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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

A photograph of three men sitting on a sidewalk in front of a row of closed shops with corrugated metal shutters. The man on the left is wearing a light-colored shirt and shorts, looking down. The man in the middle is wearing a white cap and a white shirt, looking towards the camera. The man on the right is wearing a white shirt and shorts, looking towards the camera. The background shows a street with more closed shops and a utility pole.

Businessmen's strike against excessive taxation

LUXURY THAT GLIDES



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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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Businessmen's strike against excessive taxation

Farhan Khan

The country's major chambers of commerce and industry observed a nation-wide strike on July 19, in protest against the harsh taxation measures introduced in the Finance Act 2025.

According to business circles, a number of controversial provisions have been introduced in the Finance Act, including a Rs200,000 threshold on cash transactions, the wide-ranging powers of arrest granted to FBR officials on allegations of tax fraud, and the mandatory implementation of digital invoicing and e-billing.

This is in addition to the recent increases in GST and withholding tax rates which have put new burdens on the trade and industry. The general complaint is that the rise in withholding tax rates year after year has eroded the profitability of the industrial sector,

hikes and retards economic growth. Those who decided to impose a 15 percent withholding tax on gross revenue are unaware of the fact that many businesses operate on a profit margin of 10 percent or less. The Finance Act also contains provisions mandating digital invoicing and restricting cash transactions but these are difficult to enforce in an environment in which educational level is not high and cash payment is the norm. If the government wants to move towards a digital economy, it must allow for a transitional period and launch a concurrent awareness raising campaign.

Taxation is a sensitive matter and it has to be handled with care and caution. Draconian tax measures can boomerang and will lead to the growth of the informal economy. The latest strike once again brings into sharp focus the lack of equity and justice in our taxation policy. This policy has an extremely narrow base, put-

to raise FBR collections through raising existing taxes or bringing more items under the sales tax net is to ensure that the budget deficit is sustainable. But a better option would be to reduce administrative expenditure which has become bloated during the last few years. For instance, the budget for the current year envisages a 10 percent raise in civil administration expenditure.

Needless to say, without structural reforms and revamping the existing tax structure, revenue cannot be increased proportionate to the paying capacity of various sectors of the economy. Despite years of repeated efforts aimed at expanding the tax base and boosting revenue collection, the country has not succeeded. In a recent report the Asian Development Bank highlighted the broader structural issues that have long plagued the economy: a narrow and inequitable tax base, a burdensome, com-



undermining investor confidence, leading to a sustained reduction in industry's contribution to GDP. What has caused special concern is that in the Finance Act there has been a sharp increase in withholding tax rates for service providers which has undermined the viability of countless businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector. The standard withholding tax rate has now been raised to 15 percent of turnover which means that businesses have to surrender 15 percent of their total revenue to the government, regardless of profitability. This is too much as the earlier rates were nine percent for companies and 11 percent for individuals or associations of persons. It is clear that very few businesses can afford a 15 percent tax on gross revenue, irrespective of the profit margin.

It is true that the economy cannot function without taxes but it is equally true that excessive taxation causes inflation and price

ing excessive burden on certain sectors while sparing some holy cows. Its biggest failing is its reliance on indirect taxes which is hard on the poor classes.

Successive governments have continued to focus on raising revenue rather than on undertaking long overdue reforms that would render the structure fair, equitable and non-anomalous. Direct taxes account for nearly 49 percent of total collections; however, this does not take account of the fact that 75 to 80 percent of these collections are withholding taxes levied in the sales tax mode, which is an indirect tax — an exercise that the Auditor General of Pakistan noted and recommended to the FBR. In this context, it is relevant to note that increasing reliance on petroleum levy is budgeted to generate 1.468 trillion rupees this year, which is an indirect tax and impacts the transport costs of the poor and vulnerable classes. The authorities assert that the attempt

plicated compliance regime and a vast informal economy that remains outside the tax ambit.

As a result, revenue collection has seen little growth in real terms over the past decade. The tax-to-GDP ratio continues to lag well behind other regional economies, falling short of the 10.6 percent target for FY2024-25. While formal registrations have increased on paper since 2014, they have not been matched by a commensurate rise in actual revenue, as many filers declare negligible or no taxable income. Besides weakening compliance among existing taxpayers, the structural inefficiencies are driving more and more businesses to move to the informal sector. A key reason for the reluctance of many enterprises to formalise is the prohibitively high cost of compliance to the tax regime. In recent years, not only have tax rates risen steeply, but the procedural complications have also deterred businesses from joining the formal economy.

Rain disaster: a call to action

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan is once again in the grip of a highly destructive annual weather cycle. Unusually heavy monsoon rains have caused widespread death and destruction across the country, with over 200 dead and hundreds more injured across the country. Torrential downpour has caused landslides, structural collapses, electrocutions and dislocated large swathes of population in Punjab, KP, Sindh and Balochistan.

Since late June, extreme weather has battered vast swathes of the country. According to data released by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), children account for half of the fatalities. Punjab has reported the heaviest toll with 123 deaths, followed by 40 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 21 in Sindh and 16 in Balochistan. Of the total deaths, 118 resulted from collapsing buildings, 30 from flash floods, and the rest from drowning, electrocution, lightning strikes, and landslides. The human toll has been compounded by a massive disruption of the infrastructure, power supply and transport networks.

Rawalpindi was submerged by flash floods that surged through streets and residential areas. Faisalabad recorded 11 deaths and 60 injuries over two days, mostly linked to structural collapses. In Chakwal, more than 32 roads were reportedly washed away after rainfall exceeded 450mm, crippling transport and emergency response systems. The overflowing River Soan breached a dam, flooding entire villages in the district and parts of Jhelum and the surrounding areas. Communication lines and electricity remain disrupted across several affected regions, exacerbating the impact on already distressed communities. Emergency teams are struggling to reach remote villages that have been cut off due to washed-away roads and landslides.

According to the disaster management authorities, the intensity of the monsoons this year is 60pc to 70pc higher than as compared to last year. The authorities are now warning of at least four more heavy monsoon spells before the end of August. Pakistan is faced with the rising risk of glacier lake outburst floods in the mountainous regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where melting ice masses threaten sudden surges downstream.

A UN News report has described the recent deluge as yet another reminder of

Pakistan's susceptibility to climate-induced disasters. "Pakistan regularly experiences monsoon-related flooding from June to September, leading to fatalities, infrastructure losses, and displacement, particularly in areas with poor drainage and high population density," the report said. According to the UN report the unfolding crisis – rising rivers, forecasts of further downpours, fragile rural homes collapsing and transport links severed – has revived stark memories of the catastrophic 2022 floods that submerged a third of the country and affected more than 33 million people.

Experts have warned that Pakistan is likely to experience more frequent and severe floods due to extreme rainfall events and human-induced development encroaching on floodplains in the coming days. Flooding risks

floods could have been controlled and minimised had the administration taken preemptive measures on time. Despite early warnings of heavy rains from the disaster management agencies, the provincial and district authorities failed to prepare themselves adequately and make arrangements to mitigate the severity of the crisis when it occurred. Faulty urban planning and poor governance only exacerbated the situation.

Learning from the current crisis we should develop new short and long term plans to deal with urban flooding and improve disaster management and emergency response systems. To this end more resources will have to be allocated to meet the requirements for climate adaptation and resilience to tackle extreme weather events. Without further delay the



in Pakistan could increase dramatically under a high-emission scenario, with intense rainfall events. In the given circumstances, Pakistan has to focus more on climate change adaptation techniques to mitigate these risks, such as restoring natural floodplains, improving drainage, and shifting development away from riverbanks. Local emission reduction measures combined with smarter land planning can reduce damage and save more lives. To reduce the rainfall-induced direct flooding in targeted areas, there is an urgent need to fix and upgrade drainage systems in both cities and rural areas to mitigate its impact.

