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LOWERING BUSINESS COSTS IS NOW AN ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

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Lowering business costs is now an economic imperative

Farhan Khan

The Supreme Court of Pakistan has called upon the government to create incentives through appropriate policies to lower the cost of doing business and the cost of producing and supplying goods, thereby facilitating lower prices for consumers. "It is the constitutional obligation of the government, as provided in Article 38 of the Constitution, to promote the economic and social well-being of the people," emphasised Justice Jamal Khan Mandokhail.

This judicial reminder arrives at a moment when Pakistan's business climate remains one of the more challenging environments in the region. In the World Bank's Doing Business report of 2020, Pakistan ranked 108th out of 190 economies. Although that flagship index was later discontinued, subsequent assessments by the Heritage Foundation have placed the country's business freedom score at a modest 54 out of 100—well below the global average and reflective of persistent structural obstacles that continue to discourage entrepreneurship, investment and expansion.

For entrepreneurs and investors, the hurdles begin at the starting gate. Registering a company still involves dealing with multiple agencies, overlapping documentation and unpredictable delays. Obtaining construction permits, securing electricity connections and navigating land registration remain time-consuming and costly processes. Once operations begin, the regulatory load intensifies. Businesses confront a complex web of federal and provincial taxes, frequent changes in rates and levies, and a compliance burden that can consume a substantial share of profits. Energy costs are high and supplies can be unreliable; access to finance is constrained by high interest rates and collateral requirements; and contract enforcement through the courts remains slow and uncertain. Intellectual property protection is weak, the informal sector creates uneven competition, and profit repatriation for foreign firms has at times been delayed by foreign-exchange shortages and bureaucratic friction.

These difficulties have exacted a visible toll. Over the past several years, a string of major multinationals have scaled back or exited the Pakistani market. Shell sold a majority stake in its local operations. Procter & Gamble announced the wind-down of its manufacturing and commercial activities. Microsoft reduced its footprint after decades in Islamabad. Uber, Yamaha, Eli Lilly and TotalEnergies have also withdrawn or significantly downsized their operations. Industry bodies and company executives have repeatedly cited inconsistent tax policies, the imposition and repeated extension of super taxes that push effective corporate rates above 40 percent, unpredictable regulatory changes, high energy tariffs and difficulties in repatriating earnings as decisive factors. Political and macroeconomic volatility have further compounded the perception of elevated sovereign risk, discouraging long-term capital commitments and making investors increasingly cautious about expanding their presence in Pakistan.

The contrast with successful business environments elsewhere is stark. Singapore consistently ranks among the world's easiest places to do business. A company can be incorporated in roughly a day and a half through fully digitised processes. Corporate income tax stands at 17 percent, with no capital gains tax and extensive treaty networks. The government maintains transparent and predictable regulations, invests heavily in infrastructure and talent, and offers targeted support for research, innovation and market expansion. Regulatory approvals carry published service standards, while licence validity periods have been lengthened to reduce recurring administrative costs. The result is an ecosystem that attracts global firms and enables them to establish operations, invest with confidence and scale efficiently.

Several European countries offer instructive models as well. Estonia has pioneered digital governance: nearly all new companies are registered online, often in minutes, while its e-residency programme allows non-residents to establish and manage businesses remotely while accessing the European single market. Corporate tax is levied only on distributed profits, encouraging reinvestment and supporting business expansion. The Netherlands combines a sophisticated logistics hub with practical incentives—including R&D tax relief, entrepreneur allowances and streamlined support schemes—while participating in the European Union's Points of Single Contact system, which consolidates information and formalities for cross-border operators. Across the European Union, systematic efforts to cut red tape, digitalise procedures and apply "one-in, one-out" principles for new regulations have helped lower the administrative burden on firms of all sizes and made regulatory compliance more predictable.

Pakistan is not without reform efforts. The Easy Business Act 2025, the Business Facilitation Centre and the Special Investment Facilitation Council represent attempts to streamline approvals, reduce paperwork and improve the investment environment. Yet the gap between announced measures and the lived experience of most businesses remains wide. High effective taxation, policy unpredictability, fragmented federal-provincial regulations and weak institutional coordination continue to raise the cost of formal enterprise. When the cost of compliance exceeds the cost of operating informally, capital and talent migrate—either to the informal economy or abroad. This ultimately weakens the formal tax base, reduces productive investment and limits the economy's capacity to generate sustainable employment.

Lowering the cost of doing business is not merely a technical exercise in regulatory simplification. It is both a constitutional and economic imperative. Consumers ultimately pay the price of inefficiency through higher costs of goods and services, while businesses pass on excessive taxation, energy costs, compliance expenses and regulatory uncertainty wherever possible. Investors, meanwhile, respond to environments that offer predictability, reasonable tax burdens, efficient administration and confidence that rules will not change arbitrarily.

Singapore and Estonia did not achieve their reputations as business-friendly economies overnight. They pursued sustained and coherent policies that treated enterprise as a partner in economic development rather than simply as a revenue source to be maximised. Pakistan needs a similar long-term approach. The objective should not merely be to announce another package of incentives or establish another facilitation centre, but to create an environment in which businesses can start, operate, invest and expand without excessive bureaucratic and financial obstacles.

Pakistan's Supreme Court has correctly identified the state's duty. The real test now lies in translating that constitutional obligation into tangible reductions in the cost of starting, operating and expanding a business. If the government can provide stable policies, rational taxation, reliable energy, faster approvals, stronger institutions and predictable regulations, it can help restore investor confidence and encourage businesses to expand rather than retreat. Whether Pakistan can reverse the outflow of capital and talent—or continue to watch economic opportunity leave its shores—will depend largely on how seriously this imperative is addressed.

It's time Arab states and Iran join hands to ensure regional security

Nasim Ahmed

Iran's Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei has urged Muslim countries, particularly those in the Gulf, to unite against what he called their "real enemy" and said divisions among Muslims served the interests of their adversaries.

The message was published on Mojtaba's Telegram account for Islamic Unity Week, which marks the birth anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It called for Muslim unity, cooperation in various fields and mutual defence, saying anyone who creates divisions among Muslims, "knowingly or unknowingly," helps Islam's enemies.

"And how, in these times, can anyone attribute such an act to ignorance or negligence, when the tyrants of the world, led by the criminal US, have now cast aside the deceptive and flimsy masks concealing their ugly colonial aims and their hegemonic and aggressive schemes, removed their deceptive velvet gloves, and revealed their bloodstained claws to the entire world?" the supreme leader said, according to Iran's Press TV.

He asked whether Palestinians would have been left "so helpless" and "subjected to the oppression and crimes of the occupiers" if Muslims had been united. Mojtaba specifically asked Gulf Arab rulers whether "rogues without identity" would have dared to covet their lands and possessions if the peoples and governments of the Gulf had been "united under the flag of Islam." "My emphatic and repeated recommendation to the rulers of Islamic countries, especially the countries of West Asia and the Gulf, is to identify your real enemy, understand his plan and confront it," Mojtaba said. He, according to Iranian media, said that "unity among Muslims is the fundamental cornerstone for achieving a proud and dominant Islamic civilisation."

This is a message that deserves more than a diplomatic shrug. Coming from Tehran's new leadership, still recovering after a devastating war with the United States and Israel earlier this year, the call for unity could easily be dismissed as rhetoric aimed at rallying a bruised nation. But dismissing it would be a mistake. Whatever one makes of the messenger, the message speaks to a real and urgent problem: the Muslim Middle East remains fractured at precisely the moment it can least afford to be.

