



WEST & CENTRAL ASIA

within the Transforming Global Order & Trends

INTERNATIONAL WEB SEMINAR

10 December 2025

**INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS (ISSRA)
NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD**

Conversations



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West and Central Asia Within the Transforming Global Order & Trends

INTERNATIONAL WEB SEMINAR

10 December 2025

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Ambassador Asad Majeed Khan
Secretary General ECO



Dr. Idrees Zaman
Afghanistan



Mr. Sultan Zahidov
Azerbaijan



Dr. Foad Izadi
Iran



Mr. Berik Kemalov
Kazakhstan



Mr. Murat Aslan
Türkiye



Ambassador @ Riffat Masood
Pakistan



Ms. Sumaira Khan
Pakistan

Introduction

- The Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA) at the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, hosted an international web seminar on “West and Central Asia Within the Transforming Global Order and Trends” on Wednesday, 10 December 2025.
- This was the fourth session in ISSRA's international webinar series, designed to strengthen collaboration and outreach with ISSRA's global and regional partners, including government institutions, think tanks, and academia.
- The session featured expert presentations alongside interactive session that encouraged diverse perspectives and active engagement.
- The distinguished panel included experts from across West and Central Asia, representing Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Türkiye. Pakistani expert participated in person, while regional stakeholders joined virtually.
- Discussions underscored that West and Central Asia's position in the transforming global order is shaped by intensifying great-power competition, shifting economic alignments, and persistent regional instability. Regional states are increasingly seeking to safeguard autonomy through diversified partnerships, connectivity initiatives, multi-vector diplomacy and expanded trade linkages.
- Participants emphasised that enhanced regional cooperation and trust-building are essential to realise the region's geo-economic potential, with platforms such as ECO viewed as critical, yet underutilised, for navigating geopolitical competition, advancing trade and connectivity, and promoting stability and shared prosperity across West and Central Asia.



Key Takeaways

- West and Central Asia are rapidly evolving from geopolitical peripheries into strategic hubs central to the emerging Eurasian order due to their energy resources, geographic location, and growing role in global trade.
- Regional connectivity remains a shared aspiration, yet progress is constrained by geopolitical rivalries, sanctions, terrorism, trade barriers and persistent instability.
- Afghanistan's stability is indispensable for regional peace and integration; its exclusion undermines connectivity between South and Central Asia, while its inclusion could transform it into a regional bridge.
- Major power competition among the US, China, and Russia is most acutely felt in Central Asia, compelling regional states to pursue multi-vector diplomacy rather than exclusive alignments.
- Transport and energy corridors—including the Middle Corridor, North–South routes, and Pakistan-linked maritime access— were discussed as mechanisms to improve trade connectivity, reduce transit costs, and expand market access for landlocked Central Asian states.
- ECO is experiencing renewed political momentum, reflected in revived ministerial processes, institutional reforms, and renewed interest in trade and transport integration.
- Trust deficit and security-centric mindsets remain the principal barriers to regionalism, limiting the effectiveness of both ECO and other regional frameworks.
- Pakistan's geo-economic bridging role between Central Asia and global markets through the Arabian Sea was repeatedly emphasized as a strategic asset for regional integration.



Summary of Proceedings

- The discussions highlighted that West and Central Asia were undergoing significant transformation due to shifts in the global order, with the region increasingly shaped by changes in power distribution, economic realignments, and evolving geopolitical priorities.
- Participants noted that Central Asia, in particular, has gained prominence due to its strategic location, energy resources, and role in Eurasian trade flows, leading to increased engagement by global and regional powers.
- It was emphasized that Central Asian states have actively diversified their external relations, engaging simultaneously with the US, China, Russia, the EU, and regional groupings, while avoiding zero-sum alignments.
- Speakers observed that the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar global order, together with the increasing use of financial sanctions and trade-related restrictions, has renewed interest in regional cooperation and alternative economic arrangements within the ECO region.
- The revival of ECO ministerial processes—particularly in trade, transport, and interior affairs—was highlighted as an indication of renewed political will, following long periods of institutional stagnation.
- Transport connectivity emerged as a central theme, with participants noting that seven of ECO's ten member states are landlocked; however, it was also acknowledged that intra-ECO trade remains limited- at approximately 8% of total trade- explaining why regional corridors and transit infrastructure continue to feature prominently in discussions.
- Several transport initiatives, including the Istanbul–Tehran–Islamabad corridor and other regional rail and road corridors, were discussed, alongside the challenge of mobilizing sufficient financing from international financial institutions.
- Afghanistan was repeatedly identified as a pivotal factor for regional connectivity, with speakers stressing that the absence of stability and a unified regional approach toward Afghanistan continues to obstruct trade, transit, and economic integration.
- Terrorism, particularly in relation to instability in Afghanistan, was raised as a persistent concern, with participants noting its impact on trust between states, cross border trade, and regional connectivity and cooperation initiatives.