But ascribing the rain damage to climate change alone is only part of the story. There is little doubt that the damage from the recent

authorities concerned with the help of experts should develop a comprehensive climate adaptation strategy embracing a clutch of measures to overcome both structural vulnerabilities and institutional inefficiencies that result in unnecessary loss of life and property

In this context, the Punjab Disaster Management Authority and the National Disaster Management Authority need to work more closely with local authorities in the disaster-prone areas to deal with any rain emergency in real time. We could learn a lot from Bangladesh which has institutionalised anticipatory remedial action in cyclone and flood-prone districts, linking it to provincial and national disaster management agencies, health supply chains and forecast-based triggers.

Pakistan's youth boom vs. job bust

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan stands at a perplexing crossroads — teeming with a teeming youth populace brimming with raw potential, yet tethered by a disquieting scarcity of viable employment. The unemployment rate has insidiously crept to 7.8%, and with a relentless wave of fresh aspirants entering the labor market each year, the economic scaffolding is visibly straining.

This isn't some hollow metric to be glossed over — it's an urgent klaxon blaring across policy corridors. A nation braced on the cusp of either youthful renaissance or generational despair, Pakistan is flirting with a perilous trajectory. According to official reckonings, the joblessness rate has bloated from a modest 1.5% just a decade prior to a jarring 7%, a trajectory that evokes both dismay and foreboding. A sputtering GDP, akin to a candle flickering in the wind, remains ill-equipped to fuel substantial employment growth — particularly in linchpin sectors like healthcare and education.

The UN's recent World Economic Situation and Prospects analysis forecasts a “tempered resurgence,” projecting GDP upticks to 3.4% in 2025 and potentially 4.2% by 2026. A gentle stir of economic breath after the stifling stagnation of 2022–2023. But in the greater South Asian theatre, where nations like India surge ahead on the back of formidable fiscal momentum, Pakistan's climb seems hesitant and uneven. The region as a whole is poised for a 5.7% GDP ascent in 2025, further amplifying to 6% by 2026 — a cadence set by India's economic heft and echoed modestly by recoveries in Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

But figures only tell half the tale. In the tapestry of South Asian economies, Pakistan's thread appears frayed — particularly in its floundering attempts to integrate women and youth into the formal workforce. With an annual population swell nearing five million, the specter of unmet basic needs looms ever larger. The Planning Commission posits that at least 1.5 million new jobs must materialize each year simply to hold the line. Their prescription? A strategic scalpel to excise youth unemployment by 6% and a bold ambition to shear women's joblessness by 17%, while dismantling the entrenched socio-economic ramparts that marginalize female participation.

But strip away the data and dive into the marrow of the matter — this is a lived crisis. Nearly two-thirds of Pakistan's denizens are under 30 — a demographic reservoir with the potential to electrify national progress. But

potential, when left untapped, corrodes into disillusionment. The raw 7.8% unemployment stat belies the bleaker truth: countless degree-holders are marooned in roles that belittle their capabilities, others scraping a living from unstable, underpaid informal gigs. For women, the prospects are bleaker still — with participation rates languishing in the doldrums, a far cry from regional benchmarks.

The narrative, then, is clear but chilling — a swelling tide of talent with no port in sight. Pakistan's youth aren't simply looking for jobs; they're craving relevance, dignity, and the chance to carve their imprint on a nation still figuring out its direction. Without structural metamorphosis and deliberate, strategic resolve, what ought to be Pakistan's greatest strength may well become its most volatile burden.

What's holding things back? An economy that's been hobbling along, propped up by an IMF bailout lifeline. Growth is too slow, foreign

it's no replacement for real, stable jobs. Pakistan needs to kick its factories into gear, lure investors to high-value industries, and make it easier for small businesses and startups to thrive. Meanwhile, a brain drain's bleeding the country dry — talented pros are bolting overseas for better shots at a future, leaving the economy weaker still.

This isn't just about paychecks; it's about keeping the peace. A generation locked out of opportunity won't stay quiet forever. Ignore them, and you're rolling the dice on everything from street crime to unrest — or worse. The Planning Commission is screaming for reforms to spark jobs and tame inflation, and they're right — it's urgent.

The fix means flipping the script. Instead of just juggling the books for the IMF, Pakistan's leaders need to chase growth with gusto — courting private investment, sparking entrepreneurial fire, and revamping education



cash is scarce, and industries are choked by outdated systems and sky-high interest rates. The government has been waving the reform flag, but so far, it is more talk than action. Tight budgets might steady the ship for the IMF, but they've also squeezed businesses so hard they're scared to hire or grow.

Pakistan's youth should be its secret weapon — a vibrant crew ready to hustle and build. Other countries have cashed in on their young populations with smart investments in schools, tech, and factories. The education system is churning out grads with degrees that don't fit the job market, and there's barely any training to bridge the gap. Plus, without a solid manufacturing backbone, there just aren't enough slots for the flood of new workers.

The gig economy is picking up steam, but

and skills training. Structural tweaks alone won't cut it; they've got to pair them with bold moves to get the economy humming and people working.

Pakistan's at a fork in the road. It can harness its young energy to build a buzzing, thriving future — or let it slip into a mess of missed chances. The stakes are sky-high, and the clock is ticking.

Pakistan is staring down a make-or-break moment. Its young blood could be the fuel for a powerhouse economy, but only if the jobs show up. Right now, it is a slog — grads are underworked, women are overlooked, and talent is fleeing. The fix isn't just tinkering; it's a full-on push for growth, grit, and opportunity. Get it right, and the future is bright. Get it wrong, and the fallout could echo for decades.

Remittance-led surplus masks deep structural faults

Muhammad Zain

While Pakistan closed the fiscal year with a rare current account surplus, the broader economic picture remains far from encouraging. Despite the government's aggressive push for foreign investment and asset privatization, both domestic instability and regional tensions have kept investor sentiment tepid.

Record-high remittances may have offered temporary relief, but underneath the surface lies a fragile economy grappling with low exports, shrinking foreign direct investment, and a growing dependence on debt rollovers and import suppression.

After a slumbering hiatus of fourteen years, Pakistan's fiscal ledger for FY2024-25 has astonishingly closed in the green, as the current account emerged with a rare surplus — a breath of fiscal air that has given the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) ample maneuvering room to steer the external front with measured ease entering FY26. The SBP's freshly disclosed figures unveil a current account surplus of \$2.105 billion, a dramatic reversal from the previous fiscal cycle's \$2.072bn red ink. This positive deviation is the fruit borne of disciplined stewardship by both fiscal czars and the central bank, who stitched together prudent policies that reinforced macro-economic resilience, shielded the exchange rate from undue turbulence, and gave the foreign currency coffer a significant boost.

A standout protagonist in this fiscal turnaround has been the torrent of homebound remittances — a staggering \$38.3bn — marking a 27% leap over the preceding year. These vital inflows not only became a keystone of reserve fortification but also stabilized the financial pulse of the rupee. Economic savants note that FY26 has unfurled with an air of optimism: a sterling current account position, fortified reserves crossing the \$14bn watermark, a relatively anchored exchange rate, and the continuation of the IMF's patronage all point towards a cautiously hopeful trajectory.

Furthermore, the geopolitical cushion provided by allied nations added ballast to the external profile, with approximately \$16bn in loan rollovers orchestrated in FY25. This show of camaraderie has created space for potential augmentation of bilateral support in FY26. Tentative forecasts peg the external debt servicing burden for the ongoing fiscal within the \$23bn to \$26bn range — a sum hefty but not unmanageable.

Zooming into the month of June 2025, the current account chalked up a \$328 million surplus, a stark divergence from the \$84m deficit

etched in May. Except for the opening quarter (July-September FY25), which saw a shortfall of \$474m, the ledger stayed predominantly in the green. The second quarter yielded a robust \$1.492bn surplus, the third mellowed to \$820m, and the final quarter posted a more subdued \$262m — indicating a tapering arc across the fiscal rhythm. On the trade horizon, measured upticks were observed. Merchandise exports nudged up to \$32.295bn against \$30.980bn a year prior. Imports, while also swelling, clocked in at \$59.076bn — higher than last year's \$53.157bn. Service-sector flows too exhibited slight lift: exports and imports posted \$8.394bn and \$11.014bn, respectively.