For nearly half a century, the fault line between Iran and the Arab Gulf states has been the region's defining fracture — sharpened by sectarian rhetoric, proxy conflicts from Yemen to Lebanon, and a deep well of mutual suspicion. That mistrust has never served ordinary people on either side of the Gulf. It has, however, served outside powers very well.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are not simply two more capitals in a crowded regional map. As the pre-eminent centres of Shia and Sunni Islam respectively, they carry an outsized responsibility for the temperature of the entire Muslim world. When Tehran and Riyadh are at odds, the tremors are felt from Islamabad to Jakarta. When they cooperate — as they showed with their 2023 China-brokered rapprochement — the region breathes easier.

That responsibility cuts both ways. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours must stop treating Washington's security umbrella as a substitute for genuine regional diplomacy with Tehran. And Iran, for its part, must resist any temptation — however tempting confrontation with Washington and Israel may make it — to strike at Arab Gulf states or their infrastructure. Gulf capitals are not combatants in Iran's conflict with the United States and Israel, and treating them as extensions of that fight would shatter whatever fragile trust has been rebuilt in recent years, hand Iran's enemies a propaganda victory, and drag the wider Gulf into a war it did not choose.

Equally, Gulf states cannot keep outsourcing their security indefinitely to distant powers whose interests do not always align with regional stability. A security architecture built entirely on foreign guarantees is inherently fragile — it can be withdrawn, renegotiated, or weaponised as leverage. What the region needs instead is a homegrown framework, one that includes Iran rather than encircles it, built on verifiable confidence-building measures, hotlines, incident-avoidance protocols in the Gulf waters, and joint economic projects that make conflict costlier than cooperation.

Turkiye and Pakistan are natural bridge-builders in this effort. Neither is a party to the Iran-Gulf rivalry, both maintain workable relations with Tehran, and both have deep, decades-old defence ties with Saudi Arabia. That combination gives Ankara and Islamabad a credibility neither Washington nor any Western capital can match.

This is not theoretical. Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan formalised the "Mecca Joint Defence Agreement" — following on from Riyadh and Islamabad's own Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed last September — under which an attack on any one of the three would be treated as an attack on all. Analysts describe it as combining Saudi financial muscle and geography, Turkish defence-industrial capacity, and Pakistan's military experience and nuclear deterrent. It is not a NATO-style alliance, and its architects have been careful to say so. But it is a genuine step toward a regional order less dependent on any single outside guarantor — and, crucially, one that need not be aimed at Iran if Tehran is engaged rather than excluded. A framework built to reassure Gulf states could, with the right diplomacy, evolve into one that also draws Iran into confidence-building rather than confrontation.

What is too often missing from this conversation is the sheer economic cost of disunity. Every flare-up between Iran and its Gulf neighbours rattles oil markets, spikes shipping insurance premiums through the Strait of Hormuz, delays Gulf states' ambitious diversification plans, and scares off the very foreign investment those plans depend on. A region that holds a large share of the world's proven energy reserves, sits astride some of its busiest trade corridors, and boasts a combined population approaching half a billion people should not be defined by insecurity and improvisation.

Worse, disunity is an open invitation. Every rivalry left unmanaged, every trust deficit left unaddressed, gives outside powers — old colonial hands and new great-power competitors alike — an opening to fish in troubled waters, selling arms to both sides of a quarrel they have every incentive to prolong.

The Middle East does not lack the resources, the institutions, or even the goodwill to chart a more stable course. What it has lacked is the political will in Tehran and Riyadh to treat unity as a strategic necessity rather than a seasonal slogan. If that will exists — and the recent flurry of pacts and rapprochements suggests it might — the region's Muslim states could yet turn the page on decades of mutual suspicion, and deny outside powers the divisions they have so long profited from.

Petroleum levy: Easy tax at heavy cost for Pakistan's poor

Muhammad Hassan

The steady increase in the petroleum levy has once again highlighted one of the most persistent weaknesses in Pakistan's tax system: the government's growing dependence on easily collected indirect taxes to finance an overwhelmingly current-expense-driven budget. While the levy provides a convenient and predictable source of revenue for the government, its impact is anything but convenient for ordinary citizens, particularly lower-income households already struggling with high living costs.

The petroleum levy has been budgeted to generate Rs1.676 trillion during the current fiscal year. Although the government temporarily reduced the levy in the early weeks following the US-Israel invasion of Iran to provide some relief to consumers amid rising fuel prices, it has subsequently restored the levy in phases. The increases have been broadly aligned with the revenue target approved in the federal budget.

The restoration of the levy has also been linked to commitments made under Pakistan's ongoing Extended Fund Facility programme with the International Monetary Fund. Under the programme, the authorities are expected to ensure that the revenue targets incorporated into the budget are achieved. The government is also required to avoid approving unbudgeted expenditures, including additional subsidies, and where unforeseen costs arise, these are expected to be passed on to consumers rather than absorbed by the exchequer.

From the government's perspective, the petroleum levy is therefore an attractive fiscal instrument. It provides a relatively reliable stream of revenue without requiring the state to undertake a complicated process of identifying taxpayers, assessing incomes or enforcing compliance across large sections of the economy. The consumer pays the levy at the pump, and the money can be collected with comparatively little administrative effort.

However, the latest increase in fuel prices has not been driven by the levy alone. Another factor was the agreement reached with the Pakistan Petroleum Dealers Association after the association launched a nationwide strike. The settlement resulted in an adjustment in the margins and contributed to the increase ultimately faced by consumers at filling stations. The growing dependence on the petroleum levy has become increasingly visible in successive federal budgets. There are two fundamental reasons for its appeal to the government. The first relates to the way the levy is classified for fiscal purposes. It is placed among taxes outside the divisible pool, meaning that the revenue does not have to be shared with the provinces under the National Finance Commission mechanism.

This classification has long been a subject of debate because, in practical terms, the levy is imposed on petroleum consumption by the general public and has characteristics similar to a sales tax. Sales tax revenues, however, are part of the divisible pool and are consequently shared with the provinces under the NFC arrangements. The classification of the petroleum levy as a non-divisible tax therefore gives the federal government greater control over the revenue it generates.

The second reason is even simpler: the levy is extraordinarily easy to collect. Unlike income tax, which requires taxpayers to declare earnings and the Federal Board of Revenue to monitor compliance, the petroleum levy is collected at the point of sale. Petrol stations effectively perform the role of collection agents, while the FBR has relatively limited involvement in determining whether an individual consumer has paid the correct amount. The tax is embedded in the price of fuel and collected before the consumer drives away from the filling station. This makes the petroleum levy an extremely efficient source of revenue from the government's perspective. But administrative efficiency should not be confused with economic fairness.

For a country where poverty remains exceptionally high, repeatedly increasing the cost of fuel through taxation has consequences extending far beyond vehicle owners. Pakistan's poverty level is estimated at around 44 percent, an extraordinarily high figure for a country seeking to achieve sustainable economic growth. Any additional burden on petroleum consumers reduces the purchasing power of households already operating under severe financial constraints.

The impact is particularly pronounced because petrol is not merely a product consumed by private motorists. Fuel costs are embedded throughout the economy. Public transport operators face higher operating expenses, which are eventually passed on to passengers. Transport costs influence the prices of food and other essential goods because almost everything consumed in Pakistan has to be moved from farms, factories, warehouses or ports to markets.

A rise in petroleum prices can therefore function as a tax on virtually the entire economy. A worker who does not own a car may still pay the price through more expensive bus or motorcycle fares and higher prices for food and household necessities. In this sense, the petroleum levy reaches considerably further than the filling station.

The deeper problem, however, is not the existence of the petroleum levy itself but the extent to which the government has come to rely on it. A government whose expenditure is dominated by current spending will naturally seek revenue sources that can be collected quickly and predictably. Yet this approach creates a vicious cycle. Instead of reforming the tax system and broadening the direct-tax base, the state repeatedly turns to consumption taxes because they are easier to collect. Around 93 percent of total federal expenditure is consumed by current, non-development spending. This leaves relatively limited fiscal space for investment in infrastructure, human capital, education, healthcare and other areas capable of raising long-term productivity.

