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ECONOMICS OUTLOOK: A MIXED PICTURE

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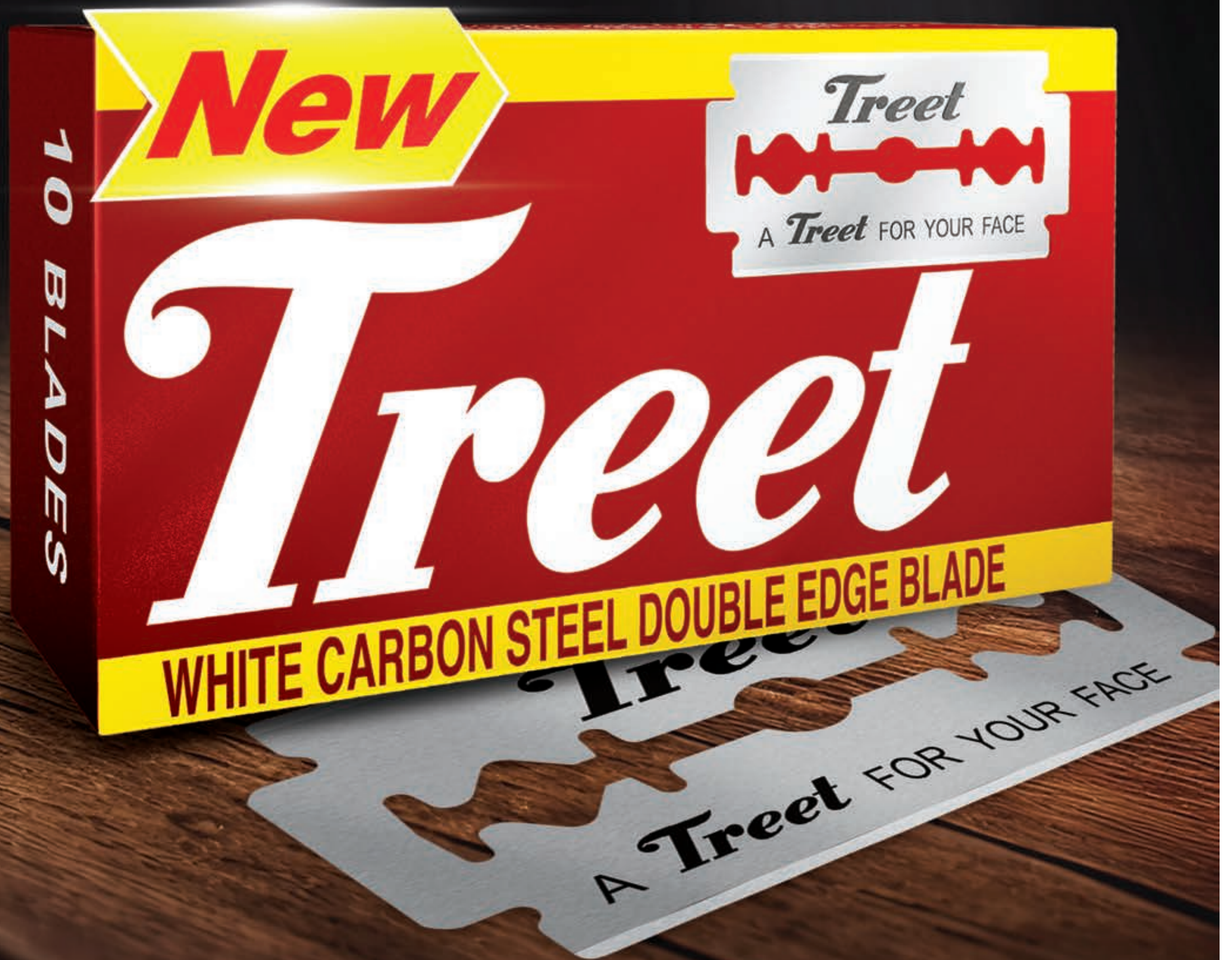

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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan —- Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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Economics outlook: a mixed picture

Farhan Khan

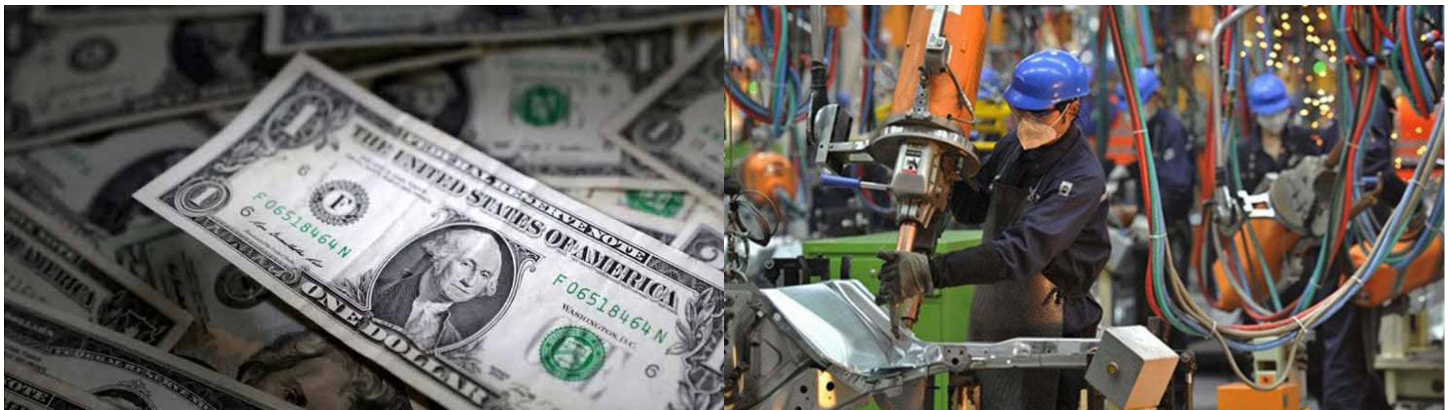
Pakistan's economy is in a multiple bind. First, there is the steadily mounting debt burden and its costly servicing. Secondly, the manufacturing sector is in a moribund state, while exports are stagnant.

FDI inflows are also much below expectation. The government talks of economic stability and falling inflation but the ground realities tell a different story. Economic growth remains below 2 percent, while all the employment-generating sectors — large-scale manufacturing, agriculture and construction — are showing a declining trend. The balance of payments position remains wobbly. Despite a satisfactory current account performance recently, the SBP's reserves have decreased over the last two months.

The Asian Development Bank has downgraded Pakistan's growth rate to 2.5 percent for the current year, against the 3.5 percent budgeted for the year by the government with 3.2 percent forecast by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) five months ago in October. The World Bank projected a growth rate of 2.8 percent, below potential due to tight macroeconomic monetary and fiscal policies and elevated inflation but it added that "with slower wage and employment increases and high population growth rate at nearly 2 percent, the poverty headcount for fiscal year 2025 is estimated to remain unchanged at 42.3 percent, close to Covid 19 peak levels, implying an additional 1.8 million poor people."

Significantly, the growth rate was downgraded by the State Bank of Pakistan in its half yearly July-December 2024 report, which stated that "the economic recovery achieved in FY2024, with GDP growth rate of 2.5 percent against a contraction of 0.2 percent in FY2023, has sustained positive growth of 0.92 percent in the first quarter of FY2025. However, growth has slowed compared to the 2.3 percent recorded last year, reflecting moderation across key sectors, particularly in agriculture."

In this context it is relevant to note that the services sector (with the largest component of wholesale and retail trade) and agriculture were expected to lead the way towards growth while large-scale manufacturing sector as per the latest figures for July-January 2025 registered negative 1.78 percent growth as opposed to negative 0.65 percent in the comparable period of the year before in spite of nearly halving of the discount rate from 22 percent in April 2024 to 12 percent at present.



No doubt, there is some progress in containing the deficit which has been reduced to 1.7 percent of GDP in July-January FY25, compared to 2.6 percent in the same period last year. Also, the primary surplus rose to Rs 3.6 trillion (2.8% of GDP) from Rs 1.9 trillion (1.8% of GDP) last year. This improvement is driven mainly by two factors: higher SBP profits from the previous year and a sharp rise in taxes on formal businesses and salaried individuals. But the authorities have signally failed in expanding the tax base. The Tajir Dost Scheme has not yielded much. The same goes for agriculture and real estate sectors.

On the negative side, current expenditure grew by 17 percent, with markup payments increasing by 20 percent, and non-markup expenditure growth slowing to 11 percent – largely due to reduced subsidy spending. At the same time, it is relevant to note here that the excessive burden placed on the formal industrial sector is retarding growth and deterring much-needed investment which has dampened demand. Global commodity price suppression also played a role in this situation. Food and energy prices remained low, but the resulting pressure on the farm economy has been on the increase.

On the other hand, major crops have underperformed and suppressed farmer incomes which has dragged down overall demand for other goods and services. Meanwhile, core inflation remains stubborn, with double-digit increases in health, clothing & footwear, and education. The Ministry of Finance report says that large scale manufacturing shows a mixed trend — 11 out of 22 sectors recorded positive growth, including textiles, wearing apparel and tobacco. However, apart from wearing apparel, nearly every sector remains below its 2022 peak figure.

Although there is some modest economic recovery, there is still the risk of renewed pressure on the current account, which could hinder reserve building and fuel inflation. The latest Moody's report notes that Pakistan may see a worsening of the external position if the US tariffs are implemented on our exports to the US. In view of this, Pakistan must start seeking alternate markets for its exports, an objective which has remained neglected despite numerous rhetorical claims over the years.

