Key Features of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO):

1. Founding Member and Advocate for Regional Cooperation:

Pakistan alongside Iran and Turkey, was instrumental in the formation of ECO as a successor to the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD). Pakistan's leadership emphasised regional cooperation for shared prosperity, particularly in trade, transportation and energy.

"We must look towards our neighbors for mutual benefits, creating a platform that fosters economic collaboration and strengthens ties between nations that share common aspirations"

(Zulfikar Ali Bhutto)

2. Promoting Trade and Economic Integration:

Pakistan has consistently advocated for enhanced intra-regional trade through trade agreements and tariff reductions. The ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), signed in 2003, is an example of Pakistan's efforts to liberalize trade in the region. However, the implementation of ECOTA has been slow, and Pakistan continues to push

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3. Infrastructure Development and Connectivity:

Pakistan has also played a significant role in promoting infrastructure development under the ECO framework. Initiatives like the ECO Corridor and the revitalization of transport routes such as the Islamabad - Tehran - Istanbul railway are seen as steps to strengthen connectivity across the region.

"Infrastructure is the bedrock of connectivity and development"
(Xi Jinping)

4. Energy Cooperation:

Pakistan has actively pursued energy cooperation through ECA, particularly in terms of regional energy trade. Initiatives like the Turkmenistan - Afghanistan - Pakistan - India (TAPI) gas pipeline and other energy-sharing projects align with Pakistan's energy security needs.

III. Future Prospects of ECO for Pakistan :

(A) Enhanced Trade Opportunities :

ECO with its strategic location, Pakistan stands to benefit greatly from increased regional trade under ECO. Given the potential markets in Central Asia, ECO's effectiveness in reducing tariffs and improving trade infrastructure could significantly boost Pakistan's exports particularly textiles, agricultural products and technology.

Currently, ECO intra-regional trade stands at approximately 8% of the total trade member states.

(B) Regional Connectivity and Economic Corridors :

Pakistan's role as a transit hub can be further strengthened through ECO's regional connectivity projects. The completion of corridors linking Central Asia to South Asia, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) integrated with ECO's transport framework could enhance Pakistan's regional influence.

(C) Energy Cooperation and Security:

Pakistan's energy needs can be met through effective regional cooperation under ECO. The organization offers a platform for Pakistan to secure reliable energy supplies for Central Asia, fostering greater energy security and stability.

"Energy is the golden thread that connects economic growth, social equity and environmental sustainability"

(Ban Ki Moon)
Former UN Secretary-General

(D) Geopolitical Significance and Economic Diplomacy:

ECO provides Pakistan a diplomatic platform to engage with regional powers like Iran and Turkey, balancing relations with global powers. By fostering economic ties through ECO, Pakistan can increase its regional influence while ensuring economic security.

(E) Challenges Faced by ECO and Regional Instability:

Despite its potential, ECO faces challenges like regional instability, slow progress in economic integration and potential political differences among members. Pakistan's future role will depend on its ability to navigate these issues while maintaining economic diplomacy within the organization.

Conclusion:

Pakistan's historic role in ECO reflects its commitment to regional economic integration. The country's future prospects under the ECO framework hold promise in terms of trade, connectivity and energy cooperation. However, realizing these benefits will require overcoming political and logistical challenges that continue to hinder the organization's effectiveness.

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