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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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Let's make austerity drive a national habit

Farhan Khan

The government has announced a comprehensive set of austerity measures to cope with rising oil prices triggered by the ongoing war in the Middle East. Oil prices have climbed above \$100 per barrel — a development that poses a serious challenge for Pakistan, whose economy remains heavily dependent on imported fuel. Such a sharp increase in energy costs places immense pressure on foreign exchange reserves, driven by swelling import bills and a corresponding rise in inflationary pressures across the economy.

In response, the government has decided to enforce austerity across all ministries and departments, recognising that the country cannot absorb another economic shock without significant restraint in public expenditure. The package unveiled includes a wide range of steps aimed at mitigating the impact of higher oil prices. As spelled out by the prime minister, fuel allocations for government vehicles will be reduced by half for the next two months, while 60 per cent of official vehicles at both federal and provincial levels will be taken off the roads. Cabinet ministers, advisers and special assistants have agreed to forgo their salaries and allowances during this period, while members of parliament will face reductions in their remuneration. Officials in the highest pay grades will also be subject to temporary salary deductions. In addition, a 20 per cent cut has been imposed on non-development spending for the final quarter of the current fiscal year.

At the same time, provincial governments in Punjab and Sindh have introduced their own fuel conservation measures, including reductions in the use of official vehicles and broader spending curbs to manage limited resources more effectively amid volatile global energy markets. In this regard, the Sindh government's proposal to limit wedding gatherings to 200 guests and strictly enforce a one-dish policy has been widely appreciated. Punjab had introduced similar restrictions more than a decade ago, including limits on late-night wedding functions and enforcement of a one-dish rule. Despite resistance from certain segments of society, these measures demonstrated that governments can play a constructive role in discouraging unnecessary

extravagance. More importantly, such initiatives reflect a pragmatic attempt to address a deeply entrenched social trend in which wedding celebrations have increasingly become excessive displays of wealth. In a society grappling with persistent inflation and rising living costs, the social pressure to host large and elaborate events often imposes an unjustified financial burden on low-income families.

With regard to the newly announced austerity drive, it is evident that many of these steps should have been implemented much earlier. Government institutions have long been associated with wasteful expenditure on official transport, protocol privileges, foreign travel and ceremonial functions. The need to curtail such practices has been overdue for years. The public sector must demonstrate the same level of restraint that

witnessed numerous austerity drives in the past, but most have failed to deliver meaningful results. In many cases, the outcome has been the opposite of what was intended. Calls for fiscal discipline and national sacrifice have frequently been undermined by politically motivated exemptions, bureaucratic inertia and a lack of sustained political will. As a result, the gap between policy announcements and actual practice has remained wide.

In the present context, the austerity policy announced this week offers the government an opportunity to demonstrate both commitment and sincerity. If the proposed reductions in expenditure are implemented rigorously and monitored transparently, it will send a strong signal that the leadership is serious about managing public resources

responsibly. In this regard, the prime minister's appeal to the country's elite to fulfil their responsibilities carries particular significance. Citizens are far more likely to endure economic hardship if they observe that those in positions of authority are equally willing to make sacrifices. Austerity at the highest levels of the political and administrative hierarchy can play a crucial role in restoring public confidence at a time of national economic stress.



ordinary citizens are repeatedly urged to adopt during times of economic hardship. It is therefore encouraging that the government has finally acknowledged the urgency of conserving resources in a period of economic uncertainty. Restrictions on foreign travel by officials, limits on the use of protocol vehicles and the suspension of official functions in hotels are all aimed at reducing discretionary and open-ended spending that cannot be justified in a country striving to stabilise its fragile economy. The introduction of remote working arrangements for government offices, along with the temporary closure of educational institutions, represents additional efforts to reduce fuel consumption and better manage energy demand.

However, the real test lies in implementation. The credibility of these measures ultimately depends on how seriously and consistently they are enforced. Pakistan has

Pakistan's economy continues to face multiple structural vulnerabilities. A rising debt burden, stagnant exports, increasing poverty and high unemployment remain defining features of the current economic landscape. External shocks — whether in the form of surging energy prices or regional geopolitical instability — have the potential to further exacerbate these underlying weaknesses. Therefore, the current austerity drive should not be treated merely as a short-term response to an immediate crisis. Instead, it should evolve into a sustained national approach to economic management, led by example from the top leadership. With global oil prices on the rise and Pakistan's heavy reliance on imported energy, conservation has become an urgent national priority. Every segment of society, from government institutions to private households, must contribute meaningfully in navigating these challenging times.

World Water Day: Bridging gender inequality through water justice

Nasim Ahmed

World Water Day, observed on 22 March every year, is an annual UN-designated occasion that highlights the critical importance of freshwater. The day not only celebrates the essential role of water in human life but also raises awareness about the 2.1 billion people worldwide who still lack access to safe drinking water. It serves as a global call to action to address the deepening water crisis, which continues to worsen over time.

Each year, UN-Water sets a specific theme for the observance. In 2024, the focus was on “Leveraging Water for Peace,” followed by “Glacier Preservation” in 2025. In 2026, the theme — “Water and Gender” — underscores a crucial reality: while the global water crisis affects everyone, it does not do so equally. In regions where access to safe drinking water and sanitation is limited, inequalities are magnified, with women and girls bearing the greatest burden. This year’s theme rightly places them at the centre of water solutions.

Experts emphasise that sustainable and long-term solutions require the empowerment of women to actively shape water policies and systems. Water services must be resilient to climate change and inclusive enough to meet the needs of all segments of society. A transformative, rights-based approach is essential — one that fully recognises women’s voices, leadership and agency. The slogan “Where water flows, equality grows” captures this vision effectively. When women and girls are given equal participation in decision-making, water systems become more inclusive, efficient and sustainable. Investing in women’s leadership is therefore key to making water a driver of health, prosperity and gender equality.

In this context, the latest United Nations World Water Development Report 2026, released by UNESCO, provides a sobering assessment. Titled “Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities,” the report highlights that the global water crisis is not merely about scarcity but also about deep-rooted inequality — particularly gender inequality — that deprives billions of people of a basic human right. It shows how unequal access to water resources continues to hinder social and economic progress worldwide.

More than 2 billion people still lack access to safely managed drinking water, underscoring the failure of existing systems to ensure equitable distribution, especially in developing regions. Water scarcity is no longer just an environmental concern; it has evolved into a pressing social and economic crisis with far-reaching consequences.

In many parts of the world, women remain primarily responsible for collecting water, often walking long distances under harsh conditions. According to the report, women collectively spend hundreds of millions of hours each day fetching water. This unpaid labour exposes them to health risks and significantly restricts their access to education



and employment opportunities. The findings clearly establish that water inequality and gender inequality are deeply interconnected. Limited access to clean water exacerbates poor health outcomes, reduces school attendance and restricts economic participation — particularly among women. Vulnerable populations, especially in low-income countries, are disproportionately affected, making urgent intervention imperative.

To address these challenges, the report calls for a comprehensive and inclusive strategy. Key recommendations include empowering women by ensuring their active participation in water governance and decision-making, and adopting a rights-based framework that recognises water as a fundamental human right. Ensuring equitable access to water — particularly for women and marginalised communities — is essential for building a more just and sustainable world.