Yet, despite these encouraging fiscal and trade-side signals, international credit raters remain unmoved — a crucial roadblock for foreign capital infusion and sovereign bond floatation. Senior mandarins from the Ministry of Finance have lately lobbied Moody's for a more generous assessment. Observers believe an upgrade may materialize should the economic pulse sustain its current rhythm into December 2025.

In terms of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), progress has been modest. The data divulged by SBP reveals a 4.7% uptick in FDI, amounting to \$2.457bn for FY25. The final month, June, saw \$206.6m in inflows — almost a mirror of the \$205m notched in June 2024 — underscoring the government's limited traction in turning investor sentiment decisively in its favor. In summation, while the macroeconomic climate shows notable signs of repair and recalibration, the path to long-term fiscal consolidation and global investor confidence remains an uphill expedition — requiring sustained prudence, structural persistence, and perhaps a bit more than polite persuasion.

Despite persistent overtures by the government to court foreign capital, neither domestic conditions nor the regional climate have proved fertile for investor confidence. Financial observers argue that India's belligerent stance and persistently antagonistic posture have cast a long shadow over Pakistan's investment profile, branding it a high-risk environment. Simultaneously, the country's internal political disarray continues to sow uncertainty, further cooling foreign appetite.

The recent conflagration between Iran and Israel has added fuel to this regional volatility, delivering collateral damage to Pakistan's external trade, with commerce with Tehran plummeting to historical lows. Analysts contend that these dual geopolitical crises have rendered the region commercially inhospitable. They also underscore that even homegrown

capital has shied away from the industrial realm, citing policy inconsistency and rising friction between business stakeholders and state decision-makers.

The government, undeterred, pins its hopes on the sale of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and other public assets to magnetize foreign inflows in the coming year. Yet early signals suggest that the national flag carrier may likely land in domestic hands, further dimming foreign interest. The overarching privatisation roadmap, once heralded as a magnet for global capital, has thus far failed to yield tangible FDI gains in FY25.

Meanwhile, the State Bank of Pakistan has flagged an additional concern: the rupee has depreciated to a 21-month low on the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) index, slumping by 1.22% to 96.61 in June 2025, down from 97.79 in May. While the external account has registered a surplus, foreign reserves have only managed to climb to \$14.5bn — enough to cover barely 10 to 12 weeks of restricted imports. This remains eclipsed by the \$16bn in rolled-over bilateral loans from China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which continue to act as a lifeline in staving off sovereign default.

Top government officials have rushed to celebrate the current account surplus, often heralded as a symbol of financial health — a signal that a nation exports more than it imports, while receiving robust income and transfer inflows. But this celebratory stance belies the hard truth: Pakistan still hemorrhages dollars through a gaping trade deficit of over \$29bn in goods and services, despite draconian import restrictions.

With merchandise exports frozen at a paltry \$32bn — a mere 8% of GDP — Pakistan languishes among the weakest global economies in terms of trade dynamism. Simultaneously, foreign private investment remains tepid, hovering around \$2.5bn or just 0.6-0.7% of GDP — among the most anaemic figures in the region. Even under the watchful eye of the IMF, financial inflows from multilateral and bilateral backers have shrunk to a trickle.

The financial account lays bare a bleaker picture: lacklustre investment traction, restricted credit channels, and a near halt in external borrowings. These patterns expose deeper systemic frailties. The government's inability to access global bond markets — blocked by abysmal credit ratings and investor scepticism over the substance of recent macroeconomic tweaks — further underscores the fragility of the fiscal framework.

The much-lauded current account sur-

plus, when dissected, reveals a single overpowering engine: a 27% leap in remittances, climbing to an unprecedented \$38bn. That — not a trade boom, not capital inflows — has driven the surplus. It's a tide lifted not by production but by the diaspora's remittances, a precarious scaffolding on which to rest national economic stability.

But this remittance windfall is a fleeting cushion, not a cure. It is a temporary sedative, not a structural fix. Building balance-of-payments resilience on this foundation is akin to balancing a house of cards in a gust of wind. It's no surprise that despite the surplus, the country

faces a mounting dollar crunch, rekindling underground currency trade as demand for the greenback outpaces supply.

The long arc of economic sustainability doesn't bend toward stopgap measures like debt rollovers or import throttling. It demands the hard graft of structural reform — elevating productivity, igniting exports, and cultivating a competitive edge. Without bridging these foundational voids, Pakistan's balance-of-payments future will remain susceptible to shocks. A surplus born of remittances and repression, rather than dynamism and reform, is no victory — it's a warning.

The appearance of macroeconomic stability — driven largely by remittances and emergency financing — belies the persistent structural vulnerabilities embedded in Pakistan's economy. Without deep reforms to boost productivity, enhance competitiveness, and revive exports, the country's balance-of-payments situation will remain perilously unstable. Celebrating a remittance-fueled surplus while trade deficits balloon and investment stagnates is short-sighted; real progress demands a shift from quick fixes to long-term, export-led growth anchored in policy clarity and institutional credibility.

Zohran Mamdani cannot be boxed in

Sabrina Mahtani

On July 3, The New York Times published a report scrutinising a 2009 college application submitted to Columbia University by Zohran Mamdani, the winner of the Democratic party primary for mayor of New York City. The document was leaked by a hacker and showed that in a question about race and ethnicity, the applicant identified as Asian and African American. The source of the information was later revealed to be the eugenicist Jordan Lasker.

Although the journalistic ethics of the article were widely questioned, it was immediately picked up by opponents in an attempt to discredit Mamdani. Did Mamdani really try to “exploit” an African American identity to get into college, as opponents have claimed?

It's worth noting that the two boxes he checked did not assist him to get into Columbia, where his father, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, is teaching African studies. Was he wrong to tick the “African American” box? There are several issues that should be brought up when considering the answer to this question.

First, Mamdani was born in Uganda to a Ugandan father of Asian origin and an Indian American mother. He lived in Africa for seven years before moving to the United States. He had only a Ugandan passport until he was naturalised as a US citizen in 2018.

On the Columbia University application form, like with many US universities, there is a section for voluntary self-identification of race and ethnicity. It asks if you are Hispanic or Latino (regardless of race) and then lists five other options to select one's “race”: “American Indian or Alaskan Native”, “Asian”, “Black or African American”, “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” or “white”. There is a further section for “additional optional information”.

These categories are arbitrary and reductionist and cannot capture the full complexity of identity that many people around the world

have, including Mamdani and myself. As a British Zambian of Asian origin whose family have lived in Zambia for three generations, I feel anxiety and frustration when having to select ethnicity checkboxes. I am regularly interrogated about my identity, which cannot be squeezed into one box on a form, or even two or three.

As Mamdani himself told The New York Times: “Most college applications don't have a box for Indian Ugandans, so I checked multiple boxes trying to capture the fullness of my background.” He also explained that he wrote “Ugandan” in the application, which allowed students to provide “more specific information where relevant”. The second issue we need to keep in mind is that the history of Asian Africans — and how we fit into African societies — is complex. Between the 1860s and 1890s, the British Empire brought thousands of indentured labourers from its colony in the subcontinent to its colonies in Southern and East Africa.

In the following decades, many other South Asians followed as merchants. And then, as the British partitioned the subcontinent along religious lines in the 1940s, thousands more fled the impending chaos to Africa. Once on the continent, the Asian population largely occupied a kind of middle position in which they were both victims and agents of colonial racism. In East Africa, many functioned as a subordinate ruling class, employed by the colonial police and administrators as part of a divide-and-rule strategy. In many countries, Asians enjoyed success in business during the colonial period and gained significant control of the economy.

