

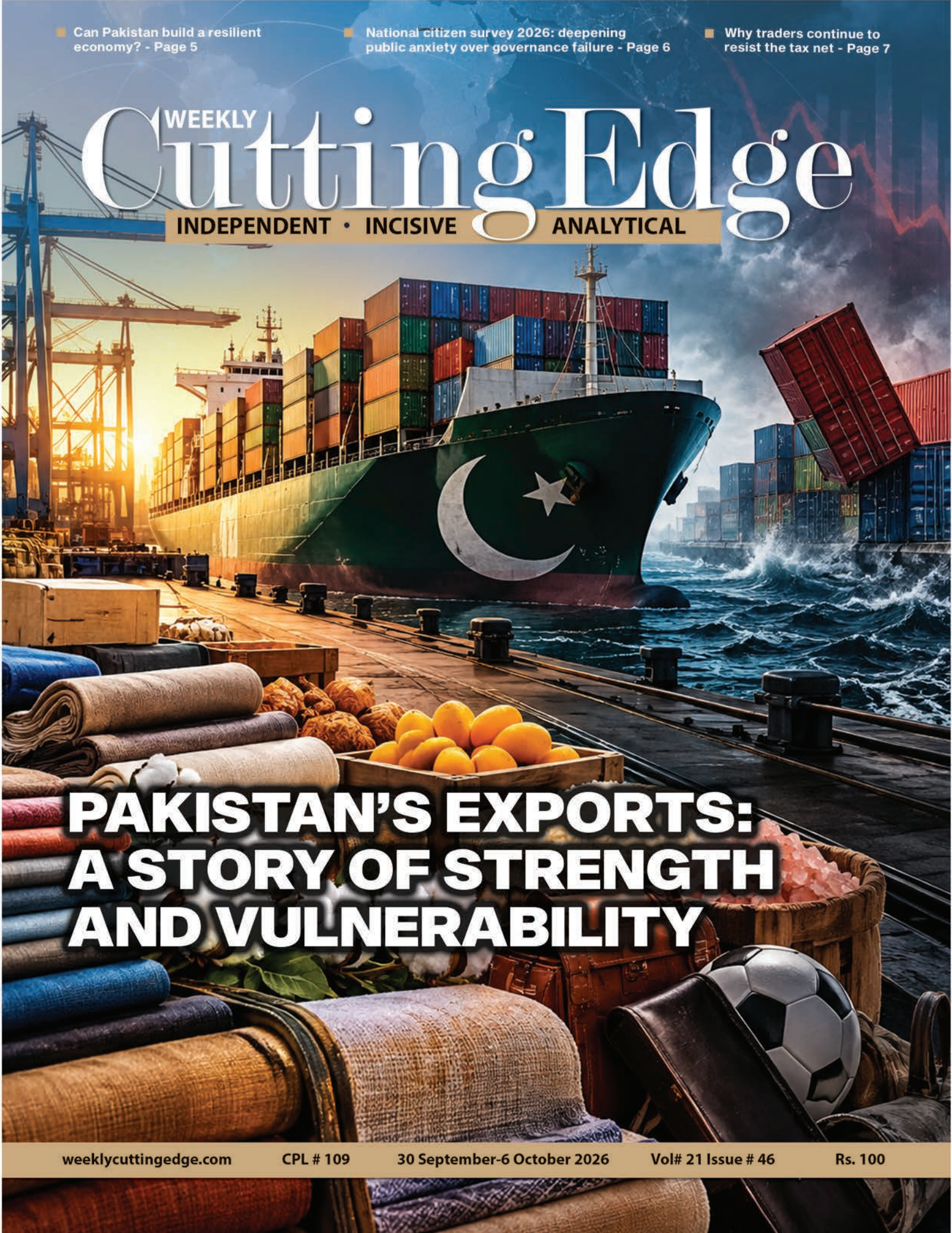
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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL



PAKISTAN'S EXPORTS: A STORY OF STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY

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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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Pakistan's exports: a story of strength and vulnerability

Farhan Khan

No doubt, Pakistan's exporters compete successfully on the world stage, but the latest trade data makes it clear that this competitiveness is confined to a dangerously narrow band, leaving the country almost entirely absent from the markets that matter most for future growth.

The scale of the challenge is stark. Pakistan's total exports stood at \$30.67 billion in 2025, against global exports of \$25.61 trillion. That translates into a global market share of just 0.12 percent. For a country of more than 240 million people, this is a strikingly small footprint in world trade and underscores the enormous room for expansion.

Pakistan's top exports are heavily concentrated in textiles, agro-food and a handful of other manufactured products. In nearly every category where the country has a strong revealed comparative advantage, it ranks among the world's most specialised exporters. Bed linen is the standout example. The global market for the product is worth \$23.6 billion, and Pakistan alone supplies \$4.42 billion, giving it an RCA of 156 and placing the country among the most extreme specialists in the world. Bed linen alone accounts for 14 percent of Pakistan's entire export basket.

Men's wear tells a similar story on a larger global stage. Against global exports of \$55 billion, Pakistan exports \$3.13 billion, with an RCA of 47, contributing 10 percent of the country's total exports. Rice, meanwhile, generates \$2.42 billion out of a \$33 billion global market, with an RCA of 60 and a 7 percent share of national exports.

Together, these three products — bed linen, men's wear and rice — account for nearly one-third of everything Pakistan sells abroad. The specialisation runs even deeper through the textile and leather chains: jerseys and cardigans (\$856 million against a \$71 billion world market), T-shirts (\$792 million against \$59 billion), leather apparel and accessories (\$609 million against a \$7.65 billion market, with an RCA of 66), made-up textile articles (\$514 million against \$19.3 billion) and cotton fabrics (\$494 million against \$9.14 billion). In agro-food, beyond rice, meat exports of \$376 million against a \$40 billion global market give Pakistan an RCA of 8.

This is a genuine achievement. It

demonstrates that Pakistani industry can compete globally in labour-intensive, low- to medium-technology production, particularly in cotton textiles, leather goods and selected food products. But the same data carries an unmistakable warning. Success and vulnerability are, in this case, two sides of the same coin.

First, there is the problem of concentration. When a single product such as bed linen accounts for 14 percent of national exports, and three products together make up nearly a third, the economy becomes exposed to any shock affecting those specific sectors, whether a shift in global demand, a competitor's currency devaluation, changing buyer preferences or a disruption in cotton supplies.

Second, most of these strengths remain



concentrated in raw or minimally processed goods. Pakistan's agro-food exports, in particular, are dominated by primary commodities with limited value addition. The country grows, spins and stitches well, but it has not moved decisively up the value chain into branded, design-led or higher-margin products.

Third, and perhaps most consequentially, is the country's near-total absence from markets that are both among the largest and fastest-growing segments of world trade: pharmaceuticals, electronics, machinery, automobiles and petrochemicals. These are sectors driving much of global trade and industrial transformation, yet Pakistan remains barely present in most of them.

The picture that emerges is not one of failure, but of a narrow lane travelled with real skill. The question now is whether that lane can be widened, and whether new lanes can be opened, before the window of opportunity narrows.

What is the way forward? Improving export performance requires action on two fronts simultaneously. The first is to deepen and

upgrade existing strengths. Pakistan's textile, leather and food exporters need to move into higher-value, branded and sustainable products, backed by genuine investment in design capabilities, quality certification and diversification into new export markets. The objective should not simply be to produce more of the same commodity goods, but to capture a larger share of the value generated by products in which Pakistan already has an established competitive position.

The second is to scale up new sectors where global demand is both large and growing: pharmaceuticals, footwear, processed foods, chemicals, plastics and selected manufacturing niches. Over the longer term, the groundwork needs to be laid for entry into electronics, automobiles and renewable-energy equipment — sectors that are likely to shape global trade for decades to come and in which Pakistan currently has only a limited presence.