All in all, it is highly unlikely that growth would be higher than 2.5 percent this year mainly because of the IMF programme conditions. The only way out of the situation is for the government to undertake structural reforms, including expansion of the tax net and curtailment of current expenditure.

Unlocking mineral wealth for sustainable growth

Nasim Ahmed

With the holding of the two-day Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum 2025 (PMIF25) last week in Islamabad, Pakistan has finally moved towards unlocking its immense mineral wealth through sustainable, and inclusive development. Organised by the Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDCL), with support from the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) and the government of Pakistan, the forum brought together over 300 delegates from around the world, including government leaders, mining experts, investors, and academics.

The forum was aimed at boosting local and foreign investment in Pakistan's mineral sector, which holds immense untapped potential and forging strategic, long-term partnerships by showcasing Pakistan's mineral wealth. Participants from China, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, Kenya, Finland, and other countries joined local investors and stakeholders to explore investment opportunities and sign agreements and memorandums of understanding across various segments of the mining value chain. Delegates from prominent organisations such as the US State Department, US Exim Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and executives from mining companies across Denmark, Kenya, Finland, and the UK also attended the moot.

The country has suffered long from the absence of a comprehensive and clear-cut policy framework for mineral development and that is the reason why despite possessing immense mineral wealth no benefits have occurred to the nation. Despite Pakistan's resource potential, mining currently contributes only 3% to GDP. In this background, the conference was a welcome initiative for promoting policy dialogue, investment facilitation, and knowledge sharing—setting the stage for Pakistan to emerge as a competitive player in the global minerals market.

Addressing the conference, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called on both local and international investors to seize the opportunity to tap into Pakistan's abundant mineral resources, underscoring that this could significantly reduce the country's reliance on global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He said: "This is not a secret. These deposits are valued in the trillions of dollars and are well-known in the public domain. If we can tap into these resources, Pakistan would be able to move away from reliance on institutions like the IMF and eliminate the burden of loans and high borrowing costs." He also stressed the need for adding value to the country's mineral output by processing and exporting finished and semi-finished products, rather than simply exporting raw materials.

He proposed that any investment partnerships include a gradual transfer of technology to Pakistan, ensuring long-term benefits and encouraging businessmen to explore joint ventures, particularly in establishing vocational training centres across the country.

An important part of the conference was the launching of the National Minerals Harmonisation Framework 2025 which is a comprehensive reform package designed to streamline investment policies and create a more investor-friendly regulatory environment. On the sidelines of the PMIF25, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Pakistan and Turkey for joint offshore exploration. The MoU was inked between the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) and Pakistan's state-owned enterprises—OGDCL, Mari Energies Ltd, and Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL)—during a meeting between Federal Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik and Turkey's Minister for Energy and Natural Resources. Federal Minister for Energy Ali Pervaiz Malik and Federal Minister for Commerce Jam Kamal Khan also held a meeting with the high-level delegation of Saudi Arabia led by Abdulrahman Al-Belushi, Deputy Minister for Mining. During the meeting, the two sides discussed strengthening bilateral cooperation in the energy and mineral sectors. Both sides explored avenues to deepen collaboration in Pakistan's oil, gas, and mining industries. The Saudi delegation expressed a strong interest in exploring investment opportunities in Pakistan's energy and mineral sectors.

Reko Diq is the crown jewel of Pakistan's mineral sector. During the event, Barrick Gold CEO Mark Bristow highlighted the significance of the Reko Diq copper and gold project and said that it was of pivotal milestone for Pakistan. He pointed out that the project would not only economically benefit Pakistan but also transform the economy of Balochistan. Bristow said that the feasibility study has been completed, with production targeted to begin in 2028. The mine is expected to produce 240,000 tonnes of copper and 300,000 ounces of gold annually. During peak construction, the project is set to employ over 7,500 people and will provide 4,000 long-term direct jobs. He expressed confidence that Pakistan is poised to join the ranks of top global mining jurisdictions, competing with countries like Chile, Peru, the DRC, and Zambia.

Needless to say, developing the country's mineral sector calls for more than just rhetoric or high level conferences. The importance of developing a skilled workforce to support the sector's expansion cannot be overemphasised. To this end, we need curriculum reforms, regulation of training funds, and the establishment of mining-focused campuses, particularly in Balochistan and KP. Side by side, we should understand the importance of stable and investor-friendly policies, risk mitigation mechanisms, and global benchmarking to attract capital into Pakistan's mineral value chain. Let us hope the latest mineral conference will not go the way of similar meetings in the past and will lead to concrete results in the near future.

A fragile recovery: Unpacking Pakistan's economic crossroads

Muhammad Hassan

The finance ministry's economic update paints a cautiously optimistic picture, touting recovery in select sectors and a cooling inflation rate as signs of stability.

It's the kind of report that wants you to focus on the glass half full—fiscal discipline is paying off, deficits are shrinking, and a few industries are showing sparks of life. But scratch the surface, and the optimism feels brittle. Growth is stuck below 2 percent, barely keeping pace with the population, while job-heavy sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, and construction are languishing.

The central bank's reserves are down $1 billion in two months, signaling cracks in the balance of payments. Taxes are squeezing salaried workers and formal businesses dry, yet efforts to broaden the tax base are flopping. Meanwhile, farmers are reeling from low crop yields and prices, dragging down demand across the board. This report, meant to chart a path to sustainable growth, seems more focused on short-term wins than tackling the deeper issues holding Pakistan back. It's a snapshot of an economy teetering between hope and hardship, where the numbers tell a story that's harder to spin.

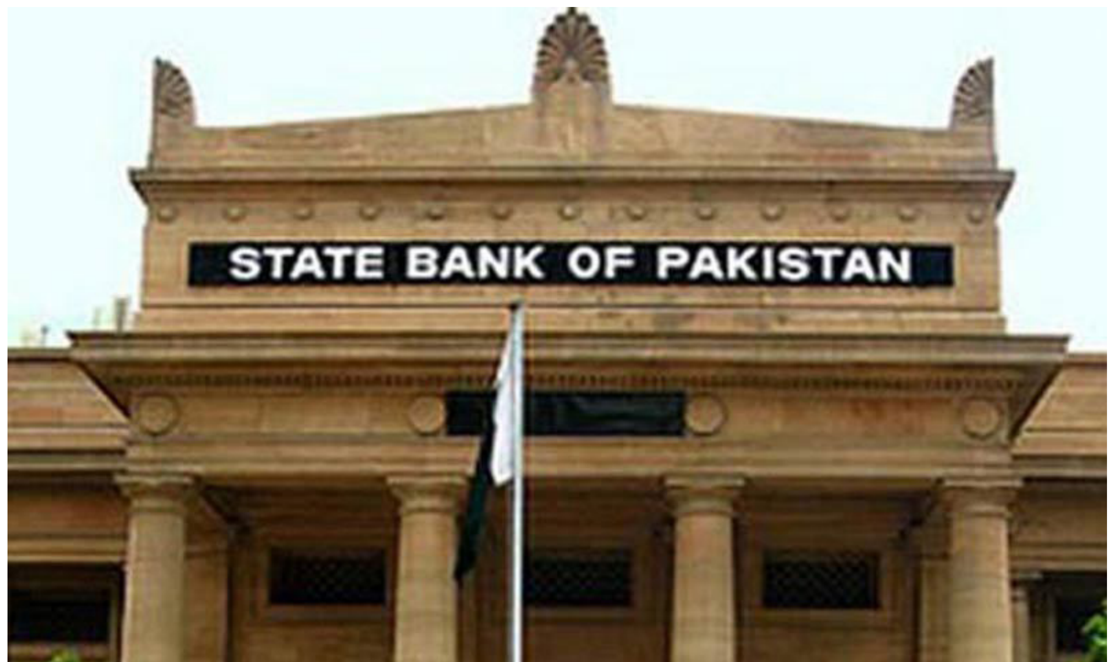
The report tries to sell a story of economic recovery, spotlighting a few bright spots and cheering for steady inflation. But honestly, it feels like they're glossing over the rough bits. The truth? Growth is limping along at under 2 percent. Key job-creating sectors like manufacturing, agriculture (outside of livestock), and construction are stuck in a rut. It's tough to feel optimistic when the engines of employment are sputtering. Then there's the balance of payments mess. Sure, the current account looks okay on paper, but the State Bank of Pakistan's reserves have taken a $1 billion hit in just two months. That's not exactly the kind of news that inspires confidence.

The ministry's main gig is steering the fiscal ship toward long-term growth, but this report feels like it's fixated on quick wins. The fiscal deficit is down to 1.7 percent of GDP for July-January FY25, better than last year's 2.6 percent. And the primary surplus? It jumped to Rs 3.6 trillion (2.8% of GDP) from Rs 1.9 trillion (1.8% of GDP). Not bad, right?

But dig deeper, and it's clear this progress comes from leaning hard on last year's central bank profits and jacking up taxes on salaried workers and formal businesses. Meanwhile, efforts to widen the tax net—like the Tajir Dost Scheme—have barely made a dent. Agriculture and real estate taxes? Still stuck in neutral.

Spending's another sore point. Overall, it's up 17 percent, with debt interest payments climbing 20 percent. Other spending grew just 11 percent, mostly because subsidies got slashed thanks to lower global commodity prices. It's a mixed bag—less debt and a tighter current account deficit are wins, but squeezing the formal sector this hard is choking growth and scaring off investment.

On the bright side, inflation's genuinely cooling off, thanks to the central bank's



tight grip last year and taxes that've crushed demand. Falling global food and energy prices helped, too. But there's a catch: farmers are hurting. Major crops tanked, and low farm incomes are dragging down demand for everything else. Core inflation's still stubborn, though, with health, clothing, and education costs rising fast.

