- Petrol shock: Pakistanis pay the price of war - Page 5
- When climate and war collide, food becomes the first casualty - Page 6
- A $7b risk: The high cost of ignoring Brussels' GSP+ warning - Page 7

WEEKLY Cutting Edge
INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE • ANALYTICAL

PAKISTAN'S WIDENING TRADE GAP: WHY EXPORTS ARE STAGNANT

weeklycuttingedge.com | CPL # 109 | 16-22 September 2026 | Vol# 21 Issue # 44 | Rs. 100


SUPER
SAFEX PLATINUM
SALON RAZOR
WITH SAFETY GUARD
سیفٹی گارڈ کے ساتھ محفوظ شیو
A PRODUCT BY
Treet®

Index | CUTTING EDGE

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.

Founding Editor
Dr Niloufer Mahdi
Sub-Editor
Rizwan Ahmad
Communication Manager
Usman Riaz
Webmaster
Imran Shoukat

Editorial Office:
Treet Corporation Limited
2-H, Gulberg-II, Lahore
Phone +92-42-35817141-47,
Fax: +92-42-35817138
weeklycuttingedge@gmail.com
editor@weeklycuttingedge.com
info@weeklycuttingedge.com
Printed by Creative Vorks,
Plot# 203, Green Light Street,
Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact
info@weeklycutting.com

Pakistan's widening trade gap: Why exports are stagnant

Farhan Khan

Pakistan's trade deficit has widened sharply once again, reviving an old and uncomfortable question: why, despite decades of incentives, devaluations and IMF-guided reforms, does the country's export base remain so stubbornly narrow?

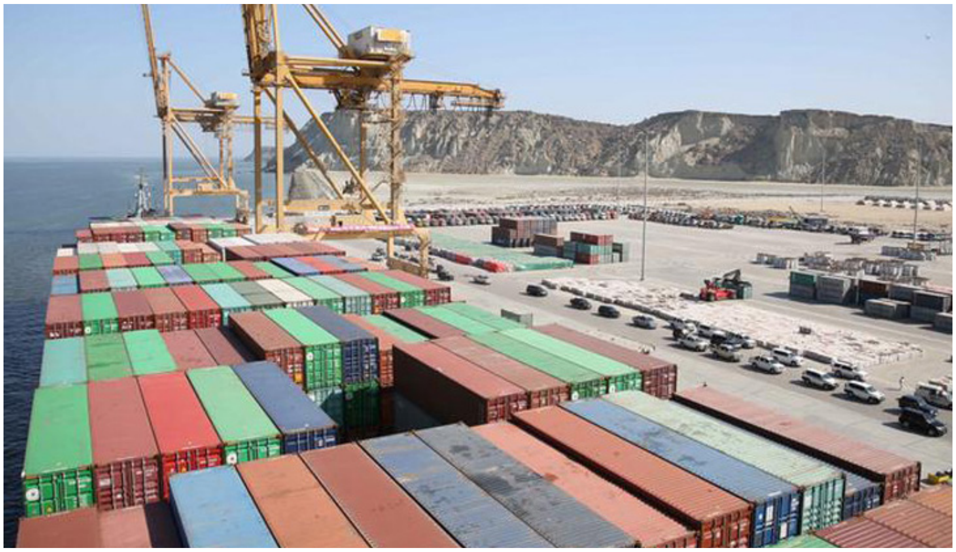
According to data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) for the July-August 2026 period, the trade deficit rose from $6.025 billion in the same period last year to $7.116 billion this year — an increase of 18.11 percent. Exports grew by 7.04 percent year-on-year, but imports outpaced them, climbing 13.03 percent over the same period. The arithmetic is simple: when imports grow nearly twice as fast as exports, the gap between what Pakistan sells to the world and what it buys from it only grows wider.

A closer look at the July figures — the most detailed breakdown currently available — shows that the rise in exports was led by textiles and textile articles, with apparel, clothing and knitted goods emerging as the largest contributors, even as raw cotton exports declined. Base metals, particularly copper and aluminium, along with tools, implements and cutlery, also contributed to the uptick.

But economists caution against reading too much optimism into these figures. The rise is recorded in dollar value, not volume, meaning it likely reflects higher prices rather than Pakistan actually selling more goods abroad. The most plausible explanation lies in the ongoing Middle East conflict, which has severely disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. With sea routes constrained, exporters have increasingly turned to air freight — a far costlier mode of transport — pushing up the recorded value of shipments without a corresponding rise in quantity.

Equally telling is what has not risen. Petroleum and petroleum product imports, widely expected to surge given the regional conflict, actually fell to $1.198 billion in July 2026 from $1.655 billion in July 2025. On the surface, this might look like prudent import management, similar to measures other countries, including China, have taken. But such restraint often comes at a cost: when the government curbs imports administratively rather than through structural reform, it is frequently the productive sectors — factories reliant on imported raw materials and semi-finished goods — that bear the brunt. A slowdown in these sectors risks dragging down GDP growth, denting employment, and, ultimately, eroding the standard of living for ordinary Pakistanis, even if it offers short-term relief to the current account.

This is not a new story for Pakistan. For decades, a chronic current account deficit has forced successive governments into a predictable pattern: clamp down on imports, seek an IMF bailout, and watch as export-oriented industries — starved of the very inputs they need — cut output instead of expanding it. The July data does not yet make clear whether this cycle has finally been broken through genuine structural reform, or whether Pakistan is simply repeating the same cycle under new geopolitical pressures.



To be fair, Pakistan bears no responsibility for the global economic shock triggered by the US-Israel strikes on Iran on February 28 this year, the effects of which continue to ripple through economies worldwide, Pakistan included. But external shocks do not excuse the absence of internal reform. What Pakistan can control is whether it uses this moment to finally break the cycle rather than simply survive it.

The problem is structural, not cyclical. Much of Pakistan's export base — with the notable exception of the IT sector — consists of industries that export their surplus rather than producing specifically for export markets. Textile mills, for instance, typically sell first to the domestic market and export only what remains, rather than building capacity oriented around global demand. This is fundamentally different from the model followed by economies that successfully reached an export-led "take-off" stage, where industries are built from the outset to compete internationally.

Compounding this, many of Pakistan's traditional industries have remained in a state of perpetual "infancy" despite decades of fiscal and monetary support — a criticism the IMF itself has repeatedly raised. Protective tariffs, subsidies and preferential financing, intended to nurture nascent industries toward global competitiveness, have instead allowed inefficiency to persist unchallenged.

Reversing this trend requires more than short-term import compression. Genuine reform means deliberately cultivating industries built to export from inception — diversifying beyond textiles into higher value-added manufacturing, technology-enabled services, and sectors where Pakistan holds genuine comparative advantage. It means phasing out open-ended protections for industries that have failed to mature after decades of support, redirecting that fiscal space toward firms and sectors with real export potential. It also means investing in trade infrastructure and logistics resilience, so that external shocks — like the current disruption in the Strait of Hormuz — do not translate so directly into costlier, less competitive exports.

The ultimate goal, as economists increasingly emphasise, should not merely be a narrower deficit but an eventual trade surplus. Achieving that would reduce the need for endless industry subsidies, ease the pressure that periodically forces Islamabad back to the IMF's door, and gradually lessen the country's chronic dependence on external borrowing. Until such reforms take hold, Pakistan risks watching this same story — rising imports, sluggish exports, a widening gap — repeat itself year after year.