The result is a tax structure that places a disproportionate burden on consumption rather than income and wealth. Indirect taxes such as sales taxes and petroleum levies affect poorer households more severely because lower-income families spend a larger proportion of their earnings on basic necessities. Wealthier households, by contrast, have greater capacity to save and invest and can therefore absorb consumption taxes more easily.

The solution is not simply to abolish the petroleum levy overnight, particularly when the government faces substantial financing requirements and has committed itself to fiscal targets under the IMF programme. The more important task is to reduce dependence on such taxes over time by fundamentally reforming the tax structure.

Pakistan needs a stronger system of direct taxation based on the ability-to-pay principle. Those with higher incomes, greater property holdings and larger economic gains should contribute proportionately more to the national exchequer. At the same time, tax administration must become more effective so that income and wealth that currently escape taxation are brought into the formal system.

Such reforms would not be easy. They would inevitably encounter resistance from powerful economic groups and require political determination. But continuing to extract more revenue from fuel consumption is hardly a sustainable alternative.

The government needs revenue, and the country needs fiscal discipline. But the question is not simply how much revenue can be collected; it is also who bears the burden. A tax system that repeatedly turns to petrol pumps because they offer an easy collection mechanism may balance the books in the short term, but it does little to create a fairer or more productive economy.

The petroleum levy may be an efficient tax collector's dream, but for millions of Pakistanis it is another deduction from an already shrinking household budget. If the government is serious about reducing poverty and creating sustainable growth, it must gradually move away from taxing consumption and towards taxing the ability to pay. Fiscal stability achieved by making everyday necessities increasingly expensive is not a durable economic solution. Pakistan needs a tax system that raises revenue without continually squeezing those least able to bear the burden.

Pakistan's current account under renewed pressure

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's external account is showing early signs of renewed strain, with persistently high international oil prices, a widening trade deficit and sluggish export growth beginning to test the stability achieved over the past year. The situation is not yet alarming, but the warning signs are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. If import growth continues to outpace exports while remittance inflows lose momentum, pressure on the rupee could intensify and complicate the country's broader efforts to maintain macroeconomic stability.

The current account recorded a deficit of $328 million in July 2026. On the surface, the figure is relatively manageable and compares favourably with both the preceding month and July last year. However, looking beyond the headline number reveals a more worrying trend. Imports have crossed the $6 billion threshold despite signs that the momentum of large-scale manufacturing is slowing, as reflected in the latest June data. Goods exports, meanwhile, are roughly half the value of imports, leaving the country with a goods trade deficit of around $3.1 billion, an increase of 17 percent over the same month last year.

The widening trade imbalance is particularly concerning because Pakistan's external position remains heavily dependent on remittances to bridge the gap between what the country earns abroad and what it spends on imports. If that gap continues to widen, the economy will require increasingly strong remittance inflows or additional external financing to prevent pressure from building on the currency and foreign exchange reserves.

The services account provides one of the few encouraging developments. Services exports have continued to perform relatively well, particularly in information and communication technology and other business services. Technology-related exports rose 18 percent in July to $417 million, maintaining the strong momentum seen in recent months.

The expansion of services exports is partly explained by the significant taxation advantage available to workers providing services to overseas clients compared with those employed formally in the domestic economy. The difference in tax treatment creates a strong incentive for skilled workers to serve foreign markets while remaining physically based in Pakistan. This has helped the services sector become an increasingly important source of foreign exchange.

However, the improvement in services is not yet sufficient to offset the deterioration in merchandise trade. The combined goods and services deficit widened by 27 percent to $3.4 billion. Once the primary income balance is included, the overall external deficit rises to approximately $4.2 billion. Against this, remittances amounted to around $3.6 billion in July. The numbers explain why the current account ultimately slipped into deficit: remittances are no longer large enough to completely compensate for the combined external shortfall.

The outlook for remittances also deserves careful attention. More than half of Pakistan's remittance inflows originate in the Gulf, making the country particularly vulnerable to economic and geopolitical developments in the region. The continuing Iran-US conflict and resulting instability have increased uncertainty, while the possibility of slower economic activity across the Gulf could eventually affect employment and income opportunities for Pakistani workers.

At the same time, geopolitical tensions are contributing to higher international oil prices. For an oil-importing country such as Pakistan, this creates a double burden. Higher petroleum prices increase the import bill precisely when the trade balance is already under pressure. They can also feed into domestic inflation, raising costs across transportation, electricity, manufacturing and other sectors.

Inflationary pressures could become more visible over the next couple of months, with inflation potentially remaining in double digits. That would further complicate monetary policy and could undermine some of the economic momentum that had begun to emerge before the latest geopolitical shock.

The immediate challenge, therefore, is not simply to prevent a current account deficit but to preserve the broader stability painstakingly achieved during the past year. Pakistan's fiscal position has improved, while debt-servicing costs have declined considerably. These developments provide some protection. But fiscal consolidation alone cannot resolve an external imbalance. The fundamental issue remains the trade account.

The most sustainable solution is to narrow the trade deficit through a combination of slower import growth and stronger exports. The question is how this can be achieved without damaging economic activity. So far, the State Bank of Pakistan has relied heavily on monetary policy to restrain domestic demand. Maintaining real interest rates at positive levels of around 2 to 3 percent or more can discourage excessive consumption and imports, but it comes at a cost. Higher interest rates increase the government's financing burden and can put additional pressure on fiscal resources, particularly when public debt remains elevated.

There may therefore be a case for allowing the rupee to depreciate gradually rather than relying excessively on high real interest rates to contain demand. A modest and orderly adjustment in the exchange rate could reduce demand for imported goods while improving the competitiveness of Pakistani exports. It could also create some room for monetary policy to operate with less restrictive real interest rates.

The argument becomes stronger when viewed through the real effective exchange rate. Pakistan's REER reached 107.92 in July, its highest level since May 2018. That compares with 100.0 in July 2025. The sharp appreciation suggests that the rupee has become increasingly strong in real terms relative to Pakistan's trading partners. With inflation expected to remain elevated, the REER could rise further in August and September.

This does not mean the SBP should allow the currency to fall sharply. A disorderly depreciation could quickly revive the very instability the central bank has spent considerable effort containing. Pakistan has experienced the consequences of delayed exchange-rate adjustment many times: a period of relative currency stability is followed by mounting external pressures, eventually forcing a much steeper depreciation.

The State Bank can reasonably point to its substantial purchases from the interbank market and the resulting improvement in foreign exchange reserves as evidence that the present strategy is working. Those purchases have helped rebuild external buffers and should not be dismissed. But reserve accumulation should not become a reason to ignore emerging market signals.

The wiser approach may be gradualism. If the currency is becoming overvalued in real terms, a controlled adjustment now could prevent a much more painful correction later. Policymakers should ideally act before market participants begin to believe that the exchange rate is being artificially maintained.

Pakistan's current account deficit is still manageable, and July's $328 million shortfall does not by itself represent a crisis. But the underlying trends warrant close attention. High oil prices, weak export growth, rising imports, geopolitical uncertainty and the possibility of slower remittance growth could combine to recreate external pressures faster than expected.

The lesson is straightforward: stability cannot be preserved indefinitely through reserves, borrowing and demand suppression alone. Pakistan needs a competitive exchange rate, stronger exports and a broader foreign-exchange earning base. The immediate task for policymakers is to make small adjustments while there is still room to manoeuvre, rather than waiting until the economic pressure becomes impossible to contain.

A cautious, gradual response today could spare Pakistan the far more disruptive currency correction it has repeatedly been forced to endure in the past.