Manufacturing is a mixed bag. Some sectors—like textiles and apparel—are inching up, mostly for exports. Tobacco is doing better, too, thanks to tighter tax enforcement. But overall, large-scale manufacturing dipped 1.8 percent in the first seven months of FY25, and most sectors haven't touched their 2022 highs.

Looking ahead, the economy might nudge up to 2-2.5 percent growth for the year, better than the first half's 1.7 percent. But that's still slower than population growth, so it's not like we're gaining ground. Worse, any pickup could strain the current account, stall reserve growth, and maybe even spark inflation again. All in all, it's a tough road. The report tries to put a brave face on things, but the numbers tell a story of an economy that's struggling to find its footing.

Pakistan's economic journey in March 2025 feels like a tightrope walk—some steps forward, but plenty of wobbles. The report celebrates fiscal gains and lower inflation, and those are real achievements. A leaner deficit and a stronger primary surplus show discipline, while cooling prices offer relief to consumers battered by years of hikes. Yet, the bigger picture is sobering. Growth is too slow to lift living standards, and key sectors employing millions are stuck in reverse. Tax policies are choking the formal economy, and without a wider tax net, the burden stays unfair.

Falling farm incomes and sticky core inflation hint at deeper troubles brewing. The risk of a strained current account looms, threatening to unravel hard-won stability. This isn't a crisis, but it is far from a success story. Pakistan needs bold moves—reforms to spark investment, support for struggling farmers, and a tax system that doesn't punish growth. For now, the economy's holding on, but it is a fragile grip. The path ahead demands more than cautious optimism; it calls for courage to confront the structural flaws and build a foundation for prosperity that lasts.

Pakistan's power play: Cheaper bills, costly glitches

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's energy scene is buzzing with a rare bit of good news: electricity bills are shrinking, offering a breather to homes, factories, and shops.

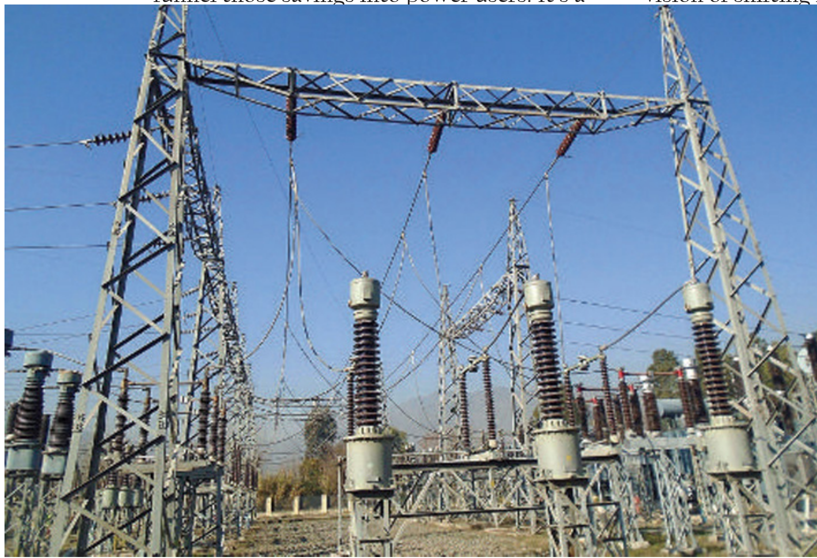
The government is betting big on this, nudging folks away from pricey gas and oil toward the grid, especially as global fuel prices dip and local power capacity sits idle. It is a smart pivot—taxing petrol to fund cheaper electricity could ease our oil import addiction, fire up surplus renewable energy, and even give electric vehicles a nudge. With industrial gas costs soaring, factories are eyeing the grid, too, which might finally soak up that excess RLNG we're stuck importing. But here's the rub: the grid's a shaky foundation. Frequent outages, especially in Punjab, are driving industries up the wall, while Karachi's KE network seems to dodge the worst. Then there's the runaway circular debt, fueled by rampant theft and creaky infrastructure leaking power like a sieve. This isn't just a hiccup—it's a flashing warning sign. The dream of a cleaner, electrified future hinges on fixing these cracks, and fast. Without bold reforms, Pakistan's power play risks fizzling out before it even gets going.

There's a sliver of good news on Pakistan's energy front, but it's not the full story. Electricity bills are dipping, and folks are breathing a small sigh of relief. The catch? This relief comes from tinkering with taxes and riding the wave of lower inflation and interest rates, not from fixing the creaky power transmission and distribution mess that is long overdue for an overhaul. The government's rolled out a three-month cut in power tariffs for homes, businesses, and factories alike, thanks to tweaks like tariff differential subsidies (TDS), quarterly tariff adjustments (QTAs), and fuel cost adjustments (FCAs). Some of these—like the QTA drop tied to reworked deals with power producers, stable currency, and cheaper borrowing—might stick around in next year's base rates if things stay steady. That's a cautious win.

Then there's the TDS, slashing rates by Rs1.7 per unit, funded by hiking the petroleum levy (PL) by Rs10 per liter. With global oil prices likely to dip—partly due to a 10 percent tariff slapped by Trump and a brewing U.S.-China trade spat—the government's betting on keeping that levy high at Rs70 per liter to bankroll cheaper electricity. It's a clever move, honestly.

Here's why it makes sense: Pakistan's electricity prices are sky-high compared to neighbors, but petrol's dirt cheap. We guzzle more petroleum than electricity, even though we've got surplus power capacity, especially from renewables and local sources. Meanwhile, we're stuck importing most of our fuel. Taxing petrol to cut power costs sends the right signal—use electricity, not oil.

The government's maxed out on the petroleum levy, though. To raise it past Rs70, it will need a nod from parliament in the next budget. If oil prices keep sliding, it should funnel those savings into power users. It's a chance to nudge drivers toward electric vehicles, ease the oil import burden, tap surplus electricity, and maybe even give the environment a break. For now, it is a step forward—but the real fix lies in tackling those deeper, messier reforms we keep dodging.



Surging electricity demand could ease Pakistan's headache of excess RLNG imports, which we're stuck buying and managing no matter what. That is a big deal when gas prices for industrial users are skyrocketing, making the grid look like a better deal by comparison. The gap is widening, and factories have every reason to switch to electricity—if only it were that simple.

The grid is a bottleneck. In Punjab especially, industries are fed up with constant tripping that disrupts operations. For factories with non-stop processes, these outages mean costly waste. Others wrestle with machinery that just doesn't play nice with an unstable grid. Karachi's KE network fares better, but elsewhere, it's a struggle. KE, being privately run, is hustling to fix things, while other DISCOs drag their feet.

Worse, the power sector's circular debt keeps ballooning, even with cheaper tariffs and subsidized relief. Transmission and distribution losses are out of control—way beyond acceptable limits. Electricity theft is rampant, and some DISCOs can barely collect bills. It's a mess that's practically criminal, undoing all the gains we're chasing.

The fix isn't rocket science: privatize and professionalize DISCOs. NEPRA needs to crack the whip on losses. If we don't, the vision of shifting industry and transport from gas and oil to electricity will stay a fantasy, stuck in the wires. Pakistan's energy shift is tantalizingly close, yet frustratingly out of reach. Slashing power tariffs and taxing fuel to fund it is a clever move—one that could lighten the load on wallets, cut oil imports, and tap into surplus electricity. The push to get industries off gas and onto the grid makes sense, especially with RLNG piling up and gas prices pinching. But the system's creaking under pressure. Grid failures are more than an annoyance—they're costing businesses dearly, especially outside Karachi's better-managed KE network. Meanwhile, circular debt's swelling like a bad bruise, fed by theft and losses no one's reining in.

It is maddening to watch these self-inflicted wounds erode the gains. Privatizing DISCOs and letting NEPRA enforce accountability isn't just a suggestion—it's a must. Without it, the vision of an electrified Pakistan, with humming factories and EVs zipping around, is just talk. The pieces are there: cheaper power, eager industries, and a shot at a greener future. But if we don't fix the grid and plug the leaks, we're stuck dreaming instead of doing. Let's not let negligence dim the spark of what could be.

Hope and hard choices

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy is likely to remain on a gradual but modest recovery track, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) predicting growth at 2.5% in fiscal year 2025 and 3% in 2026. But the ADB has cautioned that this nascent rebound is very much exposed to domestic as well as external risks and invited policymakers to remain firmly committed to reforms and not fall into the trap of premature policy easing.

The international lender has estimated Pakistan's economy to expand by 2.5% in the current fiscal year but cautioned that the nation's fragile recovery path remains susceptible to derailment. The bank stressed that any deviation from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reform program or early optimism could jeopardize the nation's progress toward economic stability. In its most recent Asian Development Outlook (ADO) report, the Manila-based bank presented a positive outlook for South Asia, estimating it will be the fastest-growing sub-region. It forecasts South Asia to record growth rates of 6% in 2025 and 6.2% in 2026, an increase from 5.8% in 2024. India is estimated to lead the region, with forecasted expansions of 6.7% in 2025 and 6.8% in 2026.

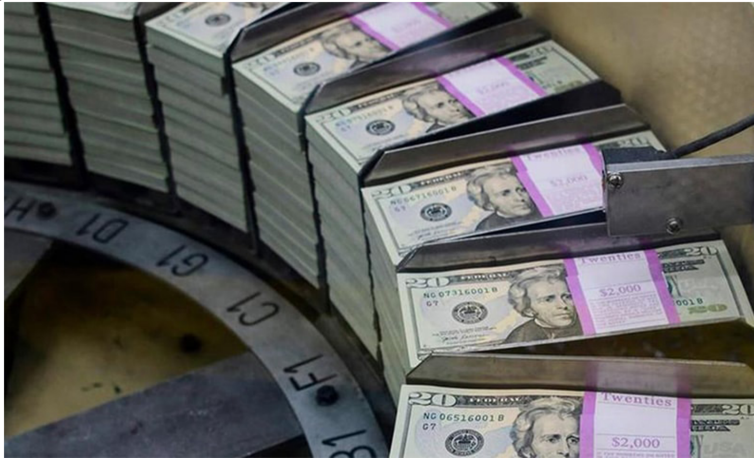
For the overall Asian region, growth is expected at 4.9% in 2025, followed by 4.7% in 2026. Nevertheless, the report identified enduring headwinds such as China's property crisis and issues of international trade. It also mentioned that the complete economic impact of the additional US tariffs announced on April 2 had yet to be incorporated in these forecasts.