Petrol shock: Pakistanis pay the price of war

Nasim Ahmed

The Middle East conflict has turned Pakistan's petroleum market into another source of distress for a population already struggling with inflation, falling purchasing power and stagnant incomes. Petrol, which was selling at around Rs266 per litre in the first week of March, subsequently climbed sharply, touching a peak of Rs458.41 on April 3 before retreating as international oil prices eased. By September 11, however, petrol was again being sold at Rs370.80 per litre, while high-speed diesel had reached Rs398.04.

The scale of the shock becomes clearer when the starting point is considered. Petrol rose from about Rs266 in early March to more than Rs458 in April — an increase of over Rs192, or roughly 72 per cent, at the peak. Although prices subsequently fell, the latest rate remains about Rs105 per litre, or nearly 40 per cent, higher than the pre-war level. The diesel story has been even more dramatic: HSD rose from Rs281 after the outbreak of hostilities to a peak of Rs520.35 on April 3.

The government has attributed the increases to the international oil shock caused by the war and disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz. There is little doubt that Pakistan, as a heavily oil-importing country, is vulnerable to such disruptions. The renewed fighting has sharply constrained shipping through the strategic waterway. Before the latest crisis, more than 140-150 oil tankers could pass through the Strait daily; during the hostilities, traffic was reportedly reduced to a fraction of that level.

Against this background, the government's decision to move from weekly or fortnightly petroleum-price revisions to daily adjustments from July 18 has some economic logic. International crude prices can change dramatically within hours when geopolitical developments occur. The new mechanism is intended to pass those changes through more quickly to consumers and ensure that domestic prices reflect movements in the international market with less delay.

Yet there is a legitimate question over whether consumers should bear every international fluctuation immediately. Critics point out that petroleum companies purchase substantial quantities in bulk rather than buying each day's requirement at that day's international price. Daily retail adjustments, therefore, do not necessarily represent the actual cost of every litre already sitting in storage. Moreover, frequent changes make it extraordinarily difficult for households and businesses to plan their expenditures and manage their monthly budgets.

India also faces the same international oil market and the same geopolitical risks, yet it has shielded consumers considerably more effectively. Petrol in New Delhi is currently around Rs102.12 per litre in Indian currency, and has remained unchanged since May despite crude oil again crossing $100 a barrel. Bangladesh has gone even further in holding the line. Its government kept petrol at Tk140 per litre throughout September, with diesel at Tk115, despite continuing volatility in international oil markets. The rates have remained unchanged since May.

The contrast does raise an important policy question: why must Pakistani consumers absorb such a large proportion of the international shock when neighbouring governments are prepared to cushion their populations?

The answer lies partly in Pakistan's fiscal predicament. Petroleum prices are not determined by the international price of crude alone. The government adds customs duties, petroleum development levy, climate support levy, freight-related charges, margins and commissions. The result is a substantial tax burden at the pump, meaning that the price paid by consumers reflects not only the international cost of oil but also a significant domestic fiscal component.

The petroleum levy has become a major source of government revenue. Pakistan collected a record Rs1.567 trillion from the levy in 2025-26, 29 per cent more than the previous year's Rs1.22 trillion. The target for 2026-27 is around Rs1.676 trillion, while the IMF's programme has incorporated an even higher petroleum-levy trajectory.

The government, therefore, faces a difficult dilemma: reducing the levy would provide immediate relief to consumers but create a fiscal gap at a time when the state is already struggling to mobilise sufficient revenues. Yet continuing to extract more revenue from fuel also has a serious economic cost. It raises transportation expenses, production costs and the prices of virtually every commodity. The petroleum levy is particularly attractive to the government because it is collected automatically at petrol stations rather than through the cumbersome machinery of the Federal Board of Revenue.

The World Bank estimated Pakistan's poverty rate at 42.4 per cent in FY2025 under its lower-middle-income poverty line of $3.65 a day, with an estimated 1.9 million additional people falling into poverty during the year. Higher petrol prices mean more expensive buses, vans, rickshaws and goods transport. They increase the cost of bringing vegetables, milk, meat and other perishables from farms to cities. Food inflation was already a major concern, and higher transportation costs inevitably feed into retail prices.

Productive sectors are also complaining that daily price changes make it almost impossible to forecast input costs. An entrepreneur contemplating an investment cannot confidently calculate next month's transportation, distribution or production expenses when fuel prices can change every day. For manufacturers, farmers, retailers and transport operators, uncertainty itself becomes an additional cost, discouraging investment and making long-term business planning increasingly difficult.

The Jamaat-i-Islami has tapped into the growing resentment by launching a street movement against the petroleum levy. The government and JI have agreed to form committees to consider reducing the levy, but the party has said its protests will continue. It has now announced a September 20 march on Islamabad and is demanding withdrawal of the Rs114-per-litre petrol burden. The government should not dismiss this merely as political agitation. It reflects genuine economic pain among households and businesses already struggling with high living costs.

Analysts have pointed out that before asking citizens to pay more, the state should demonstrate that it has exhausted every possibility of reducing its own expenditure. The cost of running the civil government crossed Rs1 trillion in 2025-26, rising 16 per cent despite claims of austerity. Free or heavily subsidised petrol and electricity for senior bureaucrats, political office-holders and privileged institutions should be abolished. Official vehicles, unnecessary foreign trips, oversized government establishments, ceremonial expenditures and other non-essential spending need to be cut drastically.

Pakistan cannot indefinitely finance fiscal adjustment by squeezing ordinary citizens. Nor can it expect industry and agriculture to become competitive while repeatedly increasing the cost of energy and transportation. A government that asks people to accept higher taxes and fuel prices must also demonstrate that it is willing to impose discipline on its own spending and eliminate privileges that are difficult to justify in the midst of an economic crisis.

Petrol cannot be treated merely as another source of revenue. It is the lifeblood of the economy. When its price rises excessively, the shock travels through every road, factory, farm, classroom and household. In a country where nearly half the population is already vulnerable to poverty, continuing to rely on ever-higher fuel taxation is not a sustainable economic policy. The government must cut waste, reform taxation, protect productive sectors and provide relief before the petrol crisis becomes an even deeper crisis of livelihoods.

When climate and war collide, food becomes the first casualty

Muhammad Hassan

The latest increase in global food prices offers a troubling glimpse of what happens when multiple crises begin reinforcing one another. Climate change, geopolitical conflicts, energy disruptions and fragile supply chains are no longer operating as separate threats. They are increasingly converging in agricultural markets, with the consequences eventually reaching the dinner tables of consumers around the world.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's food price index rose 1.9 per cent in August alone and was 2.5 per cent higher than a year earlier. The increase came as extreme weather damaged agricultural production while conflicts disrupted trade, energy supplies and access to vital farm inputs. Sugar prices surged by almost 12 per cent in a single month, while wheat became 15 per cent more expensive than a year earlier. Even maize markets have begun feeling the effects of disruption around the Strait of Hormuz.

The numbers are significant not simply because food has become more expensive, but because of what is driving the increase. Climate stress and geopolitical instability are increasingly arriving at the same point in the global supply chain. There is little reason to believe that the pressure will disappear quickly. Exceptional heat has already affected crop yields in parts of Europe, while the prospect of a powerful El Nino raises concerns about agricultural production across Asia. Disruption around the Strait of Hormuz has pushed up fuel costs and complicated the movement of fertiliser supplies, while the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to affect grain logistics in the Black Sea region.

