

■ Can US-Iran deal deliver durable peace? - Page 5

■ Tougher times ahead - Page 6

■ Stability without growth - Page 7

WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

PAKISTAN'S WHEAT ECONOMY UNDER STRAIN

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Index

CUTTING EDGE

4

Economics
Pakistan's wheat economy under strain

10

Education
Education: Four provinces, one persistent failure

5

Opinion
Can US-Iran deal deliver durable peace?

11

Opinion
Pakistan's real failure is not planning, but execution

6

Economics
Tougher times ahead

7

Economics
Stability without growth

8

Economics
Pakistan's external sector exposes structural fault lines

9

Tension
Strategic perils of India's escalating anti-Pakistan posturing

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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Pakistan's wheat economy under strain

Farhan Khan

The wheat sector has remained in a state of crisis over the last two years. Following the recent harvesting season, complaints regarding price fluctuations and possible shortages have surfaced across the country.

Against this backdrop, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz last week ordered strict action against traders who fail to declare their wheat stocks within a fortnight, underlining the government's concern over the size of the 2025-26 crop and fears of rising flour prices in the coming months.

There have recently been reports of lower wheat production and speculative buying by traders anticipating shortages and higher prices in the days ahead. According to the Punjab Agriculture Department, average wheat yields this year remained around 33 maunds per acre, while Punjab's overall production reportedly fell short by three to 10 per cent. However, some experts believe that the national crop may be more than 20 per cent below annual requirements. This is a matter of serious concern in view of volatile global grain markets caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and continuing instability in the Middle East.

To make matters worse, wheat stocks held by the Pakistan Agricultural Storage and Services Corporation Ltd (Passco) and provincial food departments are said to be insufficient to bridge the projected shortfall. Delayed procurement decisions, contradictory policies and uncertainty over stock regulations have further roiled the market. Economists argue that the crisis is not merely about hoarding but reflects rapid market fluctuations driven by anticipated scarcity, uncertainty regarding procurement policy and expectations of future shortages.

The roots of the problem can be traced to the government's decision last year to abandon the support price mechanism and liberalise the wheat market. As a result, farmers received nearly Rs2,200 per maund for wheat — a price that severely disrupted the wheat economy. Consequently, the acreage under cultivation

shrank drastically. Rising fertiliser prices further complicated the situation. Although the Punjab government later announced a procurement price of Rs3,500 per maund this year, the decision came rather late. Consequently, farmers at the beginning of the season reportedly received only Rs2,900 to Rs3,100 per maund.

According to Pakistan Kissan Ittehad, the minimum support price mechanism had been designed to protect farmers from hoarders and black marketeers, but it was abandoned without proper planning. Various studies show that the wheat economy has been facing a severe crisis due to rising input costs. DAP fertiliser prices increased from around Rs12,000 per 50kg bag last year to over Rs16,000 this season, while diesel, electricity, seeds and labour have all become more



expensive. Despite these market realities, the government reduced the indicative wheat price from Rs3,900 per 40kg last year to Rs3,500 this year. This move discouraged wheat sowing. At the same time, wheat yields reportedly declined by nearly five maunds per acre because many growers reduced fertiliser usage amid uncertainty surrounding procurement and pricing policies. According to flour mill owners, inconsistent regulatory interventions and weak financing arrangements further aggravated the crisis. The government announced the procurement support price at a time when open-market prices had already risen sharply.

In many cases, farmers withheld their stocks in the hope of securing higher prices later in the season. Procurement through approved dealers' groups relied heavily on bank

financing, but financial institutions remained reluctant to lend because of prevailing market uncertainty. Meanwhile, private dealers had already swept through the market much earlier.

According to media reports, speculative investors unrelated to the wheat trade also entered the market solely for profit-driven stockpiling. On the other hand, fears of raids, transport restrictions and stock seizures discouraged flour mills from maintaining normal inventories.

Knowledgeable circles maintain that it was a mistake on the part of the government to set aggressive procurement targets, impose restrictive movement controls and intervene administratively at below-market prices. These measures reduced market liquidity by creating uncertainty among traders and private buyers.

It is no secret that markets react not only to actual shortages but also to expectations of shortages. Once farmers and traders became convinced that the crop was smaller and procurement weaker than expected, prices inevitably started rising.

Independent economists suggest that freer wheat movement and transparent private-sector participation can go a long way towards improving the market situation. If flour mills are allowed to build inventories openly, wheat ultimately reaches consumers through increased flour production. However, when traders fear raids or arbitrary restrictions, they

tend to hold stocks for longer periods, further tightening supply in the market.

The government's concern is understandable because food inflation carries serious political implications. It must maintain strategic reserves to address possible market shortages. To achieve this objective, several reform measures are urgently required, including timely crop estimates through satellite and field data, flexible procurement prices linked to market conditions, transparent private-sector participation before harvest and the removal of unnecessary inter-provincial movement barriers. Equally important, the government should focus less on suppressing flour prices and more on reducing agricultural input costs in order to encourage higher production and ensure long-term food security.

Can US-Iran deal deliver durable peace?

Nasim Ahmed

After decades of hostility, proxy wars, sanctions, and military brinkmanship, the Middle East may finally be approaching a historic diplomatic opening. Reports emerging from Washington, Tehran, Doha, Islamabad, and Beijing suggest that the United States and Iran are inching toward a broad framework agreement that could reshape the regional security architecture for years to come.

The latest developments indicate that both sides now recognize that endless confrontation has become too costly politically, economically, and strategically. The question confronting the world is whether this fragile thaw can evolve into a durable peace. Recent reports suggest that negotiators are close to finalizing a temporary 60-day arrangement that would reopen the Strait of Hormuz, reduce tensions, and create space for more comprehensive negotiations on Iran's nuclear program and regional security issues.

At the centre of the talks lies the long-standing dispute over Iran's enriched uranium stockpile. Washington wants Iran to halt high-level enrichment and eventually remove or neutralize its highly enriched uranium reserves. Tehran, however, insists that its nuclear program is peaceful and that any final arrangement must preserve Iran's sovereign right to civilian nuclear technology.

Despite public disagreements, diplomatic signals suggest both sides are moving toward compromise. American negotiators appear willing to phase sanctions relief and allow Iran to resume unrestricted oil exports, while Iran may accept tighter international monitoring and limitations on enrichment levels. The reopening of the Strait of Hormuz has emerged as another crucial pillar of the negotiations. The strait is not merely a regional waterway; it is the lifeline of global energy trade. Any prolonged closure threatens oil supplies, financial markets, and shipping routes across the world. Under the reported framework, Iran would ensure freedom of navigation while the United States would ease naval pressure and sanctions targeting Iranian ports and maritime trade.

The respective positions of Washington and Tehran reflect cautious pragmatism rather than mutual trust. The United States seeks three primary objectives: preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons capability, guaranteeing free navigation through Hormuz, and stabilizing the region sufficiently to avoid another costly

Middle Eastern war. Washington also wants to reassure Gulf allies and Israel that any agreement will not embolden Iran strategically.

Iran, on the other hand, seeks recognition of its regional legitimacy, removal of crippling sanctions, recovery of frozen financial assets, and guarantees against future military action. Tehran also wants acknowledgment that it cannot be permanently isolated from the regional order.

One of the most significant dimensions of current diplomacy is the growing role of China. Beijing has quietly emerged as a critical power broker because of its deep economic ties with both Iran and Gulf Arab states. China remains heavily dependent on Middle Eastern energy imports and therefore has a strong interest in ensuring stability in the Gulf. This explains why US President Donald Trump's recent visit to Beijing attracted close global attention. Reports indicate that Iran and Hormuz were central topics during Trump's discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Trump reportedly sought Chinese cooperation in persuading Iran to maintain open shipping lanes and moderate its nuclear posture.