Pakistan's future development greatly depends on the continuation and effectiveness of its current economic reforms within the IMF format, which has been instrumental in stabilizing Pakistan's macroeconomic fundamentals. An important step, the report noted, is the passage of all four provincial legislatures of the law to subject agricultural income to taxation — an action regarded as a key milestone toward more equitable and wider taxation.

Even with these reform efforts, Pakistan still suffers from inherent structural vulnerabilities and rising fiscal pressures. The ADB emphasized that consistent and disciplined policymaking is crucial to enhance resilience and promote long-term, inclusive economic growth. The report also noted the fiscal burden imposed by attempts to contain budget deficits. The government had to cut development expenditures to offset the rise in interest payments, which devoured a growing portion of public resources. Subsidy reforms and stricter budget discipline did manage to lower non-interest current spending from 10.6% of GDP in FY2023 to 9.9% in FY2024.

Meanwhile, debt servicing charges jumped but the expense of servicing debt was extravagant, with interest outlays increasing from 6.8% to 7.7% of GDP, consuming a whopping 61% of government revenues. The ADB credited this steep increase to both elevated policy interest rates and the swift accumulation of public debt, which increased by 20.3% each year over the last two years, reaching Rs71.2 trillion — about 67.5% of GDP — by June 2024. The lion's share of this load was domestic borrowing, which accounted for 95.5% of the government's overall debt obligations.

The bank expects Pakistan's economic recovery to spill over into the medium term, forecasting GDP growth of 2.5% in fiscal year 2025 and 3% in 2026. But it warned that this scenario is overshadowed by a number of major downside risks that would upset progress. The report emphasized that if Pakistan's external accounts strengthen and inflation declines more rapidly than anticipated, policymakers may be tempted to relax economic constraints prematurely. Such a step, the ADB cautioned, would undo recent progress and revive balance-of-payment pressures, erasing gains so far.



Equally, if fiscal responsibility falters — either from poor revenue capture or increasing government spending — the nation's debt burden can rise even further, increasing borrowing costs. This situation would crowd out private sector lending and place further pressure on the exchange rate.

The ADB also warned of diminished financial assistance from international lenders and development partners if Pakistan drifts off the path of its reform agenda. A fall in policy consistency would disturb the stream of foreign funds, subjecting the rupee to additional pressures and making economic management even more complicated.

Political uncertainty was also identified as a major weakness. Increased political tensions would undermine business confidence, deter private investment, weaken household spending, and arrest economic momentum. The report further stated that bad weather, particularly insufficient rains or the beginning of drought, is another threat — not just to the nation's growth but also to its food security. Worldwide, Pakistan remains vulnerable to commodity and food price spikes and any sudden changes in global trade policies, which would result in increased interest rates and exchange rate volatility.

In spite of these issues, the ADB noted some positives. The report indicated that both the industry and services sectors are poised to benefit from better macroeconomic conditions and continued interest rate easing. Restored investor confidence, backed by a more stable exchange rate and continuing reform efforts, is also likely to drive private investment. Besides, robust remittance flows, tempering inflation, and easier monetary policy are anticipated to boost household spending, supporting growth. Inflation is projected to be at an average of 6% in FY25 and 5.8% in FY26 — within the central bank's medium-term goal of 5% to 7%.

The recent moderation in inflation was in general line with expectations, the ADB stated, attributing the fall to softer food prices, stable global energy and commodity prices, tepid domestic demand, and an easy comparison against last year's high inflation base. But the report cautioned that core inflation — while moderating — is still uncomfortably high. Prices will tick higher again in the coming months, particularly as future reforms in the gas industry, such as an increase in tariffs for captive power plants, will likely drive up cost of production for industries dependent on private power generation.

Although Pakistan's short-term prospects bear some semblance of stability, the ADB emphasized that the country's recovery is dependent on sustained reform efforts, tight fiscal discipline, and navigating both global and domestic uncertainties. Strong remittance flows, moderating inflation, and better investor sentiment can continue to drive momentum — but in the absence of consistent policies and resilience to external shocks, the path to sustained economic stability remains uncertain.

Addressing Balochistan's deprivation through NFC

Raza Khan

Pakistan's federal structure relies on the National Finance Commission (NFC) to distribute financial resources between the central government and provinces, a process critical for economic stability and national cohesion. However, the failure to announce a new NFC Award since the 7th Award expired in 2015 has exacerbated tensions, particularly in Balochistan, where multidimensional poverty and underdevelopment fuel unrest.

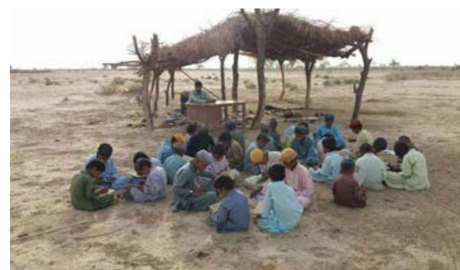
With 38.3% of Pakistan's population (88.7 million people in 2021) classified as multidimensionally poor and Balochistan facing a poverty incidence of 71%, equitable resource allocation is urgently needed. This discussion examines the NFC's role in addressing Pakistan's fiscal challenges and argues for a larger financial share for Balochistan to mitigate deprivation and strengthen national unity.

Since the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC) Award was finalized in 2010 by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government, no new financial award has been announced after its expiry in 2015. This failure violates the Constitution of Pakistan and has created significant economic and financial challenges, particularly in relations between the central and provincial governments.

Distributing financial resources in a federal state is inherently complex. Western nations, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, developed sustainable mechanisms centuries ago to allocate resources between central and regional governments. In culturally homogenous countries like Japan, this process has been relatively smooth. However, in culturally diverse states like Pakistan and India, equitable distribution remains a formidable challenge.

In Pakistan, the vertical distribution of financial resources between the central government and provinces has been particularly contentious, largely due to the country's highly centralized state structure. The 1973 Constitution introduced the National Finance Commission (NFC) to manage the Federal Divisible Pool (FDP), distributing resources vertically between the federal government and provinces and horizontally among the provinces. However, no fixed criteria were established for this distribution. Instead, the federal and provincial governments must negotiate through the Council of Common Interests (CCI) to agree on resource allocation periodically. The NFC Award is a critical mechanism for determining these distributions, and regular agreements are essential for political stability, efficient governance, and addressing the population's needs.

The 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) and the 7th NFC Award, enacted in the same year, granted provinces, including Balochistan, greater fiscal autonomy. The amendment abolished the Concurrent Legislative List, devolving subjects and departments to the provinces as originally envisioned in the 1973 Constitution. While this was a positive step, the 7th NFC Award fell short of delivering justice. Although the provincial share of financial resources increased to 57.5%, this was insufficient given



the scope of devolved responsibilities. Provinces should have received at least 75% of the divisible pool, with the federal government retaining the remainder.

The most recent publicly available survey data for Pakistan's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) estimation, from 2017/2018, indicates that 38.3% of Pakistan's population (88.7 million people in 2021) is multidimensionally poor, with an additional 12.9% (29.9 million people) classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty. The intensity of deprivation, measured as the average deprivation score among the multidimensionally poor, is 51.7%. Pakistan's MPI value, which adjusts the share of the multidimensionally poor population by the intensity of deprivations, is 0.198—higher than Bangladesh (0.104) and India (0.069).

The case of Balochistan is critical in discussions of financial resource allocation and poverty. The province faces a strong separatist insurgency, with the state's authority weakening in many areas. A key driver of this unrest is the perception that Balochistan has been denied its political and economic rights, particularly in the distribution of financial resources through the National Finance Commission (NFC). Historically, Balochistan has been Pakistan's least developed province compared to Punjab and Sindh. According to the 2016 MPI survey, Balochistan had a staggering poverty incidence of 71%, with a deprivation intensity of 55%. Given these conditions, Balochistan deserves a significantly larger share of financial resources.

Several compelling reasons support allocating a larger NFC share to Balochistan. First, the province has not been a priority for central government development policies, despite claims to the contrary, fostering widespread deprivation and fueling separatist sentiments. In the 7th NFC Award, a "war on terror" criterion was introduced, granting Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) a 1.8% share for its role as a frontline province in Pakistan's fight against terrorism. However, this allocation was minimal, and in recent years, Balochistan has faced comparable levels of terrorism. Thus, Balochistan should also receive dedicated "war on terror" funds in the next NFC Award.

The crisis in Balochistan is multidimensional, but increasing its NFC share could help address the pervasive sense of deprivation. This is in Pakistan's broader national interest, as persistent grievances and separatist tendencies undermine state cohesion and nation-building. Moreover, Balochistan's underdevelopment hampers Pakistan's overall progress. Widespread unemployment, poverty, and misery in the province stem from this neglect, making a larger NFC allocation urgent. Consensus on a new NFC Award is critical to address these issues and promote equitable development.