This, alongside a lack of integration, contributed to widespread anti-Asian sentiment in East Africa, seen most prominently by the expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972. In apartheid South Africa, people of Indian descent, the majority of whom were descendants of indentured labourers forcibly transferred by the British, were also subjected to discrimination. Prominent members of the community, such as Ahmed Kathrada, who was jailed for life in 1964

along with Nelson Mandela, played a key role in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Today, younger generations are still grappling with these complex identities and histories, including Mamdani himself. In his twenties, he was part of a rap duo — Young Cardamon & HAB — with a Ugandan of Nubian descent. They rapped in six languages, including Luganda, Hindi and Nubi, and confronted social issues such as racism and inclusion.

As a mayoral candidate of one of the most diverse cities in the world, Mamdani has much to do to address persistent anti-Blackness among Asian communities. Many Asian Africans, and other Asian communities, have internalised the white supremacy of the colonial era and the belief that being closer to whiteness offers more opportunities and privilege. Mamdani's mother, Mira Nair, is the filmmaker behind *Mississippi Masala*, one of the first films to address this issue more than 30 years ago, with its rare depiction of an interracial relationship between a Black man and Asian African woman in the US. Her son credits this film for his existence: His mother met his father in Uganda at Makerere University while she was conducting research for the film.

The third issue that needs to be considered is that this hacked information seems aimed at discrediting Mamdani, who secured fewer votes in Black neighbourhoods during the mayoral Democratic primary election. Pitting communities of colour against each other is a classic divide-and-rule tactic and a cornerstone of colonialism used to fracture alliances and weaken resistance. Its remnants can still be seen today in my country, Zambia, in areas that were historically segregated on the basis of colour.

Opponents attempting to frame Mamdani as a mayor solely for South Asians — or worse, playing into and exacerbating Islamophobic sentiment — are weaponising identity to sow division and fear. Such attempts must be resisted, especially now, when the US and much of the world are facing growing authoritarianism, xenophobia and inequality.

Pakistan's fiscal crossroads

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan stands at a delicate yet decisive inflection point—where economic stability hinges on a paradox: international credit rating upgrades are crucial to unlocking market access and foreign capital, yet the very liquidity needed to warrant those upgrades depends on that access.

While macroeconomic indicators have begun to stabilize—thanks to IMF adherence, a surprise \$1 billion injection from UAE-based lenders, and historic primary surpluses—the road ahead remains strewn with fiscal pitfalls, strained industries, and ambitious tax targets. In this situation, timing is everything, and the window of opportunity is as narrow as it is fleeting.

Despite swirling clouds of global economic ambiguity, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected a revivalist uptick in growth across the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and Pakistan in 2025 and onward. Yet, IMF's Resident Envoy in Pakistan, Mahir Binici, issued a tempered caution, underscoring the perils of intensifying trade hostilities, fractured geopolitical alignments, and the fraying tapestry of global cooperation.

In direct reference to Pakistan, Binici highlighted that the nation's engagement with the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) has thus far charted a resilient course. The approval of the programme's inaugural review by the IMF Executive Board in May 2025 marked a pivotal waypoint on this journey. Nonetheless, he asserted that deep-seated structural recalibrations remain indispensable for enduring fiscal viability—specifically in revamping tax architecture, rejuvenating the entrepreneurial terrain, and spurring private capital deployment.

"Pakistan's early interventions," Binici remarked, "have tempered macroeconomic turbulence and begun mending the rift in investor assurance—this, even amidst a storm of external adversities." He acknowledged Pakistan's incremental strides in its ecological policy sphere, fostered through the IMF's Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF).

In parallel, Islamabad's financial stewards are redoubling their diplomatic entreaties to global credit rating behemoths. In a recent conclave with Moody's, Pakistan's finance minister petitioned for an upward recalibration of the country's sovereign rating. Although marginal ameliorations have surfaced since, the rating lingers in the shadow of its 2021 stature. The fiscal rupture of 2022 had triggered a cascade of downgrades, virtually cauterizing access to foreign debt pipelines. As macroeconomic indicators began steadying in 2024, the

sovereign rating saw a modest uplift to Caa2 in August, along with a cautiously optimistic outlook. Nonetheless, the scar tissue of past downgrades remains—several rungs beneath its pre-crisis standing.

This prolonged exclusion from international debt venues had left Pakistan adrift, with commercial borrowings from global financiers grinding to a standstill. That tide turned in recent weeks, however, when the administration procured a \$1 billion syndicated loan from UAE-headquartered banks. This lifeline swelled the State Bank's foreign reserves to \$14.5 billion by June's end—a salve for a liquidity-parched economy.

With a semblance of monetary footing reestablished, Pakistan is now charting its reentry into global capital avenues. It aims to debut its first Panda bond on Chinese soil



within the current fiscal cycle and is weighing the prospect of a Eurobond issuance. However, such ambitions remain tethered to the sine qua non of an enhanced sovereign rating—a key that could yet unlock the gates of dormant financial corridors.

The finance minister's fervent campaign for a credit rating upgrade stems from a pressing need: to unlock crucial external inflows that can uphold financial equilibrium. Yet, the challenge lies in a self-defeating loop—rating agencies demand sturdier reserves before revising ratings upward, while bolstering reserves hinges on market entry, which itself is contingent on improved ratings. A classic ouroboros of fiscal policy.

The recent \$1 billion facility from UAE-based banks—clinched at a relatively moderate 7 percent interest—was fortuitous, arriving at a pivotal moment. Parallely, the administration has adhered strictly to the IMF's playbook, ticking off every binary benchmark. Notably, for the first time since 2004, Pakistan has registered consecutive primary budget surpluses, with the current fiscal year aiming for a

record surplus as a percentage of GDP.

On the macroeconomic front, inflation has plummeted, driven by tepid domestic consumption, retreating global commodity prices, and a largely steady rupee. This disinflationary wave has allowed interest rates to be slashed in half—further reductions remain within the realm of possibility. The current account flipped to a surplus in FY24, and the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) amassed over \$9 billion from the interbank market during the year. This accumulation trend has rolled over into 2025, enabling reserve expansion without the burden of additional external borrowing. In tandem, the SBP has markedly trimmed its forward and swap obligations.

The present juncture offers a fleeting but favorable policy window. Yet, vulnerabilities lurk beneath the surface. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) underperformed on its revenue goals in FY25, and the targets set for the current cycle are even steeper. The private sector is raising alarm over the expanded authority granted to the FBR, coupled with newly minted policy impositions. Formal sector enterprises—already encumbered by heavy taxation—are buckling under pressure, with repercussions rippling through investment sentiment.

Industrial output remains subdued, hamstrung by capacity underutilization and fiscal overreach. The tax yoke, particularly on compliant businesses, is becoming unsustainable. Hence, securing an elevated credit

rating isn't just desirable—it's imperative. It would reopen the doors to global debt markets on more favorable terms, catalyzing further reserve build-up and initiating a virtuous cycle of rating recalibrations.

In concert with a stable geopolitical backdrop, these dynamics could set the stage for a broader economic renaissance—reviving both foreign direct investment and reinvigorating domestic entrepreneurial conviction.

With inflation subdued, reserves rising, and macro fundamentals recovering, Pakistan is better positioned than it has been in years to re-engage with global capital markets. However, the country's economic fate cannot hinge solely on favorable conditions—it must actively secure an improved sovereign rating to convert this momentum into long-term stability. Doing so will not only enable critical inflows and ease external pressures but also restore confidence among investors, both foreign and domestic. If handled astutely, this could be the inflection point that breaks the loop, resets the cycle, and charts a more resilient, growth-oriented economic future.

Strategic dimensions of expanding CPEC to Afghanistan

Raza Khan

China and Pakistan have recently reached a significant agreement to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban-led government has also expressed its willingness to join the project. This landmark decision was made during a trilateral meeting held in May in Beijing, attended by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, and Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. This development marks a major shift in the region's strategic and economic landscape, with potential long-term implications for regional stability.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has long supported the idea of expanding CPEC into Afghanistan. However, several political and security challenges had previously hindered concrete progress. While earlier efforts remained largely symbolic, the current agreement suggests a shift in momentum. There now appears to be strong political will in both Pakistan and Afghanistan to integrate Afghanistan into the corridor. Notably, the Taliban leadership seems convinced of the strategic and economic necessity of joining the initiative.