None of this can be achieved through exporter effort alone. It requires stable macro-economic policies so businesses can plan investment with confidence, a consistent trade and investment regime that does not change with every budget cycle, and major investment in education and skills to build the

workforce required for higher-value manufacturing.

It also requires modern infrastructure, from ports and logistics networks to reliable power supplies, as well as institutions capable of negotiating effective trade agreements, actively promoting exports rather than merely facilitating them, and supporting small and medium enterprises that often lack the resources to break into new international markets on their own.

Pakistan has the capacity to compete. But competing successfully on a larger scale will require diversification, upgrading and entry into markets that are likely to matter most in the years ahead. The opportunity is real, but it will not remain open indefinitely.

Acting with urgency now, rather than treating today's narrow specialisation as a permanent ceiling, will determine whether Pakistan's export story remains one of a few products done exceptionally well or evolves into the story of a modern, diversified economy capable of holding its own in global trade.

National citizen survey 2026: deepening public anxiety over governance failure

Nasim Ahmed

A landmark nationwide poll has laid bare the deep economic anxieties gripping Pakistan, revealing that skyrocketing utility prices, a mounting national debt crisis, and an increasingly hostile business environment are the premier concerns for the country's citizenry.

The National Citizen Survey 2026, the first comprehensive gauge of public sentiment of its scale in Pakistan, paints a vivid picture of a population under profound financial duress. Executed by the Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR) in collaboration with the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the extensive study surveyed 5,155 voting-age citizens across both rural and urban demographics between August 23 and September 5, 2026.

The findings come at a critical juncture for policymakers, exposing a stark and widening disconnect between official state expenditure priorities and the day-to-day realities of ordinary citizens. The biggest public grievance is the crippling cost of living, driven primarily by utility tariff hikes. According to the data, 19% of all respondents identified rising electricity and gas prices as the single most critical challenge facing the nation today. This anxiety is further compounded by volatile fuel costs, which an additional 10% of citizens categorized as their primary concern. Together, the energy matrix constitutes the heaviest financial burden on Pakistani households.

Beyond immediate household expenses, the survey captured a profound collective anxiety regarding the macroeconomic trajectory of the state. A staggering 66% of respondents classified Pakistan's rising national debt as a grave issue, with 49% characterizing the situation as "extremely concerning". This public concern aligns directly with structural criticisms of the federal budget. Respondents sharply highlighted a severe spending mismatch within national resource allocation. While debt servicing consumes a staggering 42.9% of the national budget, critical social sectors remain severely underfunded, exemplified by healthcare allocations that sit at a negligible 0.1%. This imbalance has fuelled a growing perception that state resources are being utilized to satisfy systemic liabilities rather

than fostering human development.

The report delivers a damning indictment of Pakistan's economic infrastructure, particularly regarding entrepreneurship and local commerce. An overwhelming 91% of citizens stated that starting or running a business in the country is difficult, reflecting systemic barriers that stifle private sector growth and innovation. When asked to isolate the primary operational obstacles, the tax regime emerged as the dominant grievance:

- **Complex Tax System:** 46% of respondents cited the convoluted and burdensome tax infrastructure as their primary hurdle.
- **Credit Crunch:** 19% identified limited access to bank loans or formal credit lines as a critical barrier.



- **Systemic Corruption:** 12% pointed to corruption and the institutional requirement for bribery as the main impediment.
- **Energy Costs:** 10% focused on the direct impact of high industrial and commercial utility rates.
- **Regulatory Red Tape:** 7% blamed restrictive government regulations and bureaucratic friction.
- **Political Volatility:** 2% highlighted general political instability.

In response to these pervasive operational challenges, there is a strong public mandate for structural intervention. Over 76% of citizens called for the immediate introduction of robust government legislation explicitly designed to safeguard private enterprises from arbitrary regulatory overreach and economic instability.

The survey also investigated public perceptions of international financial interventions, revealing deep-seated skepticism toward

the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For decades, IMF programs have been utilized as a fiscal stabilization mechanism by successive administrations, yet the public remains largely unconvinced of their efficacy.

A plurality of 38% of respondents expressed the belief that IMF programs yield absolutely no tangible benefit to the public. Furthermore, 30% of those surveyed went a step further, labelling the structural adjustment programs as actively harmful to the domestic economy and the lower-income strata.

This pervasive scepticism regarding foreign bailouts mirrors a broader deficit of trust in domestic institutions. The IPOR-PILDAT data indicates that public confidence in state institutions remains remarkably depressed, driven by years of perceived economic mismanagement and unfulfilled reform promises. While financial pressures dominate the public consciousness, the survey also highlighted significant social anxieties. Chief among these is the escalating crisis of drug abuse, which has rapidly climbed the ladder of civic priorities to become a top-tier concern among families across both rural and urban sectors. Respondents noted that social vulnerabilities are worsening in tandem with economic deterioration, signalling a multi-dimensional crisis that extends far closer to home than national balance sheets.

The findings of the survey present a formidable challenge to Pakistan's legislative and executive leadership. The data demonstrates that public anxiety is no longer confined to political polarization; rather, it is anchored entirely in survival-level economics—affordable power, fair taxation, institutional integrity, and accessible credit. The survey provides an evidence-based roadmap for governance reform. It signals an urgent need for the federal government to pivot away from aggressive taxation on formal businesses and instead focus on expanding the tax base, simplifying compliance, lowering energy costs, and reallocating resources toward social safety nets and healthcare. For a population increasingly cynical of political rhetoric, the National Citizen Survey serves as a definitive, quantifiable record of the citizen's voice—one that demands structural reform over short-term fiscal fix.

Can Pakistan build a resilient economy?

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's economic policymakers broadly agree on one fundamental point: macroeconomic stability cannot be the final destination. The ultimate objective has to be stronger and more sustainable economic growth capable of creating jobs, raising incomes and reducing poverty.

The debate is largely about timing. Some believe that the economy has now stabilised sufficiently to move decisively towards growth, while others argue that the government should first ensure that the gains achieved through stabilisation are durable.

The finance minister has emphasised the need to make macroeconomic stability permanent before pursuing a stronger growth strategy. There is, in fact, little contradiction between these positions. Pakistan needs both stability and growth. The more important question is whether the stability achieved so far is sufficiently strong and deeply rooted to support sustained economic expansion.

At present, the answer remains uncertain. Much of Pakistan's recent stability has been achieved through fiscal compression, monetary restraint and external financing. These measures have played an important role in containing demand, reducing immediate pressure on the external account and restoring confidence in the economy. They have also helped rebuild foreign exchange reserves and bring some order to public finances.

But stabilisation measures cannot by themselves generate the productivity gains required for long-term growth. Restricting demand can reduce imports, but it does not make Pakistani products more competitive abroad. Higher interest rates can contain inflation, but they do not automatically encourage investment. External borrowing can strengthen reserves temporarily, but it does not create a sustainable source of foreign exchange.

This distinction is crucial as Pakistan considers its next phase of economic policy. The economy grew by around 3.7 per cent last year, a rate only modestly above population

growth. Such expansion may represent a recovery from a period of severe economic weakness, but it is not enough to transform living standards. Pakistan needs significantly stronger and more inclusive growth to create sufficient employment opportunities for a rapidly expanding working-age population and to make meaningful progress in reducing poverty.

The condition of foreign exchange reserves illustrates the fragility of the present situation. Reserves have improved, but a substantial part of the increase has been supported by external borrowing. Borrowing can provide valuable breathing space, particularly during a period of adjustment, but it does not eliminate the underlying requirement for sustainable foreign exchange earnings.

The recent rise in global energy risks makes this vulnerability even clearer. Pakistan remains heavily dependent on imported fuel,

long-term capital simply because inflation has temporarily declined or the current account has improved. They look at the broader business environment and assess whether policies are predictable, regulations are transparent, contracts are enforceable and infrastructure is reliable.