- Participants emphasized that Afghanistan's geographic position makes it indispensable for linking South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, and that its exclusion from regional economic processes carries significant costs for both Afghanistan and the wider region.
- The consequences of fragmented regional approaches toward Afghanistan were noted, including blocked connectivity, prolonged humanitarian dependence, reduced economic opportunities, and increased exposure to non-state actors and criminal networks.
- Recent disruptions in Afghanistan–Pakistan trade were cited as illustrating how political tensions quickly spillover into economic domains, undermining confidence among traders and logistics operators across the region.
- Energy security featured prominently in the discussions, with participants noting the concentration of global oil and gas reserves in West and Central Asia, the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints, and the region's relevance to major energy consumers.
- Iran's role as an energy and transit hub was discussed in the context of regional connectivity, sanctions, and its geographic position linking multiple sub-regions.
- Kazakhstan's perspective emphasized the importance of diversified transport arteries, particularly the Middle Corridor and potential north–south routes through Pakistan, as well as the security implications of instability in Afghanistan and the South Caucasus.
- Azerbaijan's role as an energy and transport hub was highlighted, alongside its emphasis on multi-vector diplomacy, regional integration formats, and confidence-building measures following the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.
- Türkiye's presentation focused on the structural transformation of global politics, the intensification of great-power competition, and the need for Central Asian states to strengthen economic, military, and societal resilience.
- Pakistan's perspective underscored the historical interconnectedness of the region, the persistence of unresolved conflicts, and the centrality of peace as a prerequisite for meaningful economic integration and regional cooperation.
- Participants noted that despite shared interests and geographic proximity, regional organizations such as ECO have struggled to translate potential into outcomes due to trust deficits, security-centric mindsets, and external constraints.

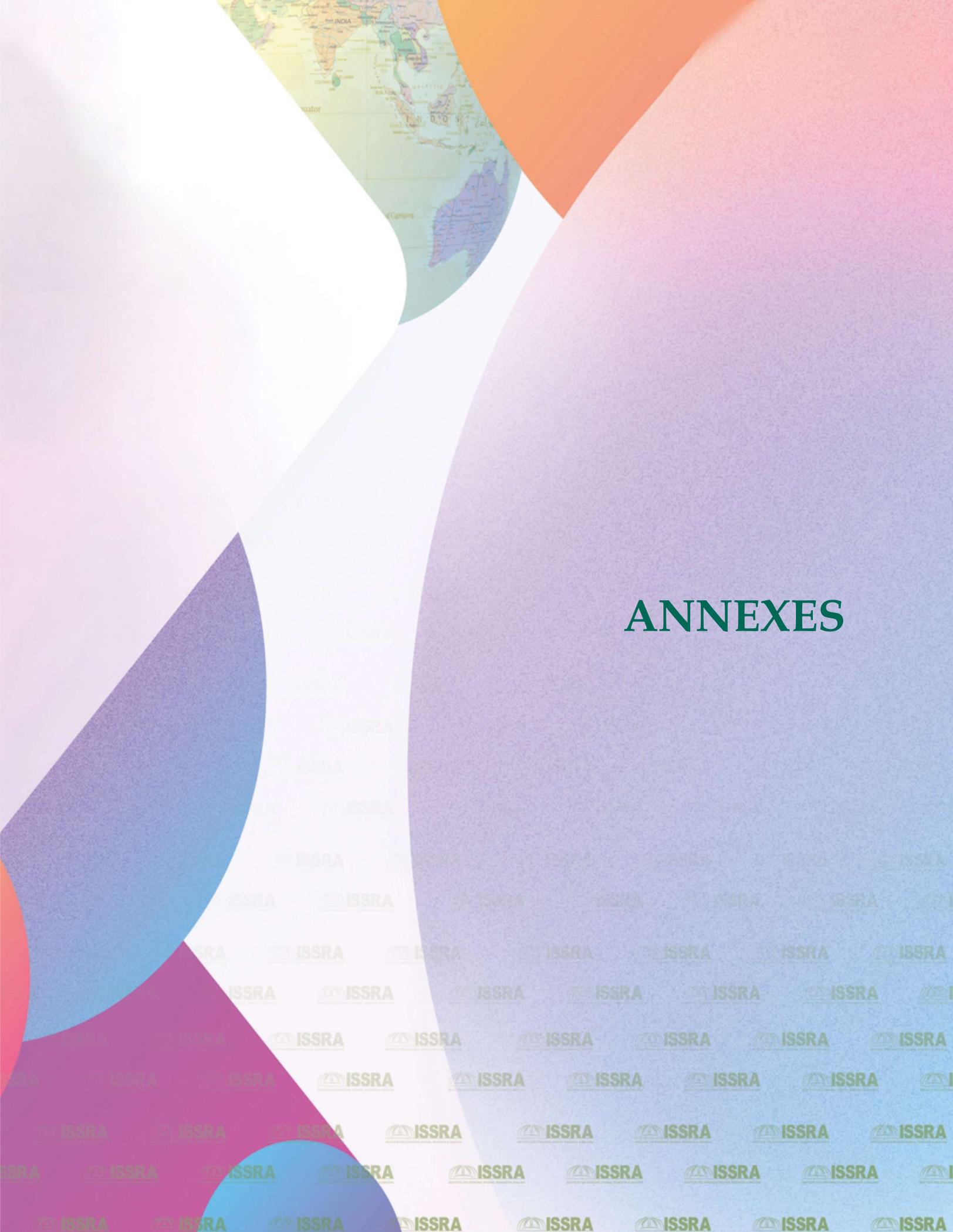
- The interactive session reinforced concerns regarding terrorism, instability emanating from Afghanistan, and the lack of a cohesive regional framework for engagement and security cooperation.
- Concluding remarks emphasized that while ECO has not met earlier expectations, external factors – rather than lack of intent among member states – have played a significant role in constraining its effectiveness.
- There was cautious optimism that renewed political will, institutional reforms, and convergence of interests among member states could enable ECO to play a more effective role in promoting connectivity and cooperation in the future.