Pakistan-Russia ties: An underappreciated strategic partnership

Raza Khan

The recent signing of the highly significant mutual defence pact among Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey, along with Pakistan's central role in the peace negotiations between the United States and Iran aimed at ending their ongoing war, has been the talk of the town in Pakistan and important world capitals. At the same time, however, Islamabad's relations with Russia have received relatively little attention in the national and international media, as well as among experts of international relations, despite their growing importance over the last few years.

The most important events related to Pakistan's relations with Russia included Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's visit to Islamabad on October 15–16, 2024, to attend the 23rd Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government. The visit was important because, during his stay, Russian Prime Minister Mishustin also held formal bilateral talks with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif aimed at expanding economic and regional cooperation. However, Russia's recognition last year of the Afghan Taliban regime has somewhat raised doubts in Islamabad regarding Moscow's role in Afghanistan and the wider region. Russia has been the first, and so far the only, country to extend diplomatic recognition to the Afghan Taliban regime, which Islamabad and most other countries have so far refused to recognise. For Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban regime has increasingly become a rival because of its consistent and all-out support for the Pakistani Taliban network, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which maintains sanctuaries in Afghanistan and carries out attacks inside Pakistan. Against this backdrop, Russia's recognition of the Taliban regime was quite surprising for Pakistan.

Significantly, when, at the fag end of his tenure, former Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Russia in February 2022, on the eve of Moscow's military invasion of neighbouring

Ukraine, to initiate a new era of relations, mainly focused on economic ties between Russia and Pakistan, many eyebrows were raised in Western capitals. Although Imran Khan had repeatedly clarified that he visited Moscow only to request and secure cheap oil and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) supplies from Russia to ease the burgeoning energy crisis at home, most Western countries considered the visit to have strategic motives. Mr Khan was subsequently ousted from power through a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly by opposition parties after they secured the support of dissidents from his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party and smaller coalition partners. After being shown the door, the former prime minister accused Washington of dislodging his government because of his visit to Moscow.

In a historical context, Russia-Pakistan friendly ties are not only very important but also extremely interesting. Although both Pakistan and Russia have bitter historical memories of working against each other's interests, by the dawn of the second quarter of the 21st century, the two countries have few alternatives but to improve their mutual ties. As Pakistan shifted, at least avowedly, its foreign-policy paradigm in 2020 from a geo-strategic to a geo-economic approach, its relations with Russia in this context have become extremely important.

The most important factor for Pakistan in developing extensive economic relations with Russia is the latter's huge reserves of oil and gas. Potentially, Russia could supply large volumes of oil and gas to Pakistan, and that too at discounted prices, which could be instrumental not only in overcoming the country's chronic energy deficiency but also in significantly reducing Islamabad's oil import bill. Equally importantly, crude oil and gas supplies to Pakistan from Russia could reduce the country's overdependence on Middle Eastern oil and gas supplies, especially from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Although Russia may not gain substantial immediate economic benefits from providing crude oil and LPG to Pakistan at reduced rates, such an arrangement could offer Moscow significant diplomatic and political advantages. Such supplies would make Pakistan increasingly dependent upon Russia, potentially offsetting some, if not all, of the influence of Washington and its Western allies over Pakistan. Russia still considers the Cold War-era NATO to be its strategic nemesis, while Moscow has justified its military intervention in Ukraine and the occupation and annexation of parts of Ukrainian territory as measures intended to prevent NATO from bringing Ukraine and other Russian neighbouring countries into its fold. This eastward expansion of NATO has long been viewed by Russia as a US-orchestrated strategy aimed at strategically encircling Russia and extending Western influence into what Moscow regards as its traditional sphere of influence.

Therefore, greater energy cooperation between Russia and Pakistan is in the national interest of both countries. However, it has largely been the fear of US-Western opposition and possible economic retaliation that has prevented Islamabad from moving much further with the idea of asking Moscow, in all earnestness, to provide oil and LNG at discounted prices. When Russian Energy Minister Nikolay Shulginov visited Pakistan, the two countries announced that they had reached an agreement on the supply of crude oil to Pakistan. Russian authorities, however, informed Pakistan that Russia was not in a position to supply cheap LNG in the following few months and that Pakistan should instead engage directly with Russian energy companies, such as Gazprom, in this regard. Nevertheless, both countries announced that they had agreed "in principle" on energy cooperation.

It is proverbially said that there are many slips between the tongue and the lips, meaning that there is still much to be done before a final achievement or agreement is reached. Keeping in view the understandable opposition of the United States and India towards energy cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, as well as ambiguity and a lack of vision on the part of our strategists, including the political leadership, Moscow and Islamabad may yet fail to reach a final agreement on the supply of Russian crude oil to Pakistan at discounted rates.

If there is already such opposition to Russia-Pakistan economic cooperation internationally and within Pakistan, then the scale of antagonism that could emerge if both countries were to initiate substantive cooperation in the fields of defence and security is only imaginable. Nevertheless, cooperation between these two states, particularly for Pakistan in the realm of defence and security, could become critically important, especially at a time when the US and the wider West may not be looking favourably towards Islamabad.

However, any detailed analysis of defence cooperation at this point in time would be difficult and, to some extent, beside the point. Nevertheless, the situation in Afghanistan that has developed since the Taliban took over the country in August 2021, and the hesitation of the entire international community—including Russia and Pakistan—to extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime, remain key matters of mutual interest between Moscow and Islamabad.

It is encouraging that Russia and Pakistan are coordinating their strategies regarding the Afghan Taliban regime. In this context, Moscow's sudden recognition of the Afghan Taliban regime was somewhat surprising. Despite the fact that the Afghan Taliban cannot necessarily be trusted to keep their promises to the international community, Russia could likewise not have been certain that the Taliban would fulfil any commitments regarding preventing anti-Russian elements from using Afghan soil.

Pakistan has already been left in the lurch by the Afghan Taliban, which has allowed Pakistan's largest terrorist network, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, to operate from its soil. Therefore, both Russia and Pakistan still need to coordinate their strategies closely on Afghanistan. This is particularly important because instability in Afghanistan directly affects the security interests of both countries and can undermine efforts to promote regional connectivity.

Pakistan's geo-economic aspirations also make closer engagement with Russia increasingly relevant. Russia possesses enormous energy resources, while Pakistan occupies a strategically important geographic position connecting South Asia with Central and potentially Central Asian markets. Improved relations could therefore create opportunities in energy, transportation, trade, investment and regional connectivity. At the same time, Islamabad must carefully balance its relations with Moscow, Washington, Beijing, Riyadh, Ankara and other important partners rather than allowing any bilateral relationship to become a source of unnecessary confrontation with another major power.

Pakistan-Russia relations are consequently much more significant than the limited attention they currently receive might suggest. The two countries have travelled a complicated historical path, moving from periods of considerable strategic mistrust to cautious engagement and increasing cooperation. Their interests do not coincide on every issue, but neither do they need to. What matters is whether they can identify areas of mutual interest—particularly energy, trade, regional connectivity and Afghanistan—and develop practical cooperation without unnecessarily turning their relationship into a zero-sum geopolitical alignment.

The changing regional and global order provides both Islamabad and Moscow with an opportunity to redefine their relationship. For Pakistan, closer economic engagement with Russia could diversify its sources of energy and investment, strengthen its geo-economic position and provide greater strategic flexibility. For Russia, stronger ties with Pakistan could enhance its connectivity with South Asia and expand its diplomatic and economic presence in a strategically important region.

The challenge is to move beyond declarations of intent and translate political goodwill into concrete projects. Pakistan and Russia have already demonstrated that dialogue is possible. The next step should be to develop a sustained framework for economic, energy and regional cooperation while maintaining necessary caution on sensitive strategic and security issues. If Islamabad and Moscow can manage this delicate balance, their relationship could become an important pillar of regional peace, connectivity and economic integration across South and Central Asia.