They also consider the quality of public institutions. This places governance at the centre of Pakistan's growth challenge. The argument that governance can improve only after economic growth takes place reverses the relationship between the two. Better governance is not merely a consequence of economic development; it is one of the conditions that make development possible.

A government that formulates consistent policies, enforces contracts, reduces unnecessary regulatory uncertainty and holds public institutions accountable creates an environment in which businesses can plan for the long term. Investors are more willing to commit capital when they can reasonably predict the rules under which they will operate.

Similarly, businesses are more likely to invest in productivity-enhancing technology when they are confident that policies will not change abruptly. Exporters need reliable infrastructure and competitive energy costs. Manufacturers require predictable regulations. Small and medium-sized enterprises need access to finance without excessive administrative obstacles. All of these factors ultimately influence economic growth.

Pakistan therefore needs to move beyond the narrow definition of stabilisation as simply avoiding another immediate crisis. A country can have a relatively stable exchange rate, controlled fiscal deficit and improved reserves while still lacking the conditions necessary for sustained economic expansion.

The quality of stability matters as much as its existence. The government should use the breathing space created by recent stabilisation to undertake reforms that can make growth less dependent on borrowing and temporary consumption. The tax system needs to generate revenue through a broader base rather than placing an increasing burden on existing taxpayers. The energy sector needs structural



meaning that a significant increase in international oil prices can quickly raise the import bill, increase inflationary pressures and put pressure on the external account. A genuinely resilient economy should be able to absorb an external energy shock without immediately facing renewed balance-of-payments difficulties.

Pakistan's current stability is not yet sufficiently supported by strong exports, domestic energy security, rising productivity and sustained foreign investment. These are the foundations that must eventually replace emergency stabilisation measures. Foreign direct investment is particularly important in this context. Investors do not commit substantial

reform to reduce costs and improve reliability. Export industries require policies that enhance competitiveness rather than short-term support that becomes difficult to sustain.

Investment also needs to become a central component of the growth strategy. Pakistan cannot raise productivity without increasing investment in machinery, technology, infrastructure, human capital and skills. Public investment has a role, but private investment must also expand substantially if the economy is to generate the scale of employment required.

At the same time, monetary and fiscal policies must be calibrated carefully. Moving too quickly from stabilisation towards demand-led expansion could recreate the very external pressures that forced the country

into adjustment. But maintaining restrictive policies for too long without addressing supply-side constraints could also suppress investment and limit potential growth.

The challenge is therefore not to choose between stability and growth. It is to transform one into the foundation for the other. Macroeconomic stability should create the space for structural reforms, while those reforms should gradually make stability less dependent on fiscal compression, monetary restraint and external borrowing. Stronger exports, higher productivity, greater investment and improved governance should ultimately provide the buffers that Pakistan currently lacks.

Growth must indeed be the destination. But the pursuit of growth cannot mean abandoning the discipline required to preserve

macroeconomic stability. Equally, stability cannot be declared a success simply because the immediate crisis has been contained.

The real test of Pakistan's economic policy is whether today's fragile stability can be converted into a stronger productive base. If the country can improve governance, attract investment, expand exports, secure energy supplies and raise productivity, growth can become sustainable rather than another temporary phase between economic crises.

Pakistan therefore needs a transition from stabilisation to transformation. The objective should not merely be to prevent the next crisis, but to build an economy capable of absorbing external shocks while continuing to grow. Only then will macroeconomic stability have fulfilled its real purpose.

Why traders continue to resist the tax net

Muhammad Zain

The government's much-publicised fixed tax scheme for traders appears to be struggling to attract the very taxpayers it was designed to bring into the formal tax system. Only two previously unregistered shopkeepers have opted into the scheme so far. Although 317 traders have been registered under the programme, it has generated just Rs26 million against a budgeted target of Rs50 billion. The figures raise serious questions about the government's approach to broadening the tax base and, more importantly, about the willingness of traditionally under-taxed sectors to enter the formal economy.

The latest initiative is not the government's first attempt to bring traders into the tax net. The earlier Tajir Dost scheme also failed to produce the expected results. The repeated inability to persuade shopkeepers to register suggests that the problem goes beyond the design of an individual tax programme. It points towards a much deeper resistance to documentation, taxation and regular interaction with tax authorities.

Under the new scheme, the government attempted to make compliance considerably easier. Traders were offered a tax rate of just 1 per cent of turnover, exemption from routine audits and withholding obligations, and relief from installing digital payment systems. These concessions were intended to remove some of the concerns traditionally raised by traders

about joining the formal tax system. Yet the response has remained limited. The fact that only two previously unregistered traders have opted into the scheme indicates that even substantial concessions may not be enough to persuade many shopkeepers to voluntarily become part of the documented tax regime.

This raises a fundamental question about tax policy. If incentives cannot persuade businesses to comply voluntarily, what should the government do next? Continuing to introduce increasingly generous concessions without establishing an effective enforcement mechanism risks creating a cycle in which taxpayers wait for further concessions while the state repeatedly lowers the cost of compliance.

Many traders appear to believe that their collective political influence provides greater protection than any incentives offered by tax authorities. Trader associations have demonstrated their ability to mobilise members, close markets and exert pressure whenever taxation or documentation measures are perceived as threatening their interests. Such collective action can make governments reluctant to pursue sustained enforcement, particularly when policymakers fear disruption in commercial centres. From the perspective of individual traders, resisting registration may therefore appear less costly than accepting even a relatively modest fixed tax. But this behaviour creates a wider problem for the economy. A tax system cannot function fairly if significant sections of the commercial sector remain outside the net

while those already documented are repeatedly subjected to additional taxation.

The contrast with salaried taxpayers illustrates the imbalance. Income tax collected from salaried individuals increased by 7.5 per cent to Rs91 billion during July-August, an increase of Rs6.3 billion over the corresponding period of the previous year. Salaried workers generally have little ability to avoid documentation because taxes are deducted at source. Their income is recorded, their employers report their earnings and the tax liability is automatically enforced.

The situation is different for many businesses operating largely through cash transactions. Where turnover, profits and transactions are inadequately documented, tax authorities face greater difficulty in determining actual liabilities. This creates an uneven distribution of the tax burden, with documented taxpayers carrying a disproportionate share of revenue collection.

The performance of the real estate sector also illustrates the challenges facing revenue mobilisation. The sector contributed Rs28 billion during the period, representing a decline of 28 per cent despite expectations that stronger property activity would generate higher revenues. The figures demonstrate that the government cannot rely on a few sectors or conventional revenue sources to compensate for weaknesses elsewhere in the tax system.

Pakistan's longstanding tax problem is therefore not simply one of insufficient

tax rates. It is fundamentally a problem of a narrow tax base, weak documentation, inconsistent enforcement and unequal treatment among economic sectors. Repeatedly increasing taxes on those who already comply may produce short-term revenue, but it does little to create a sustainable system.

The government should also recognise that incentives and enforcement are not mutually exclusive. Incentives can play a useful role in making registration easier and reducing the initial resistance to formalisation. Simplified tax procedures, predictable liabilities and fewer unnecessary interactions with tax officials can encourage compliance. But such measures can work only when taxpayers also believe that non-compliance will eventually have consequences.

A credible tax system requires certainty rather than selective enforcement. Traders should know what they are required to pay, how their liability will be calculated and what procedures they must follow. At the same time, those who remain outside the system despite clear legal obligations should face enforcement under transparent and consistently applied rules.

The government must also ensure that enforcement does not become arbitrary or dependent on political connections. Selective action against some traders while influential businesses remain untouched would undermine public confidence and strengthen resistance to documentation. Equal treatment is essential if tax compliance is to become a normal part of commercial activity.

Digitalisation can assist this process. Greater use of electronic payments, point-of-sale records and integrated databases can gradually reduce dependence on self-reporting and cash-based transactions. But digitalisation should be accompanied by safeguards against excessive administrative burdens and misuse of taxpayer information. The objective should be a system that makes compliance simple



while making deliberate evasion increasingly difficult.