World Water Day holds particular significance for Pakistan, which is facing an increasing water shortage. In his message on

the occasion, Asif Ali Zardari urged India to immediately restore full implementation of the Indus Waters Treaty in line with international obligations. He strongly condemned India’s unilateral suspension of the treaty, describing it as a deliberate weaponisation of shared water resources.

The president warned that such actions undermine the letter and spirit of a longstanding agreement that has governed the equitable sharing of the Indus river system for over six decades. He stressed that disrupting hydrological data-sharing and agreed mechanisms threatens food and economic security, endangers livelihoods and sets a dangerous precedent for the management of transboundary water resources under international law.

In April 2025, India announced a unilateral suspension of its obligations under the Indus Waters Treaty following an attack on tourists in Pahalgam, in Indian-administered Kashmir, which resulted in 26 deaths — an incident New Delhi attributed to Islamabad without presenting evidence. In June, the Permanent Court of Arbitration issued a Supplemental Award of Competence, stating that India cannot unilaterally place the treaty in abeyance.

Within Pakistan, the water crisis is equally pressing. In many regions, households still depend on distant and unreliable water sources, with women and girls spending hours each day collecting water. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a basic right recognised under the Constitution, yet its provision remains inconsistent. Ensuring a reliable and safe water supply must therefore remain a national priority. This requires improved water resource management, sustained investment in infrastructure and, crucially, greater inclusion of women in planning and decision-making processes.

In the context of World Water Day, the government must not only intensify domestic reforms but also continue diplomatic efforts to ensure that international water-sharing agreements such as the Indus Waters Treaty are fully respected. Addressing water scarcity and inequality is no longer optional — it is essential for securing a sustainable and equitable future.

Diversifying the external income

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's external sector has found a crucial lifeline in recent years through strong inflows of workers' remittances, which have helped stabilise the country's balance of payments even as exports remain largely stagnant. However, beneath this encouraging trend lie significant concentration risks that could pose serious challenges in the medium term, particularly in light of rising geopolitical tensions in the Gulf region.

Remittances have emerged as the backbone of Pakistan's external account. During the first eight months of fiscal year 2025–26, total inflows reached \$26.5 billion — a remarkable 46 percent increase compared to the same period two years earlier. This surge has played a pivotal role in supporting the current account, enabling it to remain in surplus last year despite weak export performance.

A closer look at the composition of these inflows reveals a heavy reliance on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Approximately 53 percent of remittances during this period originated from the GCC region, with Saudi Arabia contributing 23 percent, the United Arab Emirates accounting for 21 percent, and the remaining 10 percent coming from other Gulf economies.

The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has projected total remittance inflows to reach \$42 billion for the full fiscal year 2025–26. Achieving this target would require an average monthly inflow of around \$3.9 billion over the remaining four months, compared to an average of \$3.3 billion during the first eight months.

While seasonal factors such as Ramadan and the two Eid festivals typically boost remittance flows, some analysts believe that reaching \$42 billion may be optimistic. A more realistic estimate suggests that total inflows could approach \$41 billion by the end of the fiscal year.

Despite this strong performance, concerns are growing about the sustainability of remittance-driven stability. The concentration of inflows from a relatively small number of countries exposes Pakistan to external shocks, particularly those affecting the Gulf region.

The ongoing conflict involving Iran has significantly heightened geopolitical tensions across the Middle East. Unlike previous conflicts, which were often confined to a single country, the current situation appears

to be more widespread, with risks spilling over into multiple Gulf states. This evolving security environment is altering the region's risk profile. Gulf economies — especially the UAE — have long been viewed as safe havens for investment due to their political stability, advanced infrastructure, and business-friendly policies. The UAE, in particular, has experienced sustained growth in its real estate sector and has increasingly positioned itself as a hub for technology, attracting investments in data centres and cloud infrastructure.

However, the persistence of regional instability could undermine investor confidence. While the full impact will only become clear over time, there are already signs that companies are reassessing their strategies, including shifting some of their digital infrastructure to more stable regions in Europe.

Geopolitical tensions also have broader economic implications. Supply chain disruptions, sporadic security incidents, and rising uncertainty could slow economic growth across the GCC. This, in turn, may reduce job creation and limit business opportunities for expatriate workers — including millions of Pakistanis who rely on employment in the region.

The trajectory of the conflict remains uncertain. There are indications that the United States and GCC countries may prefer a de-escalation, given the economic costs associated with prolonged instability, including high energy prices and financial market volatility. However, the ideological motivations of key actors involved in the conflict could prolong hostilities, making a quick resolution uncertain.

If tensions ease in the near term, commodity prices — particularly gas and petroleum products — may gradually stabilise, while oil prices could decline more rapidly. In such a scenario, Pakistan's external account might experience some pressure due to lower remittance inflows, but not to the extent of causing immediate instability.

The more pressing concern lies in the medium- to long-term outlook. Even if the current conflict subsides, the possibility of recurring tensions in the region cannot be ruled out. Future episodes of conflict could disrupt economic activity in the Gulf, affecting both employment opportunities and income levels for expatriate workers.

Pakistan's dependence on remittances is particularly pronounced when compared

to other large economies. For countries with populations exceeding 100 million, Pakistan has one of the highest levels of reliance on remittances, which are now approaching 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). This ratio is more than double that of India and significantly higher than that of Bangladesh.

Such dependence creates structural vulnerabilities. Any slowdown in remittance inflows could quickly translate into pressure on the current account, exchange rate, and foreign exchange reserves. Given Pakistan's already fragile external position, this represents a significant risk.

At present, there is no immediate crisis on the horizon. Strong remittance inflows continue to provide a cushion, helping the country manage its external obligations and maintain a degree of macroeconomic stability. However, relying excessively on a single source of foreign exchange is not a sustainable long-term strategy.

To mitigate these risks, Pakistan must adopt a more diversified approach to external earnings. Strengthening export performance should be a top priority, particularly by enhancing competitiveness, improving product quality, and exploring new markets. Expanding the geographical base of remittances is equally important to reduce concentration risk.

In addition, structural reforms aimed at improving the business environment and attracting foreign investment could help create alternative sources of foreign exchange. Developing sectors such as information technology, manufacturing, and value-added agriculture could also contribute to a more balanced external account.

Ultimately, Pakistan's economic resilience will depend on its ability to reduce dependence on remittances and build a more diversified and sustainable external sector. While remittances have served as a vital stabiliser in recent years, they should not be viewed as a permanent solution to the country's structural economic challenges.

For now, the continuation of strong inflows offers some comfort. But as geopolitical uncertainties persist, particularly in the Gulf region, policymakers must remain vigilant and proactive in addressing emerging risks. A forward-looking strategy that emphasises diversification, resilience, and reform will be essential to safeguarding Pakistan's economic stability in the years ahead.

Macroeconomic stability or statistical mirage?

Husnain Shahid

The government has recently sought to reassure the public that Pakistan's petroleum supplies remain sufficient to meet domestic demand, easing fears of potential shortages amid ongoing geopolitical tensions. Officials have attributed this stability to timely policy decisions, while pointing to improvements in key macroeconomic indicators as evidence of a strengthening external position.