From China's perspective, incorporating Afghanistan into CPEC aligns with the broader vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a \$900 billion interregional connectivity project designed to boost economic cooperation and trade across Asia and beyond. If CPEC is to serve as a critical artery of the BRI, then extending it into Afghanistan is not just logical—it is essential for maximizing its regional impact. CPEC itself is a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure initiative aimed at connecting China's remote western region of Kashgar with Pakistan's strategically located but underdeveloped Gwadar Port. Spanning over 2,000 kilometers, the corridor includes roads, railways, and a range of infrastructure and energy projects, with an estimated cost of \$64 billion—primarily financed through Chinese loans. Chinese firms and experts are heavily involved in its implementation. Notable achievements already include the development of the Gwadar International Airport and the D.I. Khan-Islamabad Motorway, with numerous other strategic projects currently underway.

By bringing Afghanistan into the CPEC framework, China aims to deepen intra- and interregional economic ties, while also asserting a more active role in the region's security and development agenda. China has already taken a

proactive stance in Afghanistan's peace process, beginning in 2014 when it facilitated Taliban delegations to hold talks in Beijing—a marked departure from its previously hands-off approach.

At present, one of China's core foreign policy objectives is to expand trade and maintain its economic growth momentum. In contrast to Europe, the Americas, or other parts of Asia, major economic initiatives in South and Central Asia must be interregional by design, given the geopolitical realities. The region is among the most densely populated in the world, home to China and India—the first and second most populous nations—followed closely by Pakistan and Bangladesh. In this context, integrating Afghanistan into CPEC is not just about development; it is about shaping the future of regional connectivity and cooperation.

The regions of South Asia, Central Asia,



and the Middle East are not only geographically connected but also closely linked through deep-rooted economic and cultural ties. Against this backdrop, China and Pakistan's decision to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan could significantly boost trade among the three nations. Moreover, it could pave the way for enhanced interregional movement of goods and people, linking markets across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Beyond economic considerations, China's interest in extending CPEC to Afghanistan is driven by strategic, security, and socio-political motivations. A primary goal for Beijing is to increase the interdependence between Pakistan and Afghanistan, thereby fostering improved bilateral relations. The idea is that greater economic integration could discourage both sides from supporting instability in each other's territory. While economic interdependence can often promote peace and cooperation, its success is not guaranteed—especially given the fragile and mistrust-laden state of current Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Another significant objective for China is the development of its remote northwestern re-

gion, particularly the Xinjiang province, which is home to a large Muslim Uyghur population. Through CPEC, China hopes to accelerate development in Xinjiang, thereby weakening separatist movements like the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Integrating Afghanistan into CPEC could help stabilize the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which in the past have served as sanctuaries for such militant groups. China believes that with improved infrastructure and development, these areas will become less hospitable to extremists.

While Pakistan publicly supports regional connectivity and does not oppose Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC, it has shown limited enthusiasm for rapid expansion. Understandably, Islamabad is keen to maximize its own benefits from the corridor and may be reluctant to share its strategic and economic gains with neighboring countries—especially if doing so dilutes Pakistan's own leverage in the project.

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban leadership is eager to join CPEC, recognizing the potential economic benefits. However, strong anti-Pakistan sentiment within Afghanistan's security establishment and broader public opinion could pose significant obstacles. Additionally, India's deep-rooted influence in Afghan official circles has historically discouraged Kabul from aligning with CPEC, a project spearheaded by two of India's main regional rivals—Pakistan and China. India is particularly concerned about the growing Chinese presence in Gwadar and the strategic implications it poses. Therefore, for Afghanistan to fully embrace CPEC, the Taliban-led government would need to neutralize this Indian influence.

Another important player, the United States, may support Afghanistan's integration into broader regional trade frameworks. However, Washington views CPEC—and the wider Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—as a vehicle for expanding Chinese influence, which runs counter to U.S. strategic interests in the region. While the U.S. may back regional development in principle, it is unlikely to support projects that elevate China's geopolitical standing.

In conclusion, while there is strong political will and strategic logic behind integrating Afghanistan into CPEC, the path forward is complex. Deep mistrust persists—between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and between the China-Pakistan alliance and India. For Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC to become a reality, all stakeholders must engage in sincere dialogue and cooperation, with an emphasis on long-term regional stability over short-term geopolitical gains.

Pakistan's diabetes crisis

Dr. Fatima Khan

In a country where diabetes silently claims over 230,000 lives each year and gestational hyperglycemia affects one in five live births, the government's newly announced US\$6.8 million initiative under the Prime Minister's Programme for the Prevention and Control of Diabetes is a long-overdue but modest attempt to confront an escalating epidemic.

With millions already living undiagnosed and untreated, and unhealthy lifestyles fueling the rapid spread of Type 2 diabetes, this initiative must do far more than scratch the surface. Commencing its preliminary phase within the federal precincts, the scheme intends to progressively permeate provincial territories from the second annum forward. Its overarching ambition is to encompass nearly 33 million citizens through a triangulation of diagnostics, early detection, and therapeutic management—anchored in foundational health networks, mobilization of lady health workers, and sweeping public cognizance campaigns.

Nonetheless, this governmental maneuver, while symbolically salient, appears starkly diminutive against the daunting breadth of the diabetic upheaval engulfing Pakistan. The nation currently ranks among the uppermost triad of states exhibiting the most virulent expansion of diabetes. Empirical inquiries project that between 28 to 33 percent of urban denizens are beleaguered by this metabolic malady—further exacerbated by a staggering 27 percent whose conditions remain veiled in medical obscurity.

National expenditures tethered to diabetic care have witnessed a marginal escalation, leaping from US\$2.6 billion to US\$2.7 billion within a four-year interlude. The resultant fiscal drag—estimated at an eye-watering Rs760 billion—continues to strain Pakistan's healthcare fabric and macroeconomic sinews, as underscored by the International Diabetes Federation's (IDF) 2025 Atlas. This latest compendium unveils a harrowing statistic: Pakistan is now domicile to 34.5 million adults (aged 20 to 79) ensnared by diabetes, trailing only China, India, and the United States in this somber hierarchy. Projections portend a grim crescendo, with cases forecasted to nearly double—ballooning to an apocalyptic 70.2 million by 2050, should preemptive frameworks falter.

Amid this mounting crisis, Pakistan's per capita outlay on diabetes languishes near the nadir of global indices—standing at a meager

US\$79 per individual per annum. This parsimonious commitment results in a yawning chasm in accessible treatment, with untold numbers of sufferers languishing without care—many facing fiscal ruin from the exigencies of prolonged medical intervention.

The IDF dossier adds further disquiet: Pakistan bears the planet's most elevated age-adjusted diabetes prevalence rate—an alarming 31.4 percent, eclipsing the global norm by a stark margin. A worrisome subset—approximately 26.9 percent, or nearly 9.3 million individuals—remain medically uncharted, paving the path for catastrophic complications such as myocardial infarctions, nephritic decline, limb amputations, and irreversible blindness.

Diabetes claims nearly 230,000 lives annually in Pakistan—a staggering death toll that underscores the disease's unrelenting grip on the nation's health landscape. The latest findings further reveal a deeply unsettling trend: one in

toward scalable impact.

Nevertheless, the blueprint will falter without a hard reckoning with the insidious catalysts behind the Type 2 diabetes explosion: rampant ingestion of industrially adulterated edibles, unrelenting sugar-laden drinks, and lifestyles starved of physical exertion. What emerges is a stealthy public health siege, breeding grave afflictions—from cardiac breakdowns and renal collapse to chronic infirmity. Containment demands more than prescriptions; it requires a tectonic shift in public health policy: nationwide screening campaigns, aggressive nutritional education, and stringent curbs on toxic consumables. These must not be footnotes, but the nucleus of the government's evolving diabetes doctrine.