There is also a broader economic argument for bringing traders into the formal system. Documentation can provide businesses with access to formal credit, banking services and other financial facilities. It can also help policymakers understand the size and structure of different commercial sectors and design better economic policies. Formalisation should therefore not be presented solely as a mechanism for collecting more taxes.

However, the immediate revenue gap remains difficult to ignore. Generating Rs26 million against a target of Rs50 billion demonstrates the scale of the challenge facing the government. If the existing approach continues to produce minimal participation, the authorities will need to reconsider the assumptions underlying the scheme rather than simply extend its deadline or offer additional concessions.

Pakistan cannot build a broad and equitable tax base by repeatedly relying on those who are already within the system. Nor

can the state sustainably compensate for under-taxation in politically influential sectors by increasing the burden on salaried workers and other documented taxpayers.

The failure to attract a meaningful number of previously unregistered traders should therefore serve as a warning. The government needs a tax policy that combines simple rules, reasonable rates, reliable documentation and credible enforcement. Incentives can encourage taxpayers to enter the system, but they cannot replace the authority of the state to enforce the law.

Ultimately, the credibility of Pakistan's tax system will depend on whether citizens and businesses believe that the rules apply equally to everyone. A system in which compliance is optional for some sectors but unavoidable for others will continue to produce resentment, evasion and an inadequate revenue base. The government must therefore move beyond repeated experiments with concessions and establish a taxation framework in which registration, documentation and payment of taxes become routine obligations across the economy.

Can Pakistan turn temporary stability into real growth?

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's repeated reviews under International Monetary Fund programmes highlight a persistent paradox in the country's economic management: the headline numbers may be improving, but the underlying structure of the economy has changed remarkably little. Macroeconomic stabilisation has delivered some important gains, yet many of the weaknesses that have repeatedly pushed Pakistan towards

external assistance remain firmly in place.

The government has made progress on several fiscal and monetary targets. The external account is less vulnerable than it was during the most difficult phase of the crisis, foreign exchange reserves have recovered and fiscal discipline has improved. These are huge achievements but stabilisation was never meant to be the final destination. Its real purpose is to create the economic and political space needed to undertake reforms that can

support durable growth.

That is where the central question arises: what has actually changed beneath the improving indicators? There is an increasingly familiar pattern surrounding IMF reviews. The Fund conducts its assessment, government officials hold meetings, the authorities present their performance, and eventually the IMF issues its findings. The latest assessment often acknowledges progress on quantitative targets while highlighting many of the same structural

weaknesses identified in previous reviews. Delays in reforms, governance problems, market distortions and shortcomings in social-sector spending continue to appear in the discussion.

The objective of an IMF programme, however, cannot simply be to pass one review after another. Yet much of Pakistan's economic policymaking still appears to revolve around precisely that exercise: achieve the required targets, secure the next tranche and then prepare for the next review.

Such an approach can produce short-term stability without necessarily changing the mechanisms that generate recurring economic crises. Meeting fiscal targets can improve the immediate budget position, but it does not automatically create a more efficient tax system. Restricting demand can reduce pressure on imports, but it does not make Pakistani exports more competitive. Raising energy prices can improve the financial position of utilities, but it does not by itself resolve the structural inefficiencies that have contributed to the energy sector's problems.

Pakistan has undoubtedly gained some breathing space. Fiscal management has improved, foreign exchange reserves have been rebuilt and the external account is less precarious. Inflationary pressures have also moderated from the exceptionally high levels experienced during the earlier crisis, although price pressures remain a concern. These developments provide policymakers with an opportunity that the country has often failed to use effectively in the past.

The IMF continues to identify delayed critical reforms, market interventions, governance weaknesses and inadequate social-sector spending as areas requiring attention. Several legislative and institutional measures agreed under the programme have also yet to be fully implemented. Taken together, these issues suggest that the central challenge is not simply compliance with programme conditions but the willingness and capacity to change the way the economy operates.

The tax system provides one example. Pakistan has repeatedly relied on higher tax rates and additional revenue measures to meet fiscal targets, but the fundamental challenge of broadening the tax base remains. A sustainable fiscal system requires a wider pool of taxpayers, better compliance, stronger administration and fewer distortions. Without such changes, every economic downturn is likely to revive pressure for emergency revenue measures.

The energy sector presents another example. Raising tariffs and reducing subsidies may help meet immediate fiscal objectives, but the deeper problems of inefficiency, transmission losses, circular debt and expensive generation require structural solutions. Unless these issues are addressed, the sector will continue to impose a heavy burden on households, businesses and the public finances.

The same applies to exports. Stabilising the

current account through import compression can provide temporary relief, but it cannot substitute for sustained growth in productive capacity and exports. Pakistan needs investment, technological upgrading, diversification and greater competitiveness if it is to generate the foreign exchange required to finance long-term growth.

There is also a danger that stabilisation itself could create a political temptation. Once reserves have been rebuilt and the immediate crisis has receded, governments may face pressure to loosen fiscal and monetary policies in an effort to accelerate economic growth. If this happens without corresponding improvements in productivity and investment, a temporary expansion could once again be followed by



rising imports, widening external deficits and renewed pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

The political cycle can make this temptation particularly strong. As elections approach, governments may find it attractive to demonstrate higher growth, increase spending or offer measures aimed at boosting consumption. Such policies can generate visible economic activity in the short term, but if they are financed through borrowing or import-heavy consumption rather than productivity-enhancing investment, the resulting gains may prove difficult to sustain.

Pakistan has experienced this pattern repeatedly. Stabilisation is followed by an expansionary phase; imports and external imbalances rise; foreign exchange reserves come under pressure; and eventually another balance-of-payments crisis forces the country back towards an IMF programme. The repetition of this cycle suggests that the fundamental problem lies deeper than any individual government or programme.

The current programme should therefore be judged not only by whether Pakistan completes its reviews but by whether it leaves behind stronger institutions and a more productive economy. An IMF programme can provide a framework for stabilisation and reform,

but it cannot substitute for domestic political commitment to structural change.

The government has an opportunity to use the present period of relative stability differently from previous episodes. Instead of treating improved reserves and fiscal indicators as gains that can eventually be spent, policymakers should treat them as a platform for reforms that make future crises less likely.

That means expanding the tax base rather than repeatedly increasing the burden on existing taxpayers; fixing the energy sector rather than relying indefinitely on tariff adjustments; improving governance and regulatory certainty; strengthening social protection and human capital; and creating conditions that

encourage investment and exports. Economic growth must ultimately come from higher productivity, stronger investment, competitive industries and better-skilled workers. It cannot be sustained simply by increasing public spending after every period of stabilisation.

The real measure of success, therefore, will not be whether Pakistan passes the next IMF review or receives the next tranche. It will be whether the country can eventually reach a point where external assistance is no longer required because the economic model itself has become more resilient. Until that happens, improved numbers will remain welcome but incomplete evidence of progress.

Pakistan has returned to the IMF programme more than two dozen times. The lesson from that history is clear: stabilisation without structural reform merely postpones the next crisis. The current period of relative economic stability should be used to break that cycle. If the gains are instead consumed through another short-lived spending-driven expansion, the country risks repeating the same sequence once again. The objective should be not merely to complete another IMF programme, but to ensure that there is no need to repeat it.

What if Karachi becomes a new province

Raza Khan

The debate over the creation of new provinces or administrative units in Pakistan has gained renewed momentum, and with it has come an increasingly intense discussion over what administrative and constitutional status should be accorded to Karachi, the country's largest city.