Among these indicators, the current account balance and foreign exchange reserves have shown some positive movement. Pakistan recorded a current account surplus of \$427 million in February 2026, a notable increase from the \$68 million surplus in January. This improvement was largely driven by a steady rise in workers' remittances, which reached \$3.288 billion in February, compared to \$3.127 billion in the same month last year.

However, a closer examination of the broader trend suggests that these gains may not be as robust as they appear. Despite the monthly surplus, the cumulative current account balance for the first seven months of the fiscal year (July–January) remained in deficit at \$1.1 billion, according to the Finance Division's economic update.

Including February's performance, the deficit for the first eight months still stood at \$673 million, indicating that structural pressures on the external account persist.

The second indicator cited by the government is the improvement in gross foreign exchange reserves, which reportedly rose to \$17.164 billion. While this increase provides some buffer against external shocks, it is important to distinguish between gross and net reserves. Gross reserves reflect the total foreign assets held by the central bank, whereas net reserves account for short-term external liabilities and thus offer a more accurate measure of available liquidity to support the currency.

Data from earlier in February 2026 suggests that reserves were at \$16.2 billion, raising questions about the pace and sustainability of their accumulation. Moreover, the relative stability of the exchange rate during this period warrants scrutiny. The rupee remained broadly unchanged — moving marginally from 279.6 per

US dollar in February 2025 to around 279.5 by late February 2026 — despite fluctuations in reserve levels. This stability may reflect policy interventions rather than purely market-driven dynamics.

An analysis of the components contributing to the current account surplus further highlights underlying vulnerabilities. The improvement in February appears to have been influenced more by a contraction in imports than by a strengthening of exports.

Exports declined to \$2.482 billion in February 2026, down from \$2.745 billion in January and also lower than the \$2.609 billion recorded in February 2025. At the same time, imports fell to \$5.152 billion from \$5.346 billion in January. While a reduction in imports can temporarily narrow the trade deficit, it does not necessarily indicate a healthy expansion in economic



activity.

In fact, the comparison with February 2025 is instructive. Imports during that period were even lower, at \$5.050 billion, but this was largely due to administrative restrictions imposed by the government to curb external imbalances. These measures were later relaxed because they were constraining economic growth, limiting industrial output, and adversely affecting employment and poverty levels.

The recent decline in imports may partly reflect external factors, including disruptions linked to the ongoing Middle East conflict, rather than deliberate policy measures or improvements in domestic productivity. This underscores the fragility of the current account surplus, which may prove difficult to sustain if external conditions change.

More concerning are trends in investment inflows, which paint a less encouraging picture of Pakistan's economic outlook. Foreign direct investment (FDI) during the July–Janu-

ary period of fiscal year 2025-26 fell sharply to \$981.4 million, compared with \$1.660 billion in the same period last year — a significant decline of 40.9 percent. Portfolio investment has also deteriorated, with net outflows reaching negative \$463.9 million in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, compared to negative \$177 million in the same period last year. This represents a steep increase of 162 percent in outflows, signalling declining investor confidence in Pakistan's financial markets.

These trends are particularly striking given that Pakistan maintains one of the highest policy interest rates in the region, which would typically be expected to attract foreign capital. The continued outflow of portfolio investment suggests that investors remain concerned about macroeconomic stability, policy consistency, and external risks.

Taken together, these indicators point to a disconnect between headline improvements and underlying economic realities. While the current account surplus and higher reserves offer some short-term relief, they are not sufficient to offset structural weaknesses in trade performance and investment flows.

The government's emphasis on selective positive indicators risks overlooking

deeper challenges that require comprehensive policy responses. A narrow focus on short-term gains may obscure the need for reforms aimed at strengthening export competitiveness, attracting sustainable investment, and improving overall economic resilience.

A more holistic approach to macroeconomic management is therefore essential. Policymakers must assess not only headline figures but also the underlying components driving these outcomes. This includes examining the quality and sustainability of inflows, the composition of trade, and the broader investment climate.

In conclusion, while recent data provides some grounds for cautious optimism, it also highlights the importance of looking beyond surface-level improvements. Pakistan's economic stability will depend not on isolated indicators, but on a coordinated strategy that addresses structural imbalances, restores investor confidence, and ensures long-term sustainability.

A chokepoint for the economy

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economic vulnerability to global energy shocks has once again come into sharp focus, as a recent study by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) warns that any disruption in the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz could have severe and far-reaching consequences for the country's economy.

The study highlights that Pakistan — as a heavily energy-importing nation — is particularly exposed to fluctuations in global oil supply chains. Even a minor disruption in oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical energy corridors, could trigger a chain reaction of rising fuel costs, accelerating inflation, and mounting pressure on the country's external accounts.

The research presents a detailed, scenario-based analysis of how global energy disruptions transmit into Pakistan's domestic economy. According to the study, nearly 20 percent of the world's petroleum supply — approximately 20 million barrels per day — passes through the Strait of Hormuz. This makes the waterway a critical artery for global energy flows. Any geopolitical tension, military conflict, or logistical disruption in this region can quickly lead to sharp spikes in international oil prices.

For Pakistan, where more than 22 percent of total imports consist of energy products, such disruptions carry significant economic risks. The study stresses that the impact of oil shocks is not limited to crude prices alone but extends across multiple economic channels, making the overall effect more complex and severe than commonly perceived. One of the key contributions of the research is its challenge to the conventional assumption that domestic fuel prices are driven primarily by international crude oil rates. Instead, it highlights a multi-layered transmission mechanism that amplifies the impact of global shocks.

During periods of crisis, freight and shipping costs tend to rise sharply due to supply chain disruptions. War-risk insurance premiums also increase, adding further to the cost of transporting oil. At the same time, exchange rate depreciation makes imports more expensive, while domestic taxes, duties, and distribution margins further compound

the final price paid by consumers.

As a result, global oil shocks translate into a series of interconnected domestic price increases, significantly intensifying inflationary pressures across the economy. To assess the potential magnitude of these impacts, the study uses a nonlinear scenario framework, outlining three possible outcomes: mild, stress, and severe shocks. Under a mild shock scenario, inflation could rise to nearly 8.8 percent within six months, reversing recent disinflation trends. In a stress scenario, inflation could exceed 10.4 percent, reaching levels that pose serious macroeconomic risks. In the most severe case, inflation could surpass 12 percent, driven by strong second-round effects that ripple through various sectors of the economy.

The study notes that even under conservative assumptions, the effects of an oil shock would be widespread. Higher diesel prices would increase transportation costs, which in turn would raise the prices of essential goods, particularly food items. This cascading effect would disproportionately affect lower-income households, further exacerbating economic inequality.

In addition to inflationary pressures, the study highlights significant risks to Pakistan's external sector. A disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could lead to a substantial increase in the country's petroleum import bill. Monthly petroleum imports could rise by as much as \$384 million, while the current account — which may initially be in surplus — could quickly shift into deficit within a matter of months. Over the course of a year, the total external impact could exceed \$4.6 billion in a severe shock scenario.