Each of these crises enters the food system differently. Climate shocks reduce production. Wars interfere with trade routes. Energy disruptions raise transportation and processing costs. Fertiliser shortages increase the cost of cultivation and can ultimately reduce yields. But their effects converge in one place: the price paid by consumers. This should be forcing governments to reconsider the way they approach global food security. Instead, much of the international political establishment remains preoccupied with military calculations, geopolitical influence and short-term domestic political interests.

Wars that have already demonstrated their ability to inflict economic damage far beyond their immediate theatres continue with no clear resolution. At the same time, increasingly severe climate warnings are being issued almost every year, yet preparations for their economic consequences remain inadequate. Food is particularly vulnerable because modern agriculture depends on an interconnected network of energy, fertiliser, transportation, finance and international trade. A disruption in any one of these areas can increase costs. When several are affected simultaneously, the pressure can become overwhelming.

Higher oil prices make farming, transportation and food processing more expensive. Fertiliser shortages raise production costs and can threaten future harvests. Droughts, floods and extreme heat directly reduce agricultural output. Disrupted shipping then makes the transportation of available supplies more expensive and unpredictable. The burden falls most heavily on poorer countries and low-income households. They have fewer financial resources to absorb price increases and are often more dependent on imported fuel, fertiliser and food. A shock originating thousands of miles away can therefore quickly become a domestic inflation problem.

Pakistan has particular reasons to be concerned. Food accounts for a substantial share of household expenditure, particularly among lower-income families. At the same time, the country's agriculture remains highly exposed to extreme weather, while its economy is vulnerable to increases in the international prices of petroleum and other imported commodities. A simultaneous increase in energy, fertiliser and food prices could therefore pass rapidly through the domestic economy. Higher fuel costs would increase transportation and production expenses, while expensive fertiliser could raise agricultural costs and weaken farmers' ability to maintain yields. Additional import requirements would also place pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

For ordinary households, however, the most immediate consequence would be another increase in the cost of living. Poor families would be hit first because they have the least room to absorb another inflationary shock. For them, higher food prices are not an inconvenience that can be managed by reducing discretionary spending; they directly affect nutrition and household welfare. The broader problem is that the international community has repeatedly acknowledged these risks without adequately addressing their underlying causes.

Governments have spent years describing climate change as an existential threat while continuing to act as though its economic consequences can be postponed. Similarly, conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have demonstrated how quickly warfare can disrupt grain supplies, energy markets, fertiliser availability and global shipping. The disruption of the Strait of Hormuz is a particularly stark reminder of the vulnerability of global trade. A maritime passage through which enormous quantities of energy and other commodities move can affect food prices far beyond the region when its normal operations are threatened.

The latest FAO figures should therefore be regarded as an early warning rather than simply another monthly statistic. A 1.9 per cent increase in one month may appear manageable when viewed in isolation. What is more worrying is the possibility that several of the forces behind the increase could persist at the same time. Weather patterns remain uncertain, conflicts show little sign of immediate resolution, shipping disruptions can quickly affect energy and input prices, and farmers around the world are being forced to make production decisions amid uncertainty over both climate conditions and costs.

The world has already experienced how rapidly food, fuel and financial shocks can cross borders. It should have learned that waiting for shortages and price explosions before responding is among the most expensive forms of crisis management. What is needed is greater investment in climate-resilient agriculture, diversified food and energy supply chains, strategic reserves, improved storage and transport infrastructure, and international cooperation to keep vital trade routes open.

Above all, governments need to recognise that food security is not separate from peace, climate policy or economic stability. They are increasingly parts of the same equation. The disturbing lesson from the latest food-price increase is that the world is not facing a single crisis. It is facing several crises capable of amplifying one another. Yet while the consequences are becoming increasingly visible, those with the greatest power to reduce the risks remain focused on competition for influence and military advantage. The danger is not that the world lacks warnings. It is that it continues to ignore them until the warnings become emergencies.

A $7b risk: The high cost of ignoring Brussels' GSP+ warning

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's preferential access to the European Union market is entering a critical phase, with Brussels making it clear that Islamabad can no longer assume that the trade concessions it has enjoyed for years will continue automatically. The warning comes as the existing GSP+ arrangement approaches its expiry at the end of this year and Pakistan seeks admission to a successor framework carrying tougher conditions.

The EU ambassador's assessment that the outcome remains "not certain" should be taken seriously. For Pakistani exporters, this is not merely another diplomatic exchange or a technical discussion over trade policy. The European market is one of Pakistan's most important sources of export earnings, with the existing preferential arrangement supporting trade worth more than €7 billion annually. Any disruption to that access could therefore have significant consequences for the country's already fragile external position.

The underlying message from Brussels is straightforward: GSP+ preferences cannot be taken for granted. Pakistan must demonstrate that it is fulfilling the commitments it undertook when it was granted preferential access to the European market. The issue has become more important because the GSP+ arrangement is not simply a commercial concession. It is linked to Pakistan's implementation of international conventions covering human rights, labour standards, governance, environmental protection and other areas. In return for tariff preferences, beneficiary countries are expected to make demonstrable progress in meeting these obligations.

Pakistan has benefited enormously from the arrangement since 2014. Preferential access has helped its exporters, particularly textile and apparel producers, compete more effectively in the European market. Given the importance of the EU to Pakistan's exports, retaining this access should be treated as a major economic priority. But the European Commission's assessment for 2023-25 has raised concerns about Pakistan's record in several areas. The review pointed to a gap between legislative improvements and their actual implementation. Its concerns included enforced disappearances, restrictions on freedom of expression, weaknesses in judicial independence and forced labour.

Islamabad may argue that the assessment does not adequately reflect the country's circumstances or progress. Such objections, however, cannot substitute for measurable improvements. The central question for Brussels is increasingly not whether Pakistan has passed legislation or ratified international conventions, but whether those commitments are being implemented effectively.

That distinction is crucial as Pakistan seeks entry into the successor scheme. The new framework raises the requirements by expanding the number of relevant conventions from 27 to 32. Pakistan has ratified the five additional conventions, which is an important formal step. But ratification alone does not guarantee continued preferential access. The EU is expected to place greater emphasis on enforcement and evidence of implementation.

This means Islamabad faces a more demanding task than simply completing the necessary paperwork. It must demonstrate that its commitments are reflected in actual policies, institutions and outcomes. The timing makes the challenge particularly sensitive. Pakistan must simultaneously protect its existing preferences during the transition and satisfy the higher standards of the successor arrangement. Any perception that the country is failing to meet its obligations could complicate the process and potentially expose exporters to higher tariffs.

Such an outcome would be especially damaging for an economy already struggling to expand exports. Pakistani manufacturers are facing intense competition from regional producers, while high energy costs, expensive financing, taxation and other domestic constraints continue to undermine competitiveness. Losing preferential access to one of the country's largest export markets would add another burden that exporters can ill afford.

The government therefore needs to approach the issue as an economic and institutional priority rather than treating Brussels' criticism primarily as a diplomatic disagreement. There is also a broader lesson here. International trade preferences increasingly come with expectations concerning governance, labour rights and institutional standards. Countries seeking privileged access to major markets cannot expect commercial benefits to remain permanently detached from their broader international commitments.