The debate has acquired fresh relevance as the MuttahidaQaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) has renewed its campaign for new provinces, including a separate administrative unit in urban Sindh, while the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) continues to oppose any division of Sindh. Recent statements by MQM-P leaders have framed the demand primarily in administrative terms, arguing that the existing structure has failed to meet the governance and development needs of a rapidly growing population. One stream of argument regarding Karachi is that it should be made a federally administered unit or territory because successive provincial governments, in which the PPP has had a dominant role, have been unable to govern the mega city effectively. Proponents of this view argue that the problems of Karachi are so complex, convoluted and multipronged that only the federal government, administering it directly and without provincial political interests, could address them effectively. A second stream of argument, led by the MQM-P, is that Karachi or the major urban centres of Sindh should be made a separate province or administrative unit because only such a structural change could address the city's longstanding problems. The PPP, on the other hand, has consistently opposed dividing Sindh. In February 2026, the Sindh Assembly passed a resolution declaring Karachi an integral and inseparable part of Sindh and rejecting any move to create a separate Karachi province.

Around a couple of years ago, the MQM had formally demanded the creation of a new urban-based province in Sindh, touching off a highly sensitive issue in the politics of the country. The MQM, which has historically been a dominant political force in urban Sindh, had long been desirous of making such a demand but had often shied away from formally pursuing it. The demand was also raised on the floor of the Sindh Assembly by an MQM lawmaker, who argued for a separate province for Urdu-speaking residents of Sindh.

The MQM-P has for some time been voicing the demand for new provinces comprising the major urban centres of Sindh, including

Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur and Nawabshah, among other areas. More recently, however, the party has sought to present the demand primarily on administrative rather than ethnic or linguistic grounds. MQM-P leaders have argued that new provinces are necessary to improve governance, public service delivery, resource distribution and administrative efficiency.

Although the formation of new provinces may not necessarily be a bad idea if the objective is to improve governance and social-service delivery, the political context surrounding the MQM-P demand cannot be ignored. Critics have questioned whether the demand for a Karachi or urban Sindh province is also linked to the party's desire to regain political control over an area where it once exercised much greater influence. The MQM-P, however, now argues that the demand is based on administrative necessity rather than ethnic considerations and has publicly sought support for new provinces across Pakistan.

It is important to recognise, however, that Karachi is not an ethnically homogeneous city. Alongside Urdu-speaking residents, it has large Pashtun, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baloch and other communities. A political or administrative arrangement based explicitly on ethnicity could therefore create new tensions rather than resolve existing ones. Any restructuring of Karachi or urban Sindh would need to protect the political, economic and civic rights of all communities living in the city rather than creating a system perceived as belonging to one ethnic group.

The MQM-P's demand has also created political pressure on the PPP, which has rejected the idea of new provinces in Sindh. At the same time, the party has sought to remind the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of past demands by its leadership for the creation of new administrative arrangements. The political history of the issue is important because demands for new provinces have previously been used by major parties as leverage against one another. The MQM-P's current campaign is therefore unfolding not only as an administrative debate but also within the broader political competition among the PPP, PML-N and MQM-P. Recent exchanges between the PPP and MQM-P show that the issue has already become politically contentious.

The need for administrative restructuring has been raised for years, particularly because the existing provinces are geographically and demographically large. Effective devolution

could potentially improve administration, social-service delivery and the distribution of resources among different regions and communities. At the same time, the creation of provinces cannot by itself guarantee better governance. Without strong institutions, accountable local governments, transparent resource distribution and effective public administration, simply redrawing provincial boundaries may not solve the underlying problems.

Another important argument advanced in favour of additional provinces has been the concentration of political and administrative power in the larger federating units. Punjab's population gives it considerable weight in the National Assembly, while demands for additional provinces within Punjab have frequently been linked to concerns about political representation and equitable distribution of resources. Supporters of new provinces have also pointed to historical regions such as Bahawalpur and the Seraiki belt in Punjab.

However, the debate also demonstrates that the demand for administrative restructuring cannot be reduced to one province or one ethnic community. Groups within the existing provinces have themselves sought separate administrative units. The Hindko-speaking population of the Hazara region in KP and Pashtun communities in Balochistan are examples of communities that have, at different times, raised demands for greater administrative autonomy or separate provincial arrangements.

As far as Karachi is concerned, the issues and problems of the city are so profound and extensive that neither simply making it a new province nor maintaining the existing status quo necessarily provides an adequate answer. The city needs a governance structure capable of dealing with its enormous population, infrastructure requirements, water shortages, transport problems, sanitation needs, housing pressures, policing requirements and economic importance.

One possible option is to make Karachi a federally administered unit and have the federal government administer it through a council of experts and technocrats, with substantial representation from Karachi itself. Such an arrangement would need to be carefully designed to preserve local representation, ensure accountability and prevent excessive centralisation. It would also require constitutional and political consensus because changing the territorial status of a province or creating a new province involves constitutional proce-

dures and cannot be accomplished through an ordinary administrative decision.

The larger lesson is that Pakistan needs to approach the question of new provinces through the lens of governance rather than political expediency or ethnic competition.

Karachi's enormous economic contribution and its persistent civic problems warrant serious consideration of alternative administrative arrangements. But whatever model is eventually considered — a separate province, a federally administered territory, a powerful metropol-

itan government or substantially strengthened local government — its success would ultimately depend on whether it gives Karachi an accountable, representative and financially empowered system capable of delivering basic services to all of its residents.

Bridging the gap between labs and markets

Rasheed Ali

On paper, Pakistan has built much of the machinery needed to turn university research into industrial innovation. There are Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialisation (ORICs), business incubation centres, technology-support programmes, research grants, patents, industry liaison platforms and an increasingly visible policy vocabulary around the “knowledge economy”. Yet somewhere between the university laboratory and the factory floor, a crucial connection remains fragile: the connection between what researchers study and what Pakistan's economy urgently needs.

The problem is not a complete absence of research or collaboration. It is the weakness, unevenness and limited scale of the relationship between the two worlds. A 2021 study of university-industry collaboration in Pakistan, based on evidence from 24 universities, 25 interviews and a national workshop, found that university-industry engagement had progressed slowly and that lack of coordination among government, universities and industrial firms was hindering knowledge transfer. The study also identified trust, bureaucracy, inadequate funding and conflicting objectives as major obstacles.

Three years later, an editorial published in the *Journal of Health and Rehabilitation Research* reached a similar conclusion, arguing that the disconnect between academic knowledge and industrial requirements was contributing to limited research applications and fewer employment opportunities for graduates. It called for collaborative research, knowledge transfer and stronger protection of intellectual property rights to close the gap.

The paradox is striking. Pakistan's universities are producing research papers, post-graduate theses and increasingly sophisticated laboratory work, while industries frequently struggle with problems that could potentially become research questions. Farmers need solutions to crop diseases and post-harvest

losses; manufacturers need energy-efficient processes; exporters need better testing and quality-control technologies; pharmaceutical companies need research support; and technology firms need skilled graduates who understand real-world production environments.

The missing ingredient is often not intelligence but interaction. The 2021 study found that joint research projects and publications were the most common form of university-industry engagement among surveyed universities, reported by 81 per cent of respondents. Student placements followed at 73 per cent. But only 38 per cent reported industry input into curriculum design, while technology licensing was reported by just 19 per cent. The figures suggest that universities and companies do meet, but much of that contact does not necessarily mature into sustained co-development, technology transfer or commercially useful innovation.

The incentives inside universities are part of the story. In interviews conducted for the study, academics complained that promotions were overwhelmingly tied to publications rather than industrial projects. One professor was quoted as saying: “Academic promotions will only ever be based on research publications, not on industry-based projects.” Another university head questioned how faculty could be encouraged to work with companies when industry engagement received little recognition in evaluation criteria.

That concern has gained renewed relevance. A 2026 peer-reviewed study of research culture in Pakistan, based on interviews and a survey of 102 academics, found that a strong emphasis on publication quantity in faculty evaluation and career progression could produce unintended consequences, including faculty dissatisfaction and unethical practices. The researchers argue for a more holistic and ethical research culture rather than an overwhelming focus on publication numbers.