This would create a dangerous feedback loop. Higher import costs would put downward pressure on the Pakistani rupee, leading to further increases in fuel prices and inflation. The resulting economic instability could complicate policymaking and limit the government's ability to respond effectively. A particularly important finding of the study is the central role of high-speed diesel (HSD) in transmitting inflation throughout the economy. Diesel is deeply embedded in Pakistan's economic structure, powering transport systems, agricultural machinery, and supply chains.

Because of this, any increase in diesel prices has a disproportionately large impact on overall inflation, especially food inflation.

The study identifies diesel as a key driver of second-round effects, where initial price increases lead to broader and more persistent inflationary trends.

In light of these risks, the study calls for urgent and coordinated policy measures to enhance Pakistan's resilience to external energy shocks. Among its key recommendations is the introduction of a transparent and rules-based fuel pricing mechanism. Such a system would reduce uncertainty and improve the predictability of domestic fuel prices. It also emphasises the need to prioritise monitoring of diesel prices, given their critical role in the economy. Improved coordination between key institutions — including the State Bank of Pakistan, the Ministry of Finance, and the Petroleum Division — is essential to ensure a coherent policy response.

Targeted support for essential sectors, such as public transport and food supply chains, is also recommended to mitigate the impact on vulnerable populations. In addition, the study highlights the importance of proactive fuel financing strategies to protect the country's external account from sudden shocks.

Over the longer term, the research underscores the need for structural reforms aimed at reducing Pakistan's dependence on imported energy, particularly diesel. Investments in alternative energy sources, improvements in energy efficiency, and diversification of supply routes could help strengthen the country's energy security. The overarching message of the PIDE study is clear: Pakistan's exposure to global energy disruptions is deeper and more complex than widely understood. A disruption in the Strait of Hormuz is not merely an external geopolitical event — it has the potential to trigger a full-scale domestic macroeconomic shock.

As global uncertainties persist, the need for proactive planning and coordinated policymaking has become more urgent than ever. Managing fuel pricing, controlling inflation, and safeguarding external stability are closely interconnected challenges that require a comprehensive and forward-looking strategy.

Without such measures, Pakistan risks remaining highly vulnerable to external shocks, with serious implications for economic stability and the well-being of its population.

Pak-Afghan tensions and refugee debate

Raza Khan

As tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban continue to escalate, a recent statement by Khawaja Asif describing the hosting of Afghan refugees as Pakistan's "gravest mistake" has sparked a candid and controversial debate on decades of Islamabad's Afghanistan policy. The remarks reflect growing frustration within Pakistan's leadership as relations with Kabul deteriorate sharply amid rising security challenges.

The latest phase of armed confrontation between Islamabad and the Taliban rulers began in late February 2026, following a surge in terrorist attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These attacks were attributed to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which Pakistan alleges operates from Afghan territory with the tacit support of Kabul authorities. In response, Pakistan carried out air strikes targeting TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan, marking a significant escalation in cross-border hostilities.

The Afghan Taliban retaliated by launching attacks on Pakistani border security posts, resulting in casualties among Pakistani military personnel. In response, Pakistan initiated Operation Ghazab Lil Haq on February 27, 2026, a large-scale military action aimed at Taliban positions. The operation followed a critical border incident in which Afghan Taliban fighters allegedly killed several Pakistani soldiers and temporarily seized control of certain checkpoints. This episode proved to be a tipping point, prompting Pakistan's leadership to conclude that the Taliban had crossed a critical threshold, necessitating a robust military response. Subsequently, Khawaja Asif declared that Pakistan was effectively in an "open war" situation with the Afghan Taliban.

Despite this escalation, Pakistani leaders have continued to emphasise that the people of Afghanistan are regarded as "brothers and sisters," while placing responsibility for the crisis on the Taliban regime. Islamabad maintains that the Taliban government is unelected and lacks broad-based legitimacy within Afghanistan, and that its policies are deepening divisions between the two neighbouring countries.

Analysts and observers point out that the Afghan Taliban face a complex dilemma. On one hand, they remain indebted to the TTP, which supported their insurgency during the two-decade conflict against US- and NATO-backed governments led by Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani from 2002 to 2021. On the other hand, their domestic unpopularity has driven them to adopt policies aimed at rallying nationalist sentiment, including fostering anti-Pakistan narratives. Historically, Afghan governments have often propagated claims regarding disputed territories in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, contributing to persistent mistrust and hostility among segments of the Afghan population.

Within this broader context, Khawaja



Asif's remarks on Afghan refugees have been interpreted by some as a reflection of mounting security concerns. Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades, particularly since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. However, authorities now argue that the presence of large numbers of undocumented migrants poses security risks, especially amid allegations of involvement by some individuals in militant activities linked to the TTP—referred to by the Pakistani state as Fitna-tul-Khawarij.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that the refugee issue is complex and multifaceted. While security concerns are valid, generalisations about entire communities can obscure the reality that the vast majority of Afghan refugees have lived peacefully in Pakistan and contributed to its economy,

particularly in trade and small businesses. Many have spent decades in Pakistan, raising families and building livelihoods under challenging circumstances.

The economic dimension of the refugee presence has also been debated. In provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, Afghan migrants have played a visible role in local markets and labour sectors. Critics argue that this has intensified competition for jobs and resources, while others contend that refugees have contributed positively to economic activity and cross-border trade. These competing narratives underscore the need for balanced, evidence-based policymaking rather than sweeping conclusions.

Recent developments indicate that Pakistan has intensified efforts to regulate the presence of Afghan nationals, including crackdowns on undocumented migrants and calls for repatriation. Officials have argued that migration policies must align with international norms, allowing only a limited number of individuals to reside and work in the country through legal channels.

At the same time, the humanitarian dimension of the issue cannot be overlooked. Millions of Afghans have fled decades of conflict, instability and economic hardship. Any policy decisions regarding their status must carefully balance national security imperatives with international legal obligations and humanitarian considerations.

Ultimately, the current crisis between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban reflects a convergence of security, political and historical factors. The rise in cross-border militancy, the unresolved refugee question and mutual distrust have combined to create a volatile situation.

Moving forward, sustainable peace will require not only firm security measures but also diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation and a nuanced approach to long-standing issues that have shaped relations between the two countries for decades.

The cost of care: Pakistan's UHC challenge

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Pakistan's healthcare system faces significant challenges, from inequitable access to rising burdens of non-communicable diseases.

The 2024 Universal Healthcare (UHC) Monitoring Report, developed in collaboration with the Ministry of National Health Services and the World Health Organization (WHO), highlights these pressing concerns. With only half the population having access to essential healthcare services, and catastrophic health expenditures pushing many into poverty, achieving UHC remains a distant goal. Simultaneously, an alarming surge in NCDs, including diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, threatens the nation's health and socio-economic stability. These challenges call for urgent action, innovative solutions, and robust public-private partnerships.

The 2024 Universal Healthcare (UHC) Monitoring Report highlights significant gaps in the country's healthcare system. According to the report, only 50% of Pakistan's population currently has access to UHC, far below the global target of 80%. The report evaluates UHC using two key indicators: essential service delivery coverage and financial protection. While there has been progress, with the UHC service coverage index improving from 40 in 2015 to 53.9 in 2023, the challenges ahead remain substantial.