Balochistan: A generation caught between fear and hope

Rasheed Ali

For a child in Balochistan, the distance between home and school can sometimes be measured not in kilometres but in fear.

A school may stand only a short distance away, yet insecurity, militancy, displacement and the threat of violence can make the journey seem impossibly long. In a province already struggling with poverty, inadequate infrastructure and teacher shortages, violence has added another formidable barrier to one of the most basic rights of childhood: education.

The consequences are stark. Around 70,000 children have been deprived of education because of deteriorating law and order and mass migration from sensitive parts of Balochistan, according to former chief minister Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, who disclosed the figure while responding to a debate in the Balochistan Assembly almost a decade ago. And now, as many more must have been added to that group of children.

His statement offered a glimpse into how insecurity can transform an entire generation's educational prospects. Dr Baloch said worsening law and order and migration had deprived thousands of children of schooling, describing education as a fundamental right. But the problem, he suggested, was larger than school buildings or enrolment figures. “Right from the Sariab Road area of Quetta to Mand in Turbat, nobody feels safe to go there,” he told the provincial assembly.

Areas that had once been considered ordinary communities, he said, had gradually become sensitive and troubled because of policies pursued by successive governments.

The description of these areas as “no-go” zones illustrates the extent to which insecurity can reshape everyday life. When residents are afraid to move freely, children inevitably become among the first casualties. School attendance falls, teachers become reluctant to serve in affected districts and families may migrate in search of safety.

For children forced to move, education can become an early casualty of displacement. Armed conflict and counter-terrorism operations can interrupt schooling for months or even years. A child who leaves school during the formative years may find it increasingly difficult to return, particularly when the family has lost its home, livelihood and social support network.

The crisis is particularly painful for girls, whose access to education is already constrained by distance, social pressures and inadequate facilities. Insecurity adds another reason for families to keep daughters at home. The impact of violence is not limited to attendance.

Schools themselves can become targets or suffer damage during clashes and attacks. Prolonged closures deprive children of structured learning, while repeated disruption weakens an already fragile educational system.

The psychological consequences can be even more enduring. Children exposed to violence, sudden unrest, displacement and military operations can carry fear and anxiety into the classroom. Concentration suffers when a child's attention is divided between a lesson and the possibility of danger outside.

Teachers face the same uncertainty. Security concerns can discourage qualified educators from accepting postings in remote or volatile districts. Where teachers are absent, schools may remain closed or function only intermittently. The result is a cycle in which insecurity produces teacher shortages, teacher shortages weaken schools, and weak schools further diminish educational opportunities.

Against this bleak landscape, Balochistan Home Minister Mir Ziaullah Langau has sought to frame education as the province's strongest alternative to violence. Speaking to delegations of young people in Quetta, Langau recently urged them to reject violence and embrace education, research, innovation and constructive activity.

“The pen, not the gun, is the true instrument of national development,” he said. He argued that terrorism and extremism bring destruction, instability and darkness, while education and awareness provide a path towards peace and prosperity. “The future of Balochistan is associated with Pakistan. Nations achieve progress through education, knowledge, and constructive thinking—not through violence,” Langau said. His message was directed particularly at young people—a generation that represents both the province's greatest vulnerability and its greatest potential.

Langau warned that young people who choose armed violence and head to the mountains risk their own lives while also damaging the peace and stability of the province. The path of terrorism, he said, deprives young people of the opportunity to make a positive contribution to society. His warning comes against a backdrop of continuing concerns over militancy and extremism in the province, including the reported involvement of women in terrorist-related activities.

The home minister also stressed that Balochistan's youth possess immense talent and can play a major role in Pakistan's development if provided opportunities to pursue education and productive careers.

That proposition places education at the centre of the province's struggle—not merely as a social service but as a possible instrument of stability. The contrast could hardly be sharper.

On one side is the gun, representing violence, displacement, fear and lost opportunities. On the other is the pen, representing education, employment, research and the possibility of a different future.

When communities are displaced, schools lose students. When teachers fear for their safety, classrooms lose teachers. When schools are attacked or closed, children lose precious months of learning. And when children grow up surrounded by violence, they risk losing something less visible but equally important—the belief that education can change their lives.

There is also an economic dimension. Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province by area but remains confronted by severe development challenges. Every child who leaves school permanently represents not only an individual educational loss but a future worker, professional, entrepreneur, researcher or public servant who may never acquire the skills needed to contribute fully to society.

The cost therefore extends beyond today's classroom. It reaches into tomorrow's economy. The province's security crisis has already made it difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers in remote districts. At the same time, resources required for education compete with the demands of security and counter-insurgency. Basic facilities, learning materials and curriculum development can suffer when public priorities are dominated by emergency responses.

Yet Balochistan's young population remains a source of possibility. Langau's appeal to young people to choose education over violence reflects a simple but profound reality: the province cannot build a peaceful future while denying its children the opportunity to learn. Education alone cannot end militancy. Nor can schools substitute for political dialogue, effective governance, economic opportunity or security. But without education, each of those efforts becomes harder to sustain. The school is where a child learns to read the world beyond the immediate boundaries of his or her village. It is where a young person can acquire skills instead of weapons, aspirations instead of fear, and a profession instead of a life defined by conflict.

For Balochistan, that choice has become increasingly urgent. And as Home Minister Langau put it, Balochistan's future will ultimately be determined not by the gun, but by the pen.

Preserving Pakistan's harvest

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Pakistan's agricultural economy is losing billions of dollars not because farmers are failing to produce, but because far too much of what they produce is being lost before it reaches consumers or markets. The Asian Development Bank's latest assessment of the country's agribusiness sector puts the annual cost of post-harvest losses at a staggering $2 billion. The figure should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers, because it exposes a weakness that has persisted for years across almost every stage of the agricultural value chain.

The losses occur between the farm and the final market, affecting commodities destined for domestic consumption, industrial processing, export and, critically, national food security. In an economy where agriculture contributes roughly one-fifth of GDP and provides employment to more than a third of the workforce, allowing such a large share of agricultural value to disappear is not merely an operational inefficiency. It represents a major economic loss at a time when Pakistan can ill afford to waste productive resources.

The problem has become even more serious as climate change increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Agriculture is inherently vulnerable to weather, but Pakistan's recent experience demonstrates how climate shocks can rapidly become economic shocks. The catastrophic floods of 2022 destroyed approximately four million hectares of agricultural land and caused billions of dollars in losses. Before farmers, markets and supply chains had fully recovered, last year's floods destroyed another 2.2 million hectares of cropland.

Repeated disasters have consequences that extend well beyond the immediate destruction of crops. They disrupt transportation and supply networks, reduce farmers' incomes, damage irrigation systems and other productive assets, and place additional pressure on an economy already struggling with limited fiscal and financial resources. When these shocks repeatedly hit the same sector, recovery itself becomes more difficult, creating a cycle in which farmers have fewer resources to invest in resilience before the next disaster arrives.

The ADB report is therefore right to identify climate change as one of the major structural obstacles confronting Pakistan's agribusiness sector. But climate vulnerability is only part of the story. The country's agricultural problems are also rooted in inefficient use of land and water, inadequate adoption of climate-smart farming techniques and years of insufficient investment.

Private investment currently accounts for less than five percent of agribusiness capital, an exceptionally low share for a sector of such economic importance. Small and medium-sized enterprises face particular difficulties in accessing finance because banks frequently require collateral that these businesses cannot provide. Even when credit is available, short repayment periods can make agricultural investment commercially unattractive, particularly for projects whose returns take years to materialise.

Climate finance is even harder to access. Farmers and agribusinesses that want to invest in resilient technologies, efficient irrigation, renewable energy or improved storage frequently lack access to affordable financing designed specifically for climate adaptation.