China's position is nuanced. Beijing opposes military escalation and unilateral sanctions while simultaneously supporting diplomatic engagement. Chinese leaders appear eager to project themselves as responsible global mediators capable of balancing relations with all sides. Beijing also understands that a stable Middle East strengthens China's Belt and Road economic ambitions.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has played a highly constructive role in keeping negotiations alive. Islamabad has reportedly served as an important intermediary channel between Washington and Tehran during periods when direct communication became politically difficult. Pakistani diplomatic and military leadership have consistently emphasized de-escalation and regional stability.

Pakistan's involvement reflects both geography and strategic necessity. A wider regional war would have severely damaged Pakistan's fragile economy, disrupted energy supplies, and intensified sectarian tensions within the region. Islamabad therefore had every incentive to facilitate dialogue rather than confrontation.

The Gulf Arab states are also recalibrating their positions in response to changing realities. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates increasingly recognize that perpetual hostility with Iran threatens their own economic modernization agendas. Mega-development projects, foreign investment plans, tourism initiatives, and energy diversification

programs all require regional stability.

Rather than relying exclusively on external military protection, Gulf states may now seek inclusion within a broader collective security framework involving Iran, the United States, and regional powers. Such an arrangement could include maritime security cooperation, non-aggression commitments, crisis hotlines, and gradual confidence-building measures.

In this evolving landscape, Qatar has emerged as one of the most effective diplomatic mediators. Doha maintains working relationships with Washington, Tehran, Islamist movements, and Gulf monarchies simultaneously. Qatar's flexible diplomacy and communication channels have enabled it to facilitate sensitive negotiations that other regional actors often cannot manage openly.

Similarly, Turkey has sought to position itself as a stabilizing regional power capable of balancing competing interests. Ankara supports dialogue while simultaneously protecting its own strategic interests in Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey also understands that prolonged regional instability threatens trade corridors and economic recovery across the broader region. Yet despite the positive momentum, enormous obstacles remain. Hardliners in both Washington and Tehran continue to distrust compromise. Israel remains deeply skeptical of any agreement that leaves Iran with residual nuclear infrastructure. Proxy conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen continue to generate instability. Moreover, any accidental military incident in the Gulf could rapidly derail negotiations.

Still, the current diplomatic moment appears more serious than many previous attempts because all major actors now face powerful incentives for restraint. The United States wants to avoid another endless conflict. Iran needs economic breathing space. China seeks energy stability. Gulf states prioritize economic transformation. Pakistan wants regional calm. Qatar and Turkey want diplomatic relevance.

For perhaps the first time in many years, the major powers and regional states share at least one common objective: preventing the Middle East from descending into another catastrophic war. Whether this emerging framework becomes a durable peace or merely another temporary truce will depend on political courage, sustained diplomacy, and the willingness of all sides to accept compromise over maximalist ambitions. The road ahead remains uncertain, but the possibility of a new regional order can no longer be dismissed.

Tougher times ahead

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's upcoming federal budget appears set to deepen the country's ongoing austerity cycle, with heavy taxation and stringent fiscal measures expected to dominate economic policy under the government's commitments to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As negotiations with the lender shape the final contours of Budget 2026-27, early indications suggest that the burden of adjustment will once again fall primarily on ordinary citizens and the formal sector of the economy.

Among the most significant and potentially painful measures under consideration is a further increase in the petroleum development levy (PDL), alongside the expansion of sales tax coverage on additional services and agricultural income. These steps are aimed at meeting ambitious revenue generation targets agreed upon with the IMF, which continues to prioritize fiscal consolidation and deficit reduction as central pillars of Pakistan's stabilization programme.

The scale of the proposed fiscal targets is substantial. The IMF has reportedly set a PDL collection target of Rs1.73 trillion for the next fiscal year, underscoring the government's increasing reliance on indirect taxation to bridge revenue gaps. At the same time, defence expenditure is expected to rise by Rs101 billion, taking the allocation to approximately Rs2.665 trillion. Together with other expenditures, these commitments are projected to push the total size of the federal budget to nearly Rs17.1 trillion, reflecting an increase of around 9 percent over the current fiscal year.

These figures point toward an increasingly strained fiscal environment. Federal and provincial governments are expected to impose additional taxes amounting to roughly Rs860 billion to compensate for a significant revenue shortfall recorded during the outgoing fiscal year. During the first nine months alone, tax collection reportedly fell short of targets by nearly Rs680 billion, highlighting persistent weaknesses in the country's revenue administration system.

To close this gap, the government appears prepared to intensify revenue extraction through multiple channels. An additional Rs259 billion is expected to be generated through higher petroleum levies, which will almost

certainly translate into further increases in fuel prices. Since petroleum products directly influence transportation, electricity generation and industrial costs, higher fuel prices are likely to trigger broader inflationary pressures across the economy.

For consumers already struggling with rising living costs, the impact could be severe. In Pakistan's inflation-sensitive economy, increases in fuel prices quickly feed into food prices, transport fares and utility bills, reducing household purchasing power and placing additional strain on low- and middle-income families.

The government also plans to raise approximately Rs215 billion through enhanced enforcement measures, including tax audits, production monitoring and stricter compliance mechanisms. While improving enforcement is often presented as a way to broaden the tax net and reduce evasion, businesses frequently argue that such measures can become arbitrary and burdensome when implemented through a weak

retail, agriculture and real estate—continue to remain undertaxed or insufficiently documented. Without structural reform to broaden the tax net fairly, additional taxation risks intensifying pressure on already compliant sectors while doing little to improve long-term fiscal sustainability.

Adding to public anxiety are reports that the government may avoid increasing salaries and pensions in the upcoming budget. If true, this would further weaken household incomes at a time when inflation has once again entered double-digit territory. Rising prices combined with stagnant wages could significantly erode real purchasing power, particularly for salaried workers and retirees who are already facing elevated costs of living.

Critics argue that the burden of austerity remains unevenly distributed in Pakistan's highly unequal economic structure. While ordinary citizens face higher taxes, reduced subsidies and rising utility prices, elite sectors continue

to benefit from exemptions, preferential treatment and untaxed privileges. Estimates frequently cited in economic debates suggest that elite capture and economic privileges cost the country roughly \$22 billion annually, equivalent to nearly 6 percent of GDP. Yet meaningful reform in these areas remains politically difficult.

The IMF programme is also expected to shape broader policy decisions beyond taxation. Conditions attached to the bailout reportedly include amendments to laws governing

special economic zones and technology zones, alongside regular adjustments in electricity and gas tariffs to maintain what the IMF describes as a "progressive tariff structure." In practical terms, this means consumers should prepare for further increases in utility prices as the government continues efforts to reduce subsidies and recover energy sector costs.

These measures are being introduced at a particularly fragile moment for the economy. Inflationary pressures remain elevated, while Pakistan's trade deficit has widened sharply, reportedly reaching a 46-month high of \$32 billion. Foreign exchange reserves, though stabilized compared to previous crisis periods, remain limited at around \$17 billion—insufficient to provide long-term security against external shocks.

At the same time, concerns are growing



and inefficient administrative structure.