Performance varied across regions in 2023 as Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) achieved the highest score at 63.9%. Punjab followed with 55.5%. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa recorded 51%, Sindh 50.7%, and Balochistan 38.4%. The report emphasized equity issues, noting that Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan lag significantly behind other areas, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

The report underscored several critical issues. The proportion of households spending more than 10% of their income on healthcare worsened between 2013 and 2021, with 5.4% of households affected in 2021. Low government investment and reliance on out-of-pocket payments remain key barriers. While the burden of disease has declined from 70,086 DALYs per 100,000 population in 1990 to 42,399 in 2021, the challenge of addressing non-communicable diseases and mental health issues is growing.

The report called for long-term investments in human capital, efficient resource utilization, and capacity building at the district

and private sector levels. It also stressed the importance of inter-sectoral policies to tackle over half of the disease burden effectively. While Pakistan has made strides in improving UHC, achieving equitable and comprehensive healthcare access remains a distant goal. The report highlights stark disparities in healthcare access across Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, which lag significantly behind other regions. These inequities underline the urgent need for targeted interventions and equitable healthcare policies. One of the report's critical findings is the worsening trend in catastrophic expenditures between 2013 and 2021. A significant share of healthcare funding relies on out-of-pocket payments, which deter many citizens from seeking essential health services and push vulnerable families further into poverty.



Despite healthcare being recognized globally as a fundamental human right and an essential element of socio-economic development, it remains a low priority for Pakistan's policymakers. Resource constraints are often cited as barriers to progress, yet more efficient allocation and utilization of existing resources could significantly improve healthcare outcomes. The report highlights examples of private contributions and public-private partnerships that are making an impact. In Punjab, philanthropic entrepreneurs have funded additional facilities in government hospitals and provided free medicines and meals to underserved populations. In Sindh, a capacity enhancement initiative combines monetary donations from philanthropists with government resources, resulting in better-managed public hospitals offering free, high-quality health services. This model serves as a blueprint for other provinces to emulate.

It is imperative for all stakeholders to rec-

ognize that investments in universal healthcare not only improve individual well-being but also contribute to the nation's socio-economic development. Inter-sectoral policies and interventions, as suggested in the report, could address more than half of Pakistan's disease burden, making it an actionable course of action.

Pakistan is experiencing an alarming epidemiological shift, with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) accounting for over 60% of annual deaths, as noted in a report by the World Health Organization (WHO). Pakistan now has the highest global diabetes prevalence, with cases rising from 6.3 million in 2011 to an estimated 36 million in 2024, including one million pre-diabetics. Diabetes claims over 1,100 lives daily. Cardiovascular Diseases are responsible for 55% of NCD-related deaths, amounting to approximately 450,000 fatalities

annually. Nearly 40% of the population is overweight or obese, with the adult obesity rate reaching 28%, according to WHO estimates. The growing burden of NCDs and regional healthcare disparities demand urgent and coordinated action. By embracing public-private partnerships, improving resource allocation, and adopting inter-sectoral approaches, Pakistan can address its pressing healthcare challenges.

Healthcare investments are not just expenditures but long-term investments in human capital, driving the country towards progress and prosperity. It is time for policymakers to prioritize healthcare and leverage every available opportunity to improve the lives of millions.

The growing disparities in healthcare access and the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases in Pakistan highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms. While examples of private contributions and public-private partnerships offer hope, a broader, unified effort is required to address inequities, improve financial protection, and invest in long-term healthcare infrastructure. Policymakers must recognize that healthcare is not merely a basic human right but also a cornerstone of national development. By adopting inter-sectoral policies and prioritizing investments in health systems, Pakistan can improve the quality of life for its citizens and pave the way for sustainable progress and prosperity.

The mirror of rectitude: Where compassion verges upon genius

Dr. Fatima Khan

In a century still searching for its defining grammar — torn between disruption and discovery, fracture and possibility — a question of unusual weight has begun to surface with renewed urgency: who, truly, has shaped our times?

The answer, or at least an ambitious undertaking at one, has arrived through the Impact Hallmarks®, which has unveiled 181 global nominees — including 20 from South Asia and China — for its international opinion poll tied to the Quatercentennial Merited Impacts Gazette (2000-2025). It is not merely a planetary ballot interface; it is an evolving ledger of influence — where human effort is measured not in visibility, but in consequence; not in noise, but in the quiet force of transformation.

And as the first contours of this global exercise come into view, what emerges is less a predominant hierarchy of merit than a tapestry — intri-

cate, layered, and profoundly human. Across these 20 regional icons alone, a remarkable spectrum of human endeavours unfolds. There are guardians of human life such as Chen Si, who has stood watch for decades at the edge of despair, intervening in hundreds of suicide attempts with quiet, unyielding resolve; and there are those who have reframed the science

itself, like Prof Aurangzeb Hafi and Chandra Wickramasinghe. There are ecological visionaries such as Dr Asha de Vos and Yi Jiefang, and there are architects of economic dignity: Prof M. Yunus and Dr. Amjad Saqib, who re-engineered finance as an instrument of social justice. There are defenders of rights and dignity, from Kailash Satyarthi to Dr Jehan



Perera continuing to shape reconciliation in fractured societies.

There are innovators like Dr Fathima Benazir J. and Nitesh Kumar Jangir, whose work directly saves lives, and caregivers such as Pushpa Basnet and Parveen Saeed, who restore dignity to the overlooked. There are embodiments of resilience, such as Arunima Sinha, and the youngest among them — Ghulam Bisher Hafi and Ubaida Al Fiddhah Hafiah, whose voices carry moral clarity far beyond their years.

And finally, there are legacies that continue to breathe through time, in figures like Bilquis Edhi, Ruth Pfau, and A T Ariyaratne, whose lives have become enduring moral compasses.

At the Asian territory's intellectual core, stands Arch-Researcher Aurangzeb Hafi, a figure whose work resists easy categorisation. To call him a scientist would be accurate, but insufficient; to call him a polymath comes closer, yet still only hints at the breadth of his pursuits. His intellectual architecture stretches across cosmology, environmental science, biological systems, toxicology, public health modelling, and digital pedagogy — fields he does not merely visit, but invokes, and then effectuates to interlink.

His core-conceptual frameworks — such as Magneto-Hydro-Tropism (MHT), which explores interactions between magnetic fields and biological patterns, and the IRT Terato-kinesis model, which interrogates developmental anomalies through integrative and environmental triggers — signal a persistent effort to collapse disciplinary silos. In parallel, his applied work has addressed some of the defining crises of the age: modelling COVID-19 outbreak behaviour in resource-constrained environments, advancing environmental toxicity mapping in industrial era, and developing early-warning frameworks for stark public health risks in vulnerable populations.

Yet his work is not confined to theory or laboratory abstraction. During the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, he stepped into one of the most volatile humanitarian landscapes of our history, leading the Child Retardation Risk Assessment (CRR) and Management (CRRM) programmes in Sri Lanka. At a time when much of the global scientific community relied on remote data aggregation, he pursued direct, field-based evidence in high-risk zones — an insistence that not only shaped the integrity of his findings but also redefined methodological courage in 'crisis surveillance pedagogics'. The recognition that followed — including the rare 'De Jure' supreme knighthood classification — was notable; his subsequent decision to decline the Nobel Prize nomination in 2006, on ethical grounds linked to funding sources, was perhaps even more so.