Pakistan's progress hinges on addressing the systemic inequities in its resource distribution, particularly for Balochistan, where poverty and unrest underscore the need for reform. The NFC remains a vital mechanism to achieve this, but its effectiveness depends on timely consensus and fair criteria that prioritize underdeveloped regions. By allocating a significantly larger share to Balochistan, including dedicated funds for terrorism-affected areas, the government can alleviate deprivation, curb separatist sentiments, and foster inclusive development. A new NFC Award, grounded in justice and national interest, is imperative to strengthen the federation and ensure a cohesive, prosperous future.

Pakistan's water crisis calls for unity

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Pakistan's water woes have reached a breaking point, with the UN's 2023 Global Water Security Assessment branding the nation "critically water-insecure." Climate change, population surges, mismanagement, and wasteful habits are draining the country's lifeblood, pushing communities toward a future where clean water could become a rare commodity.

But this isn't just a technical glitch—it's a political and social tangle demanding bold, collective action. From Punjab's new canal plans to Sindh's coastal losses and urban water waste, recent moves highlight a fractured approach to a shared crisis. Without a unified strategy, Pakistan risks deepening divides when it needs solidarity most.

The Pakistan Meteorological Department's recent alert about an escalating drought threat in Sindh, Balochistan, and southern Punjab isn't just another weather update—it's a wake-up call screaming for attention. Sindh's rainfall has plummeted 62% below average, with Balochistan close behind, painting a grim picture of parched lands and dwindling resources. In some districts, the earth has gone over 200 days without a drop of rain. Dams are scraping rock-bottom levels, and the soil is baking under relentless heat. This isn't a prediction anymore—it's a crisis unfolding in real time.

Look at the numbers: Tarbela and Mangla, the lifeblood of Pakistan's farms, are dangerously depleted. Temperatures in the south are running 2-3°C hotter than usual, sucking moisture from the ground faster than it can hold on. In Punjab, places like Bahawalpur and Rahim Yar Khan are already flashing red on the drought radar. Yet, the response so far feels like a half-hearted nod to "planning" when what's needed is all-out action.

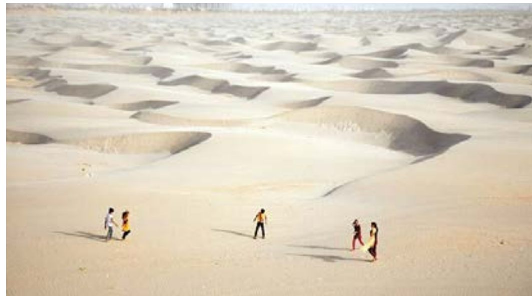
This drought isn't just about dry fields—it's a domino effect threatening food, jobs, and the stability of entire communities. Agriculture, the backbone of millions of lives and Pakistan's economy, is choking on shrinking water tables and scorched soil. The government's sluggish pace is a gamble we can't afford.

It's time to get serious. Ration water for irrigation now. Fix the crumbling canal systems leaking precious drops. Crack down on reckless groundwater pumping. Flood the airwaves with campaigns begging people to save every liter. These aren't wild ideas—they're survival tactics.

Cities like Karachi, Hyderabad, and Quetta can't sit this out either. As rural areas dry up, people will flock to urban centers, straining already creaky systems. We need bold moves: pump money into desalination, recycle wastewater, and team up with private players to overhaul outdated pipelines. Waiting will only make the mess uglier.

This crisis doesn't care about provincial borders—it's a national problem. Water disputes that have festered for years need to be shelved for a united front. A national drought task force should be up and running, not stuck in a meeting room debate.

Climate change isn't some distant storm—it's here, reshaping Pakistan with brutal heat, erratic rains, and vanishing resources. Treating this drought like a one-off is a recipe for disaster. The PMD has done its job sounding the alarm. Now it's on those in charge to prove they're not just listening—but ready to fight for every drop, every field, and every life at stake.



Pakistan's water woes already push millions to the edge, forcing families to uproot and chase survival elsewhere. The clock's ticking, and hope alone won't fill the dams. The UN's 2023 Global Water Security Assessment didn't mince words: Pakistan is teetering on the edge of a water crisis so severe it's labeled "critically water-insecure." The reasons pile up like storm clouds—climate change drying up rivers, a booming population stretching resources thin, and years of mismanagement letting precious water slip through the cracks. Per-capita water availability is shrinking fast, and without bold action, entire communities face a future where clean water is a luxury.

The problem isn't just about leaky pipes or low rainfall—it's a tangled mess of politics and power. Decades of underinvestment in dams, canals, and recycling systems have left Pakistan scrambling to keep up. Yet, too often, leaders treat this as a technical glitch rather than the sprawling, high-stakes showdown it is. That narrow view is choking efforts to build a real plan for saving water and using it wisely.

Lately, the issue's been thrust back into the spotlight. Punjab's push to carve out new canals to green up Cholistan's barren expanses has set off alarm bells downstream in Sindh. There, reduced flows below Kotri have already invited the sea to swallow coastal lands, uprooting countless families along the Indus Delta. Meanwhile, a Lahore High Court judge has had enough of watching fresh water vanish in Punjab's cities. He's demanding an emergency declaration, a clampdown on wasteful housing projects, and serious recycling plans. At the same time, a federal minister's promising full backing for Wapda's hydropower dams to store more water and churn out clean energy.

These moves—new canals, urban conservation, bigger dams—might seem like unrelated fixes, but they're threads of the same knot. Untangling it demands a unified strategy that pulls in everyone: federal and provincial governments, local councils, farmers, city dwellers, and activists. The first hurdle? Sorting out the political minefield. Provinces need ironclad water rights, and the public deserves a clear stake in this shared resource. Without that foundation, every step forward risks tripping over distrust.

Climate change is turning up the heat—literally and figuratively. Floods, droughts, and unpredictable monsoons are hitting harder and more often, shrinking Pakistan's window to secure its water for fairness, jobs, and food. This isn't a puzzle for desk-bound officials to solve alone. Top politicians, from Islamabad to the provinces, need to roll up their sleeves, bridge divides, and hammer out a deal that puts interprovincial grudges aside.

Until that happens, hitting pause on any water project that smells like it's stepping on another province's toes is the least leaders can do to keep tensions from boiling over. Pakistan's water clock is ticking—cooperation, not controversy, is the only way to turn it back.

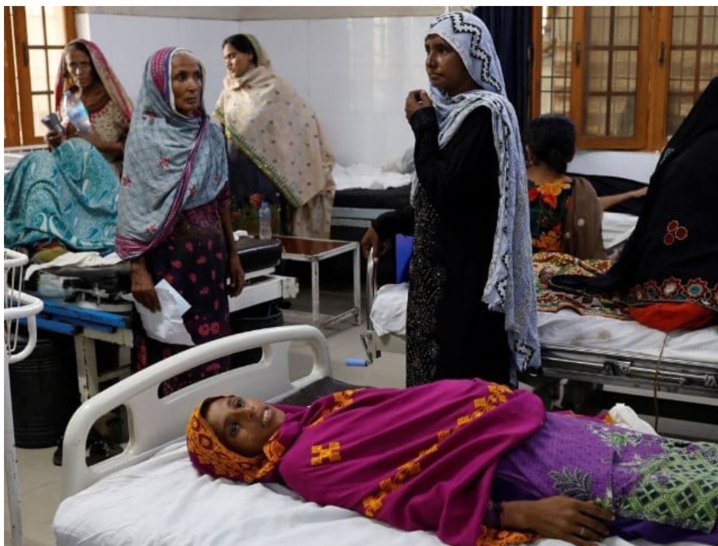
Pakistan's water crisis isn't a distant threat—it's here, reshaping lives with every drought, flood, and vanishing stream. Leaders can't afford to keep kicking the can down the road or fueling provincial mistrust with hasty projects. A comprehensive, inclusive policy that secures water rights and prioritizes cooperation is the only path to equity, food security, and stability. For now, hitting pause on divisive schemes is critical to clear the way for solutions that don't pit one region against another. Time's running out—only by working together can Pakistan turn the tide.

Uneven progress and challenges in maternal health

Dr. Fatima Khan

A recent UN report lays bare the stark realities of maternal mortality, spotlighting Pakistan, Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as bearing nearly half of the world's 260,000 maternal deaths in 2023. While global declines in maternal mortality offer some hope, uneven progress across regions and the heavy toll of poverty, conflict, and underage marriages reveal deep-rooted challenges. With aid cuts threatening hard-won gains, the fight to save mothers and newborns demands urgent action and a broader vision for women's health and empowerment.

In 2023, Pakistan joined Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as one of the four countries responsible for nearly half of the world's 260,000 maternal deaths, according to a sobering UN report. The findings, shared in time for World Health Day, have sparked urgent concerns about the devastating effects of reduced aid funding from nations like the US and UK. The report, a collaboration between UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and UNFPA, defines maternal deaths as those caused by complications during pregnancy or childbirth. It paints a stark picture: Nigeria alone bore the brunt with 75,000 deaths, making up 28.7% of the global total. India and the DRC each saw 19,000 deaths (7.2% each), while Pakistan recorded 11,000 (4.1%). Together, these nations accounted for 47% of all maternal deaths worldwide last year.



Despite a 40% drop in maternal mortality since 2000—thanks to better access to healthcare—the report warns that recent aid cuts threaten to unravel this progress. With funding shortages forcing cuts to critical maternal and child health services, the UN agencies are calling for immediate action, particularly in crisis-hit regions where death rates are already alarmingly high.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasized that while solutions exist to prevent most maternal deaths, pregnancy remains perilous in many parts of the world. Beyond quality maternity care, he stressed the need to bolster women's health and reproductive rights to ensure safer pregnancies and healthier futures. The report also sheds light on the ripple effects of COVID-19, noting a spike in maternal deaths—40,000 in 2021, climbing to 282,000 in 2022, and reaching 322,000 in 2023. These losses stemmed not just from the virus itself but from widespread disruptions to maternity care, underscoring the need to safeguard these services during emergencies.