Pakistan should therefore use the transition to the successor GSP+ framework as an opportunity to address the deficiencies identified by the European Commission. Improving implementation would not only strengthen the case for continued EU preferences but could also enhance Pakistan's reputation among other international trading partners and investors. This requires concrete action rather than assurances. Where laws exist but enforcement remains weak, implementation needs to be strengthened. Where institutions lack capacity, that capacity must be developed. Where fundamental rights are at issue, credible safeguards must be put in place. And where labour standards remain inadequate, enforcement mechanisms need to become more effective.

For more than a decade, Pakistan has benefited from an important trade advantage in the European market. But that advantage was never unconditional. The present warning from Brussels should be viewed as an opportunity to recognise that reality before it becomes a crisis. Islamabad must convince the EU through evidence and action that its international commitments are not merely promises written into legislation or treaties. Preserving preferential access will require credibility, consistency and demonstrable implementation.

The choice is therefore not between defending Pakistan's position and accepting criticism from Brussels. It is between treating the warning as a diplomatic dispute and using it as a catalyst for reforms that can protect both market access and Pakistan's long-term economic interests. The latter is clearly the wiser course.

Pakistan needs a second layer of border fencing

Raza Khan

The efforts by China to sort out the issue of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan's support for the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) between Islamabad and Kabul have so far not borne any fruit, and relations between the two neighbours have remained extremely strained. It appears that China has not been able to prevail upon the Afghan Taliban to stop supporting the TTP, as ostensibly, for Kabul, the interests of the militant regime take precedence over the country's larger national interest.

This is the reality that China and Pakistan must realise and, therefore, should not expect much from the Afghan Taliban in terms of giving up their support for the Pakistani Taliban, referred to by Islamabad as 'Fitna Tul Khawarij'. Even if the Taliban regime momentarily stops harbouring the TTP, this would most likely be a makeshift arrangement aimed at obtaining concessions from Pakistan, including the opening of the border between the two countries. The Pakistan-Afghanistan international border, known as the Durand Line, has remained closed since October 2025, when Islamabad shut it in desperation after

Kabul continued supporting the TTP, enabling the latter to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. So, reportedly, despite recent diplomatic developments suggesting a renewed push to ease tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Foreign Office of Pakistan recently said that meaningful progress in relations would depend on the Taliban taking concrete and verifiable action against the TTP and other terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory.

At his final weekly media briefing as Foreign Office spokesperson, Tahir Andrabi said Islamabad welcomed China's continuing engagement, but that external facilitation could not substitute for action by Kabul against militant infrastructure. While any Chinese mediation between Pakistan and Afghanistan is not seeing the light of day, the problem for Pakistan is the continued large-scale terrorist attacks by the TTP, now reportedly in collusion with the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) in the Pashtun parts of Balochistan. This means that the closure of the border by Pakistan is not proving sufficient to prevent the infiltration of terrorists from Afghanistan into Pakistan.

It may be mentioned that one of the key reasons for the continued large-scale infiltration of TTP terrorists from Afghanistan into Pakistan is the removal of sections of the border fencing by Taliban fighters. The fencing was constructed by Pakistan along its 2,640-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan. Although around 90 percent of the fencing is still very much intact, infiltration is obviously taking place through the 10 percent where breaches have occurred.

Therefore, apart from physical and political efforts to search for a solution to the Afghan Taliban's recalcitrance to stop harbouring the Pakistani Taliban on Afghan soil, Pakistan needs to take physical steps, short of military action against terrorist hideouts in Afghanistan. This key physical action is to erect another layer of fencing within its territory, parallel to the already fenced border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Although it may sound like a strange and even absurd idea to some, erecting another layer of fencing is far less difficult than constructing the original fencing along the border, which started in 2016 and was successfully completed by the end of 2021. By that time, Pakistan had completed fencing around 2,600 kilometres, while the remaining 21 kilometres were to be fenced with the consent of the Taliban regime. Islamabad had expected that, after their second coming to power, the Taliban would behave maturely, particularly towards their main benefactor, Pakistan, but this never happened. Instead, the regime has repeatedly vowed to pull down the fence.

In this situation, the best strategy for Pakistan to safeguard its territory and its people from terrorists and other negative influences is, as suggested above, to erect a second layer of fencing along the border. This is a very important policy recommendation for Pakistan's decision-makers because it is a matter of national security, and there should be no flexibility or delay in taking this step. Ideally, the decision to establish another layer of fencing along the border should come from the political government, or even Parliament, because it is fundamentally an issue of Pakistan's territorial integrity and national security.

Over the years, however, the political leadership has failed to come up with a comprehensive policy, despite repeated spikes in terrorist attacks in the country, mostly linked to Afghanistan. The only clear policy was the National Action Plan (NAP), formulated by the leadership of the country after the horrific December 16, 2014 school attack in Peshawar,

which claimed the lives of around 150 people, mostly schoolchildren. However, implementation of the 20-point NAP has left a lot to be desired.

This tells us a very hard reality of our national life: when decision-makers, who ought to formulate major policies, fail to do so, a policy vacuum is created, resulting in extremely negative consequences. Ultimately, this policy vacuum, which somehow has to be filled, is plugged by institutions that are not primarily mandated or expected to formulate such policies.

Effective management of border control is directly linked to national security and, therefore, it is the foremost responsibility of the political government to focus completely on this aspect of governance. The entire process of development and peace-building is dependent on national security. But the problem with the present political dispensation is that it has different, rather divergent, priorities from what national security requires of Pakistan.

The decision to erect another layer of fencing along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan is the irreducible minimum required to protect Pakistan and its citizens from terrorist attacks. It is not only a long-term solution to prevent Pakistan from being negatively influenced by war, conflict and associated problems in Afghanistan, but, more importantly, it would help regulate the cross-border movement of goods and people between the two countries.

Irregular and informal cross-border movement has been a cause of multiple problems for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. One example is the large-scale smuggling of goods that are transported back into Pakistan without being consumed in Afghanistan. Better border management and controlled movement could significantly reduce such practices while making legitimate trade and travel more transparent and manageable.

On its part, the Afghan regime has consistently rejected the fencing of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. There is also strong opposition from important political groups and stakeholders on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line, including Pashtun ethno-linguistic nationalist parties such as the Awami National Party (ANP) and PkMAP, as well as Jamaat-e-Islami and tribal organisations such as Tanzeem-e-Ittehad-e-Qabail. By and large, however, a dominant majority of Pakistanis have remained supportive of border fencing.

Today, most Pakistanis would like their government to take concrete measures to put an end to terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. But this can only be achieved if certain key policy measures enshrined in the NAP are implemented and, above all, if Islamabad initiates the construction of a second layer of fencing along the border.

Nations take massive measures to protect their territory and people from negative influences emanating from other countries. Erecting another layer of fencing would undoubtedly be a huge task, both financially and logistically. But against the backdrop of Pakistan's critical national security needs, it is a necessary and relatively small step forward. The objective should not be to permanently isolate Afghanistan but to establish effective border control, prevent militant infiltration, regulate the movement of people and goods, and protect Pakistan's territory and citizens from the spillover of conflict across the borde

High costs, low ambition: The two-front battle to save Pakistan's exports

Shahid Hussain

The country's trade deficit increased by 18.1 per cent to $7.1 billion during the first two months of the current fiscal year, as imports continued to rise while exports remained largely stagnant. It points to a fundamental weakness in Pakistan's external sector: exporters are operating in an increasingly expensive environment while struggling to compete in international markets.