This concern is particularly relevant given the longstanding problems within the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR). Despite repeated reform pledges, the institution continues to face criticism over inefficiency, weak enforcement capacity and allegations of harassment and arbitrary assessments. The upcoming fiscal year reportedly carries a tax collection target of Rs15.27 trillion, requiring an increase equivalent to approximately 0.6 percent of GDP. Achieving such an ambitious target through the existing tax infrastructure appears highly challenging.

The difficulty is compounded by Pakistan's narrow tax base, where a relatively small segment of salaried individuals, registered businesses and compliant taxpayers shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden. Meanwhile, large sectors of the economy—including

about the sustainability of remittance inflows, which have played a critical role in supporting Pakistan's balance-of-payments position. Geopolitical instability in the Middle East, combined with slowing global growth and labor market uncertainties in Gulf countries, could potentially weaken remittance growth in the coming months. Since remittances have become one of the country's primary sources of foreign exchange, any slowdown would place additional pressure on the external sector.

The broader concern is that the budget once again reflects a strategy centered on short-term stabilization rather than long-term

economic transformation. Fiscal tightening and aggressive revenue extraction may help the government meet IMF benchmarks and avoid immediate financial crisis, but they do little to address the structural weaknesses that repeatedly undermine Pakistan's economy.

High energy costs, weak industrial competitiveness, low productivity and policy uncertainty continue to constrain growth and investment. Excessive dependence on indirect taxation discourages consumption and business activity, while limited development spending restricts the state's ability to invest in infrastructure, education and productivity-enhancing

reforms.

In conclusion, Budget 2026-27 appears likely to reinforce Pakistan's ongoing austerity-driven economic framework. While fiscal discipline and revenue mobilization are necessary to maintain macroeconomic stability, the current approach risks placing an increasingly heavy burden on ordinary citizens without generating sustainable growth. Unless accompanied by deeper structural reforms that broaden the tax base, improve governance and strengthen productive sectors of the economy, the budget may offer temporary financial stabilization but little long-term economic relief.

Stability without growth

Muhammad Zain

The broad contours of Pakistan's upcoming federal budget have begun to emerge following recent negotiations between the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The direction appears familiar: continued fiscal tightening, strict monetary discipline and an overriding emphasis on macroeconomic stabilisation.

While officials present these measures as necessary for maintaining economic order, there is little indication that the next budget will depart from the stabilisation-heavy approach that has defined policymaking under the current IMF programme. The latest understanding between Pakistan and the IMF reinforces what many had already anticipated. Fiscal consolidation will remain the central pillar of economic management, driven primarily through revenue extraction, reduced subsidies and a continuation of tight monetary policy. In contrast, growth, industrial expansion and employment generation are once again likely to receive secondary importance.

At the core of this framework is the government's commitment to maintaining a primary surplus of 2 percent of GDP—a target that now appears effectively non-negotiable. Combined with what the IMF describes as an “appropriately tight” monetary stance, the strategy points toward another year of compressed domestic demand and restricted economic activity. Additional revenue measures, including higher petroleum levy collections and new taxes, are expected to support fiscal targets, while development spending and subsidies may face further reductions.

In practical terms, this means continued pressure on businesses and households alike. High borrowing costs, elevated energy prices and reduced purchasing power are likely to



suppress industrial growth and limit private investment. At the same time, constrained fiscal space will reduce the government's ability to invest in infrastructure, social development and productivity-enhancing initiatives.

The recent Gulf conflict has added another layer of uncertainty and has, to some extent, strengthened the justification for maintaining a cautious stabilisation strategy. The IMF itself has referenced the risks posed by regional tensions and external disruptions during discussions with Pakistan. Rising energy prices and geopolitical instability undeniably create additional economic challenges.

However, external shocks alone do not explain the economy's weak condition. Even before the latest geopolitical tensions, Pakistan

was struggling to generate sustainable growth momentum. Inflation may have eased from the historic highs witnessed in previous years, and foreign exchange reserves may have stabilised temporarily, but the economy's underlying structure remains fragile. High debt levels, weak productivity and dependence on external financing continue to define Pakistan's economic reality.

The IMF's mission statement emphasized “gradual fiscal consolidation” through measures such as broadening the tax base, improving tax administration and enhancing spending efficiency. On paper, these objectives appear reasonable. Yet the broader direction of policy remains largely unchanged. As in previous adjustment cycles, the burden of economic

correction is likely to fall disproportionately on low- and middle-income households as well as compliant sectors of the formal economy.

This pattern has become increasingly familiar. Instead of addressing structural inefficiencies and expanding the productive capacity of the economy, fiscal adjustment often relies on higher indirect taxation, utility price increases and cuts in development expenditure. Such measures may improve short-term fiscal indicators, but they also weaken demand, discourage investment and increase economic hardship for ordinary citizens.

More importantly, the overall fiscal architecture continues to revolve around meeting stabilisation benchmarks rather than resolving the structural weaknesses that repeatedly push Pakistan into economic crises. Fiscal consolidation has effectively become a substitute for deeper reform. While policymakers focus on achieving IMF targets, long-delayed structural changes remain largely unaddressed.

Agriculture, despite being a major contributor to employment and rural livelihoods, continues to suffer from low productivity, inefficient water management and outdated market systems. Industrial competitiveness has steadily eroded due to high energy costs, regulatory uncertainty and a difficult business environment. Exports remain narrowly concentrated and struggle to compete effectively in international markets.

These weaknesses are not new, nor are they unknown to policymakers. In fact, the relative macroeconomic stability achieved through painful adjustment measures could have created an opportunity for meaningful

reform. Periods of stabilisation are typically intended to provide governments with the space needed to modernize institutions, improve productivity and lay the groundwork for sustainable growth.

Instead, Pakistan appears to be repeating a familiar cycle. Policymakers have largely relied on debt rollovers, external financing support and IMF disbursements to maintain short-term stability while postponing more difficult structural decisions. The economy survives from one tranche to the next without fundamentally strengthening its productive base.

This reliance on stabilisation without transformation carries significant long-term costs. High interest rates and compressed demand may temporarily reduce imports and improve fiscal balances, but they also suppress industrial activity and discourage entrepreneurship. Businesses facing rising costs and uncertain policies are less likely to invest in expansion or innovation. As a result, job creation slows and growth remains weak.

The social consequences are equally serious. Economic adjustment measures disproportionately affect vulnerable populations through higher living costs, reduced subsidies and limited employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the absence of broad-based growth prevents improvements in incomes and living standards. Stabilisation may prevent immediate crisis, but it does little to create prosperity.

The deeper concern is that Pakistan risks emerging from the current IMF programme without having addressed the core issues that make its economy repeatedly vulnerable. Low exports, weak tax mobilisation, poor gover-

nance, inadequate human capital development and an uncompetitive industrial structure remain unresolved. Without reforms in these areas, the economy is likely to continue oscillating between temporary recovery and renewed balance-of-payments crises.

A sustainable economic strategy requires more than fiscal discipline alone. Pakistan needs reforms aimed at increasing productivity, modernizing industry and expanding exports. Energy sector inefficiencies must be addressed to reduce costs for businesses. Tax reform should focus on broadening the base fairly rather than overburdening existing taxpayers. Policy consistency and institutional credibility are also essential for restoring investor confidence.

Equally important is the need to shift the focus of economic management from short-term survival toward long-term development. Stabilisation should serve as a foundation for growth—not as a permanent policy objective in itself.

In conclusion, the emerging framework for Pakistan's next budget suggests continuity rather than change. Fiscal consolidation and monetary tightening will likely remain the dominant priorities, while growth and structural reform risk being sidelined once again. Although stabilisation has helped avert immediate crisis, it cannot substitute for genuine economic transformation. If policymakers fail to use this period to implement meaningful reforms, the current IMF programme may ultimately be remembered not as a turning point, but as another missed opportunity in Pakistan's long struggle for sustainable economic stability and growth.