The consequences of this investment gap are visible throughout the agricultural value chain. Pakistan remains short of adequate cold-storage facilities, modern warehouses, efficient rural roads, testing laboratories and internationally recognised certification systems. These deficiencies mean that agricultural products can deteriorate before reaching markets or fail to meet the standards required by international buyers.

Post-harvest losses are consequently not simply a problem of farmers harvesting crops inefficiently. A farmer can produce a good-quality crop and still lose significant income because there is no suitable storage facility, because roads are inadequate, because transportation takes too long or because the product cannot meet export certification requirements.

This infrastructure deficit also prevents Pakistan from moving sufficiently up the agricultural value chain. Instead of exporting higher-value processed products, the country frequently remains dependent on the sale of relatively low-value commodities. The lost opportunity is considerable: processing, packaging, branding and certification can generate far more income and employment than the sale of unprocessed agricultural output.

Technology presents another major weakness. Pakistan invests only around 0.2 percent of agricultural GDP in research and development. Such limited investment makes it difficult to develop and disseminate technologies suited to local conditions, particularly as farmers confront changing temperatures, water shortages and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns.

The adoption of climate-smart seeds, modern machinery and precision agriculture also remains inadequate. An outdated agricultural extension and advisory system compounds the problem. Farmers often lack timely, reliable and locally relevant information about weather conditions, crop diseases, water management, markets and modern farming practices.

The ADB's proposed roadmap is important precisely because it recognises that Pakistan cannot solve these problems through a single intervention. The suggested National Agribusiness Investment Fund could help address the shortage of long-term financing, while credit guarantees could encourage banks to lend to businesses that currently struggle to meet collateral requirements. Warehouse-receipt financing could also allow farmers and traders to use stored agricultural commodities as a basis for accessing credit.

There is similarly a case for expanding innovative forms of climate finance. Green bonds and blended finance could mobilise private capital for projects aimed at climate adaptation and resilience. Public-private partnerships could help develop cold chains, storage facilities and climate-resilient infrastructure where private investors may otherwise hesitate because of high upfront costs or uncertain returns. Institutional coordination is equally important. Pakistan's agricultural policy environment is divided between federal and provincial governments, often resulting in fragmented initiatives and overlapping responsibilities. The proposed National Agribusiness Transformation Committee could help provide strategic direction, while digital monitoring dashboards and climate-smart budget tagging could make it easier to track whether public spending is actually addressing the sector's most urgent vulnerabilities.

Technology also needs to move beyond policy speeches and pilot projects. Leasing arrangements for drones could allow smaller farmers to access precision agriculture without having to purchase expensive equipment. Solar-powered pumps could reduce energy costs while improving water efficiency. Agri-tech research hubs could connect farmers, researchers and businesses, while artificial intelligence, remote sensing and real-time data could improve everything from crop monitoring to weather forecasting and farm-level decision-making.

The central message from the ADB report is therefore much broader than the $2 billion annual post-harvest loss figure. Pakistan's agricultural challenge is not simply that it produces too little. Increasing production without fixing the system through which crops are stored, transported, processed and sold would leave much of the underlying problem untouched.

The country must learn to preserve more of what it already produces, extract greater value from agricultural commodities and protect farmers and supply chains from increasingly severe climate shocks. Reducing post-harvest losses alone could release billions of dollars of economic value without requiring an equivalent expansion in cultivated land or natural resources. Pakistan's agriculture cannot remain trapped in a low-investment, low-technology and low-value cycle while climate risks continue to intensify. The $2 billion annual loss should not be regarded simply as another statistic in an international report. It is an opportunity cost, a warning and, potentially, a roadmap for reform.

If Pakistan can combine better infrastructure, accessible finance, modern technology, stronger research, improved governance and climate-smart farming, the agricultural sector could become a much stronger engine of exports, employment and rural prosperity. The real goal should not merely be to produce more crops, but to ensure that what farmers produce reaches markets safely, earns its full value and survives the increasingly unpredictable climate in which it must be grown.

Educated? Skilled? Ambitious? Traffickers are looking for you

Amy Pope

Good salary. Visa sponsored. Flight included. Applicants must be educated, fluent in English and confident online.

It sounds like a great opportunity for a young graduate, but it is the bait in a trafficking operation. The advertised job does not exist. On arrival, the person's passport is taken. They are moved to a compound they cannot leave and are forced to run online scams: impersonating strangers, building false relationships and persuading people thousands of kilometres away to send money.

Those who miss their targets may be beaten, starved or placed in solitary confinement. Their families may sell land or take on debt to raise money to pay for their release. I heard versions of this story firsthand during a recent visit to Rwanda, where I met two survivors who had been trafficked through fraudulent job offers. They were fluent in English and comfortable with technology. They had been looking for the same thing as millions of other young people: a good job and the chance to build a better future.

Those qualities made them valuable to the traffickers. They were given scripts and forced to impersonate women online, build romantic relationships with people in Europe and persuade them to send money. Today, after returning home with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), they are working alongside us to warn communities and other young people. They are using some of the same platforms on which traffickers search for recruits to help others recognise the danger.

Their experience exposes a crime that creates victims on both sides of the screen. One person is held under threat and forced to deceive. Another has their trust exploited and may lose their savings. The criminal network profits from both. At least 300,000 people are estimated to have been trafficked or coerced into scam compounds across Southeast Asia. People from at least 80 countries and territories have been identified among them. Across the Asia Pacific, scams cost people an estimated $88bn to $114bn in 2025. Those losses cover a wider range of scams, but they show the scale of the criminal economy in which these compounds operate.

The threat is also reaching further into Africa. IOM and its government partners are identifying a growing number of victims from countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. During recent visits to Tanzania and Rwanda, leaders told me of fraudulent job offers reaching young graduates and other jobseekers through social media. These networks are global by design. Recruitment may happen in one country, travel through another and exploitation in a third. The scams can target people anywhere. When an operation is disrupted, it moves and starts again elsewhere.

Government responses are often divided. Labour authorities see an unlicensed recruiter. Border officials see suspicious travel. Police see online fraud. Consular teams see citizens stranded abroad. Traffickers exploit the gaps between them. These gaps need to be closed. Governments should provide trusted ways to verify overseas employers, recruiters, contracts and visas. Labour, border, police and consular authorities need to share alerts quickly and investigate the networks together.

Technology companies have an equally important role. Fraudulent recruitment happens openly on social media, messaging services and job platforms. Companies should detect and remove deceptive advertisements, make them easy to report and preserve evidence that can help identify those responsible. Awareness campaigns designed with survivors must reach young people in those same spaces.

Above all, people forced to run scams must be treated as victims of trafficking. Some escape the compounds only to be detained or prosecuted for immigration offences or crimes committed under threat. No one should be punished for acts they were compelled to carry out because they were trafficked.

From 2022 to 2025, IOM assisted more than 3,500 victims from 39 countries who were trafficked for forced criminality in Southeast Asia. Survivors need protection, medical and psychological care, a safe way home and support to rebuild their lives. Jobseekers can take precautions. A legitimate employer should have a verifiable address. The contract should describe the work, and the visa should match the job. A recruiter should not pressure someone to travel immediately, keep the offer secret or surrender their passport.

But polished deceptions are designed to appear credible. The burden of defeating sophisticated international criminal networks cannot rest on jobseekers alone. Before someone boards a flight, there must be a reliable way to verify the offer. When trafficking is suspected, authorities must act together. When a victim escapes, they must be met with protection rather than punishment.

For many people, trafficking now begins with an ordinary message on an ordinary phone. Our response must reach them there. Every jobseeker should be able to ask: Is this really a job, or is someone trying to lure me into a trap? None should be left to answer that question alone.