The rising cost of doing business as a major constraint on export growth. A policy rate that remains higher than those of regional competitors, expensive and unreliable energy supplies, and increased taxation on petroleum products all add directly to production costs. These structural disadvantages ultimately appear in the prices quoted by Pakistani exporters, making their products less competitive against suppliers from countries facing lower financial and energy costs.

Yet the export problem cannot be explained by high domestic costs alone. The deeper challenge lies partly within the export sector itself.

For decades, Pakistan has relied heavily on textiles and apparel, but the composition of these exports has changed remarkably little. While competing economies have moved towards higher-value products and diversified their export bases, Pakistan has remained heavily dependent on traditional textile products and other relatively low-value commodities.

Bangladesh offers an instructive comparison. It has strengthened its position in higher-value garments while simultaneously expanding into areas such as pharmaceuticals and light engineering. Pakistan, by contrast, continues to export substantial quantities of yarn, grey cloth, low-end made-ups and other commodities that generate limited value compared with finished, branded or technologically sophisticated products.

Value addition has long been recognised as the obvious route out of this trap. However, much of the manufacturing sector has failed to make the necessary transition. Producing finished goods requires investment in modern machinery, product development, skilled professionals, branding and international marketing. It also involves greater commercial risks and longer-term investment horizons. Many businesses have preferred the relative ease and higher pricing power of the domestic market, where competition is often less intense and regulatory and marketing demands are different.

This approach may make sense from the perspective of an individual business seeking to maximise short-term returns. Collectively, however, it has weakened Pakistan's export base and left the country vulnerable to shifts in international demand.

Market concentration presents another serious problem. Exporters that have spent decades relying on the same products and a limited number of markets have little bargaining power when demand weakens. They also have few alternatives when a particular market becomes less accessible because of changing regulations, geopolitical tensions, economic downturns or stronger competition.

Diversifying both products and markets requires investment. Companies must spend on market research, product development, international marketing, compliance and customer relationships before the benefits become visible. Pakistani businesses have generally been reluctant to bear these costs, particularly when the domestic market offers opportunities for relatively high margins without the complexities of international competition.

The structure of many exporting companies is another obstacle. A large proportion of businesses remain family-owned and family-managed, with limited in-house expertise in international marketing, product design, regulatory compliance and modern corporate management. Professionalising these functions would require business owners to hire outside expertise and, in some cases, surrender a degree of direct control.

Few owners have shown sufficient willingness to make that transition.

The reluctance to embrace corporatisation is particularly striking when exporters themselves identify high borrowing costs as a major impediment to investment. If bank financing is too expensive, companies have another potential source of capital: equity markets. Equity financing does not carry the same interest burden as bank borrowing and can provide businesses with the capital needed for expansion, technology upgrades and diversification.

Yet relatively few Pakistani companies have shown enthusiasm for listing on the stock exchange. The reasons are not difficult to understand. Going public requires greater financial transparency, regulatory scrutiny, professional governance and the sharing of ownership and profits beyond the founding family. For some businesses, these requirements may be inconvenient; for others, they may expose weaknesses in financial reporting, governance or overall business viability.

This reluctance suggests that the export sector's problems cannot simply be placed at the government's doorstep. Policymakers undoubtedly need to address the structural costs that undermine competitiveness. Lower and more predictable energy costs, a competitive interest-rate environment, rational taxation and a stable regulatory framework are essential if Pakistani exporters are to compete successfully in global markets.

But businesses must also confront their own weaknesses.

Pakistan needs an export sector that is more diversified, more technologically sophisticated and more professionally managed. Companies must move beyond low-value products, invest in research and development, build international brands and develop expertise in global marketing and compliance. They must also be willing to explore new markets instead of relying indefinitely on traditional buyers.

The challenge, therefore, is two-sided. The government must create an economic environment in which exporting is commercially viable, while the private sector must demonstrate a greater willingness to invest, innovate and modernise.

Pakistan cannot sustainably increase exports simply by asking exporters to produce more under the same conditions. Nor can businesses expect government concessions to compensate indefinitely for outdated products, concentrated markets and weak corporate structures.

The country's export crisis ultimately requires a change in both policy and business culture. The government must remove structural barriers to competitiveness, while industry must embrace value addition, diversification and corporatisation. Without progress on both fronts, Pakistan risks remaining trapped in a low-value export model while regional competitors continue moving up the global value chain.

The Indus River is moving—Why isn't the government?

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

A warning that the Indus River has shifted nearly 4.5 kilometres east of Larkana over the past 35 years and is now threatening a critical section of the flood protection dyke should be enough to trigger immediate government action. Satellite analysis by SUPARCO has documented sustained channel migration and bank erosion around the Aqil and Moria loop bunds, with approximately 2,000 hectares of land already lost to erosion along the left bank.

The river has gradually consumed much of the safety margin that once separated its active channel from vital flood protection infrastructure. Yet, once again, evidence of a potentially devastating disaster appears to be moving faster than the machinery responsible for preventing it.

There is little justification for official surprise. Scientists, water experts, investigators and the media have repeatedly warned about the consequences of encroachment, unplanned construction and interference with natural waterways. The Supreme Court's Flood Commission examined many of these issues after the catastrophic floods of 2010, when the breach of the Tori Bund contributed to widespread devastation in Sindh.

The lessons from that disaster should have been obvious. Settlements and fish ponds had emerged within protected areas, natural flood channels had been obstructed and vulnerable communities were ultimately left to bear the consequences. Homes were destroyed, livelihoods disappeared and thousands of families were displaced. Sixteen years later, the underlying governance failures remain disturbingly familiar.

Riverine land continues to be occupied, floodplains continue to be developed and construction continues without sufficient consideration of hydrology or long-term flood risk. Around Hyderabad, areas that once served as natural riparian buffers have increasingly been converted into permanent housing and roads. Such development reduces the space available for floodwater to spread naturally and can increase pressure on embankments and nearby settlements when the Indus rises.

The findings from Larkana make the situation even more urgent. Satellite imagery has demonstrated that decades of erosion and sediment deposition have gradually pushed the active river channel towards the flood defences. Continued erosion can undermine an embankment long before floodwater actually overtops it. If a weakened section fails during a period of high flows, communities on the other side could have dangerously little time to respond or evacuate. This is not a hypothetical threat buried in a technical planning document. It is a measurable physical process recorded through decades of satellite observations.

The obvious question is: where is the corresponding urgency from the government? Pakistan has developed an unfortunate pattern of responding more vigorously to disasters after they occur than to the evidence of danger before they strike. Commissions are formed, investigations are conducted, reports are prepared and recommendations are issued. But once the immediate crisis fades, responsibility often becomes dispersed among departments and implementation loses momentum.

The problem becomes even more difficult when encroachments involve influential or politically connected interests. Weak enforcement, poor urban planning and corruption can turn natural hazards into entirely preventable human disasters. The financial cost alone should be sufficient to prompt immediate action. A major failure of flood protection could expose billions of rupees worth of homes, agricultural land, roads, public infrastructure and economic activity. Reconstruction would then consume scarce public resources and potentially require years of rehabilitation and external assistance.

The human cost would be far greater. Families could lose their homes, crops and businesses. Communities could be displaced. Children's education could be interrupted and local economies could take years to recover. Most tragically, lives could be lost because authorities failed to respond to risks that had been identified well before floodwaters arrived.

The Sindh government must therefore treat the SUPARCO findings as an urgent planning and disaster-prevention document rather than another report to be filed away. The vulnerable sections of the bund should undergo immediate technical assessment, with reinforcement or other protective measures undertaken wherever necessary.