"A mother's death during pregnancy or childbirth often puts her baby's life in jeopardy, too," said UNICEF's Catherine Russell. "Far too many families lose both, even though we know how to prevent these tragedies." She urged global leaders to prioritize funding for midwives, nurses, and community health workers, especially in vulnerable regions, to give every mother and newborn a fighting chance at survival.

The UN report reveals stark disparities in maternal mortality across regions and nations, with progress uneven at best. Between 2000 and 2023, global maternal deaths dropped by about 40%, with sub-Saharan Africa making notable strides. Alongside Australia/New Zealand and Central/Southern Asia, it was one of only three UN regions to see meaningful declines after 2015. Yet, sub-Saharan Africa still carried 70% of the world's maternal deaths in 2023, weighed down by poverty and ongoing conflicts.

Meanwhile, progress stalled in five regions post-2015: Northern Africa/Western Asia, Eastern/South-Eastern Asia, Oceania (minus Australia/New Zealand), Europe/North America, and Latin America/Caribbean. Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA's Executive Director, called access to quality maternal care a fundamental right, not a luxury. She urged stronger health systems—better supply chains, more midwives, and detailed data to identify those most at risk—to end the heartbreak of preventable maternal deaths and their ripple effects on families.

The report also spotlights the dire risks faced by pregnant women in humanitarian crises, where nearly two-thirds of global maternal deaths now occur amid fragility or conflict. Beyond ensuring care during pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum, it stresses improving women's overall health through family planning and tackling conditions like anemia, malaria, and chronic diseases. Keeping girls in school and equipping them with health knowledge is equally vital.

A key driver of high maternal and infant mortality is the persistent issue of underage marriage. In Sindh, the Child Marriages Restraint Act of 2013 aimed to curb this, but enforcement remains spotty. Young brides face heightened pregnancy complications, often repeatedly, and are less likely to be educated or informed about their health and childbearing choices. This is compounded by scarce quality healthcare, especially in rural areas, and limited access to family planning, leaving women vulnerable to frequent, risky pregnancies. Universal healthcare remains a low priority for many governments.

As a WHO official noted, investing in maternal and newborn health isn't a cost—it's a boost to human potential. The path forward goes beyond better medical care. It means prioritizing girls' education, ensuring they finish school, and empowering them with knowledge to make informed choices. Educated girls grow into women who can navigate health services, plan families, and contribute to stronger societies.

The path to ending preventable maternal deaths hinges on more than just healthcare—it requires a commitment to equity and empowerment. Strengthening health systems, expanding family planning, and confronting crises like underage marriage are critical steps. Above all, keeping girls in school and equipping them with knowledge can transform lives, enabling healthier choices and stronger communities. As the UN report underscores, investing in mothers and newborns isn't just a moral imperative; it's a foundation for a thriving future.

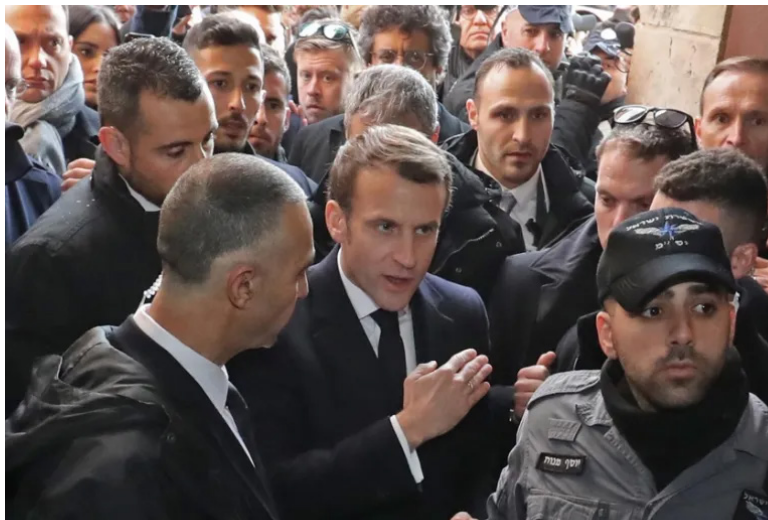
France can and must do more than recognising Palestinian statehood

Xavier Abu Eid

French President Emmanuel Macron has announced that France is preparing to recognise Palestinian statehood within a few months. If it proceeds, Paris would become the 12th European Union member to officially accept the existence of the Palestinian state. Last year, Slovenia, Ireland and Spain did so, bringing the total number of EU states recognising Palestine to 11 out of 27.

The French recognition would be a significant step in the right direction, especially if it affirms Palestine's 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as its capital, respecting international law provisions and the international consensus. This could move other European countries to do the same, including Luxembourg and Portugal and could put significant pressure on others, notably the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Belgium.

However, France is at risk of turning its recognition of Palestine into another empty gesture to save face amid growing opposition among Europeans to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the genocide in Gaza. Under Macron, France has been far from meeting its legal and political obligations towards Palestine, turning a blind eye to Israel's horrific crimes and violations. In this context, the French announcement can be seen as a diplomatic move that is too little, too late.



Until recently, Western powers largely conditioned the recognition of Palestine on the outcome of peace negotiations, which in reality meant giving Israel a veto right over Palestinian statehood. This is because Israel does not want negotiations to produce a solution – whether a two-state one along the 1967 borders or a one-state one in which Palestinians and Israelis have equal rights.

Israeli law opposes recognition of Palestine and the fulfilment of the Palestinian right to self-determination, but Western powers have continued to act as if this was not the case. Israel was given this leverage over Palestine despite the fact that its own statehood was based on United Nations Resolution 181, which called for the creation of two states, and its membership in the UN was conditioned on the implementation of Resolutions 181 and 194 – the latter pertaining to the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Successive Israeli governments have systematically violated both resolutions as well as many others without facing any consequences from their Western allies.

Now that the Israeli government has finally made clear that its plan is ethnic cleansing and annexation of all of Palestine, some Western countries seem to be reconsidering their stance and are opting to recognise Palestinian statehood. While recognition is important, it cannot be the only step a country such as France should take to implement the Palestinian right to self-determination. France is a former colonial power in the Middle East, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a leading member of the EU, one of Israel's most important trading partners and an important donor for Palestine.

As such, it has the moral and legal obligation to do more than that. Recognition on its own is not going to stop the ongoing ethnic cleansing and annexation. These processes continue unabated because countries like France fail to act and hold Israel accountable. For example, France was one of the first European countries to grant de facto immunity to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant against him in November. Paris has opened its airspace on several occasions for Netanyahu to fly over on his way to the United States in violation of its obligations under the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC.

Despite growing calls for an arms embargo on Israel, France has continued to sell weapons to the Israeli army during the ongoing genocide. French citizens face no repercussions for engaging in settler-colonialism in the occupied West Bank or serving in the Israeli occupation forces, which have been repeatedly accused of committing horrific war crimes. Likewise, France continues to tolerate the fundraising for illegal Israeli settlements while several French companies have contributed to the ongoing annexation process of occupied Palestinian territory.

France has been granted a special role in Jerusalem with regards to protecting the status quo benefits of Christian denominations. However, it has hardly taken any concrete measures to stop ongoing Israeli attempts to impose illegal taxes on churches and take over church property. If France is truly interested in being a broker of peace in the Middle East, it needs to do more than just recognising Palestinian statehood. It must act in accordance with its obligations under the UN Charter and the Rome Statute. It must put real pressure on Israel to end its occupation and colonisation of Palestinian land and take action against French citizens and companies involved in them. It must reverse its decision to grant immunity to Israeli officials wanted by the ICC.

At the EU level, France must join Spain and Ireland in demanding a review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement in light of Israel's flagrant violation of Article 2, which stipulates that relations should be based on respect for human rights. It goes without saying that the Israeli government opposes any recognition of Palestine and will make use of its available tools to prevent it. It could apply pressure by mobilising domestic opposition, coordinating with close Israeli allies, such as the United States, and taking action against diplomats based in Jerusalem – among other tactics.

This will force France to face its moment of truth: Is it willing to stand up for its principles, or will it succumb to Israeli blackmail? Will it lead the way in Europe on respecting international obligations, or will it let its recognition of Palestine remain an empty gesture? At a time when US President Donald Trump's administration endorses ethnic cleansing as an official policy and the EU is at its lowest political point with regards to Palestine, France has the opportunity to make a difference. It can join other EU members, like Spain and Ireland, which along with the Global South are pushing for a rules-based international order where Palestine is no longer the exception to the norm. It can live up to its own motto of "liberté, égalité, fraternité" by supporting the Palestinian people's pursuit of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Sorry, America, tariffs won't bring jobs back

Kamal Munir

At a White House dinner back in 2011, Steve Jobs was asked by President Obama what it would take to build iPhones in the United States. Jobs knew where this was going. "Those jobs aren't coming back," he replied.

Supply chains and ecosystems that sustain manufacturing of hi-tech products like the iPhone take years to get going. The skills, capabilities and relationships that are involved take even longer to develop. Factories cannot simply be picked up from one place and transplanted into another.

President Trump decided to try, anyway. On "Liberation Day", he announced sweeping tariffs, which were not reciprocal but based on the idea of balancing trade deficits. This has thrown the economy into turmoil and sent markets plunging – under pressure mainly from Wall Street, he delayed the higher tariffs for 90 days but ratcheted them up for China. Markets recovered somewhat but the uncertainty remains and might even have done some permanent damage already by being baked into the cost of capital.