To sum up, the discussions reflected a cautious balance between optimism and realism. On the one hand, West and Central Asia face entrenched challenges arising from geopolitical rivalries, sanctions and instability in Afghanistan; on the other, there is growing recognition that regional cooperation is no longer optional but essential for improving connectivity, economic engagement and regional stability.

Participants reaffirmed that regional connectivity, multilateral engagement, and trust-building remain the most viable pathways forward. Although ECO has yet to realize its full potential, current political momentum suggests that it can evolve into a more effective platform if member states converge around shared interests and insulate economic cooperation from political disputes.



ANNEXES



Programme

1200-1230 hrs	Online Assembling
1230-1235 hrs	Welcome Remarks by Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad, HI (M), DG ISSRA
1235-1250 hrs	Keynote address by Guest of Honour Ambassador Asad Majeed Khan, Secretary General ECO
1250-1350 hrs	<p>Experts' talk on:</p> <p>“West and Central Asia within the Transforming Global Order and Trends”</p> <p>Distinguished Speakers:</p> <p>Perspective from Afghanistan</p> <p>1. Dr. Idrees Zaman - Former Acting Foreign Minister and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs</p> <p>Perspective from Azerbaijan</p> <p>2. Mr. Sultan Zahidov - Leading Adviser at the Centre of Analysis of International Relations (CAIR)</p> <p>Perspective from Iran</p> <p>3. Dr. Foad Izadi, Associate Professor, University of Tehran</p> <p>Perspective from Kazakhstan</p> <p>4. Col. Berik Kemalov (Retd) – Chief Expert Centre for Military-Strategic Research (CMSR), Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan</p> <p>Perspective from Türkiye</p> <p>5. Associate Professor Murat Aslan, Senior Researcher SETA and Faculty Member of Hasan Kalyoncu University</p> <p>Perspective from Pakistan</p> <p>6. Ambassador ® Riffat Masood, Former Ambassador to Iran</p> <p>Moderator:</p> <p>Ms. Sumaira Khan, Journalist</p>
1350-1440 hrs	Interactive Session
1440-1450 hrs	Concluding Remarks by Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad, HI(M) DG ISSRA
1450 hrs	Refreshments Dispersal

List of Participants

Chair	
Major General Raza Aizad, HI (M)	Director General ISSRA
Keynote Speaker	
Ambassador Asad Majeed Khan	Secretary General ECO
Moderator	
Ms. Sumaira Khan	Journalist
Experts Participants	
Dr. Idrees Zaman	Former Acting Foreign Minister and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs, Afghanistan
Mr. Sultan Zahidov	Leading Adviser at the Centre of Analysis of International Relations (CAIR), Azerbaijan
Dr. Foad Izadi	Associate Professor, University of Tehran, Iran
Col. Berik Kemalov (Retd)	Chief Expert Centre for Military-Strategic Research (CMSR), Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan
Mr. Murat Aslan	Associate Professor, Senior Researcher SETA and Faculty Member of Hasan Kalyoncu University, Türkiye
Ambassador ® Riffat Masood	Former Ambassador to Iran

Picture Gallery







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