At the same time, encroachments that obstruct natural flood flows need to be identified and removed in accordance with the law. Construction and permanent settlement in high-risk floodplains must be brought under effective control. Land-use planning should take actual river behaviour into account rather than treating floodplains as ordinary development land. The government should also make its response transparent. It should publicly release the relevant findings, identify the vulnerable locations, announce a clear action plan and provide timelines for remedial measures. Regular progress reports would help ensure that responsibility remains visible and cannot once again disappear into departmental files.

This is precisely the kind of situation in which prevention is both possible and considerably cheaper than recovery. The investigators have investigated. The scientists have analysed. The satellites have documented the river's movement. The experts have warned. And the river itself is providing unmistakable evidence of where its channel is heading.

The authorities therefore have something Pakistan rarely possesses in the face of a major disaster: advance warning supported by scientific evidence and enough time to act. They must use it. Waiting for the Indus to provide the final warning in the form of a breached embankment and flooded communities would not be an unfortunate accident. It would represent a failure to act on a danger that was clearly visible in advance.

The Houthis' escalation in Yemen could flop

Sultan Barakat

The speed of the Houthi advance along the Red Sea coast has changed the strategic landscape. After capturing Mocha, Houthi forces moved into Dhubab and reached Mayyun, or Perim Island, at the narrowest point of the Bab al-Mandeb strait. These are not peripheral gains. They give the movement unprecedented leverage over one of the world's most important maritime corridors.

This latest escalation in Yemen is not simply another episode in its long civil war. It is also not simply an escalatory move by Iran against Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. It is at once a struggle for the control of Yemen, a renewed confrontation between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, and another front in the wider war involving Iran, Israel and the United States.

Several factors contributed to it, including the false sense of balance of power in Yemen, the Houthi desire to secure a stronger negotiating position, and the spillover of the Iran war. The latest offensive cannot be understood without considering the false sense of peace that preceded it.

A United Nations-mediated truce took effect in April 2022. Although it formally expired six months later, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis largely maintained a de facto ceasefire. Saudi and Omani delegations travelled to Sanaa a year later. In June 2023, direct flights resumed between Sanaa and Saudi Arabia to carry Yemeni pilgrims to Hajj, the first such flights since 2016. In September 2023, a senior Houthi delegation visited Riyadh for talks on ending the war.

These were important confidence-building measures. But they also encouraged the dangerous assumption that Yemen's conflict was gradually resolving itself. The internationally recognised government appears to have mistaken the absence of major fighting for a durable balance of power. Despite repeated talk since April 2025 of an offensive along the western coast, its leaders remained divided, and its armed formations answered to competing commands. Rather than using the pause to rebuild legitimacy, improve governance and establish a coherent military structure, the government and its supporters became complacent.

The Houthis used the same period very differently. The reduction in fighting gave them time and strategic space to consolidate their administration, reorganise their forces, expand their missile and drone capabilities, and recruit on a vast scale. A 2024 report by United Nations experts estimated that the Houthis' fighting strength had risen from approximately 220,000 in 2022 to 350,000, compared with just 30,000 in 2015. Such figures must be treated cautiously, but they indicate how extensively the movement expanded during what others regarded as a period of peace. It should be noted that this process also involved documented coercion and child recruitment.

The genocide in Gaza also gave the Houthis a powerful mobilising cause. Palestine is close to the heart of almost every Yemeni, cutting across many of the country's political, regional and sectarian divisions. By presenting their attacks on Israel and their Red Sea operations as direct action in defence of Gaza, the Houthis portrayed themselves not merely as one party in Yemen's civil war, but as perhaps the only Arab force willing and able to impose a cost on Israel.

For the first six months of the war, Iran appears to have tried to keep the Red Sea from becoming another major front. It had a clear interest in keeping Saudi Arabia and Egypt (the two pivotal Arab powers bordering the Red Sea) outside a US-led military alignment. Renewed Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia or commercial shipping risked pushing Riyadh and Cairo closer to Washington.

It is reasonable to assume that Tehran initially pressed the Houthis not to provoke Saudi Arabia. But the Saudi strike on Sanaa International Airport in July changed the calculation. Reportedly intended to prevent an Iranian aircraft from landing, it gave the Houthis a reason to retaliate and evidence that restraint would not protect them. Iran may not have wanted a Saudi-Houthi confrontation, but once the Houthis decided to respond, Tehran could hardly demand that they remain passive without undermining the credibility of an alliance it had spent years cultivating.

The escalation also serves Iran's interests. Its disruption of Gulf supplies was losing some of its force as Washington and its partners helped the international market adjust through alternative suppliers and routes bypassing Hormuz. Oil prices are high, but the shortage Iran may have hoped to create has not fully materialised, while additional sanctions and the blockade are beginning to bite.

Bab al-Mandeb offers another pressure point: Disrupting international trade and driving up oil and transport costs ahead of the US midterms could make the war politically and economically more costly for the Trump administration, possibly forcing it to reconsider its terms for ending it. This does not mean that Iran ordered the Houthi offensive. Iranian weapons, training and technical assistance have been central to the movement's transformation, but support should not be confused with authorship. Iran and the Houthis are allies, not identical actors.

The Houthis have their own interests. They are seeking an independent bargaining position before any regional settlement can be negotiated over their heads. Their blockade of Saudi vessels, attacks on Saudi infrastructure and advance towards Bab al-Mandeb were not simply undertaken on Iran's behalf; they were also intended to make the Houthis indispensable to any future negotiations. Control of territory overlooking the strait gives them leverage over Saudi exports, Egyptian interests and, most importantly, navigation between Asia and Europe.

While the Trump administration is likely following this escalation in Yemen with concern, given the skyrocketing fuel prices and inflation woes at home, there may be a silver lining for it. Until now, the US has struggled to persuade its regional and international allies to join its confrontation with Iran. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have had every reason to keep their distance. A direct threat to the Red Sea changes that calculation.

Disruption at Bab al-Mandeb would endanger Saudi oil exports, further reduce Egypt's Suez Canal revenues and threaten Europe's principal maritime connection with Asia. NATO members and other European states may consequently be more willing to support a US-led operation presented not as a war against Iran, but as the defence of international navigation.

Israel, too, will find the opportunity difficult to resist. Even without formal cooperation, US coordination could place Israeli, Saudi, Egyptian and European forces on the same side of a maritime confrontation. This could revive the security logic behind Saudi-Israeli normalisation just when Gaza had made political rapprochement appear impossible. The Houthis may therefore achieve the opposite of what Iran originally intended. By threatening Bab al-Mandeb, they could draw Saudi Arabia and Egypt closer to Washington while creating new, largely unacknowledged forms of coordination with Israel.

The Iran war reveals the limits of BRICS

Ronny P Sasmita

This year's BRICS summit has wrapped up in New Delhi with the usual promises of deepened cooperation and expanding economic ties. But there was an important absence.

Although the US-Israel war on Iran has affected most of BRICS' 11 members and 10 partner countries, the declaration issued by the bloc did not address it directly. Nor did it condemn the United States, which – objectively speaking – is the aggressor state in the conflict.

The wording allowed all members to remain inside the same diplomatic tent. It also revealed just how difficult it is for BRICS to turn shared dissatisfaction with the Western-led order into coordinated geopolitical action. The problem was already visible months before the summit. In May, the BRICS foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi failed to produce a common position on the war on Iran. The outcome document acknowledged differences among members and avoided naming either the US or Israel.