Yet, the backdrop remains grim. A recent 16 percent scalpel slash to the federal health development budget effectively amputates the state's ability to erect vital health infrastructure

or galvanize robust preventive systems. Such austerity belies the urgency of the threat and risks sabotaging even well-intentioned interventions.

Commendable though the US\$6.8 million initiative may be, its fate hinges on more than good intentions. It demands uninterrupted capital flow, synergy across bureaucratic and sectoral silos, and a systemic metamorphosis in how the nation views non-communicable diseases. To meaningfully curb the diabetic deluge—and

simultaneously grapple with other persistent scourges like hepatitis, polio, and tuberculosis—Pakistan's leadership must escalate its resource commitment and enshrine universal, equitable access to screening and treatment.

Only a resolute, all-encompassing campaign, armed with foresight and fortitude, can transform this embryonic programme into a landmark stride toward national health justice.

While the launch of the national diabetes programme marks a step in the right direction, it is only the beginning of a far more arduous journey. The current funding and fragmented policy approach are insufficient to stem the rising tide of non-communicable diseases that threaten to overwhelm Pakistan's healthcare system. To truly deliver health equity and lasting impact, the government must invest boldly, legislate strategically, and act decisively—transforming this modest programme into a cornerstone of a resilient and inclusive public health future.



every five live births is now impacted by gestational hyperglycemia, heralding enduring health jeopardy for both mothers and their newborns.

The financial framework proposed—jointly underwritten by the federal and provincial echelons—merely grazes the surface of what is imperative for an authentic recalibration of the country's diabetic response. Funding, in its current guise, falls woefully short of what is required to revamp preventative strategies, bolster educational outreach, ensure access to essential pharmacotherapy, and enable sustainable, long-term disease stewardship.

Yet, there's a faint glimmer of optimism. The programme ambitiously envelops the majority of the at-risk population, signaling that those at the helm are beginning to grasp the full magnitude of the crisis. This broad-based inclusion dovetails with expert counsel urging integration of diabetes countermeasures within the scaffolding of primary care services—a pragmatic move

Why is the UN not declaring famine in Gaza?

Moncef Khane

On July 9, 2024, no fewer than 11 experts mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a mayday call about famine in Gaza.

“We declare that Israel’s intentional and targeted starvation campaign against the Palestinian people is a form of genocidal violence and has resulted in famine across all of Gaza. We call upon the international community to prioritise the delivery of humanitarian aid by land by any means necessary, end Israel’s siege, and establish a ceasefire,” their statement read.

Among the experts were Michael Fakhri, special rapporteur on the right to food, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, and Francesca Albanese, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967. In their opinion, the death of children from starvation despite attempts to provide them with medical treatment in central Gaza left no room for equivocation.

While “famine” is generally understood as an acute lack of nutrition which would lead to starvation and death of a group of people or an entire population, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept in international law.

However, in 2004, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) developed the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a five-stage quantitative humanitarian scale to map the food insecurity of a population. The aim of this evaluation instrument is to spur collective action when food insecurity is identified and prevent such situations from reaching Level 5 on the IPC scale when famine is confirmed and declared. It has been used by FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP) and their partners as a scientific, data-driven tool for the past 20 years.

The IPC quantifiable criteria for declaring famine are gruesomely straightforward: 20 percent or more of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; acute malnutrition in children exceeds 30 percent; and the death rate exceeds two people per 10,000 per day. When these three benchmarks are met, “famine” needs to be declared. Although it does not trigger legal or treaty obligations, it is nevertheless an important political signal to compel an international humanitarian

action. If the aforementioned experts could conclude, in unison and over a year ago, that famine was present in the besieged Gaza Strip, it is hard to understand why the competent UN entities and executive heads have not yet reached the conclusion that Level 5 has been reached by July of this year, after over four months of a medieval siege.

In the era of real-time information transmitted to smartphones the world over, the reality of fatal levels of food insecurity is glaring and unconscionable. Images of emaciated bodies reminiscent of those taken in Nazi concentration camps tell the macabre tale of the reality in Gaza, blockaded by the uncompromising Israeli occupation forces.

And yet, even against the backdrop of UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA)



warnings issued on July 20 that one million children in Gaza are facing the risk of starvation, “famine” is not yet declared. On the surface, the explanation for not declaring “famine” in Gaza is that the necessary data used under the IPC scheme is not available. This may well be the case since Israel prevents access to the Gaza Strip to journalists and some humanitarian workers. IPC analysts, therefore, do not have primary data collection capabilities, which they have for the other 30 or so situations they monitor. But when the physical evidence is plain to see, when some reliable data is available, humanitarian considerations ought to override technical requirements.

However, in today’s UN system culture transfixed by a US administration gone amok against it, political considerations override the sense of duty and professional imperatives. Those at the helm know what is right (or one hopes so) — and what could be fatal to their

persona and careers.

The US government’s ad hominem attacks against and sanctions imposed on Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Karim Khan and UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese are a vivid reminder that those jobs are not without risks. In the case of Albanese, her mandate is not even a “job” as she is carrying it out pro bono, which makes her steadfastness and courage all the more exemplary.

Admittedly, UN executive heads such as Secretary-General Antonio Guterres have more complex calculations to contend with, punitive actions by some powers on the organisation they lead being the principal one. As the saying goes, “money talks” and the US is the single largest contributor to the UN system.

But now that the US Congress has passed an unprecedented bill defunding the UN system, not doing what is right to shield the concerned UN organisations from Washington’s retaliatory wrath is no longer an acceptable cop-out, if it ever was.

It is important here to remember that the Statute of the ICC provides that starvation of civilians constitutes a war crime when committed in international armed conflicts. The full siege of Gaza since March 2, which is resulting in the starvation of civilians, first and foremost infants and children, falls squarely within the purview of Article 8 of the Statute,

all the more so as it is the result of a deliberate and declaratory policy denying humanitarian assistance for months.

In this man-made famine, Palestinians are starving to death amid the deafening silence of the world, while tonnes of food are going to waste on the Egyptian side of the border while awaiting permission to enter Gaza. Israeli troops and foreign mercenaries hired by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation have killed more than 900 Palestinians seeking aid at so-called humanitarian distribution sites. Some 90,000 children and women are in need of urgent treatment for malnutrition, according to the WFP; 19 people died of starvation in a single day on July 20, the Gaza Ministry of Health reported. And worse is yet to come.

Michael Fakhri, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo and Francesca Albanese said it a year ago — it is high time for the UN to officially declare that “famine” is in Gaza.

Trump talks tough on Russia, but will he follow through?

Maximilian Hess

On July 14, United States President Donald Trump teased a sea change in his approach to Russia's war against Ukraine. Trump declared he would send significant additional air defence units to Ukraine, whose cities are now subject to an average onslaught of more than 100 Russian drones and missiles daily. Leaks from the White House even claimed Trump had inquired with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a preceding phone call about what offensive weaponry Kyiv needed to hit Moscow directly.

Trump also made his most explicit sanction threat to date, proposing a 100 percent "secondary tariff" on countries that buy Russian oil, if the Kremlin does not agree to a ceasefire in 50 days, by September 3. But Trump's tough talk has fallen far short of moving the dial. Russian officials have laughed off his claims about hitting Moscow. Air defence deliveries may lower the damage from Putin's aerial onslaught, but delivering them in anything like the numbers Trump floated will take many months.

Trump's sanctions threat has not moved markets, though such a restriction would amount to an attempted blockade of the world's third-largest oil producer. That Trump has shifted his approach to Russia should, however, come as no surprise. Despite Trump's apparent personal affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin, regarding Ukraine and Russia, his view of key US strategic interests is fundamentally opposed to Putin's.

Trump wants to export more US natural gas; Putin wants to do the same with Russia's gas, having lost his European pipeline market. Trump cares about Greenland because he recognises the importance of Arctic shipping routes in the future, and for Russia, its rival Arctic shipping route is a key factor in maintaining Chinese support. Putin wants to seize as much of Ukraine's mineral resources for Russia as he can; Trump wants to do the same for Washington.