Pakistan's external sector exposes structural fault lines

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's external sector is once again exposing the vulnerabilities that years of temporary stabilisation measures and bilateral debt rollovers had merely concealed rather than resolved. The latest figures on foreign direct investment (FDI) and the return of the current account deficit highlight the fragility of the country's economic position and raise serious questions about the sustainability of the much-publicized recovery narrative.

The sharp 31 percent decline in FDI during the first 10 months of fiscal year 2025-26 is particularly alarming. Beyond the immediate reduction in investment volumes, the more troubling

reality is that Pakistan has struggled for years to attract meaningful levels of foreign investment. FDI inflows have remained persistently low, fluctuating only marginally despite repeated government promises of reform, investment facilitation and economic stabilization.

This persistent weakness points to a deeper structural problem. Foreign investment typically flows toward economies that offer policy consistency, macroeconomic stability, institutional credibility and long-term growth prospects. Pakistan, however, continues to struggle on all these fronts. Investors remain cautious due to unpredictable policymaking, recurring balance-of-payments crises, currency volatility and concerns about the broader busi-

ness environment.

The composition of foreign investment further underlines this concern. More than half of the FDI received during the current fiscal year originated from China, reflecting Pakistan's continued dependence on a single strategic partner rather than a diversified investor base. Chinese investment remains vital for infrastructure, energy and connectivity projects, but the concentration of inflows from one country highlights the absence of broader international investor confidence.

Even more concerning is the fact that Chinese inflows themselves have declined. Investment from China reportedly fell from over \$1 billion last year to approximately \$740 million

this year. This decline suggests increasing caution even among Pakistan's closest economic partners. Such a trend carries important implications because Chinese participation has long been viewed as a stabilizing factor for Pakistan's external sector, particularly through projects linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

At the same time, the scale of disinvestment has become increasingly difficult to ignore. The withdrawal of foreign capital from sectors such as telecommunications reflects growing frustration among multinational companies operating in Pakistan. The likely impact of Telenor's exit has reinforced negative perceptions among international investors and raised broader concerns about the viability of long-term business operations in the country.

Several factors continue to discourage foreign companies from maintaining or expanding their presence.

Policy uncertainty remains one of the most significant challenges. Frequent changes in taxation policies, regulatory inconsistency and shifting economic priorities create an unpredictable operating environment. Currency instability further complicates matters, particularly for firms dependent on imported inputs or those seeking to repatriate profits.

Difficulties in profit repatriation have also emerged as a major concern. Restrictions on foreign exchange availability and delays in transferring earnings abroad have weakened investor confidence, making Pakistan appear increasingly risky compared to regional competitors. Over the past several years, numerous multinational firms have either scaled down operations or exited the market entirely, reinforcing the perception of an increasingly difficult investment climate.

Another critical issue is the nature of the investment that continues to enter the country. Much of the remaining foreign capital is concentrated in sectors offering guaranteed or protected returns, such as energy and infrastructure, rather than export-oriented manufacturing or technology-based industries. While these investments may provide short-term financial inflows, they contribute relatively little toward improving productivity, generating exports or strengthening the country's long-term foreign exchange earning capacity.

This pattern reflects a broader weakness in Pakistan's economic structure. Instead of attracting investment into sectors capable of driving sustainable growth, the economy remains dependent on debt inflows and remittances to

support external financing needs. As a result, the developmental impact of FDI remains limited, and the country continues to struggle with recurring balance-of-payments pressures.

The re-emergence of the current account deficit in April further underscores these vulnerabilities. Although Pakistan had temporarily improved its external position through import compression, remittance growth and external financing support, the latest figures suggest that underlying weaknesses remain unresolved. The balance-of-payments position continues to be highly sensitive to fluctuations in imports and external shocks.

The widening trade deficit is particularly concerning because it is being driven largely by imports linked to consumption rather than productive investment. Rising food imports, in particular, expose weaknesses in agricultural productivity and planning. Pakistan's inability



to achieve self-sufficiency in key agricultural commodities despite possessing vast agricultural potential reflects long-standing structural failures in water management, farming efficiency and supply chain development.

Similarly, weaknesses in industrial policy continue to limit domestic production capacity. High energy costs, outdated infrastructure and inconsistent policies have undermined competitiveness, increasing reliance on imported goods even in sectors where domestic production could potentially expand. This dependence on consumption-led imports places constant pressure on foreign exchange reserves and external financing requirements.

The deterioration in the external account is especially troubling given that global oil prices, while elevated due to Middle East tensions, have remained relatively contained compared to previous energy crises. Had oil prices surged more dramatically, the pressure on Pakistan's external position could have been significantly worse. This highlights just how vulnerable the

economy remains to external shocks.

For now, resilient remittance inflows have helped prevent a more severe crisis. Overseas Pakistanis continue to provide a critical source of foreign exchange, supporting household consumption and stabilizing the balance-of-payments position. Despite geopolitical uncertainty and economic slowdowns in some host countries, remittances have remained strong.

However, relying indefinitely on remittances as a substitute for structural reform is neither sustainable nor sufficient. Remittances are private household transfers, not long-term productive investments. While they support consumption and help ease external pressures temporarily, they do not build industrial capacity, expand exports or generate productivity gains. An economy cannot achieve durable growth solely through external financial inflows disconnected from domestic productive activity.

The broader concern is that Pakistan may once again be slipping into its familiar economic cycle: temporary stabilization followed by renewed external pressure. The country secures emergency financing, compresses imports, stabilizes reserves and briefly restores confidence, only for structural weaknesses to resurface once economic activity begins to recover.

Breaking this cycle requires more than short-term crisis management. Pakistan needs comprehensive reforms aimed at restoring investor confidence, improving governance and creating a predictable business environment. Expanding domestic productivity, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing, is essential for reducing reliance on imports and strengthening export competitiveness.

Equally important is the need for policy continuity and institutional credibility. Investors—both foreign and domestic—require clarity, transparency and long-term consistency in economic management. Without these conditions, Pakistan will continue to struggle to attract the kind of investment necessary for sustainable growth.

In conclusion, the latest external sector data serves as a reminder that macroeconomic stabilization alone cannot resolve Pakistan's economic challenges. The decline in FDI, rising disinvestment and return of the current account deficit all point to unresolved structural weaknesses that temporary financial support cannot conceal indefinitely. Unless meaningful reforms are implemented to strengthen productivity, attract diversified investment and improve competitiveness, the economy will remain trapped in recurring balance-of-payments crises and cycles of fragile recovery.

Strategic perils of India's escalating anti-Pakistan posturing

Raza Khan

The recent highly provocative and irresponsible statement by Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi regarding Pakistan is emblematic of immaturity and headstrongness, suggesting that Indian leadership still struggles with the existence of Pakistan. The Indian army chief was quoted by the media as saying on May 16, “if you have heard me earlier, what I have said... that Pakistan, if it continues to harbor terrorists and operate against India, then they have to decide whether they want to be part of geography and history.”

In a very strong rejoinder, Pakistan's military public relations wing, the ISPR, issued a statement highlighting, “Contrary to the delusional and hallucinational belief system and despite the omnipresent ill wishes that prevail in Hindutva-led India, Pakistan is already a country of consequence at the global level, a declared nuclear power and an indelible part of South Asia's geography and history.”