Iran wanted the group to condemn the US and Israeli military campaign, while the UAE opposed language that ignored Iranian attacks and its own security concerns. That failure was more than a diplomatic embarrassment. It was a clear sign of the political cost of BRICS expansion.

The group's enlargement has increased its global reach, but it has also imported regional rivalries into the organisation itself. Iran and the UAE are a particularly clear example. Both belong to BRICS, yet their strategic calculations in the Middle East collide. Their participation in the same organisation therefore creates a built-in ceiling on how far the group can go in confronting a conflict that directly affects both.

The September summit produced a declaration, but the compromise was telling. Rather than taking a clear, strong position, BRICS became a platform for managing disagreement. The episode therefore suggests that the central problem facing the bloc is not a lack of economic or diplomatic weight. It is the difficulty of converting that weight into a single geopolitical instrument.

While BRICS has emerged out of a desire to challenge the US-dominated world order, it has failed to reach a common position on Washington. That is because its members have divergent interests when it comes to dealing with the US.

India illustrates the dilemma most clearly. New Delhi sees BRICS as a vehicle for strategic autonomy, not as an alliance against the US. It is deepening its relationship with Washington, participating in the Quad and maintaining extensive defence and economic ties with Western partners. At the same time, it remains deeply engaged with Russia and China. For India, the value of BRICS lies partly in preserving room for manoeuvre between competing centres of power. Turning BRICS into an anti-American bloc would undermine precisely that strategic flexibility.

China and Russia also have reasons to avoid transforming BRICS into a mechanism for direct confrontation with the US. For Russia, BRICS is unquestionably an important platform for reducing the political and economic impact of Western economic pressure. Yet, pursuing more aggressive policies through military alliances could push Moscow into a conflict with the US and NATO – something it wants to avoid at all costs.

For China, the calculation is even more complex. Beijing wants a stronger multipolar order and greater influence for the Global South. It also wants to reduce the structural advantages enjoyed by the US in global finance, trade and international institutions. But China has little reason to turn every BRICS dispute into a binary confrontation with Washington. The US remains an important market for its exports and an important factor in global trade.

Brazil and Indonesia add another layer of complexity. Brasilia wants a more representative international system, greater development finance and stronger bargaining power for developing countries, but has little incentive to turn BRICS into an instrument of Chinese or Russian geopolitical strategy. Similarly, Jakarta sees BRICS as a way to widen its strategic and economic options rather than as a vehicle for choosing sides.

BRICS is caught in what appears to be a polycentric trap. Its greatest strength is its diversity. That diversity gives the group legitimacy across regions that have historically had little influence over the architecture of global governance. But the same diversity makes collective geopolitical action difficult. Every new member adds economic resources, diplomatic reach and political legitimacy. It also adds another set of national interests that must be accommodated.

This explains why BRICS is more likely to become a powerful bargaining coalition than a coherent geopolitical bloc.

Its members can agree on reforming international institutions, increasing representation for developing countries, strengthening South-South trade, expanding development finance and reducing excessive dependence on Western financial infrastructure. They can also cooperate on local-currency payments, development lending, energy and food security.

But agreement becomes harder when cooperation requires members to choose sides in an actual geopolitical confrontation. The war on Iran makes that contradiction unusually visible. That does not mean BRICS is irrelevant. Quite the opposite. Its influence may ultimately come from doing something less dramatic but more sustainable: changing the bargaining environment in which the existing international order operates.

BRICS does not need to destroy the current global system to challenge the US. It can push for greater representation in the IMF and the World Bank, strengthen alternative development institutions, expand non-dollar payment mechanisms and give developing countries more diplomatic options. That may prove to be its most consequential role.

Therefore, the limits of its geopolitical action could also be a blessing. Avoiding hard confrontation could allow for more space for gradual change and a shift in the balance of power.

Quaid's vision

As the nation observed the 78th anniversary of the death of the Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, we would do well to pause for a moment and think about how well Pakistan's young generation, growing up in a rapidly changing world, understands the vision of the country's Founding Father. The Quaid's larger message of integrity, discipline, equality, education and responsible citizenship still remains highly relevant to the challenges facing young Pakistanis today.

Jinnah, beyond any doubt or even debate, envisioned a country where citizens would be treated equally regardless of their religion, colour, caste or creed, and where constitutionalism, democracy and merit would guide the state. These principles should not remain confined to textbooks or speeches.

They must become part of how our young think and act. Young people in society, especially in classrooms and family discussions, are often told to 'build Pakistan', but are we giving them enough understanding of what kind of Pakistan they are expected to build? Educational institutions should go beyond occasional commemorative events and set up platforms and opportunities for students to engage with Jinnah's political thought, leadership and vision.

The young among us need more than inspiration. They need direction, character and a sense of responsibility. If we really want a stronger Pakistan, we, the elders, must ensure that Jinnah's principles are understood, questioned, discussed, debated, and, most importantly, practised by our younger generations.

Amir Shahzad
Karachi

Child abuse in modern times

The dark web has created one of the most dangerous spaces in terms of child abuse in modern times. Criminals use hidden networks to exploit children, trade abusive material, and escape detection. This is both a cybercrime and a direct attack on childhood, dignity and human safety. As per global agencies, online child exploitation is rising rapidly, and research shows abuse can cause lifelong depression, anxiety and trust issues.

Some people believe that this problem only affects wealthy countries or highly technical spaces. That is not correct. Any country, including Pakistan, with growing internet access faces risk. Poverty, silence, weak digital awareness, and poor enforcement make our children vulnerable even further. Most parents largely monitor school grades, but ignore digital behaviour. This only helps abusers.

The damage is borne by individual victims because these illegal networks normalise cruelty and create profitable criminal markets. When demand grows, more children are targeted. This makes prevention a collective responsibility for governments, social media platforms, teachers and families.

Open conversations about body safety, consent and reporting can reduce harm. Children must know that unsafe contact, threats, or secret messages online should be reported instantly without fear or shame. Strong laws, cyber-policing, due digital education and awareness are indispensable.

Tania Shahjahan
Kamber Ali Khan

Random overgrowth

With the monsoon in full swing, foliage in Islamabad is blooming. Unfortunately, most of the road signs are being obstructed by this random overgrowth, and looking for road directions is very difficult for the drivers. The National Highway Authority (NHA) needs to ensure that all traffic signboards are cleared of undergrowth and are visible to drivers from a reasonable distance. The trees in the older sectors also need trimming as they now have a 'hippy' look. The branches of the 50-year-old trees are drooping down on the road, and give the area a rather horror-movie appearance.

Khalid Hyder
Islamabad

Larkana trauma centre

I visited the Trauma Centre in Larkana recently to get an anti-tetanus serum (ATS) shot for my brother following a feline bite. Only a single counter was operational to register dozens of patients. The attending doctor barely examined my brother and simply redirected us to the minor procedure room. Once there, the nursing staff refused to administer the shot and bounced us back to another physician. It was only after an on-duty security guard intervened that the very same nurse agreed to administer the injection. The syringe was prepared out of sight, raising grave concerns about basic sterilisation and safety practices. Such negligence jeopardises patient safety.