Six months into the Iran war, a new Gulf security architecture is emerging

Rashid Al-Mohanadi

Six months into the war with Iran, it is worth taking stock of what has actually changed around the Gulf.

After Iran's June 2025 missile strike on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, I argued that the years ahead would be more perilous for the Gulf and that deeper defence cooperation and integration would eventually become unavoidable. Earlier this month, I wrote here that the Gulf could no longer rely entirely on the old security toolkit and would need to build more of a security ecosystem of its own. So far, events have borne out the broad direction of both arguments.

What has become clearer over the past six months is that the war is not simply changing defence budgets or generating new security agreements. It is beginning to change how Gulf states think about security itself: who they should work with, what they should expect from their partners and what cooperation needs to look like when a crisis actually begins.

Some of these changes are obvious. The war has demonstrated, in the most direct possible way, the vulnerability of cities, energy infrastructure, airports, ports and shipping lanes to missiles, drones and other forms of disruption. Threats that were often discussed in exercises and planning documents have become immediate operational problems. For decades, Gulf security rested on a familiar structure: the United States provided the main external security umbrella, Gulf states maintained bilateral relationships with Washington and other Western capitals, and the GCC provided a regional framework in which defence integration remained uneven.

That system has not disappeared. Nor should it. The US remains indispensable to Gulf security and will continue to play a central role for the foreseeable future. What is changing is the assumption that this structure, by itself, is enough. The war has accelerated the move towards a more layered security system. Gulf states are strengthening cooperation among themselves while deepening relationships with a wider range of partners. Turkiye is becoming more important. European states have greater potential to play an operational role. Existing bilateral military relationships are being asked to deliver more, while new regional arrangements are emerging alongside older ones.

The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan is perhaps the clearest recent example. Its declaration that an armed attack on one would be treated as an attack on all immediately invited comparisons with NATO. The principle itself is not new to Gulf security. The GCC's existing Joint Defence Agreement already treats an attack on one member as an attack on all, a commitment GCC states have repeatedly reaffirmed during the current war. What makes the Mecca agreement different is that it extends this collective-defence logic beyond the GCC, linking Saudi Arabia to Turkiye and Pakistan.

The comparison with NATO is understandable, but it can also distract from what is actually happening. The Gulf does not need to reproduce NATO, nor is the wider Middle East particularly suited to one large security alliance built around a single hierarchy and a single

understanding of threat.

The threat facing a Gulf state may come from a state one day and a non-state actor the next. Countries that see one threat in much the same way may have very different views of another. And no regional state, however capable, is likely to be accepted as the permanent political and military leader of every possible coalition.

What appears to be emerging instead is a system of overlapping partnerships rather than one grand alliance. Different countries will work together against different threats. Some arrangements will be Gulf-led; others will bring in regional or Western partners.

Such a system also requires a different way of thinking about leadership. A regional security architecture built around permanent hierarchy will always face resistance. Gulf and Middle Eastern states are protective of their sovereignty and bring very different capabilities to the table. Leadership should therefore follow the threat. The state facing the immediate danger should have the leading political voice in setting the objectives of the response, the acceptable level of escalation and the use of its territory. But operational leadership need not mirror political hierarchy.

A maritime crisis may be best handled by the partner with the strongest naval capability. An air defence crisis may require the partner with the most relevant capabilities to take a larger operational role. This kind of flexibility may be the only realistic basis for deeper security cooperation. But it depends on whether these overlapping relationships can connect when they need to.

This is where interoperability becomes important. If several countries agree that they will support one another in a crisis, can they actually do it? Can they share information quickly, communicate across their militaries, coordinate decisions and know in advance who is authorised to do what? An attack on one country does not necessarily mean every partner must respond in exactly the same way. Support can take many forms, from intelligence, air defence and logistics to maritime protection or, in the most serious circumstances, direct military action. The clearer these expectations are before a crisis, the more credible the commitment becomes when one occurs. There are already examples of what deeper integration can look like without requiring a large regional institution. Qatar's military relationship with Britain has gone beyond the traditional buyer-seller model. British and Qatari personnel have trained and operated Typhoon aircraft together through the joint squadron, while Qatar and Turkiye have developed a combined military command structure.

These arrangements predate the current war. The UK-Qatar relationship, however, was also tested during it: in March, an RAF Typhoon operating with the joint squadron shot down an Iranian attack drone directed at Qatar. Integration does not always have to begin with a treaty signed by ten countries. Sometimes it begins with two militaries learning how to work together properly.

Europe can play a larger role without replacing the US. Washington will likely remain the Gulf's most important security partner while Gulf states build deeper operational relationships with Britain, France, Turkiye and other capable partners. The past six months have strengthened the case for doing so.

Rethinking university hiring

Pakistani universities have generally experienced a gradual decline in academic reputation, research productivity and international competitiveness. While financial constraints, political interference and governance problems are widely discussed, one less examined issue is the weak faculty recruitment process. A university cannot progress if its recruitment system fails to identify and value the qualities required in modern academia. In many cases, selection boards continue to rely on traditional methods that emphasisememorisation of basic textbook definitions rather than evaluating research capability, teaching philosophy, innovation and future academic contribution.

University-level faculty members are not only teachers; they are also researchers, mentors and contributors to institutional growth. Modern education requires professors who may come up with novel research ideas, secure competitive research funding, publish internationally recognised work, train graduate students, establish collaborations with international institutions, and introduce modern scientific approaches into classrooms.

Individuals with such key credentials demonstrate a level of scientific competence that cannot be measured through a few basic recall questions. When universities fail to recruit faculty based on meaningful academic indicators, several problems arise. Highly productive researchers may become discouraged by recruitment systems that do not recognise their achievements. This contributes to brain drain. World-class universities, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences, are built through strong faculty members who bring research funding, international colla-borations and innovation. If universities prioritise traditional questioning over scientific achievement, young researchers may focus on avoiding mistakes in interviews alone rather than developing creativity and independent research skills.

Researchers with experience in global scientific networks can really transform universities by bringing international projects, student exchanges and advanced research techniques. Poor recruitment practices discourage such individuals from joining local institutions. Pakistani universities require a modern recruitment framework based on inter-national academic standards. Teaching ability should certainly be evaluated, but it should not be confused with memorisation of isolated facts.

A good teacher is someone who always understands concepts deeply, communi-cates effectively, updates knowledge continuously and inspires students. Some universities do follow these criteria, but they are rare. Selection boards carry a great responsibility. Their role is not to prove that candidates lack knowledge, but to identify individuals who have the potential to bring something good to the table. An insecure or poorly prepared selection panel may unintentionally focus on minor mistakes rather than recognising major achievements. Such practices can harm institutions.

The decline of Pakistani universities cannot be addressed through increased funding alone. Institutional culture, governance and recruitment practices must also change. Universities must move away from outdated examination-style selections and adopt modern evaluation systems that recognise research excellence, teaching ability and international academic contribution. A university's future depends on the people it recruits. If recruitment systems fail in identifying and supporting talented scholars, universities would continue to struggle in global rankings and scientific development. Reforming faculty selection processes is, therefore, not just an administrative issue; it is essential for the survival and progress of higher education in Pakistan.

Dr Yasir Arafat
Beijing, China

Why Sindh's longer school days backfire

The recent decision taken by the Sindh government to extend school timings by one hour appears to be a minor adjustment, but in reality it is a disruption of family routines, women's responsibilities and children's health and wellbeing. Primary school children are among those most vulnerable to this change. By 1:30pm, many are already hungry and exhausted. Expecting them to remain in class until 2:30pm and concentrate without proper nourishment is impractical and harmful. In many schools across the province, there are no proper buildings, fans or drinking water. Children struggle to survive long hours in the scorching heat in overcrowded or open air classrooms. Teachers, too, are forced to endure exhaustion and dehydration. Married women, especially those balancing jobs and household responsibilities related to their own children, face disproportionate challenges. The extended hours delay family routines, complicate childcare and add stress to already demanding schedules. For young unmarried women striving to break barriers, this policy has become yet another obstacle. Extended school hours encroach upon potential study time, prepara- tion for competitive exams and the balance that is needed to pursue ambitions beyond the classroom.