In the years since, Arch-Researcher Hafi's initiatives have continued to radiate

outward. His work in conservation biology now intersects with climate adaptation strategies for fragile ecosystems, proposing community-linked ecological resilience models of sewage-drainage systems to combat the underground water reservoirs' lethal toxification. In modern education systems, his AZH Deca-Archic Phygital Literacy Model seeks to bridge the structural divide between physical and digital learning environments, particularly in under-resourced regions. He has also contributed to digital public health architectures, interdisciplinary research collaboratives, and youth-oriented knowledge platforms — initiatives that treat knowledge not as static output, but as a living, distributive force.

Besides him, in the intellect-fertile region of South Asia, gathers a constellation of thinkers and doers whose work expands the very meaning of scientific endeavour. The signature of the era in astrobiology and interstellar research Prof Dr Chandra Wickramasinghe continues to provoke the scientific inquiries with his work on cosmic dust and cometary panspermia, inviting humanity to reconsider the origins — and perhaps the universality — of 'the life itself'.

Alongside him is Dr Asha de Vos, who has reshaped marine science by identifying non-migratory blue whale populations in tropical waters, challenging long-held assumptions and rooting conservation in local ecological realities. From China appears forth Shing-Tung Yau, who has altered how science understands space and geometry. His resolution of the Calabi conjecture forms a cornerstone of modern theoretical physics.

The scientific cohort also includes innovators like Dr Fathima Benazir J. and Nitesh Kumar Jangir, whose work continues to bridge discovery with directly saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of people including the children.

But the story unfolding through these nominations is not confined to the planets, equator or laboratories. It moves, with equal force, into the terrain of human dignity.

It is here that Chen Si stands at the threshold — quite literally. For more than two decades, he has kept vigil at the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge, a place long shadowed by despair, and attempts to end own lives. Day after day, he watches, approaches, listens — reading the fragile language of human distress before it becomes irreversible. His interventions, numbering in the hundreds, are not dramatic rescues alone, but acts of sustained care: conversations, follow-ups, quiet support. In his presence, the edge between life and death becomes negotiable again. In many ways, he is reframing the 'humanitarianism itself' — not as distant aid, but as proximity, attention, and the refusal to look away.

Alongside him, Prof M. Yunus and Amjad Saqib have re-engineered compassion

into economic systems: Yunus, through his groundbreaking 'Struggling Members Program', dismantled the barriers of traditional finance, extending trust where collateral was absent. Saqib, through the Akhuwat Foundation, rooted this vision in a culturally embedded ethic of solidarity, building the world's largest interest-free microfinance network and expanding it into a broader welfare ecosystem. Also, Kailash Satyarthi, Pushpa Basnet, and Parveen Saeed seem extending dignity to those often left unseen. Dr Jehan Perera continues to shape the architecture of inter-ethnic peace through dialogue and reform.

Elsewhere, resilience takes on a visceral, almost cinematic quality. Arunima Sinha, once a national-level athlete, refused to let a devastating accident define her limits; instead, she redrew them — becoming the first female amputee to summit Mount Everest and later conquering peaks across continents. From China, Yi Jiefang channels personal grief into ecological restoration, transforming barren land into living forest.

And then, almost unexpectedly, come the youngest voices — clear, unfiltered, and quite difficult to ignore. Ubaida Al Fiddhah Hafiah (11) and her brother Ghulam Bisher Hafi (13) emerge not as future trendsetters, but as present ones, their "Voice for the Voiceless" campaign elevating, by means of the resolutions written in their own blood, the plight of children in conflict zones into global moral consciousness.

In the reflective space of legacy, the narrative slows apparently, but deepens. Bilquis Edhi remains one of the most tender embodiments of compassion — her Jhoola (cradle) initiative, placed outside Edhi centres, offering desperate mothers as well as the society a dignified alternative to child abandonment or infanticide. Over the decades, thousands of newborns were saved through this simple yet profound intervention, each cradle a quiet promise that no child would be left to 'die alone'. Alongside her, Dr Ruth Pfau and A T Ariyaratne stand as enduring moral anchors.

What binds this vast and varied assembly is not geography, nor discipline, nor even recognition. It is impact — measured not in fleeting visibility, but in endurance; not in individual acclaim, but in collective transformation.

With public voting now open at: <https://www.impacthallmarks.org/#voting>, the initiative extends its reach beyond institutions and into the hands of ordinary citizens of the planet — inviting them to participate in an extraordinary act of reflection. Because the Quatercentennial Merited Impacts Gazette is not just a record of who mattered. It is a mirror, held up to the very face of our times — reflecting not just achievement, but values; not just progress, but purpose — the 21st Century's 'Mirror of Rectitude.'

Why the oil and gas price shock from the Iran war won't just fade away

Nikolay Kozhanov

The US-Israeli war on Iran will have a profound impact on the global energy markets. It has already sent the price of the benchmark Brent crude oil soaring to nearly \$120 per barrel, close to its highest point of \$147 recorded in July 2008.

In 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Brent crude also spiked, reaching \$139 per barrel in March, before stabilising at roughly pre-war rates the following year. The price of natural gas also registered a peak in 2022, and so it has this month, as a result of the attacks on Iran and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Some may point to the energy shock of the Russia-Ukraine war and argue that the Iran war will follow the same pattern: a temporary shock and eventual market normalisation. But that is unlikely to be the case. Yes, oil and gas prices will eventually stabilise, but that would come at a much higher economic cost for the region and the world.

The 2022 energy shock was primarily driven by the sanctions and price caps that European countries and the United States imposed on Russia. This pushed large volumes of oil into alternative trade routes and cut off most of the Russian pipeline gas supply to Europe. This resulted in the rerouting of oil and gas flows and the coordinated release of oil reserves to mitigate price spikes.

The war and the sanctions, however, did not change Russia's position in the global market: it remained one of the largest oil and gas producers. It continued to sell its hydrocarbons internationally, including to European countries, albeit through intermediaries.

By contrast, the 2026 US-Iran war has resulted in a physical chokepoint, taking offline part of the supply of oil and gas due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Tanker traffic disruptions have forced Gulf producers to curtail output as they have run out of storage capacity.

In addition, Iranian strikes on gas and oil infrastructure have resulted in some damage and the shutdown of many facilities as a precaution. These infrastructure attacks have amplified uncertainty, increasing risk premiums, and removing some production capacity from the market.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) assesses that the current episode is the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market, with flows through Hormuz collapsing from 20 million barrels per day to a trickle and

Gulf production cuts of at least 10 million barrels per day.

In 2022, the release of 180 million barrels of oil helped manage the energy price shock as it somewhat alleviated fears of shortages. However, this month's decision by the IEA to release 400 million barrels of oil is unlikely to have the same effect because it is not addressing the root problem: the physical outage.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the reserve release is constrained by logistics. Strategic petroleum reserves are predominantly located in the US, Europe, Japan, and South Korea, where they are stored in inland facilities. Moving this oil to the areas most affected by shortages, namely Asian import markets and, to a lesser extent, Europe, requires time, shipping capacity, and secure maritime routes. In the current context, with the constrained tanker availability, simply releasing oil from storage does not guarantee its



timely delivery to end users.