Having failed in his inaugural pledge to settle the conflict within a day, something he now admits was an exaggeration, Trump's long-standing hostility towards Zelenskyy – a legacy of Trump's first impeachment scandal, which resulted from an attempt to extort blackmail on the Biden campaign from Zelenskyy – was eased after Kyiv agreed to a long-term strategic alignment with Washington on those minerals.

Trump has, if belatedly, recognised that Putin has not been negotiating in good faith. No progress was made in the May and June peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow, with both sides just showing up to please Trump and try

to win him over to their respective positions. Trump's realisation may have come from the fact that Putin increased his demands amid those negotiations. He not only continued to insist on the occupation of all of the southern and eastern Ukrainian regions he claims to have annexed, though never fully occupied, but added that Russia would need a "buffer zone" in northern Ukraine as well. The change in Trump's approach has thus far had a muted impact for two reasons. Firstly, because his threat of the Russian oil tariff is not credible on its own. Trump has been extremely wary of high oil prices, or even the potential for them to rise. In the aftermath of his June strikes on Iran, he publicly decried the subsequent spike in oil markets.

But it is also doubtful that the secondary tariff threat alone will work. Trump first used a similar threat to target Venezuelan oil exports at the end of March, and while Venezuelan exports declined, they have since recovered as Beijing has expanded purchases. Especially as it is in the middle of its own tariff war with Trump, which has already seen him threaten tariffs even above 100 percent, there is little chance Beijing, Russia's largest oil buyer, will care about a similar threat on Russian production.

Additionally, Trump's decision to play for time with his threat is likely to delay passage of a Senate bill imposing additional sanctions on Russia, though 83 of 100 members of the chamber have co-sponsored it. The Republican Party's leadership in the Senate and the House are wary of being seen to goad Trump on the issue, lest it risk blowback from Trump, who demands near-universal authority and deference on policymaking from his party.

Nevertheless, while Trump has gotten Europe to agree to be more public in accepting its costs of supporting Kyiv – which cumulatively were larger than the US's even before Trump began his second term, despite his assertions to the contrary – it will continue to be US equipment and technology that drive Kyiv's ability to resist or turn the tide. And delivering new arms to Ukraine and training its forces to use them will take time.

Trump will also have to change his approach. Increasing economic pressure on Russia that can force Putin to treat negotiations seriously is not something that the US can achieve alone. It is made only harder to achieve when Washington spars with its allies and partners.

With regards to additional restrictions on Russian oil, Trump may not have much chance of convincing Russia to go along, but such restrictions could jolt India to change its approach. New Delhi has gone from being a

negligible purchaser of Russian oil before the full-scale invasion to its second-largest market, with 40 percent of India's imports now coming from Russia. India's Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri last week noted the country would not change its approach. He emphasised New Delhi has complied with previous restrictions, including the oil price cap, which the Biden administration engineered together with G7 allies in 2022 to actually keep Russian oil flowing, just limiting its revenues therefrom. They too were wary of market disruption, as Trump is today, with Biden's Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen even explicitly supporting the structure as a way to secure oil "bargains" for India and other developing markets.

But the minister did note that if there was an international agreement on shifting Russian oil purchases, then New Delhi could change its approach. If Trump wants his threats against Moscow to be credible, he will have to embrace a multilateral approach.

Some steps are easy to do. As Trump's administration has thus far resisted additional sanctions, Brussels and Westminster have taken the lead in targeting Russia's "shadow fleet" aimed at evading sanctions and the price cap, and engineering new sanctions proposals, including proposing tweaks to the oil price cap to lower it further when prices are soft. Two European Union sanctions packages have been agreed in the last six months, the second on July 18, and Trump should swiftly match their measures.

If Europe can also be convinced to support a secondary tariff or other sanctions on Russian oil purchasers, that measure too would be far more likely to be effective. Additionally, Trump can target Russia's additional liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports by finally blacklisting Novatek, its key LNG exporter. Europe has not been willing to go that far yet, instead seeking only a phaseout of its purchases by the end of next year. But because the market for LNG tankers is much smaller than the oil market, earlier US sanctions on Russian LNG projects have proven much harder to evade.

Russia's economy is finally struggling under the costs of Putin's war and all the sanctions he has brought upon his country in response to his aggression. Russian banks are reportedly holding preliminary discussions on the terms of state bailouts. But amid this pain, Russia claims to have seized a town in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk region for the first time – a claim Kyiv denies and which remains unverified. Trump can have a far more significant impact on the course of the war by reversing his resistance to Ukrainian attacks on the Kremlin's energy assets.

Mamdani's rise in New York

In a recent political development that has surprised many in the United States, a Muslim candidate, Zohran Mamdani, emerged victorious in the Democratic primaries for the post of New York City mayor. This is despite the fact that New York has for long been a stronghold of the Jewish lobby, and Muslims make up less than five per cent of the population. Yet, Mamdani defeated former governor Andrew Cuomo by securing over 43pc of the vote compared to Cuomo's 36pc.

It is obvious that the support of Muslim voters alone could not have taken Mamdani this far. It was the support of the young voters, regardless of their faith, that is behind the surprise victory. And, more to the point, it is the sense of frustration among the young with current US and Israeli policies and the ongoing genocide of hapless Palestinians that has given Mamdani the edge more than his own charisma or agenda.

Mamdani gained popularity by taking a bold stance on the Gaza war, openly criticising US and Israeli actions, and even likening Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as war criminals. His clarity of thought, especially in a city long dominated by establishment politics, resonated with the youth and progressive voters.

If Mamdani wins the mayoral election in November, which is likely since Democrats typically win in New York City, he will become the city's first Muslim and South Asian mayor. His intraparty win has already caused shockwaves within the American establishment, the pro-Israel lobby, and even within his own party. Donald Trump has called him 'crazy', while several Democratic leaders have been clearly uneasy about his rise.

Mamdani's progress thus far signals a major shift. American youth, including progressive Jews, are increasingly opposing war-driven policies, especially regarding Gaza. Mamdani's campaign has shown that supporting Palestinian rights is no longer a political burden or liability for the progressives. In fact, it can actually be a winning strategy. Analysts believe that this could be a turning point and an example that moral, inclusive and grass-roots leaders can challenge an entrenched system.

Ghulam Hyder Mugheri
Karachi

Hazardous headlights, distracting ads

The practice of getting blinding, high-intensity LED headlights in vehicles has been on the rise. This is one of the main reasons behind the rising number of road traffic accidents (RTAs) in the country. The situation in Lahore is particularly alarming. Data for January 2025

indicates a 29 per cent increase in RTAs across Punjab.

Compounding this hazard are the omnipresent, brightly lit advertisement screens installed along city roads. These dynamic, attention-grabbing displays are a major source of distraction, diverting drivers' focus from the road ahead. This grave issue can be addressed through a multi-pronged approach. The government should launch massive public awareness campaigns, educating drivers about the dangers of high-intensity lights, proper headlight usage, and the ramifications of illegal modifications.

The traffic police must conduct frequent, targeted checks, especially at night, to identify and fine vehicles with illegal or improperly aligned high-intensity lights. The fines should be substantial enough to act as a deterrent.

The authorities should implement stringent vehicle inspection protocols during annual registration renewals to ensure that the headlights of vehicles comply with safety standards. Besides, the government should regulate the import and sale of after-market high-intensity LED kits. Investment in upgrading and maintaining streetlights on all major roads and highways is essential. And, finally, there should be restrictions regarding placement of advertisement screens in areas prone to accidents or where they could cause maximum distraction, such as sharp turns, intersections, or on fast-moving motorways.

The safety of commuters is paramount. It is time the authorities acknowledged the severity of these long overlooked issues and took swift and decisive action.