The restoration of Saturday holidays by the Sindh government is a commendable act and a welcome move, but its positive impact is undermined by the ill-considered extension of daily school hours. Educational reforms must be rooted in consultation. Parents, teachers and students should be heard before policies are enacted. Policy-makers should build on the positive step of reinstating Saturday holidays and re-consider the extension of daily school hours.

Sumera Mahar
Shikarpur

Tragedy at PIMS: A call for healthcare accountability

The tragedy that struck families at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in the federal capital is beyond words. In fact, it is almost impossible to even imagine what they would be actually going through after losing their newborn children to hospital fire. While we may struggle to offer even remotely meaningful condolence to the grieving families, there is no reason why we should not raise our voice to demand accountability; brutally honest and professional accountability. If negligence in terms of staffing, safety arrangements or emergency response is established, every responsible person within hospital management and staff as well as senior government authorities and the ministry concerned must be made to face accountability. State-managed hospitals cannot be allowed to treat public safety as an afterthought. However, the healthcare crisis is not limited to public-sector hospitals. When citizens turn to private hospitals, they often face another grim reality of blatant commercialisation. Private-sector healthcare is generally treated as a business rather than a service. Expensive consultations, tests, procedures and hospital charges place quality treatment beyond the reach of many ordinary families. A healthcare system where public hospitals suffer from negligence and private hospitals make essential treatment unaffordable leaves the common man trapped between neglect and exploitation. The federal government should focus on streamlining hospitals both in the public and private sectors in this regard. The relevant authorities must ensure safe, functional and accountable public hospitals, while healthcare providers in the private sector must be regulated so that profit does not come at the expense of affordable and dignified treatment. Healthcare is a human necessity — not a privilege meant exclusively for those who can afford it, nor a business oppor- tunity built on the helplessness of the sick.

Wasif Khaliq Dad
Rawalpindi

Student workers

I went to a library and found a young man waiting for someone outside the gate. He seemed a bit worried. Talking to him, I got to know that he was a student who was also driving a rickshaw to support his family and his own education. He said he was waiting and getting late for his studies, but the man who had asked him to wait at that spot was nowhere to be seen. In his words, it was a frequent happening. There are many students working in many different fields. Employers, co-workers and customers should realise that their time is equally important and should not at all be wasted.

Abdul Haleem
Khuzdar

Ancient armored fish survived a massive impact before Earth's largest mass extinction

Derek Davis

Near the end of the Permian, an asteroid hit central Brazil and folded the rock layers around the crater it left. Farther out, one of those layers held a small armored fish fossil, and there the rock was never disturbed at all.

Léo Adriano de Oliveira, a geologist who worked on the Permian rocks of the region, found the fossil in 2005. It came out of a ravine north of the MT-100 highway near Alto Garças, in Mato Grosso state. He deposited it at the Federal University of Mato Grosso in Cuiabá, where it is cataloged as UFMT-353.

The rocks in that ravine formed on the floor of the lake, and geologists working the same beds have found freshwater clams, tiny shelled crustaceans and scraps of other fish. A 2008 paper pictured the fossil, but no one described it formally until now. Gallo's team built Leolepis out of Oliveira's first name and lepis, Ancient Greek for scale. The species name comes from the state where he found it.

The animal was about 6 inches (150 mm) long, roughly the length of a dollar bill. This one fossil is all anyone has. It's preserved in two matching slabs of reddish siltstone. Leolepis was narrow at both ends and deepest through the middle. Roughly 50 rows of scales ran from head to tail, and at least 15 rows were counted around the body. Each scale carried a coating of a hard material called ganoine. Every scale is diamond-shaped and ridged.

Capillaries can form coronary collateral arteries

Wang Xin

Chinese researchers recently revealed that capillary vessels could give rise to coronary collateral arteries, which are expected to serve as a natural bypass system and inspire a gentler and more effective new treatment for ischemic heart disease. The findings were published in the journal Science. The study was conducted by a research team led by Zhou Bin from the Center for Excellence in Molecular Cell Science at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with Kathy Lui from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Coronary artery disease remains a leading cause of mortality and disability worldwide. Following coronary artery blockage, insufficient blood supply usually results in myocardial ischemia and infarction. Although clinical interventions, such as coronary stent implantation and coronary artery bypass surgery, can restore blood flow, these approaches are invasive and may cause complications.

On the other hand, coronary collateral arteries, which are naturally present in some people's hearts, can function as a natural bypass system. They can supply blood to ischemic regions and can generate better clinical outcomes.

The researchers compared the entire vascular network to a transportation system, where arteries are like wide highways and capillaries are like narrow, intricate paths. They discovered that when a highway is interrupted, these narrow paths rapidly initiate an "upgrade and renovation project", continuously widening and strengthening themselves to acquire the structure and function of arteries. Eventually, they develop into new "highways" connecting the two main arteries, restoring the supply of blood and nutrients to the damaged heart muscle.

Researchers have been making efforts for years to find the origins of de novo coronary collateral arteries.

The Moon is getting its own version of air traffic control

Eric Ralls

The Moon is getting an airport, and airports run on schedules. A plane taxis, waits its turn, and lands only when a gate opens up. Spacecraft headed there will soon need that same kind of order, minus the runway, the tower, and anything that ever holds still. Within the next two decades, NASA's Gateway is expected to become humanity's first lunar spaceport. Orion crew capsules, landers, cargo ships, and astronauts will pass through it on their way between Earth, the lunar surface, and eventually farther into deep space. No crackling intercom will ever announce a gate change there.

Instead, every vehicle near Gateway will follow an invisible path shaped by the gravitational pull of Earth and the Moon. Someone has to work out who moves where and when. That is the job that a team of engineers from Texas A&M University, NASA's Johnson Space Center, and Purdue University set out to do. Dr. Diane Davis, an associate professor of space engineering at Texas A&M, led the group that developed the algorithms and operating rules needed to keep multiple spacecraft safely separated around Gateway. "The future of lunar exploration depends as much on the traffic management as it does on the rocket science," Davis said. Gateway will not circle the Moon the way a satellite circles Earth. It will travel in a near-rectilinear halo orbit, or NRHO, an elongated path shaped by the combined gravity of Earth and the Moon rather than by the Moon alone.

Your parents' age might improve your health outlook, study says

Dennis Thompson

People whose parents have reached age 100 can expect to reap some health benefits from their folks' longevity, a new study says. They tend to live longer and have substantially lower risks of heart disease and high blood pressure, researchers reported in JAMA Network Open. "This study provides strong evidence that the offspring of centenarians share some of their parents' advantages in healthy aging," said researcher Paola Sebastiani, director of the Center for Quantitative Methods and Data Science at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. "These findings bring us closer to understanding the biological factors that may help protect against age-related disease and promote longer, healthier lives," she said in a news release. Senior researcher Dr. Sofiya Milman, a professor of medicine and genetics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City, said studying families with exceptional longevity can provide a unique window into the biology of healthy aging. "Our findings provide a strong rationale for studying centenarians and their families to uncover those biological factors that promote longevity and protect these individuals from age-related diseases," Milman said in a news release. For the new study, researchers compared more than 2,300 children of centenarians — folks who lived to age 100 or older — to 2,700 people whose parents lived to age 85 at most. These people participated in three different long-running studies in New York City, the United States and the U.K., researchers said. At any given age, children of centenarians had a 42% lower risk of death; 33% lower risk of heart disease; and a 32% lower risk of hypertension, the study found.


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