The statement of Gen. Dwivedi is immature because obliterating another country, and that too of a huge size and population, is nearly impossible. Moreover, the Indian leadership's unending drama of blaming Pakistan for harboring terrorists against India is no longer believable to international institutions and the comity of nations. On the other hand, India's involvement in harboring terrorists in Pakistan, particularly Balochistan, has been more than obvious. The case of the arrest of in-service Indian naval commander Kulbhushan Jadhav in Balochistan in 2016, who remains in Pakistan's captivity, is enough to prove India's involvement in terrorism on Pakistani soil. Jadhav was handed capital punishment by a Pakistani military court, but the sentence has so far not been implemented due to the involvement of the International Court of Justice, which rejected India's plea for his immediate release. He was found involved in espionage and harboring terrorism in Balochistan. The large-scale insecurity and terrorist attacks in Balochistan would not be possible without foreign support, and this external backing has been actively coming from India.

The Pakistan military's rejoinder to the

Indian army chief's provocative statement, alluding to the shallow ideology of Hindutva as the basis of such assertions, is quite logical. Had a worthless and senseless ideology not been present behind such statements, they would not have been made at all. Pakistan, its people, and above all, its predominant Muslim majority constitute a living reality; destroying it by a country like India, which faces so many internal problems, is unthinkable. Having said this, it must be admitted that Pakistan is not a dreamland and faces many issues, mostly of its own making. India has been exploiting these



vulnerabilities in Pakistan, whether ethnic divisions or a lack of democracy, to destabilize the state.

Here, the Indian leadership must realize that destabilizing Pakistan is not at all in India's interest either. There appears to be a strong realization regarding this within Indian civil society and true intellectual circles. For instance, New Delhi must realize that threatening Pakistan with geographic obliteration would not be without consequences of a similar degree for India, as Pakistan is a nuclear-armed country possessing a massive military and, above all, a nation that may seem divided but remains unified regarding national survival and defence.

Apart from the military and strategic consequences of instigating instability and crisis in Pakistan, the political repercussions of such Delhi-fomented turmoil would be insurmountable for India. Pakistan was demanded and established as a unified homeland for the majority of Muslims in British India. Since it was clear during the 1947 partition of United India into two states that all Muslims

could not move to Pakistan, a massive Muslim population remained in India. These Muslims, though citizens by constitutional right, share civilizational bonds with Pakistan. In the impossible scenario, India could not remain geographically intact. More importantly, India lacks the resources and its leadership the capacity to unite entire South Asia.

The Hindutva-influenced Indian leadership seems to be living in a make-believe, fallacious past rooted in religious mythologies. For a thousand years, Muslim rulers kept India united through great sacrifice, accommodation,

and resource generation. The British colonial rulers subsequently maintained this unity through extensive wars, massive expenditures, and developing rail, road, and canal infrastructure alongside a cohesive judicial and administrative system. Hindu rulers of contemporary India—as no Muslim has ever been prime minister since 1947—have never historically ruled such a massive country. They currently struggle to run India as a normal state. Therefore, thinking of undoing Pakistan and incorporating it

into India is a vitriolic fantasy that unnecessarily manufactures enmity between two peoples.

At a time when chauvinistic Hindu leaders, who are the ideological godfathers of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are calling for communication lines with Pakistan to open, such a nasty statement by a professional soldier heading India's army reveals that ideological supremacism has crept deep into India's state structure. This shift has occurred because under PM Modi's third term, the institutional and wider societal culture of India has changed, making extremism very obvious. Recently, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale logically argued that doors of dialogue with Pakistan should not be permanently shut. Regardless of whether India engages, stability in Pakistan remains in India's national interest.

Therefore, instead of harping on old tunes of terrorism, Indian leadership must realize that normal relations with Pakistan is the only way forward for South Asian development.

Education: Four provinces, one persistent failure

Rasheed Ali

On a dusty roadside in southern Punjab, a boy no older than ten balances a tray of tea glasses between speeding motorcycles and donkey carts. At the same hour, somewhere in Lahore, elite private schools are preparing students for robotics competitions and international examinations. The contrast is not merely economic; it is the portrait of Pakistan's widening education divide.

Nearly eight decades after independence, and almost 15 years after Article 25-A of the Constitution guaranteed free and compulsory education for every child aged 5 to 16, Pakistan still carries one of the world's largest populations of out-of-school children. The crisis has become so entrenched that education experts increasingly describe it not as a policy failure, but as a national emergency.

Official and international estimates now suggest that more than 25 million children across Pakistan remain outside classrooms, making the country home to the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children.

And despite repeated enrolment campaigns, ambitious slogans and billions allocated in provincial budgets, all four provincial governments continue to struggle to fulfil the most basic promise of public education: bringing every child into school.

Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province and often presented as the country's administrative success story, ironically carries the highest absolute number of out-of-school children. According to data compiled by the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) and UNICEF Pakistan, between 9.6 million and 10 million children aged 5 to 16 are still not attending school.

In villages stretching across Rajanpur, Dera Ghazi Khan and Muzaffargarh, the reasons are painfully familiar: poverty, child labour, unsafe school buildings, teacher shortages and long travel distances. In many rural communities, especially among low-income families, education competes directly with survival.

The Punjab government insists it is

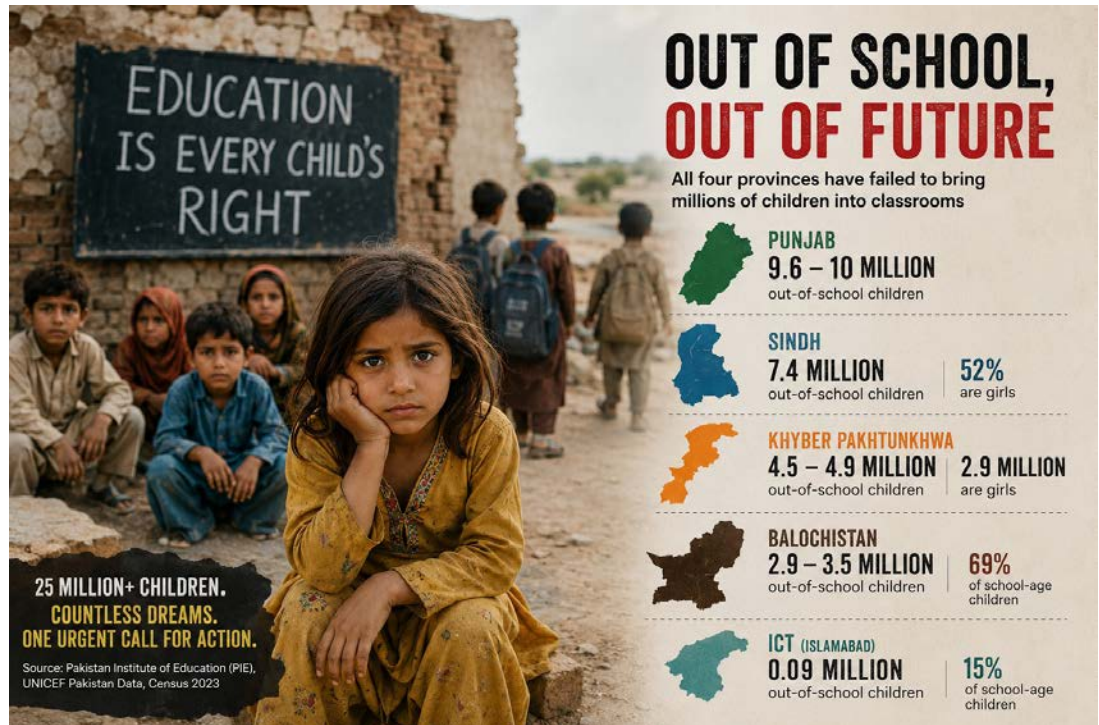
addressing the crisis through a multi-pronged strategy. The Punjab Literacy and Non-Formal Basic Education Department has unveiled a Strategic Plan 2025–2030 targeting “Zero OOSC” and universal literacy through expanded non-formal education centres. Billions of rupees have been earmarked for repairing dilapidated schools and upgrading infrastructure, while the Punjab Education Foundation has intensified enrolment drives through public-private partnerships in high-dropout districts such as Lodhran and Rajanpur.