Rerouting will also not help. Alternative pipeline routes that bypass the Strait of Hormuz in Saudi Arabia and Iraq provide only 3.5–5.5 million barrels per day of spare capacity.

The natural gas market faces a similar crisis. On a yearly basis, 112 billion cubic metres (bcm) of liquefied natural gas (LNG) or 20 percent of global LNG trade, normally passes through the Strait of Hormuz. This has now been cut off.

The alternatives are limited. There is the Dolphin pipeline, which runs from Qatar through the United Arab Emirates and to Oman and transports 20–22 bcm a year. The pipeline itself does not have much extra capacity to take on more gas, and Oman's LNG terminals, where gas is liquefied, also cannot accommodate an increased flow.

The global LNG market is even tighter than oil, and there is no spare production

capacity to satisfy global demand. Most existing facilities are already running at high utilisation rates, and short-term supply flexibility is limited. The expansion of LNG production would take time and cannot compensate for the immediate shortages.

In 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrated that the global energy system had the capacity to absorb price shocks through rerouting, substitution, and policy intervention. In 2026, the US-Israeli war on Iran exposed a fundamental vulnerability: the physical concentration of hydrocarbon flows in critical chokepoints, which cannot be compensated for when a closure occurs.

Unlike sanctions-driven disruptions, a sustained blocking of the Strait of Hormuz obstructs not only trade routes, but the very ability of producers to export, pushing markets beyond adjustment mechanisms into forced demand destruction and structural reconfiguration.

In other words, the longer the war continues and the longer the free transit through the strait remains disrupted, the longer the prices of oil and gas will remain high. Tools used in 2022 – such as diversification and rerouting – will not work to calm the markets.

Persistent high prices will force consumers and industries to curb their consumption. Energy-intensive industries such as petrochemicals, fertilisers, aluminium, steel, and cement are likely to face the most immediate pressure, as raw materials and fuel costs rise sharply.

The transportation sector will also be affected, though with different dynamics. Higher oil prices translate into increased fuel costs for aviation, shipping, and road transport, as well as raising freight rates and ticket prices.

While demand in these sectors is relatively inelastic in the short term, sustained high prices will eventually reduce mobility, shift consumption patterns, and accelerate efficiency measures. At the household level, higher energy costs will reduce disposable income, leading to indirect consumption contraction across the broader economy.

For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, this will not be merely a market shock but an existential challenge to their role as reliable suppliers, as export disruptions, infrastructure vulnerability, and rising security costs undermine both volumes and credibility.

For the rest of the world, this would mean slower economic growth. The only way to avoid grave economic consequences is to end the war as soon as possible.

Green goals, gridlock Reality

The government's recent implementation of a four-day workweek is a commendable initiative for national fuel conservation. However, additional strategies are necessary to manage the post-Eid wedding season, which typically triggers severe traffic congestion in Karachi, and risks offsetting these energy savings. Given that large banquets can draw 500 guests and approximately 100 vehicles per event, the resulting multiplier effect on road density is significant. To mitigate this, the government should consider regulating guest limits, promoting virtual ceremonies, or advocating simplified ceremonies.

Ayaz Rehmani
Karachi

The high cost of poor coordination

Six months ago, the Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) laid fresh gas pipelines in Karachi. After completing the work, they covered the dug-up roads with just mud. This made the road surface uneven, resulting in many accidents. The city government has so far not bothered to carpet these roads. The road in Garden East leading towards Aga Khan Jamatkhana was carpeted a month ago. The sewerage department has now lined up cement pipes, indicating that it will be dug up again. Why is the city government wasting the hard-earned money of Karachi's taxpayers?

M. Rafique Zakaria
Karachi

Petrol profiteering

With the recent hike in fuel prices, petrol pumps in smaller cities are refusing to provide the key commodity. Even in metropolitan areas, some petrol pumps are doing the same. Making things worse is the presence of those selling petrol in plastic bottles at double the price. It is surprising that such individuals sell petrol right next to the petrol pumps, and nobody objects to it; neither the pump-owners nor the local authorities. The relevant authorities should take urgent and effective action against petrol pumps that refuse to sell the commodity, which forces people to approach those selling illegally. There is a clear need to end this negligence and crackdown on the emerging black market.

Azeem Hassan Maitlo
Khairpur Mirs

The erosion of global order

The United Nations, an institution that once symbolised humanity's collective commitment to peace, stands increasingly weakened. The very country that was instrumental in creating and enforcing it, the United States, is drifting away from it. Since his return to the White House, the rhetoric and actions of Donald Trump have undermined the legitimacy of international law and for the institutions that once amplified

American power.

This erosion of legal norms creates a dangerous precedent. If powerful states tend to feel free to violate borders, eliminate political leaders, or destroy infrastructure without accountability, smaller nations will face increasing insecurity. The collapse of trust in international law could also disrupt global commerce, maritime navigation, and air travel agreements that depend on mutual respect for established rules.

Ironically, this transformation could ultimately weaken the very country that once championed the rules-based order. The international system created after World War II magnified American influence by aligning global institutions with its values and interests. By abandoning those frameworks, Washington risks encouraging a fragmented world where competing blocs pursue power without restraint.

The war in Gaza illustrates another paradox. Despite overwhelming military superiority and the deployment of some of the world's most advanced weapons systems, Israel and its allies have struggled to achieve decisive strategic outcomes against the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah. If overwhelming military force cannot eliminate small groups, what would be the consequences of applying the same strategy against a large and heavily armed nation like Iran? Just the thought is frightening. The deeper lesson is that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through force alone. Lasting solutions require dialogue, diplomacy and recognition of mutual sovereignty. The original vision behind the UN was precisely this: a system where disputes and disagreements would be resolved through negotiation, not war.

Today, that vision appears battered, perhaps even buried. Yet, history suggests that institutions often evolve through crisis. The devastation of two world wars had given birth to the UN. The present erosion of international law may ultimately compel global leaders to reform and strengthen the very institutions that today appear seriously weakened. Eventually, the future of the global order may depend not on military strength, but on whether or not the world chooses once again to believe that law must stand above power.

Qamar Bashir
Islamabad

The immigrant visa bottleneck

While the United States has historically identified itself as a nation built by immigrants, access to its immigrant visa regime has progressively become more restrictive for applicants from Pakistan.

The current disruptions related to the Iran conflict aside, prolonged processing times, extensive security clearances, administrative backlogs and limited visa allocations have rendered lawful immigration an arduous and uncertain process for Pakistani families and professionals. Family-based immigration cases frequently remain pending for many years, resulting in

prolonged separation of close relatives. Similarly, skilled and qualified professionals, despite meeting all statutory and regulatory requirements, often encounter delays that undermine the objectives of merit-based and lawful migration. These challenges have social, economic and humanitarian implications that extend beyond individual applicants. In this context, the role of the Pakistan Foreign Office assumes particular importance. As the primary institution responsible for safeguarding the interests of Pakistani citizens abroad, the Foreign Office is expected to engage diplomatically with host governments to address systemic concerns affecting Pakistani nationals. Structured diplomatic dialogue, consular advocacy and sustained engagement with US authorities can help ensure that visa processes remain transparent, predictable and non-discriminatory. There is no denying the crucial fact that immigration policy falls clearly within the sovereign domain of each state, and national security considerations are also legitimate. However, international practice and diplomatic norms equally emphasise fairness, proportionality and, indeed, equal treatment.