The Higher Education Commission itself

appears to be recognising the shift required. In 2025, HEC Chairman Dr Mukhtar Ahmed said the commission was moving from an emphasis on producing a high number of research publications towards greater research impact, while highlighting ORICs, the Research for Innovation portal and Business Incubation Centres as mechanisms for promoting impact-based research.

The policy infrastructure is considerably larger today than it was when the earlier university-industry study was conducted. HEC currently says its research and innovation ecosystem includes 82 ORICs, 35 business incubation centres and 40 Technology and Innovation Support Centres. Its academia-industry-government platform records 1,458 joint research projects submitted, 1,224 approved and 427 completed, alongside 794 patents filed, 381 granted and 409 licensing agreements signed. These numbers demonstrate activity, although they do not by themselves establish how many research outputs have achieved sustained commercial or social impact.

There are encouraging examples. HEC says 200 Technology Development Fund projects have partnered with 175 industries. Universities are also experimenting with more direct engagement. In June 2026, the University of Engineering and Technology Lahore announced a Research Commercialisation Fund and additional incentives for patents and quality research, while Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Shahid Munir said quality education, world-class research, innovation and strong industry linkages remained institutional priorities.

At Government College University Faisalabad, Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Rauf-i-Azam told participants at the Lyallpur Academia Industry Nexus 2026 that universities must take a leading role in connecting academic research with industrial needs so that research produces practical solutions for society and the economy.

At the University of Agriculture Faisalabad, the message has been equally direct.

In September 2026, Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Zulfiqar Ali said a new collaboration with Nestlé Pakistan would expose students and researchers to practical knowledge and contemporary industry practices while creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and joint research.

But isolated successes cannot substitute for a national culture in which industries routinely approach universities with problems and universities routinely design research around those problems. The earlier study found that many firms, particularly SMEs, lacked R&D capacity, while universities often lacked sufficient finance and commercial expertise. Industry representatives also

complained about university bureaucracy and difficulties in setting up even basic contracts.

Trust is therefore as important as money. Researchers need to understand markets, intellectual-property rules and production constraints. Companies need confidence that universities can deliver on time and protect commercially sensitive information. Students need exposure to actual workplaces before graduation. And promotion systems need to recognise patents, prototypes, licensed technologies, industry-funded research and demonstrable social impact alongside scholarly publications.

Pakistan does not need to choose between fundamental science and applied

research. It needs both. But a research system that rewards only the production of papers risks creating knowledge that remains trapped inside journals, conferences and university repositories. The real test of a research ecosystem is what happens after the paper is published: whether an idea becomes a product, a process, a policy, a treatment, a technology, a new enterprise or a measurable improvement in people's lives.

The challenge, ultimately, is to make the university and the economy speak the same language. Pakistan already has laboratories, researchers, entrepreneurs and industries. What remains unfinished is the bridge connecting them.

The Trump-Xi summit exposes a US disadvantage in the Global South

Wenran Jiang

Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to the United States came with all the choreography: a B-2 flyover, pandas, a Nixon-era toast. But for anyone watching from the Global South, the spectacle was beside the point. More important was Beijing's emphasis on "constructive strategic stability" in its relationship with Washington. For capitals from Riyadh to New Delhi to Jakarta, the summit offered a glimpse of how they may navigate relations with the two powers over the rest of this decade.

Beijing emerged from the summit offering diplomatic cover without military entanglement. Washington, by contrast, came to the meeting already embroiled in the nearly seven-month US-Israeli war on Iran, pressing allies on trade, reasserting US dominance in Latin America, and demanding that the Global South choose sides in its effort to contain China, all while Trump himself toasted Xi and hailed the summit as a success. For governments across the Global South being urged to distance themselves from Beijing, that contrast will not go unnoticed.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the Gulf. Trump wants China, Tehran's largest trading partner, to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz, choked since the US-Israeli war on Iran began in February. Xi backed a return to a ceasefire and eventual peace talks, but the Chinese readout offered no specifics on reopening the strait and no commitment to pressure Iran. Beijing appears determined to preserve its room for manoeuvre.

For Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha, that has obvious advantages. China can call Tehran, issue a UN statement, or offer to mediate, all without deploying a single soldier or demanding a mil-

itary base. Meanwhile, Washington is a direct party to the war, and its credibility as a security guarantor is eroded by the very crisis it helped create. Gulf capitals are already calibrating: stay under the US umbrella for hardware, but hedge through Beijing for diplomatic crisis management and energy-market stability. China's usefulness, in other words, lies partly in the fact that it is not fighting the wars Washington is.

That calculation extends across the wider region. For Iraq, Egypt and Algeria, all watching energy prices spike and shipping lanes choke, China's restraint has its appeal. The Global South does not need another great power to join the war; it needs someone who can talk to all sides without shooting. Beijing is positioning itself to play that role.

For governments elsewhere across the Global South, this creates a difficult set of choices. They are pressed to distance themselves from China, even as Trump himself re-engages. They are asked to absorb tariffs and supply-chain shocks, while Washington and Beijing extend their own trade truce for another two months. The result is a growing sense that other countries are expected to bear the costs of great-power rivalry while Washington and Beijing retain the freedom to negotiate with each other.

The response is already visible. India deepens its multipolar balancing, buying Russian oil while courting US tech and Chinese investment. Indonesia continues its "free and active" foreign policy, signing defence deals with both Washington and Beijing. South Africa and Brazil use BRICS platforms to hedge, not as anti-Western gestures but as insurance against a system where others write the rules. The summit did not cause this hedging, but it

is likely to reinforce it.

Artificial intelligence raises a different problem for the Global South: who gets to set the rules. Xi's emphasis on "human control" and Trump's resistance to new AI guardrails represent two competing visions, but neither was designed with the interests of countries across the Global South at its centre. The two sides have agreed to continue a new AI dialogue and are discussing an incident-notification mechanism, but no binding rules exist. Many countries will remain dependent on AI systems, infrastructure and standards developed elsewhere, with little say over the norms that govern them. China's state-led model may look more attractive than America's corporate-led alternative, but it is still another form of dependence.

Yet the Global South is not entirely passive. India is building indigenous large language models and exporting its digital-public-infrastructure playbook; the United Arab Emirates has positioned itself as a major AI hub; the African Union is pushing data-sovereignty frameworks aimed at giving African states greater control over their data and digital infrastructure. These efforts are nascent but show a determination to avoid a simple choice between US and Chinese models. Beijing has tried to institutionalise its vision, launching a Global AI Governance Initiative and helping establish the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization, whose founding agreement was signed by 29 countries in Shanghai in July. For some, this offers an alternative to Western frameworks; for others, it swaps one dependency for another. The question is whether countries across the Global South can coordinate strongly enough to shape the rules themselves.

The intelligence war is turning against the Houthis

Nawaf Obaid

The collapse of Yemen's western front was not primarily the result of sheer Houthi numbers. It resulted from a fused Russian-Iranian command system in which elements of Russia's space-based geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities were integrated into an Iranian-led command-and-control (C2) system supporting Houthi operations. Human penetration of Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces gave that system the access required to turn technical collection into a battlefield advantage.

Through Project AURORAH, the GEOINT and SIGINT fusion system I created, I identified and sequenced Russian military reconnaissance over Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, the UAE and Jordan during the Iran-US war. A compartmented special-access programme (SAP) within the project reconstructed Russian orbital collection as a single multisensor system, including the sequences that preceded Iran's precision strikes on countries across the region and on US military assets. That work later considerably assisted a major CNN investigation into Russian military geospatial satellite support for Iranian precision targeting across the Middle East.

The underlying principle had already emerged over Iran: orbital intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) was no longer merely supporting operations, but helping construct the operational picture of the battlespace before strikes were carried out. That use of satellite intelligence was already visible during the Iran war. Russian GEOINT mapped how forces were deployed, their movement corridors, headquarters and logistical changes, while SIGINT mapped the sources of electronic signals, communications patterns and command relationships.