Authorities have also launched prestigious projects including the “Nawaz Sharif Schools of Eminence” and technology-oriented

are out of school — roughly 44 per cent of the province's school-age population. Even more troubling is the gender disparity: girls account for more than half of the excluded children.

In interior Sindh, especially in districts vulnerable to flooding, poverty and feudal influence, many girls never progress beyond primary education. Census-linked data suggests that only around 24 per cent of girls in Sindh continue education beyond the primary level.

For many families, particularly in conservative rural areas, sending girls to distant schools remains socially difficult and financially burdensome. The absence of boundary walls, female teachers, toilets and transport further



initiatives designed to improve learning quality and reduce dropout rates.

Yet critics argue that the gap between policy announcements and ground realities remains vast. “Building model schools in cities does not automatically solve the problem of children sitting outside schools in remote villages,” observed an education rights activist in Lahore. “The real crisis is not only enrolment. It is retention, quality and access.”

The challenge becomes even more alarming in Sindh, where education statistics read like a humanitarian warning.

Official estimates indicate that between 7.4 million and 7.8 million children in Sindh

discourages attendance.

The Sindh government has allocated approximately Rs4 billion for out-of-school children programmes in the 2025–26 fiscal year. Civil society organisations, however, continue to demand transparent utilisation of funds, warning that ghost schools, absentee teachers and weak monitoring systems have historically undermined reforms.

In Karachi's sprawling informal settlements, another dimension of the crisis emerges. Many working-class children divide their days between workshops, street vending and domestic labour. Education becomes secondary to household income.

Further north, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa presents a different but equally troubling picture. Provincial education data and the 2023 Digital Population Census estimate that approximately 4.5 to 4.9 million children are out of school in KP, nearly 37 per cent of the province's school-age population. Of these, roughly 2.9 million are girls.

In the mountainous districts of Kohistan and the formerly merged tribal areas, dropout rates in some localities reportedly approach 79 per cent. Peshawar alone accounts for more than half a million out-of-school children.

The provincial government has anchored its response in the Free Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education Act, legally guaranteeing free education for children aged 5 to 16. Through the Elementary and Secondary Education Department and the Elementary & Secondary Education Foundation, authorities have launched the "Green Enrolment Campaign," targeting more than 1.3 million new admissions.

Girls Community Schools have been established in remote areas where formal government schools remain inaccessible, while officials increasingly promote digital learning solutions, including AI-assisted virtual schooling and the "Poha" digital education initiative.

But in remote valleys where internet signals barely function and electricity itself remains inconsistent, technology-driven solutions often collide with infrastructural realities.

Then comes Balochistan — Pakistan's gravest education crisis in proportional terms.

Here, nearly 69 per cent of school-age children are estimated to be out of school, translating into roughly 2.9 to 3.5 million children deprived of formal education.

In scattered settlements across Chagai, Dera Bugti, Panjgur and Kech, many children grow up without ever seeing a functioning classroom. Distances between villages and schools can stretch for kilometres across rugged terrain. In some communities, schools exist only on paper. The provincial government under Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti has declared education an emergency priority, launching a five-year enrolment drive focused particularly on girls and underserved areas.

Authorities say they are reactivating nearly 4,000 non-functional schools, upgrading around 1,000 institutions and enforcing a "zero closure" policy. Thousands of teachers are reportedly being recruited on merit, while a dedicated Provincial Task Force works with partners including UNICEF Pakistan to coordinate "Zero Out-of-School" campaigns.

Yet education specialists warn that Balochistan's crisis is deeply tied to broader issues of governance, poverty, insecurity and state neglect accumulated over decades.

The deeper tragedy is that Pakistan's education crisis is no longer confined to access alone. Even among children who do attend school, learning outcomes remain deeply uneven.

UNICEF notes that chronically low public investment continues to cripple progress. Pakistan has historically spent around

1.5 per cent of GDP on education — already below international benchmarks — but recent estimates suggest expenditure has now fallen to approximately 0.8 per cent of GDP, among the lowest levels globally.

Nearly 90 per cent of education spending goes toward recurrent expenditures, mainly salaries, leaving limited resources for infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum reform and learning materials.

Education experts argue that successive governments have often prioritised headline-grabbing initiatives over systemic transformation. "Every province launches campaigns. Every government announces reforms," said an Islamabad-based policy researcher. "But the numbers barely move because the structural problems remain untouched."

Those structural problems are visible everywhere: overcrowded classrooms, ghost schools, politicised appointments, weak governance, gender discrimination, child labour, climate-related displacement and widening inequality between private and public education systems.

The result is a silent national fracture. For millions of Pakistani children, especially girls in poor and remote communities, education remains less a constitutional right and more a distant privilege.

And until the state transforms promises into functioning classrooms, the morning bell will continue to ring for some children — while millions of others remain unheard outside the school gate.

Pakistan's real failure is not planning, but execution

Dr. Fatima Khan

Pakistan does not suffer from a shortage of economic plans, policy frameworks or strategic roadmaps. Over the years, governments, ministries and advisory bodies have produced countless blueprints promising export growth, industrial revival, technological advancement and private-sector development. The real problem lies elsewhere: the country's chronic inability to convert policy intentions into sustained implementation.

This gap between planning and execution has become one of the defining weaknesses of Pakistan's economic governance. Ambitious targets are repeatedly announced, high-level meetings generate familiar commitments, and new roadmaps are unveiled with optimism. Yet on the ground, structural obstacles remain largely

unchanged. Businesses continue to operate in an environment shaped by uncertainty, bureaucratic inefficiency and policy inconsistency.

The issue is especially visible in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are universally recognised as the backbone of modern economies. Across successful export-oriented countries, SMEs drive innovation, employment generation, industrial diversification and domestic value creation. Pakistan has acknowledged the importance of SMEs for decades. Policymakers routinely describe them as essential for economic growth and export competitiveness.

Despite this recognition, the operating environment for smaller businesses remains deeply restrictive. Access to financing is limited, regulatory procedures are excessively complex and taxation policies remain inconsistent and

burdensome. Infrastructure deficiencies, unreliable energy supply and administrative delays continue to undermine the ability of SMEs to expand and compete effectively.

Against this backdrop, repeated calls for new SME roadmaps naturally raise a difficult but unavoidable question: if the problems have already been identified so clearly for so many years, what has prevented implementation?

This question becomes even more relevant considering that the country's current political leadership is not confronting these issues for the first time. The ruling coalition and its major political parties have governed Pakistan—directly or indirectly—for much of the past four decades. The same themes continue to dominate official discussions year after year: exports must increase, SMEs should receive facilitation, tax refunds must be processed efficiently, and inno-

vation should be encouraged.

Yet each cycle of promises seems to produce another cycle of consultations rather than measurable transformation. Economic management increasingly appears trapped in an endless planning phase where diagnosing problems receives far more attention than resolving them.