Much analysis since the announcement about tariffs has focused on the formula used to calculate them, and the flawed understanding of economics that the new policy is based on. The formula for tariffs certainly does not measure what the president thinks it measures. Nor does it make sense for America to make everything itself. There are things that we buy in our individual lives without expecting the seller to buy something from us. And if a country tries to build everything, it cannot specialise. This means a decline in productivity and the country becoming less competitive in many areas that it would like to dominate.

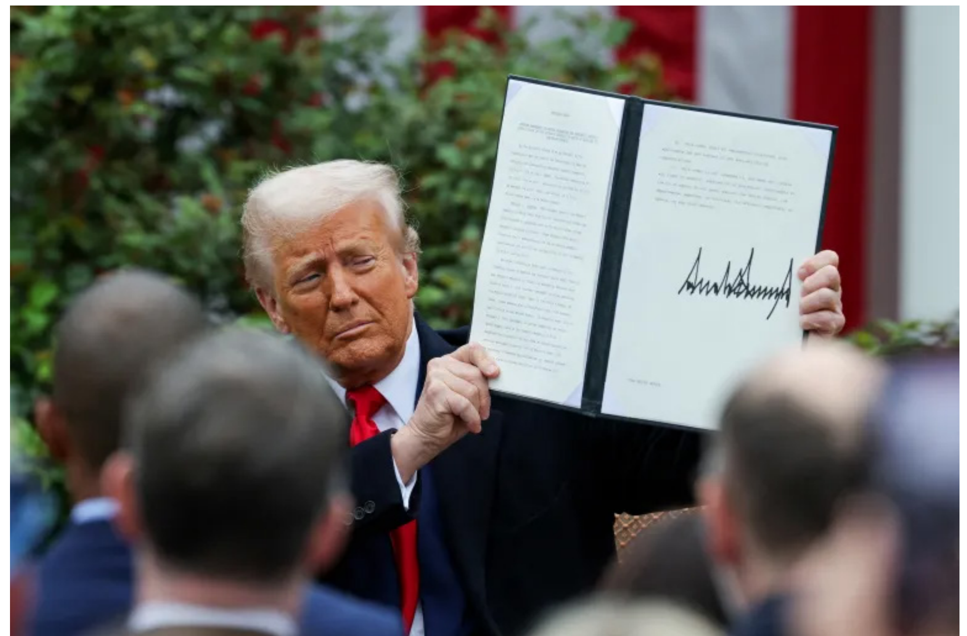
Ceteris Paribus, imposing blanket tariffs will do more harm than good, but it is worth understanding the reason behind it. It is not that America is being "ripped off" by other countries. America's competitiveness problem is rooted in the globalisation of production. More specifically, in the case of America, it is the "China syndrome" or the China Shock, terms coined by David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson in their 2013 paper. As a result of a flood of imports from China, an estimated two to three million US manufacturing jobs were lost between 1999 and 2011. Many more have been lost since then. Some areas, especially where industries competed head-on with China – in the Midwest and South – were hit hard.

These job losses were not offset by new jobs in the same regions, with the affected communities experiencing lower wages, higher unemployment and increases in opioid addiction, social instability, and political polarisation. Even workers outside manufacturing saw wage stagnation, especially those without college degrees, as the labour market became more competitive and bargaining power weakened. Promises that displaced workers could "learn to code" or move to tech jobs often failed. Many workers couldn't easily retrain or relocate, especially older ones or those in distressed communities.

With globalisation, Wall Street has benefitted, but not Main Street. It is not just low-value-added products, however. America's trade balance in advanced technology products is also negative. In 2024, it incurred a deficit of nearly $300 bn in that category. America has been borrowing to finance deficits and to continue consuming. This strategy is fundamentally unsustainable and something has to change.

Is imposition of tariffs on the whole world the answer to America's competitiveness problems? It depends upon what America is trying to achieve through that. Is it leverage? Unfettered access to foreign markets? Or bringing all the jobs that it has outsourced over the years back? On leverage, America might be able to cut some deals, but at the expense of American people's purchasing power. It might also be able to get countries to lower some barriers to American exports, but I doubt that will save GM or Ford. And as for bringing jobs back, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick is now saying factories that return to the United States will be run mostly by robots!

Strongarming countries and companies into investing in America will only go so far. Transferring ecosystems around particular products takes many years. If America's objective is to get its dominance in innovation, development and manufacturing back, slashing research funding across the board does not make sense, either. Going after university research eliminates the "commons" that all American corporations benefit from. It's an own goal.



If the idea is to reverse the outsourcing corporations rely upon to generate wealth for investors, that's like putting toothpaste back into the tube. How long is Trump willing to persist? Pressure is already mounting from powerful actors and fault lines are appearing within the Republican Party. China's tit-for-tat stance is not helping. Tariffs are not likely to work for Trump, and persisting with this strategy and raising inflation will not do him any favours in the midterms, but the problem of Wall Street v Main Street will only get worse, and someone, whether Trump or his successors, will need to address it.

Unhealthy chicken

On my way to the office recently, I watched a rather dreadful scene: a van loaded with hundreds of chickens in an utterly pitiful condition. The van was probably on its way to supply the chickens to different shops. They were all stuffed inside a small space ruthlessly. We sometimes do not realise what kind of chicken we consume. This unhealthy chicken is causing a lot of diseases. Strict and urgent action should be taken against all the poultry farms to ensure improvement in the diet of chickens, and in the manner of their transportation from the farms to the markets.

Fizzah Kafeel
Lahore

Traffic chaos in Balochistan

The frequent roadblocks in Balochistan by protesters of different dimensions increase the problems of the already stressed and resource-deprived people of the province. These roadblocks disrupt the daily life of people, making it difficult for them to travel for work, education or health check-ups. Patients, especially in rural areas, struggle to reach hospitals in time, which results in the loss of precious lives. Local communities are affected indiscriminately as they face multiple challenges in transporting goods and services. The government must devise a plan immediately to tackle the issue.

Safoora Aziz
Khuzdar

Private school teachers plight

The exploitation of teachers in private schools is a multifaceted issue. Many teachers, hailing from lower and lower-middle-class backgrounds, live in fear of losing their jobs. This prevents them from speaking out against the system. However, it is crucial for teachers to recognise their rights, and to collectively work towards achieving them. They should take a stand, not just for their own benefit, but for the benefit of those who will come after them. By fighting for their rights, teachers can create a better future for themselves and for the generations to come.

Mariah Gull
Jhang

Security challenges in Pakistan

The formulation of policies towards Taliban-controlled Afghanistan presents a significant challenge for Pakistan. The scenario emerging in Afghanistan after the American withdrawal is a more substantial security concern for Islamabad than was the case earlier, contrary to the misconception that the return of the Taliban represented a strategic success for Pakistan. The biggest concern is the resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP has regained its operational capabilities, with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan playing a crucial role in bolstering and empowering the group. The TTP claimed responsibility for as many as 42 attacks in Pakistan last month; 39 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and three in Balochistan. However, independent reports indicate that the TTP was involved in about 10 terrorist attacks in March.

The security forces in Pakistan have been actively diminishing the operational capabilities of these groups through sustained counterterrorism campaigns. In March, there was an increase in anti-militant operations, with 12 operations launched compared to six in the preceding month. Additionally, at the diplomatic level, Pakistan is said to be exerting whatever pressure it can on the Afghan Taliban to prevent the TTP and other terrorist organisations from establishing safe havens. Following the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, the Afghan security establishment that was trained by the United States and its allies rapidly disintegrated. This left many individuals with limited livelihood options, leading them to consider armed activities as a viable alternative. The choice of joining militant groups is believed to be driven more by economic necessities than ideological motivations.

It is imperative for state institutions to refrain from mixing security matters with political ones, and to resolve political conflicts politically. Security challenges have their own distinct dynamics that necessitate careful attention and consideration from both civilian and military leaders. By prioritising the security of the nation and maintaining a focussed approach, effective solutions can be worked out.

Prior to examining the mechanisms of insurgency in the tribal areas, it is essential to understand the various local and foreign militant groups operating there. The majority of these groups stand considerably weakened owing to military operations, US-operated drone strikes and internal divisions, forcing many of them to relocate to Afghanistan. However, there are still many that continue to pose a significant threat to Pakistan, and they possess the capability to instigate low-intensity insurgencies. The state has to have effective political and military strategies in place to counter this threat.

Tufail Dawar
North Waziristan

Indefensible KE

While K-Electric (KE) has made it a point to religiously defend its callous approach towards consumers, the fact remains that the main focus of the utility service remains on punishing the honest customers. The KE management is simply wasting money on public relations exercises because nobody can defend its indefensible performance. It is not uncommon to hear of the continuous electricity load-shedding on normal days. However, whatever hope and trust I had in the system were lost when I had to wake up at 7am on Eid morning when the ceiling fan went dead because of load-shedding. Despite numerous promises and rather tall claims made by the KE management that it would let the people spend a peaceful Eid, it is unfortunate that those promises remained unfulfilled. Even on a day like Eid, when families come and sit together to celebrate, loadshedding makes it utterly difficult for people to spend the day in relative peace. During festivals like Eid, it is only natural that power consumption see a spike due to extra cooking, lighting and social gatherings. However, this should not be an excuse to justify the menace of loadshedding, especially when there are ways to better manage the available resources and to provide regular power during such important days. I wonder if KE would ever be able to provide what it is supposed to — uninterrupted power supply. By the looks of it, the KE will keep making tall claims of 'good service', keep charging hefty amounts from the consumers, and keep punishing the people for being dependent on it for their energy needs.

Syeda Arfa Ali
Karachi

Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act

The Lucknow Cooperative Housing Society in Karachi's Korangi area has been under government control since March 2023, and the Sindh Cooperative Department has so far appointed 10 administrators. Since the society's bank accounts have been frozen, therefore all the administrators have been collecting dues in cash from the members. They are also allegedly involved in illegal activities.

