

**61ST CONFERENCE OF
DIRECTORS GENERAL OF CIVIL AVIATION
ASIA AND PACIFIC REGION**

*Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
7 – 11 September 2026*

AGENDA ITEM 4: AIR NAVIGATION

**IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR
HANDLING AIRSPACE CONTINGENCIES AND ATM
DISRUPTIONS**

(Presented by Pakistan)

INFORMATION PAPER

SUMMARY

The paper highlights that airspace and Air Traffic Management (ATM) contingency framework represents critical pillars of effective air navigation planning. In recent years, both the Asia and Pacific (APAC) and the Middle East (MID) regions have witnessed airspace contingency situations, underscoring the urgent need for robust, coordinated response frameworks. The paper shares Pakistan' experience in handling of recent airspace Contingencies. Effectively managing such contingencies demands strengthened internal coordination mechanism and deeper collaboration among all relevant stakeholders' including regional states, airspace users and ICAO Regional Office etc. with the overarching objective of safeguarding civil air transport operations while maintaining operational efficiency. The paper invites discussion on framework for enhanced cooperation among regional states and stakeholders to handle airspace contingencies in more harmonized and effective manner.

IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR HANDLING AIRSPACE CONTINGENCIES AND ATM DISRUPTIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 APAC region is the fastest-growing aviation market, routinely driving massive traffic volumes well above 2019 pre-pandemic levels. However, escalating geopolitical tensions have triggered a proportional rise in airspace contingencies and air traffic management (ATM) disruptions. Crises, such as ongoing ATM contingency in the Kabul Flight Information Region (FIR) and conflicts in the Middle East, altered regional traffic patterns and affected adjacent airspaces. Handling such scenario demands a collaborative framework focusing airspace safety and efficiency.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 In 2021, Air Traffic Services (ATS) were suspended in the Kabul FIR, prompting Afghanistan to implement an ATM Contingency Plan. The Plan was requiring 15-minute longitudinal separation at specific waypoints with limited flight levels availability. Pakistan actively participated in the Contingency Coordination Team (CCT) meetings under ICAO APAC Office. Initially, operators preferred to utilize ATS route P500 for connectivity from Lahore FIR to Dushanbe FIR on which the air traffic services within small segment within Kabul FIR (12 NM) were being rendered by Dushanbe Area Control Center (ACC). To accommodate this surge in traffic, Pakistan reviewed and restructured its internal ATS route with extension of ATS route T400, saving approximately 15 minutes of flying time per flight. Pakistan subsequently presented a detailed working paper on these structural optimization efforts at the 41st ICAO Assembly session (A41-WP/68-Pakistan's initiatives to reduce the impact of non-availability of ATS in Kabul FIR for long-haul transit flights). The paper is accessible on following link: [https://www.icao.int/assembly-41st-session/working-papers-number?Category=\(TE\)](https://www.icao.int/assembly-41st-session/working-papers-number?Category=(TE))

2.2 Although transit flights eventually resumed the use of Afghanistan's airspace, limited flight level availability initially subjected operators to extensive en-route holding to meet the mandatory 15-minute contingency longitudinal separation at Kabul FIR entry points. Lahore and Islamabad ACCs tactically manage the traffic by accepting at 50 NM longitudinal separation and achieving 15 minutes at Kabul and Lahore FIR boundary points. To resolve these bottleneck issues, Pakistan collaborated with the ICAO APAC Office, IATA, Afghanistan, and Aeronautical Radio of Thailand (AEROTHAI) to reactivate the Bay of Bengal Cooperative Air Traffic Flow Management System (BOBCAT) as well as to secure lower flight levels at Kabul FIR entry points. These coordinated multi-stakeholder efforts successfully led to the availability of some additional flight levels in August 2025 followed by resumption of BOBCAT services on 4 September 2025, significantly expanding airspace capacity, optimizing traffic efficiency, and providing airline operators with access to optimum flight levels. Moving forward, Pakistan and Tajikistan are in close coordination to reduce existing longitudinal separation from 10 Minutes to 50 NM over Transfer of Control (TOC) point MOTMO on ATS route P500 in an effort to further optimize airspace capacity. In this regard, designated Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP), i.e. Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA), has completed the safety risk assessment process and implementation will start after necessary liaison with Kabul ACC and signing of revised LOA.

2.3 In year 2024, Middle East escalation surfaced which started to impact flight operation in MID region. Amid evolving geopolitical developments affecting regional airspace, Pakistan's position as a key aviation corridor between Southeast Asia, Middle East, and Europe led to a significant surge in air traffic, including diverted flights from neighbouring airspaces. The substantial volumes of non-scheduled traffic were handled by ATC in certain sectors while ensuring the highest standards of safety and efficiency. Various tactical measures were adopted by PAA to handle different type of operational scenarios with availability of additional supervisory support in concerned ACCs and availability of standby air traffic controllers. A regular coordination mechanism was maintained between Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) and PAA. Timely, seamless liaison between the PCAA's Air Transport & Economic Regulation (AT&ER) Directorate and Area Control Centers, streamlined the issuance of non-scheduled traffic clearances, facilitating rapid airspace entry permissions at short notice. Concurrently, robust operational collaboration and real-time information sharing were maintained between the military

authorities and concerned ACCs. To build upon these improvements and further expand regional airspace capacity, Pakistan and Oman are actively collaborating to reduce TOC separation for cross-border flights operating between the Middle East and Pakistani airspace.

2.4 Based on the learning outcomes from the aforementioned airspace contingencies, the following insights are shared as lessons learned and strategic considerations for the meeting:

- a) active participation of States in Contingency Coordination Team (CCT) meetings, is of paramount importance for harmonized approach in regional contingency handling;
- b) timely and transparent information sharing among relevant stakeholders, particularly airspace users, is essential for proactive operational planning;
- c) identification of alternate airports and the verification of requisite ground facilities are critical to handling unforeseen flight diversions caused by sudden airspace disruptions;
- d) close institutional collaboration and regular joint discussions among Civil Aviation Authorities (CAAs), ANSPs, and military authorities serve as key enablers for managing both foreseeable and unpredictable contingency events;
- e) strong professional commitment, adaptability, and teamwork from operational personnel – most notably air traffic controllers are vital to sustaining service continuity;
- f) implementing structured, regular training for air traffic controllers on diverse operational contingency scenarios is essential to maintaining high institutional readiness; and
- g) sound, bilateral cooperation between adjacent States plays a decisive role in successfully mitigating the regional impacts of large-scale airspace contingencies.

3. ACTION BY THE CONFERENCE

3.1 The Conference is invited to note the information contained in this Paper.

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