A similar pattern is evident in Pakistan's information technology sector. The country's IT exports are projected to approach between \$4.5 billion and \$4.6 billion this fiscal year, a performance that deserves recognition. Expansion in digital infrastructure and rising internet penetration also reflect positive developments. However, these gains coexist with deep structural weaknesses that policymakers often avoid addressing directly.

Reliable internet connectivity remains inconsistent across many parts of the country. Businesses frequently encounter disruptions, slow speeds and uncertainty regarding digital access. For a sector that depends fundamentally on uninterrupted connectivity, such instability creates serious operational challenges.

More importantly, recurring concerns about internet restrictions and digital censorship continue to undermine confidence in Pakistan's technology environment. Governments often emphasize the importance of IT exports and digital entrepreneurship, yet periodic disruptions and regulatory uncertainty send contradictory signals to investors and technology firms.

The digital economy depends heavily on predictability. International investors, software companies and local start-ups require confidence that internet access will remain stable, accessible and free from sudden interruptions. In technology-driven industries, speed and reliability are not optional advantages; they are basic operational requirements.

When internet shutdowns, bandwidth restrictions or unclear digital regulations become recurring concerns, operational risks increase significantly. Businesses become hesitant to commit long-term capital, and investors begin viewing the market as unstable. As a result, Pakistan risks weakening one of the few sectors that has shown meaningful export growth potential in recent years.

Beyond infrastructure and regulation, there is also a growing credibility problem linked to the repetition of policy language itself.

Governments cannot indefinitely continue presenting long-recognized priorities as though they were newly discovered challenges. SMEs have always been essential to economic growth. Export diversification has long been necessary. Digital infrastructure has for years been central to competitiveness in the modern global economy.

These are not new insights requiring another round of strategic reflection. Businesses already understand the problems. What they increasingly need is consistency rather than conferences, implementation rather than announcements, and predictability rather than recurring policy resets.

Exporters, for example, continue to face some of the same challenges that have existed for years. High energy costs remain a major burden on industrial competitiveness. Tax refunds are often delayed, disrupting liquidity for businesses already operating under tight financial condi-



tions. Financing costs remain elevated, while tax policies frequently change with little long-term clarity.

SMEs face even greater difficulties because smaller firms typically lack the financial resilience and institutional capacity that larger corporations can rely upon. Bureaucratic complexity, documentation requirements and shifting regulations consume time and resources that smaller enterprises can scarcely afford.

Meanwhile, the IT sector continues to function within an uncertain regulatory framework despite repeated official declarations about its strategic importance. The contradiction between policy rhetoric and operational reality has become increasingly difficult to ignore.

This disconnect reflects a broader weakness in governance. Economic policymaking in Pakistan often prioritizes announcements and

targets over institutional continuity and implementation capacity. Every few months, another high-level meeting promises industrial revival, export promotion or technological advancement. Yet the underlying structural impediments remain largely intact.

None of this diminishes the importance of supporting SMEs or expanding IT exports. On the contrary, both sectors are essential if Pakistan hopes to achieve sustainable growth, create employment and reduce dependence on debt-driven stabilization cycles. SMEs can strengthen domestic production and innovation, while the IT sector offers valuable opportunities for export diversification and foreign exchange earnings.

The concern, however, is that Pakistan appears stuck in a perpetual planning cycle while regional competitors continue moving ahead with execution. Countries competing for investment and export markets are not merely

drafting strategies; they are implementing reforms, improving infrastructure and building policy credibility.

At some point, the debate in Pakistan must move beyond identifying priorities toward delivering measurable outcomes. The country does not lack policy papers, expert recommendations or strategic intentions. It lacks administrative follow-through, institutional consistency and the political willingness to remove obstacles that have already been diagnosed repeatedly.

Ultimately, the challenge facing Pakistan's economy is no longer about understanding what needs to be done. The priorities are already clear. The real test is whether the government is finally prepared to move beyond familiar promises and deliver durable action that businesses, investors and citizens can actually experience on the ground.

India's violation of international law and UN resolutions

The Delimitation of Constituencies Bill, 2026, introduced by the Indian government has heightened regional tensions by proposing changes to the electoral structure of Jammu and Kashmir while controversially extending its scope to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), a territory outside India's control. The bill allows the Election Commission of India to carry out constituency delimitation in these areas under the condition that they come within Indian administration, while simultaneously reserving 24 legislative seats for them and keeping those seats permanently vacant. This creates a symbolic legal framework that incorporates AJK into India's political system without actual governance. Supporters describe it as reaffirming India's constitutional claims, while it is actually a unilateral assertion of sovereignty rather than a genuine democratic initiative.

The bill is also seen as part of a broader political trajectory following the 2019 revocation of Article 370, which removed Jammu and Kashmir's special status and restructured it into a Union Territory. By formally fixing the assembly's total strength at 114 seats, including 24 unfilled ones representing AJK, the legislation embeds this territorial claim into the constitutional structure.

Reactions have been strongly negative in Kashmir, where many dismiss the move as impractical and symbolic, citing the lack of any mechanism to conduct elections across the heavily militarised Line of Control. Within India, the proposal has triggered political debate, with opposition parties and legal experts questioning its constitutional validity, and warning that legislating for a territory well outside India's jurisdiction is in conflict with international law.

Besides, the international human rights community has also weighed in, expressing deep concern over the potential for such a piece of legislation to further destabilise an already hyper-volatile region. While major organisations, like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have yet to issue their final reports, their early statements have focused on the violation of democratic principles inherent in the concept of 'vacant representation'.

By reserving seats for a population that cannot vote, India is creating a new category of disenfranchisement. It is asserting a right to represent people who have not asked to be represented, under a constitution they do not recognise, by a government they reject. This is the antithesis of self-determination, which is a principle enshrined in numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

Furthermore, the specific political dynamics within AJK have rendered the Indian government's move an exercise in self-defeating propaganda. The AJK government has rejected the Indian delimitation bill as a nullity.

All major political parties across the spectrum in AJK have passed unanimous resolutions condemning the legislation. The response from within the occupied Jammu and Kashmir has been one of deep political alienation.

As such, mainstream Kashmiri political leaders have used the legislative debate to highlight the hypocrisy of the central government. The Indian government claims to be concerned about the political representation of a population it does not control, while simultaneously ignoring the legitimate grievances of the population it has occupied for decades.

By attempting to legislate over a territory it does not control and a people who have consistently rejected its claims, India is not only violating international law and UN resolutions, but also creating a constitutional and political fiction that can only lead to further instability.

Abdul Basit Alvi
Muzaffarabad

Reflections on education reform

I recently attended a compelling talk featuring academics and authors who have written extensively on education, teacher education, the training of educationists, and both single and multiple curricula. The speakers presented diverse perspectives on the strengths and shortcomings of our education system and underscored that education remains the only viable path to progress, emphasising the importance of maintaining a positive outlook.

The discussion was insightful and highlighted past initiatives, policy decisions, institutional contributions and elements adopted from Western models. It also prompted deeper reflection.

While the government is achieving notable diplomatic milestones on the world stage, such as facilitating a peace agreement between Iran and the United States, one cannot help but wonder how transformative it would be if it also engaged — at some appropriate time, of course — more deeply with the Iranian government and its educationists to understand their approach to education, and then to apply relevant lessons to our own system.

It was particularly striking to observe the strong educational credentials of Iranian ministers and officials, often highlighted on social media during the conflict. Their high academic qualifications, coupled with the intellectual depth and insight evident in their discourse, speak volumes.

Notably, the way Iranians frequently quote our national poet and philosopher, Allama Mohammad Iqbal, is rarely matched by the level of engagement the Poet of the East receives within Pakistan itself. This, perhaps, is food for thought.