An application was filed with the Sindh Cooperative Department on Sept 19, 2024, under the Right to Information clauses, requesting the financial and administrative details of all the 10 administrators. This was never done, and the Sindh Information Commission was subsequently approached. The first hearing was held on Jan 20 this year, but due to the non-appearance of the respondents, the hearing had to be rescheduled. Since then, the department's designated official has appeared in the hearings, but he is naturally unable to say anything that may affect his seniors. All that the department has produced during the hearings is a four-page report that does not address the issue in question. It seems that the lawmakers have left a loophole in the legislation. Section 15 of the Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2016 needs to be amended. The responsibility being shouldered by the Designated Official must be shifted to the department head.

Waqar Ahmed Siddiqui
Karachi

Mercury is weird because of a 'hit-and-run' incident in its youth

Sharmila Kuthunur

Mercury's mysterious makeup may be the result of a grazing "hit and run" collision between two similar-sized protoplanets in the early solar system, a new study suggests.

Mercury, the smallest and innermost planet in our solar system, has a number of unusual characteristics that have long puzzled scientists. Despite being only slightly larger than Earth's moon, Mercury is extraordinarily dense. It boasts a disproportionately large, iron-rich core that makes up about 60% of its mass — twice that of other rocky planets such as Earth, Venus or Mars — challenging commonly accepted theories of planetary formation.

Adding to the mystery, data from NASA's MESSENGER probe, which orbited Mercury between 2011 and 2015, revealed that the planet's surface is surprisingly rich in volatile elements, including potassium, sulfur and sodium. These elements should have been stripped away had the planet endured a rare, single, massive impact in its youth, as researchers previously theorized. One possible explanation is that young Mercury violently collided with a much larger protoplanet. However, simulations tracing terrestrial planet formation indicate that collisions among protoplanets of very different sizes and masses are rare, prompting scientists to seek alternate explanations of how Mercury could have lost so much outer material while preserving these volatiles.

New 'heart patch' could help solve the transplant shortage

David Brzostowicki

In the U.S. at any given time, thousands of adults and hundreds of children are on waiting lists for a lifesaving heart transplant, facing waits of six months or longer. Some will die in the interim, including one out of every eight children on the list. Worldwide, about 20 people die per day while waiting for any organ. A promising advance from scientists in Germany offers a potential solution – a "heart patch" made from stem cells that could provide a bridge to transplantation, or maybe even a permanent fix. These patches of heart muscle – made from adult human stem cells – can be sutured onto a patient's heart in a minimally invasive surgery to help it pump, the journal Nature reported. Each patch contains lab-grown cardiac tissue made of up to 200 million cells embedded in a collagen hydrogel. The patch, called engineered heart muscle, or EHM, was proven to work in rhesus macaques. The first human to get a patch was a 46-year-old woman in 2021, helping her survive until she could get a heart transplant.

The patches were then used on 15 other patients with severe heart failure, with more data on those cases expected by the end of the year. The innovation represents a step forward in the larger quest to solve the heart transplant crisis. About 50,000 people worldwide have end-stage heart failure, but only 5,000 heart transplants are performed annually because of the shortfall of donor hearts. At the same time, more than 6 million Americans live with heart failure, and that number is only expected to grow as the population ages.

Why you suddenly have horrendous allergies this spring

Erin France

Are you being hit this spring with coughing, sneezing, and itchy, watery eyes?

If so-called hay fever is new to you, don't be surprised – doctors say we can develop allergies as adults. And if you've always had allergies but feel they're worse now, join the crowd – warmer weather means more pollen in the air, scientists say.

Welcome to the golden age of seasonal allergies. About one in four adults have them, whether they were sneezy kids or not. "It is possible to develop any allergy at any age," said Margaret Huntwork, MD, an immunologist and allergist at the School of Medicine at Tulane University in New Orleans. The Big Easy has become the Big Sneezy, jumping to second place in a list of Allergy Capitals released in March by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. Many Southern and Eastern cities carry a greater burden of seasonal allergies, though Wichita, Kansas, has topped the list the last three years. The group ranks cities based on pollen counts, use of over-the-counter allergy medication, and the number of allergy specialists. New Orleans, which previously held the 34th spot, saw exploding weed pollen counts in 2024, probably because of Hurricane Francine's mid-September rains combined with the warmest November on record. "As temperatures rise and humidity patterns change, we are seeing changes in pollen patterns," Huntwork said. Add those beautiful Southern live oaks and – achoo! "We certainly take pride in our beautiful oak-lined streets here, but it can be our downfall in allergy season," she said.

But throughout the country, allergy issues can strike. A warming climate means plants produce more pollen, the main trigger of "allergic rhinitis," med-speak for the usual symptoms.

Why is this giant desert turning green?

Olivia Ferrari

India's Thar Desert has become 38% greener over the past 20 years, driven by a combination of climate change and agricultural expansion, according to a new study.

The past two decades have seen more people living in this desert and changing the landscape, making it more agricultural and urban, which is part of the reason why the desert has become greener, researchers said. The other piece of the puzzle is climate change, which has caused increasing monsoon precipitation in the region.

The Thar Desert, also called the Great Indian Desert, spans 77,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers) in northwestern India and southeastern Pakistan. Although many deserts throughout the world are facing worsening droughts, the Thar Desert has become a hub of urban and agricultural growth, making it the most populated desert in the world with more than 16 million residents.

"Increased water and energy availability have led to expansion in agricultural and urban areas with a considerable increase in crop yields in the region," study co-author Vimal Mishra, a civil engineer at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, told Live Science in an email. "There is no other desert in the world that has experienced increases in urbanization, agriculture, and precipitation during the recent period." The new study, published in the journal Cell Reports Sustainability, analyzed satellite data from 2001 to 2023. Mishra and his team found that the desert became, on average, 38% greener during this time, with more vegetation visible in satellite images. To understand why exactly greening is happening, the researchers also looked at historical records of population expansion in the Thar Desert, irrigation infrastructure, and climate models.

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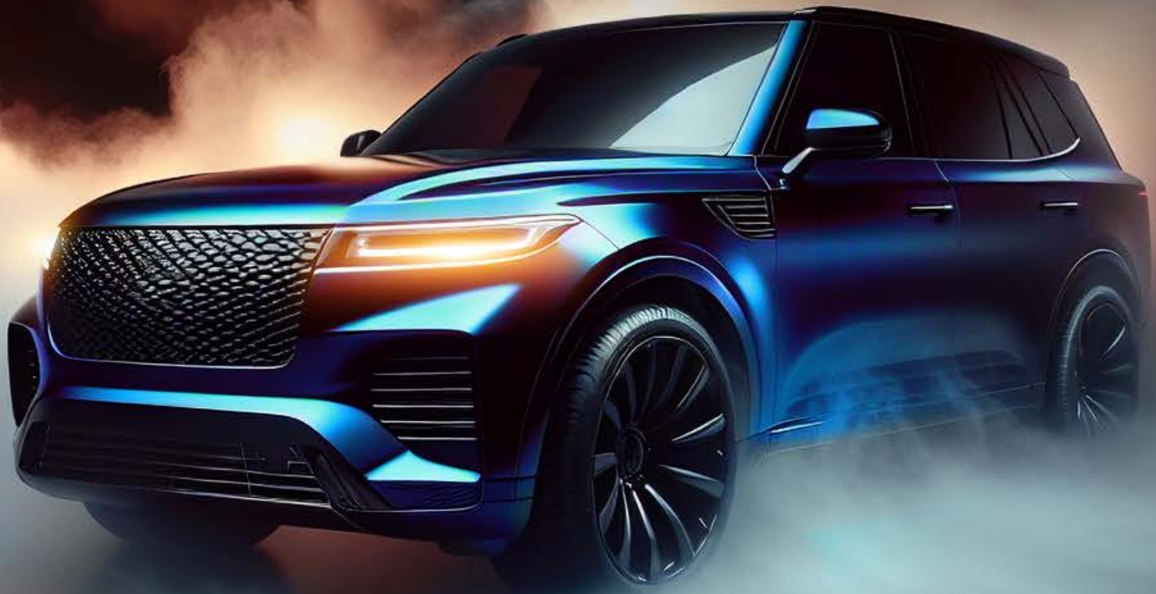

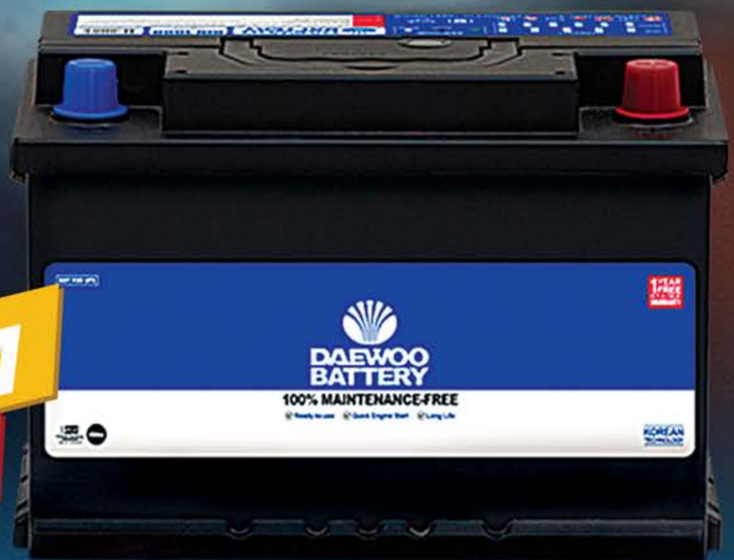

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