Abdul Wajid Waggan
Larkana

Electricity tariffs

The National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra) recently approved a Re0.75 per-unit increase in electricity prices under the monthly fuel cost adjustment (FCA) mechanism for June 2026. Although this was lower than the Rs1.20 per unit requested by the Central Power Purchasing Agency, even relatively small tariff adjustments add to the financial burden on households that are already struggling with rising cost of living. There are also cases in which consumers receive unusually high bills despite limited electricity usage. The government should review electricity tariffs and billing mechanisms, and provide targeted relief to low-income consumers.

Ishfaque Mashooq Brohi
Qubo Saeed Khan

Power shortages

Pakistan's recurring power shortages, water scarcity and devastating floods are often treated as separate crises. They are not. They share a common solution: storing rainwater through a nationwide network of small dams. Instead of allowing precious rainwater to flow into the sea, Pakistan should convert it into a strategic resource for clean energy, irrigation and climate resilience.

According to the World Bank, Pakistan's per capita water availability has fallen from over 5,000 cubic metres in 1951 to around 900 cubic metres, placing the country close to the water-scarcity threshold. At the same time, the Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) has repeatedly highlighted Pakistan's limited water storage capacity, while the Pakistan Economic Survey has emphasised the growing pressure of climate change on the country's water resources. Small-scale dams offer a practical and cost-effective solution. In addition to storing rainwater, they can generate micro-hydropower, recharge groundwater, reduce flood damage and provide reliable irrigation for agriculture. Their lower construction cost and shorter completion time make them particularly suitable for water-stressed regions.

Many countries have already demonstrated the benefits of this approach. China has built more than 90,000 reservoirs, many of them small and medium-sized, supporting irrigation, flood control and renewable electricity. Japan has integrated rainwater harvesting and multipurpose reservoirs into its disaster-management strategy, while India's check dams have significantly improved its groundwater recharge capacity and farm productivity.

Pakistan's arid areas, like Tharparkar, Kohistan, Dadu, Jamshoro and parts of Balochistan, possess considerable potential for proper rainwater harvesting through scientifically planned small dams. The time has come for policymakers to treat every drop of rain as a national asset. Investing in small-scale dams today is not merely a water-management strategy; it is an investment in Pakistan's energy security, agricultural sustainability and, importantly, long-term economic resilience.

Shahnawaz Khoso
Hyderabad

Fish do something surprising when the water turns murky

Luis Arrais

A shoal of fish stays together mostly by sight. Each fish watches its neighbors and adjusts, so when silt or algae cloud the water, a shoal ought to loosen and drift apart.

Small groups of sticklebacks did the opposite in a new experiment. In murky water they swam closer together, lined up more tightly, and reacted to each other faster. That closeness helped them reach food sooner.

Christos Ioannou, a professor of behavioral ecology at the University of Bristol, led the experiment. His team worked in a shallow tank with 72 fish, at a level of cloudiness far milder than the kind that turns a river brown after a storm. “When we put an unexpected piece of food in the water, it took the fish longer to find it when the water was cloudier. This makes sense and has been shown before in different water-living species,” Ioannou said. “However, we were excited to see that the sticklebacks were able to compensate for this challenge by changing their shoaling behavior.”

Water turns cloudy when fine particles hang in it, from clay and silt to floating algae. Scientists call that cloudiness turbidity. It’s rising in freshwater and coastal habitats around the world as farming, quarrying and construction wash more sediment into rivers. For a fish that hunts by eye, cloudy water shrinks the distance at which it can spot a meal, a friend or a predator. Earlier studies found that heavily clouded water breaks up fish shoals. At milder levels, though, shoals often held together, and in some cases they were tighter than in clear water.

Not hitting your step goal? Pick up the pace

Taylor Nicioli

If you’re watching your daily step count, you may be overlooking another important part of the equation: your pace. Taking fewer steps at a faster pace may be associated with a similar reduction in the risk of early death as getting in more steps at a slower pace, according to a study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine. The often-cited goal of 10,000 steps a day didn’t come from a specific scientific finding, said study coauthor Emmanuel Stamatakis, professor of physical activity, lifestyle and population health at Monash University in Melbourne. Rather, the target dates back to a 1960s Japanese pedometer campaign, he noted.

For some people, 10,000 steps can seem daunting and dissuade them from trying to start exercising. To “a 65-year-old managing a knee, a carer with fragmented time, or a shift worker, that number can feel less like a goal and more like a reason to give up,” Stamatakis said in an email. “Someone walking 4,000 steps a day who walks them with more purpose is doing something worthwhile, and someone who cannot walk quickly can still gain a great deal by accumulating more steps at a slower pace.”

To explore how the number of steps and the pace of those steps might work together, researchers analyzed movement data from more than 100,000 middle-aged adults in the UK Biobank, a longitudinal study that included participants from England, Scotland and Wales. Participants wore an activity tracker for seven consecutive days between 2013 and 2015, allowing researchers to measure both their daily step counts and pace. The authors of the new study found that both walking more and walking faster were associated with a lower risk of death — suggesting that the benefits of walking may be less about hitting one magic number and more about finding a combination of steps and pace that works for you.

Ancient wildfires may have inspired one of humanity’s biggest inventions

Andrei Ionescu

Long before anyone deliberately shaped a bowl, a stretch of ancient wildfires may have quietly handed early farmers the idea that changed everything: clay, once burned, doesn’t go back to being soft. A new study argues that these wildfires, and the landslides of soil that followed them, could be where the whole idea of pottery actually started. The research was conducted by Amos Frumkin from the Institute of Earth Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Thousands of years before the first clay pot, life in the southern Levant was rough in a specific way. Hillsides caught fire and whatever plants had been holding the soil together simply disappeared. And once that happened, the rains carried the soil away, dumping huge quantities of clay-rich sediment down into the valleys below. Frumkin pieced this story together from ancient lake sediments, cave deposits, layers of charcoal, and archaeological digs, stretching across two very different periods of the region’s past. What emerged is an idea he’s calling the “natural kiln hypothesis,” which suggests that people may not have invented pottery from scratch. They may have copied it. The study lines up two episodes. One is the last interglacial period, roughly 129,000 to 116,000 years ago. The other is the early Holocene, about 11,000 to 7,000 years ago, right when farming communities were starting to settle down for good.

Too much light during nighttime sleep may damage the heart

Barbara Mantel

Exposure to light during nighttime sleep may lead to potentially harmful changes in the structure and function of the heart, according to a study published in the European Heart Journal.

Previous research had shown a link between nighttime sleep while exposed to light and an elevated risk of coronary artery disease, heart attack, heart failure and stroke. The new study is the first to examine how it also affects the structure and function of the heart.

Changes to the heart — known as remodeling — can help explain the elevated risk for heart problems associated with too much nighttime light, said lead researcher Dr. Lu Qi, of Tulane University’s Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine. “The takeaway is clear: darkness deserves recognition as a vital sign, as essential to cardiovascular health as blood pressure control and clean air,” Dr. Thomas Münzel, an environmental cardiologist at the University Medical Center of Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, and colleagues wrote in an accompanying editorial.

The researchers analyzed data from 11,071 participants enrolled in the UK Biobank, a massive database that began recruiting participants in 2005 and collects data about demographics, health and lifestyle. The people in the study wore light and motion sensors on their wrists for seven days, and a few years later, they were given MRIs of the heart. They did not have cardiovascular disease starting out.

Treet®
Trim XL
GREAT HOLD ON EVERY SHAVE
Shave Oil
Pakistan Standards
CM/L-2048/2008(R)
/ Treet.Grooming