Shireen Azfar
Karachi

The cost of obstructed labour

The World Fistula Day, which falls on May 23, is an occasion to highlight obstetric fistula — one of the most devastating but preventable complications of childbirth. Obstetric fistula usually occurs after prolonged obstructed labour when a woman fails to receive timely medical treatment, particularly emergency obstetric care, such as a caesarean section.

Continuous pressure during labour damages the tissues between the birth canal and the bladder or rectum, leading to involuntary leakage of urine or faeces. Beyond physical suffering, affected women often face social isolation, stigma and psychological trauma.

Every year, an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 women develop obstetric fistulas during childbirth in Pakistan. Many women cannot reach hospitals in time because of long distances, lack of transport and the non-availability of free ambulance services. Home deliveries conducted without skilled birth attendants further increase the risk.

Only a few hundred women receive treatment each year because of the scarcity of trained fistula surgeons. The Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation (SIUT) is one of the few centres providing free treatment with dignity through minimally invasive techniques. So far, more than a thousand fistula surgeries have been performed. In 2025 alone, 39 such surgeries were carried out, including nine robotic vesicovaginal fistula repairs. The institute is running a dedicated fistula clinic every Friday.

Obstetric fistula can largely be prevented through improved maternal healthcare services, timely emergency obstetric care, skilled birth attendants, rural maternity facilities and free ambulance services. Repair surgery can successfully restore dignity and hope to the affected women. Preventing obstetric fistula is not merely a medical issue; it is a matter of women's rights, social justice and human dignity.

Dr Murli Lal
Karachi

Private school teachers

Private school teachers in Mianwali are compelled to work for salaries as low as Rs6,000. Their working hours are excessively long and they are burdened with unpaid work after school. Despite all this hassle, these teachers have no job security, financial stability or basic professional protection. Meanwhile, students of small private schools and rural areas around Mianwali are suffering as well. They are forced to sit in dark, overcrowded classrooms without proper ventilation or a healthy learning environment. The community has the right to demand a proper audit of institutions.

Muhammad Iqbal Awan
Mianwali

There's a new T. rex from the dinosaur age — and it ruled the seas with a skull-crushing bite

Kenna Hughes-Castleberry

There's a new T. rex in town, but this one didn't hunt on land. It ruled the ancient seas.

Scientists have described a new species of mosasaur, a member of a marine reptile group that lived at the same time as dinosaurs during the Cretaceous period (145 million to 66 million years ago). The newly named species fits into an already known genus: Tylosaurus. But its new species name, Tylosaurus rex — T. rex, for short — sets it apart from the other mosasaur species in the group.

The species name means 'king of the tylosaurs,' according to a new study published in the journal *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*. The fossils are about 80 million years old and were discovered mostly in northern Texas decades ago.

The mosasaur T. rex measured up to 43 feet (13 meters) long, or about the length of a tour bus. It had finely serrated teeth, unusually powerful jaws, and evidence on its fossils of violent combat with its own species. 'Everything is bigger in Texas and that includes the mosasaurs, apparently,' study first author Amelia Zietlow, a research associate of paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, said in a statement. While examining a fossil in the American Museum of Natural History's collection, Zietlow noticed that a specimen labeled as *Tylosaurus proriger* — a well-known mosasaur species first described in 1869 — didn't quite match others of its kind. The unusual fossil was discovered in 1979 near an artificial reservoir outside Dallas.



Great Pyramid of Giza is remarkably resilient to earthquakes

Stephanie Pappas

Egypt's Great Pyramid of Giza, also known as the Great Pyramid of Khufu, has stood for more than 4,600 years, even through powerful earthquakes. Now, new research explains why: The structure is remarkably resilient to vibrations.

The pyramid has lost only about 33 feet (10 meters) of height since its construction during Egypt's Old Kingdom (2649 to 2150 B.C.). That's despite experiencing strong earthquakes over the millennia, including one with an estimated magnitude of 6.8 that struck south of Cairo in the city of Fayum in 1847 and a temblor with a magnitude of 5.9 in 1992 that knocked some of the topmost stones to the ground. The new study of vibrations throughout the pyramid's structure suggests that certain architectural features, such as a series of chambers known as the pressure-relieving chambers above the chamber where the pharaoh Khufu once rested, dampen seismic movement toward the top of the structure. 'The study highlights the extraordinary practical engineering knowledge of ancient Egyptian builders, who developed highly effective construction practices through centuries of experimentation and refinement,' study co-author Asem Salama, a geoscientist at the National Research Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics in Cairo, wrote *Live Science* in an email. Salama and his team placed vibration sensors in 37 sites in and around the Great Pyramid and recorded ambient vibrations when no tourists were inside the pyramid. 'In heritage conservation, this information can provide important insights into structural stability, hidden vulnerabilities, and long-term preservation strategies while fully respecting the integrity of the monument,' Salama explained.



You could be at risk of IBD and not know it

Julie Stewart

There's mixed news on the war against inflammatory bowel disease. Cases in the U.S. fell in the 1990s, then rose in the past 25 years. But modern medicine now has plenty of new weapons to deploy — if patients seek treatment. The term 'inflammatory bowel disease' (IBD) refers to chronic conditions in the intestines, mainly Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Between 2.4 million and 3.4 million Americans have IBD. It's not much of a killer — 71,628 people died of IBD-related causes between 1999 and 2022, about 3,000 per year — but in 2018, the death rate started climbing by about 10% per year, according to a new study in *Clinical and Experimental Gastroenterology*.

Doctors are optimistic, though. 'What I tell my patients is: 'There's never been a better time in human history to have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis because the number of available therapies has increased significantly over the last several years, and that's anticipated only to continue,' said Loren G. Rabinowitz, MD, a gastroenterologist who specializes in IBD at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. IBD is easier than ever to find, thanks to better diagnostic tools like endoscopy, imaging, and stool tests. That could explain the rising number of cases. 'We're more aware of it,' said gastroenterologist Benjamin Click, MD, a professor at the University of Colorado. 'We're looking more at even older people who come in with signs and symptoms and making those diagnoses potentially in populations that we may not have historically.' But that's not the whole story. 'The data suggests we're probably still witnessing a real rise in the incidences of not only inflammatory bowel diseases but a lot of these autoimmune conditions,' said Click.



Lift lighter weight, get just as strong

Jen Ator

'Muscle' and 'strength' and 'lifting' as it all happens in your average local gym is what makes strength training intimidating for some. 'Instatrainers' and showoffs and pseudoscientists on social media only make it noisier with conflicting research, elaborate workout protocols, and stunt exercise videos to get eyeballs.

But strength training is critical for health. We all need it. Keeping our bodies strong and functional is how we maintain health and achieve, hopefully, longevity. So let's get away from the show of muscle. Some facts based on the most recent science: You don't have to lift heavy weights to get great results (unless you want to). You don't need complex equipment and workouts to get great results (unless you want those things). In fact, lighter weights can give you the same muscle-building results as heavier weight if you know how to do it. You can also lift those lighter weights to achieve more muscular power, which, as you'll see, is something worth striving for as you get older. When it comes to building and maintaining muscle, two factors matter more than anything else: volume and loading. Brad Schoenfeld, PhD, is a professor in exercise science at CUNY Lehman College in the Bronx in New York City. He's also a researcher who has published more than 300 studies in the field of exercise science and sports nutrition. His studies have consistently found that total training volume — that is, the sum of all the sets performed per muscle group per week — is a key driver of muscle hypertrophy (a.k.a. growth).



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