In fact, persistent disparities in processing outcomes for certain nationalities risk eroding confidence in lawful migration systems, and strain bilateral people-to-people relations. A well-coordinated diplomatic approach would serve the mutual interests of both the countries. Facilitating lawful immigration strengthens bilateral relations, supports family unity, and enables skilled individuals to contribute to their societies.

Asad Ullah Taimur Muhmand
Islamabad

Solarisation under siege

The proposed new rules, Prosumers Regulation 2025, appear to overregulate and, thereby, pulverise the march of rapid solarisation of domestic and commercial quarters. The pace at which the installation of solar systems has progressed in the country is indicative of both the customers' preference for electricity generation and disaffection with the power suppliers.

For some time now, the government was said to be encouraging the spread of solarisation. The cost of solar paraphernalia dipped markedly, and consumers earned dividends on account of net metering. But the new regulation has once again underscored the ruinous inconsistency of policies. It is not difficult to overemphasise the imperative importance of encouraging the solarisation of homes and commercial operations across the country in order to facilitate consumers, generate clean energy, give respite from power outages, support small businesses and agricultural activity, and, above all, provide due employment opportunities to many skilled and unskilled labourers as well as qualified engineers.

Babar Khan Sarai
Peshawar

Exercise and pain: How to move no matter how much you hurt

Jen Ator

People with chronic pain hear all about a fantasy world while living in a real one. From social media to headlines, that fantasy world has never been more in our faces. Fantasy: Research shows exercise helps chronic pain! Just get moving! Build strength, push through, all the data points to long-term pain relief from physical activity! Reality: Every decision about movement can feel like a negotiation. Will this make me worse? Am I about to trigger a flare? Is five minutes even worth it? Christynne Helfrich, a physical therapist at Hinge Health, mentions a recent patient, call him Kevin, who encapsulated the typical pain patient she sees: He'd already cycled through three other PTs, undergone imaging that revealed nothing, and still found himself in constant pain. "To say he was doubtful before we even began would be an understatement," she says. Kevin's complaint: Persistent and sometimes brutal neck and shoulder pain. But he also suffered the ripple effects — friendships fading because he was "too grumpy to be around," activities he once loved slipping out of reach. Helfrich listened. She asked questions about his daily routines, stress levels, sleep; she noticed patterns that no provider had walked him through before. Over the next 12 weeks, Kevin's relationship with movement began to change. The pain didn't vanish overnight, and flare-ups still happened, but they no longer defined him. Instead of spiraling, he understood his triggers, adjusted, and kept going. The result was far from a miracle cure, but it was something more sustainable: confidence, resilience, and a path forward. Helfrich's story illustrates a bigger truth about the complicated intersection of chronic pain and exercise.

The barriers aren't just physical; they're emotional, psychological, and deeply personal. It's true that physical activity can help reduce pain.



This 5-minute stress buster can boost your mood for days

Damian McNamara

When you're stressed, it's common to scroll through videos for a quick laugh or distraction. But new research suggests that switching to short inspirational videos — the kind where underdogs overcome challenges — may be a more effective, longer-lasting way to reduce stress.

These types of videos offer hope, said lead study author Robin Nabi, PhD, a professor of communication at the University of California Santa Barbara. Although the drawbacks of digital media often get the spotlight, this study highlights its potential for good. The findings also build on previous research from Nabi and colleagues supporting hope's significant influence on mental health.

"It's encouraging, especially in a time when things are challenging on a lot of different fronts, to feel like there's something we can do to support ourselves," Nabi said, "something that's easy, that's hopefully enjoyable, and offers these benefits."

Don Grant, PhD, a media psychologist in Los Angeles and a fellow of the American Psychological Association, called the study "extremely significant" and said he was not surprised by the findings. "In my own work, I find that generating and supporting hope is a key factor in helping my clients reduce their stress," said Grant, who was not affiliated with the new study. Stress is often generated by catastrophic or negative self-talk, so to remember, believe in, or even discover hope "is a tremendous tool when successful."



In physics first, Chinese scientists create rare 'hexagonal diamond' that's harder than natural diamond

Damien Pine

Researchers in China have made what they claim to be the first samples of pure hexagonal diamond, a theorized rare variant of superstrong diamond found in meteorites from shattered dwarf planets.



Natural diamond, also called cubic diamond, has been considered the hardest natural material on Earth for so long that the Mohs hardness scale, which rates minerals' resistance to scratching, uses diamond as the scale's upper limit. It's called cubic diamond for its neat arrangements of carbon atoms in a cubic structure. In contrast, hexagonal diamond organizes carbon atoms in a lattice made of hexagons, like a honeycomb. In 1962, researchers at the Pittsburg Coal Research Center theorized that layers of carbon atoms making up diamond could be organized in a hexagonal lattice instead of a cubic one, thanks to how carbon forms bonds with other carbon atoms. In 1967, researchers discovered hexagonal diamond — or lonsdaleite — in the lab, suspecting it could be harder than cubic diamond. They started looking for it in a special type of diamond-rich meteorite called ureilite, which forms from the mantle of smashed dwarf planets. The first detections of hexagonal diamond in the wild were documented in a 1967 paper; three Canyon Diablo meteorites (fragments of an asteroid that created a large crater in Arizona) with about 30% hexagonal and 70% cubic diamond phases, and Goalpara meteorites (found in Assam, India) that had a small amount of hexagonal diamond.

A secret weapon to fight carbon emissions was just discovered: Beavers

Kenna Hughes-Castleberry

Beavers' dams and ponds can turn a stream corridor into a net annual carbon sink, drawing in more carbon than it released over the course of a year, a new study finds.

The finding has big implications for the reintroduction of Eurasian beavers (*Castor fiber*) across Europe after centuries of being hunted to near extinction. If similar patterns hold elsewhere, the animals could help to mitigate climate change by sequestering the greenhouse gas without any costly infrastructure.

"Beavers are not going to solve climate change, but our research shows these natural engineers can quietly help river landscapes store more carbon for decades to come," study lead author Lukas Hallberg, a researcher at the University of Birmingham in the U.K., told Live Science in an email. In the study, published March 18 in the journal *Communications Earth and Environment*, the researchers examined a 0.5-mile (0.8 kilometers) beaver-influenced stream in northern Switzerland. Before the beaver wetland was established in 2010, the stream acted as more of a floodplain, with lots of trees. When the beavers were introduced, they removed many of the trees for their dams, opening up the canopy for smaller plants. The scientists measured carbon in the water, escaping into the atmosphere and being stored in sediments, biomass and deadwood. They did this by collecting core samples from the sediment and surrounding forest, along with plant samples from the algae growing along the stream.



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