The advantage came from sequencing different forms of satellite collection over time, not from any single spacecraft. Different reconnaissance satellites provided complementary geographic and electromagnetic coverage, allowing changes in how forces moved and operated to be followed over time rather than captured as isolated snapshots. During the Iran war, this combination of different forms of satellite intelligence had already shown how Russian satellite intelligence could sharpen Iranian precision operations.

In Yemen, Iran provided the operational integration. Russian-derived intelligence was combined with Houthi tactical reporting and human access to build a detailed picture of how Tariq Saleh's command actually functioned: which headquarters remained responsive, where reported positions diverged from reality, which formations were poorly coordinated, and where gaps existed in command, reporting and communications between the National Resistance Forces (NRF) and the Saudi-led Joint Forces Command (JFC). That picture made weaknesses along the western coastal front possible to exploit.

This is where the front broke. One command-and-control pathway connected JFC headquarters with elements of the NRF; another connected those forces with one another and with their own senior command. Once both became unreliable, inaccurate information flowed upwards while confused or manipulated instructions flowed downwards.

The consequences were specific. One NRF commander acknowledged an order to hold a blocking position and then withdrew. Another reported that a non-NRF Yemeni formation had vacated a military airfield when personnel were still there, giving commanders an inaccurate picture of where friendly forces were positioned and contributing to casualties after a strike. A Saudi special forces task force at Mokha was the first to recognise that reported force deployments no longer matched the reality on the ground.

Saudi strike missions had been prepared, but airpower could not be used freely when the locations of friendly forces could no longer be reliably confirmed. The problem was compounded when some NRF brigades discovered during activation that 50 to 60 percent of registered personnel had failed to report, despite months of JFC biometric registration, salary restoration and force consolidation. As coordination around the critical military hub of Jabal al-Nar deteriorated, NRF formations began leaving positions before the main Houthi forces had reached them.

That debacle has become the central learning event of the campaign. Combined Saudi-Yemeni and Saudi-Pakistani Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) teams are now being embedded with major northern formations, restoring an authenticated link between forces on the ground and the JFC's strike system. Saudi Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT) are also providing direct links to the JFC and independent-

ly verifying the manpower, location and readiness of Yemeni formations. At the same time, positive authentication of commands, compartmented reporting and redundant encrypted communications are closing the vulnerabilities exposed at Mokha.

Saudi Arabia has used a similar approach before, against a different adversary. In January 2026, JFC military counterintelligence mapped and systematically degraded the Abu Dhabi command-and-control system supporting Southern Transitional Council (STC) operations in southern Yemen, while liaison and targeting mechanisms maintained a reliable picture of operations on the ground. Once that external layer was removed, UAE task forces and aligned formations rapidly lost their freedom of action and withdrew under pressure from the Saudi-led campaign.

The system now supporting the Houthis is far more sophisticated. Russia provides satellite-based intelligence and signals intelligence; Iran integrates that information into Houthi command and operations. But that sophistication also creates vulnerabilities: the system depends on secure communications, specialist personnel, intelligence-fusion nodes, technical advisers and continuous links between Sanaa and battlefield headquarters.

Those vulnerabilities are now being targeted. On the evening of September 19, the Iranian-led top-level command-and-control structure in Sanaa suffered a massive blow. Confirmed senior Houthi battlefield losses now include at least two major generals, seven brigadier generals and 32 colonels, many removed alongside their immediate aides, staff and communications elements. There are also strong indications that figures above the rank of major general have been neutralised within the highest levels of the Houthi command structure, together with associated foreign personnel, although those details remain deliberately withheld for now.

The effect is more important than the count. Front-line command is being systematically degraded while senior command nodes in Sanaa are simultaneously coming under precise JFC air strikes, disrupting the chain between intelligence collection, decision-making, targeting and execution. Headquarters forced to relocate, surviving commanders attempting to reconnect with subordinate units and remaining junior Iranian advisers establishing alternative pathways all generate fresh signatures that can be detected, correlated and geolocated.

Space demilitarisation

The United States' acknowledgment that it has deployed weapons in space should provoke international alarm and renewed diplomatic action because space is indispensable for modern life, supporting navigation, communications, crucial weather forecasting, scientific research and essential infrastructure. Extending military confrontation into this environment exposes humanity to consequences beyond the control of any single government. The most immediate challenge is to prevent this disclosure from becoming an invitation to further deployments, and, instead, to make it the starting point for a comprehensive international agreement against space weaponisation. China has rightly warned against turning outer space into a battlefield, while Russia has called for its demilitarisation. The capacity to destroy satellites is already established. The US, Russia, China and India have demonstrated destructive anti-satellite capabilities. Missile development, satellite launches, tracking systems and spacecraft operations provide the foundations that countries can draw upon in developing military space capabilities. The spread of relevant expertise increases the importance of restraint before more governments follow the American lead. The Secure World Foundation's 2026 assessment examines counterspace developments in 13 countries. This really demonstrates that the danger extends well beyond the four countries that have so far demonstrated destructive satellite interceptions. As such, interference with navigation, communications or timing signals can disrupt civilian infrastructure, which can result in military confrontation. The US should lead that effort alongside other space powers. Preserving space serves American interests and the interests of countries whose citizens depend on services they do not control. Leadership should be measured by the ability to prevent catastrophe, not merely to prepare for confrontation. A comprehensive and verifiable agreement would protect humanity while reducing dangers/threats to American infrastructure and people. The opportunity now is to turn an alarming announcement into diplomatic momentum before competition creates consequences that no government can readily reverse.

Qamar Bashir
Islamabad

Cosmetic makeovers

In recent weeks, social media has been flooded with pictures of freshly painted government school buildings across Sindh, proudly shared as evidence of 'development work' carried out under the School Specific Budget (SSB) plan. However, the budget documents never mention that the disbursed funds are intended solely for painting school buildings.

The provincial School Education and Literacy Department releases the SSB to all functional primary, middle, elementary, secondary and high-

er secondary schools. For the current financial year, the allocation stands at Rs22.47 billion.

The budget is intended to be utilised under specific heads, including stationery, co-curricular activities, instructional and classroom materials, library and laboratory equipment, furniture, etc. The relevant minister has himself clarified that the SSB was never intended solely, or even primarily, for cosmetic work, such as whitewash.

Apparently, school heads, who now enjoy greater financial autonomy under the SSB initiative, are opting for the most photogenic use of the funds rather than the most necessary ones. All this while, broken classroom furniture remains unrepaid. Damaged boundary walls, doors and windows continue to deteriorate. Basic laboratory equipment is missing in many schools. Not a single computer lab has been highlighted on social media as having been established through this budget. The government should conduct an audit of how the SSB has actually been utilised across schools this year, and should issue clear guidelines to headmasters and head-mistresses regarding spending priorities.

Imran
Johi

Shock bills and ignored complaints

The advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) meter was installed recently at my premises by the Hyderabad Electric Supply Company (Hesco) without any notice. Subsequently, I received a monthly bill of Rs213,548 for 4,300 units consumed in July compared to Rs18,038 in just the preceding month. According to Hesco, the bill for July covered unit consumption of one-and-a-half months although I had received and paid in full the bill for June. I went to the sub-divisional officer (SDO), Jamshoro, to request him to provide me the details, including date and time of AMI meter installation, initial reading of the meter, and the technical inspection, testing and calibration report of the meter in question.

I also wanted to understand why I was supposed to pay the bill for one-and-a-half month when I had paid the full bill in the previous month. I wanted to confirm whether the installed meter was in order and that it was new. The SDO did not bother to listen to my concerns and simply asked me to submit an application to the clerk. I did so and returned. I also submitted a request at the Roshan Pakistan mobile application to provide me an exemption from late charges as my complaint was pending and the deadline for bill payment was getting closer. The next day, I received a call from an official who was calling from a mobile phone. He insisted that I press the 'matter resolved' button on the mobile application. He was not interested in discussing the content of the complaint. I refused to do that.