Muhammad Salahuddin Khan
Lahore

Lalazar's decline

For nearly five decades, I have called Lalazar my home. It was known for its cleanliness, serenity and charm — a proud part of the Rawalpindi Cantonment area. Sadly, the pride of the residents has now turned into frustration, disappointment and even embarrassment. Today, Lalazar is all about pathetic roads and garbage dumps.

For someone who has lived here for 48 years, this decline is not merely disappointing; it is heart-breaking. I never imagined a day would come when I would consider selling my house just to escape the embarrassment of living in a crumbling neighbourhood. The silence and inaction of the authorities speak louder than any promise or policy.

Lalazar deserves respect, attention and investment. Let us not wait until every resident has packed up and moved away. Let us act now to restore the beauty and dignity of Lalazar for the sake of its history, its community, and its future.

Muhammad Ali Tariq
Rawalpindi

Interest-free GPF system

The current general provident fund (GPF) system for government employees is based on interest and everyone has to participate. Those who attempt to avoid interest are offered a so-called interest-free alternative, which is an option that is fundamentally flawed. It fails to even preserve the value of their savings, let alone offer any real growth. The state should not compel its Muslim employees to choose between religious integrity and financial security. The government should immediately introduce an interest-free GPF structure that offers inflation-adjusted returns through ethical and productive avenues for the employees.

Muhammad Asif Amin
Islamabad

SBCA's deadly negligence

It is a fact that the tragic deaths caused by the recent building collapses in Lyari and other parts of Karachi were perfectly avoidable. However, beyond the surface lies a deeper malaise, the unchecked and arbitrary powers of the Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA).

SBCA officials have become powerful arbiters of fate for countless citizens. When they want to permit a building, legal or otherwise, they do so with alarming ease. Files move fast, maps get approved overnight, and construction begins without hindrance, often with the connivance of officials who look the other way for a price. Yet, when demolition is ordered, often selectively and without consistent criteria, the same authority acts swiftly and ruthlessly, sometimes without offering residents any resettlement or relief. This dual nature of SBCA's role as a facilitator of unsafe construction and agent of destruction has contributed significantly to the city's growing crisis of dangerous buildings. If these buildings were really declared hazardous earlier, why were they allowed to stand for so long? Why were lives not protected through timely action? And, most importantly, who allowed these structures to be built in the first place? It is no secret that corruption, political interference and systemic negligence have together hollowed out Karachi's urban planning regime. The poor residents who die under concrete and steel are merely numbers in a recurring tragedy, while the real culprits remain untouched, their roles uninvestigated, and their huge fortunes intact.

A serious and independent judicial inquiry must be initiated into the causes of these building collapses, and also into the SBCA's role in the approval and oversight of such structures. The people of Karachi deserve transparency, accountability and, above all, safety. Unless we treat this as more than just an engineering failure, and confront the governance rot at its heart, the matter will continue to gobble up lives.

Muhammad Anwar Ul Haque
Karachi

Giant meteor impact may have triggered massive Grand Canyon landslide 56,000 years ago

Sascha Pare

The ancient meteor impact that formed Arizona's Barringer Crater sent shock waves through the Grand Canyon — likely triggering a landslide that dammed the Colorado River, a new study suggests.



Barringer Crater, also called Meteor Crater, formed between 53,000 and 63,000 years ago, when a giant cosmic "curveball" punched a hole in Earth's surface. The force of the impact traveled more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) to the Grand Canyon, which may have caused an entire cliff face to collapse into the river, scientists have found. The discovery, described in the journal *Geology*, has linked two major events that were thought to be completely unrelated. "There are other possibilities, such as a random rockfall or local earthquake within a thousand years of the Meteor Crater impact that could have happened independently," Karl Karlstrom, a professor of Earth and planetary sciences at the University of New Mexico and lead author of the study, said in a statement.

But the events described are extraordinary, Karlstrom said — and they happened within a suspiciously small time frame, suggesting that they were related. Researchers already knew that the Colorado River flooded the Grand Canyon sometime in the Late Pleistocene (129,000 to 11,700 years ago).

Nor'easters have become 20% more destructive in the last 80 years, scientists warn

Aristos Georgiou

The strongest nor'easters — a type of North Atlantic storm that can produce devastating impacts along the U.S. East Coast — appear to be intensifying as the world warms, a new study finds. Researchers found that the maximum



wind speeds and hourly precipitation rates of the strongest nor'easters have increased since 1940. The trends identified have "profound implications" for people living across the eastern coast of North America, given that these storms bring damaging winds, heavy snowfall and significant coastal flooding, the researchers reported in a paper published in the journal *PNAS*. "While there is no apparent trend in the average intensity of nor'easters, we found that the strongest nor'easters — which do the most damage and have the most impact — are indeed getting stronger," study co-author Michael Mann, a presidential distinguished professor in the Department of Earth and Environmental Science at the University of Pennsylvania, told *Live Science*. Nor'easters are a type of extratropical cyclone (ETC) — storms that originate outside the tropics — that form along the U.S. East Coast, particularly during late fall through early spring. These storms often cause severe damage and societal disruption because they tend to pass over densely populated regions, such as the Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. metro areas. Some of the most infamous nor'easters include the "Perfect Storm" in 1991; the "Storm of the Century" in 1993, one of the deadliest of these events on record, which claimed 208 lives; "Snowmageddon" in 2010; and the January 2018 blizzard. Given the potential consequences, it is crucial to understand how nor'easters are changing in response to human-caused climate change, the authors said. Yet nor'easters have traditionally received far less attention from climate researchers than tropical cyclones have.

How protein became my secret weapon for feeling better

Jen Ator

There's nothing like a big occasion looming on the calendar (where you'll be the center of attention, no less) to get you paying closer attention to your diet.



For me, that was much of 2023. I was excitedly planning my fall wedding and wondering what might help me look and feel my best on the big day. One of those things was protein. Like many of us, I had absorbed all the Big Protein buzz filling the airwaves: It will help you lose weight! Gain muscle! Have more energy! Become the human who talks endlessly about their macros! Whether it was valid science or impressive marketing, I decided to be a bit more intentional about my protein intake — just to see what kind of impact it had. I set a rough benchmark: 100 grams of protein per day, more days of the week than not. I tracked it for a few weeks until I felt like I had a good handle on things, then I went on vibes. I didn't overly stress or obsess, but over time without really realizing it, hitting my goal (or close to it) became the default, not the exception. Let me tell you, what started as a "let's try this for a few months" has turned into a fundamental shift I'm still following today. Being intentional about hitting higher daily protein targets has had impossible-to-ignore effects, like way less brain fog and more sustained energy. I think I sleep better, and I know I get better workouts in. It has also simplified the "What should I make to eat?" mental load that used to plague my every meal. And best of all? It really wasn't as hard (or as hardcore) as social media gurus would have you believe.

Weight loss drugs work — but only if you do these 3 things

Amanda Loudin

You know them by names like Ozempic and Wegovy, and for what they can do — help people lose weight. But if you're among the roughly 1 in 8 Americans who've tried GLP-1 drugs — including newer options like Zepbound and Mounjaro, which target more than one hormone — you could be at risk of nutrient deficiency, muscle loss, and even bone loss, unless you make diet and exercise part of the picture.



"Although GLP-1 medications are a major breakthrough in obesity management, lifestyle factors still matter," said JoAnn E. Manson, MD, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. "Outcomes of patients on these medications are much better with attention to adequate protein intake, healthy diet, good hydration, and regular muscle-strengthening exercises to mitigate the loss of lean body mass."

Manson is a co-author of new guidelines to help, published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, one set for doctors and another for patients. "These represent what we believe are the first systematic tools to implement lifestyle interventions alongside GLP-1 medications," said Farhad Mehrtash, MPH, a co-author of the guidelines and a graduate of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Here's a three-pronged approach to make the most of modern weight loss medications.

With any weight loss, including that with GLP-1s, you don't get to pick where you lose it. "Loss of muscle and lean body mass is common on these medications, on average about 25%," said Manson. Over time, that can lead to bone loss too, especially in older adults or those with sedentary lifestyles.



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