For the next few days, the complaint status was shown on the application as 'assigned to SDO', and then as 'assigned to EXEN' till I received a message that my complaint had been

'resolved'. To avoid any inconvenience, I was left with no other option but to pay the unjustified bill, which I did so. I would like to ask the Hesco chief as well as the minister concerned what purpose, if any, online complaint portals serve when the complaints are marked 'resolved' without any proceedings. The authorities concerned should take action against Hesco officials in Jamshoro, and get the matter resolved at the earliest.

Salar Lateef
Jamshoro

Unprotected commuters

My wife recently had her valuables stolen while commuting on the Islamabad-Rawalpindi Metro Bus. Despite reporting the theft immediately to both the Islamabad Police and the Metro Bus Authority, weeks of follow-up yielded a shocking response: the Punjab Mass Transit Authority stated that no CCTV backup existed due to ongoing maintenance. It is unacceptable for a major public transport network to operate without working surveillance backups. Blaming routine maintenance for missing footage leaves commuters unprotected and lets criminals continue with impunity. The relevant authorities should immediately investigate this failure, overhaul security measures, and restore accountability to the transit system.

Asad Awan
Islamabad

Water woes

The Cantonment Board Clifton (CBC) has stopped providing whatever little water it used to supply through water bowzers to the residents of Defence Housing Authority (DHA). I am holding a paid water coupon dated June 22, and despite my several visits to the CBC Ittehad Water Hydrant and complaints, no water relief has been provided till date. Now, the hydrant is totally shut and no tanker is seen there. Why is there a total collapse of the water system? Moreover, the CBC charges massive amounts from the residents every year, but fails to provide satisfactory services.

Tahir Hassan
Karachi

Debate competitions

The decline of debate competitions in schools is worrying. In the past, most schools arranged debate competitions regularly. These events helped students improve their confidence, speaking skills and general knowledge. Nowadays, schools give importance only to examinations, and do not organise healthy competitions. As a result, students feel shy while speaking in front of people and often miss the chance to express their ideas. School authorities need to arrange debate competitions. Even one debating session a month can help students become confident and better communicators.

Hassan Lasi
Hub

Meet the ‘fire amoeba,’ a record-breaking survivor of extreme heat

Jake Buehler

A single-celled blob living in a California hot spring has smashed a heat tolerance record for an entire domain of life.

The newly described “fire amoeba” can grow at 63° Celsius (145° Fahrenheit), a temperature that’s fatal to all other known eukaryotes, researchers report September 22 in *Cell*. Eukaryotes include all life-forms with nuclei and organelles, such as plants, fungi and animals.

Little was known about the genetic adaptations of microbial eukaryotes that live in extreme environments. From 2023 to 2025, microbiologist Beryl Rappaport and her colleagues brought water samples from geothermal hot springs in California’s Lassen Volcanic National Park into the lab. There, the team tried to grow any amoebas they found and study their DNA. “We set up cultures at a few temperatures, with the hottest being 57° C because that is the highest temperature previously described for an amoeba,” says Rappaport, a member of microbial ecologist Angela Oliverio’s lab at Syracuse University in New York.

After seeing an amoeba growing at 57° C that looked different from the previous amoeba record holder *Echinamoebathermarum*, the team cranked up the temperature. The mystery microbe continued to replicate and thrive at a blistering 63° C, above the eukaryote record of 60° C held by some algae and fungi. This resilient amoeba could even survive up to 70° C by entering a dormant state.



Just one small serving of ultra-processed food a day linked to higher disease risk

Deirdre Bardolf

Just an extra 3½ ounces of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) a day was linked to a higher risk of chronic disease, according to a new large-scale analysis. The study, published in the journal *Family Medicine and Community Health*, looked at nearly 8.8 million adults who participated in studies across the Americas, Europe, Asia and Oceania, with follow-up periods ranging from two to 32 years. For every additional 100 grams of UPFs consumed daily, researchers found an association with a 14% higher risk of cardiovascular events, a 4% higher risk of cancer, a 3% higher risk of death from any cause and a 2% higher risk of metabolic syndrome or diabetes, according to a news release. UPFs are typically packaged and convenient, made through extensive industrial processing and often packed with additives. They can include sugary drinks, processed meats, packaged snacks and candy. One hundred grams is about the size of a 3½-ounce bag of corn chips, a small box of candy or a single-serve cup of mini cookies. People with the highest intake of UPFs also had higher risks of digestive diseases, depression or anxiety, obesity, cancer and cardiovascular events than those with the lowest intake of the foods. “Given that UPF-related chronic diseases often cluster as multimorbidity, reducing consumption of UPFs and replacing them with minimally processed alternatives may be relevant for chronic disease prevention and primary care management,” wrote the researchers, led by Xiao Liu, a cardiologist at Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hospital in China and a research fellow at Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore. These types of foods tend to crowd out healthier, nutrient-dense options, according to Kelly Springer, a New York-based registered dietitian and founder of Kelly’s Choice.



Finally, a true blue rose exists

By Tina Hesman Saey

This development could change poetry forever. Roses are red and now they’re also blue. True blue roses were once thought impossible. Roses can make red and yellow pigments but don’t have an enzyme needed to make blue pigments. At least they didn’t until 2004, when researchers at the Suntory Global Innovation Center in Kyoto, Japan, genetically modified a rose to produce blue pigments. The team inserted the gene for an enzyme that can produce a blue pigment called delphinidin. But those roses were purplish, suggesting it takes more than blue pigment to make flowers blue. Naturally blue flowers, such as irises, make blue pigments like delphinidin. But they also need almost colorless “co-pigment” molecules called flavone C-glycosides to create their blue hue. Those helper molecules stabilize pigments and make them appear deeper blue. Roses also lack genes for making the co-pigments. This time, Suntory researchers inserted four genes from other blue flower species into a light pink rose. A gene from Canterbury bells (*Campanula medium*) allowed the engineered roses to produce multiple blue pigments. Two genes from wishbone flowers (*Torenia x hybrida*) and one from clustered gentian (*Gentiana triflora*) made enzymes that produce the colorless helper molecules. The combination of the blue pigment malvidin with a helper called isoorientin made bluer flowers than roses producing only delphinidin, the company announced August 25 at the 32nd International Horticultural Congress in Kyoto.



Popular weight-loss drugs may play surprising role in cancer outcomes

Melissa Rudy

As GLP-1 medications continue reshaping the treatment of obesity and diabetes, researchers are also investigating whether the drugs could influence cancer risk and outcomes.

The American Association for Cancer Research’s 2026 Cancer Progress Report noted that obesity is a major risk factor for many cancers. As glucagon-like peptide-1 medications – including semaglutides like Ozempic and Wegovy, and tirzepatides like Mounjaro and Zepbound – are known to cause substantial weight loss and improve metabolic health, they have attracted significant interest among cancer researchers. While the AACR report cited studies suggesting GLP-1 medications may reduce the risk of certain cancers, it emphasized that the overall evidence is mixed and more research is needed. “Randomized clinical trials remain the gold standard ... however, such trials have not yet been conducted specifically to assess cancer outcomes associated with GLP-1 RA use,” the report stated. Sai Yendamuri, M.D., a thoracic surgeon at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo, New York, reiterated that obesity is a leading cause of cancer, second to smoking. Additional risk factors include alcohol and poor nutrition, he noted, “which are all layered into obesity.”

“So if obesity is related to cancer – both in terms of causing it and increasing its progression – the logical question is, would a drug that decreases obesity have an impact?” the doctor, who was not associated with the AACR report, said in an interview with Fox News Digital. There are “many lines of evidence” that suggest this would be the case, Yendamuri suggested.



THE PREMIUM SHAVE EXPERIENCE

