

NEWS LETTER

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Shahid Javed Burki
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The Shahid Javed Burki Institute
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Trump-Xi Washington Summit

Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping held their second 2026 summit in Washinton. The first one was in Beijing when Trump flew in Air Force One to the Chinese capital in May 2026. In late September Xi combined his visit to the annual meeting the United Nations General Assembly with a state visit to Washinton. It was noted by the American newspapers that the summit took place when Beijing was accused of undermining America's national interests on a number of fronts. President Trump accused China in the summer of 2026 of sinister election meddling in the 2020 poll. He considered

China's alleged involvement so serious that he devoted a prime-time TV address talking about it. There were other interventions by China in US affairs. This was discussed by Erica L. Green in a contribution to The New York Times under the caption, "Trump's welcome mat for Xi draws criticism." The Green story appeared on the day Trump and Xi met at the White House. She continued, *"Since the start of the war with Iran, Chinese companies have provided Tehran with satellite imagery, and access to a spy satellite, that Iran's military has used to mount attacks in the region. And Beijing has shown no signs of retreating from its business dealings with Iran, in defiance of U.S. efforts to cut off economic lifelines to Tehran. But as the meeting with Xi approached, Mr. Trump has repeatedly found ways to give him a pass – portraying him more as personal friend than as geopolitical competitor despite significant rivalries on matters of global power, trade, artificial intelligence and more."*

Secretary of State Marco Rubio spiritedly defended his administration's plans to receive Xi, *"The relationship between the United States and China will define the 21st century he said. The idea that we would not interact with them at the highest level is irresponsible. It's outrageous. We have to."* Foreign policy experts say that President Trump's posture has been striking even for a president who prides himself on his personal brand of diplomacy. *"Trump is displaying an extraordinary degree of deference to Xi,"* said Julian Gewirtz, a scholar at Columbia University. *"He is lavishing honors on China's leader while downplaying threats to American interests. Beijing could have hardly asked for a more accommodating host. Washington has often leveraged symbolic honors to gain substantive gains from Beijing. So, the question is straight-forward: What is Trump getting for America on return for all this ceremony."* Secretary Scott Bessent, Treasury Secretary, who is spearheading "Operation Economic Outcast" has made it clear to the Chinese that Washington will not hesitate

to hold them accountable for supporting Iran economically.

Pressed during a Fox News interview about what President Xi may want from his Washington visit, Trump responded by saying that he and the Chinese president get along very well. *"There is a rule of international politics that American presidents normally follow: treat your allies better than your adversaries",* said Nicholas Burns, the top U.S. diplomat under the Biden administration. *"And we don't want to give the impression to our allies that we care more about this relationship with Xi Jinping than we care about the relationship with them. I think the president is giving that impression by being so unremittingly uncritical of the Chinese."* Talking about the view of the Chinese about foreign affairs, Burns said, *"They are practical, hard-headed, and cynical about the United States. They're going to judge us, I think, by how strong we are and how much we push back. I think the Chinese understand power and deterrence. They'll be swayed more and affected more by strong American position than they will be flattery."*

The two leaders attended the Washington summit in vastly different positions, said Jonathan A. Czin, a researcher at the Brookings Institution who previously worked at the CIA analyzing Chinese politics. *"Xi is going to walk into this meeting and is going to be keenly aware of the fact that just weeks from now, Trump is in all likelihood going to be at best a lame duck president, and at worst he's going to be politically maimed at home and will have to deal with a divided government."*

The American president has long had an affinity for autocrats. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian at New York University who studies fascism and authoritarianism says that Trump has always admired Xi as having the kind of power he covets.



Shahid Najam
Vice Chairman

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Need for the Gulf Region New Security Order

The situation in the Middle-East, triggered by recent war and conflict between the US-Israel and Iran, has sparked a turbulent wave of multi-layered global economic, political and security concussions. The closure and blockade of Strait of Hormuz Closure has clogged around 20% of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies, obstructed merchandise trade and in particular disrupted the exports of and to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries besides engendering across the globe huge energy and food security crisis. Oil and gas prices have already witnessed around 55% jump with concomitant inflationary impact on items of daily use. The fertilizer costs have hiked by 50% to 60% with direct impact on reduced crop yields. Already 266 million people in the world are suffering from acute hunger. It is estimated that soaring food prices could push another 45 million people. The war has already inflicted a huge human, infrastructural and economic devastation throughout the region especially Gaza, Iran, Lebanon and other Gulf states.

There is thus an urgent need to work out a permanent solution to the perennial security crisis in the Gulf region. While the involvement of global players and adversaries including USA and Israel would be indispensable, a new regional security architecture should be designed, in the first instance, inclusively by the Gulf littoral states themselves with full involvement of Iran and Iraq. This will, a priori, entail a new strategic approach by abandoning

the policy of Iran's containment which has so far failed to yield sustainable results and instead opting for full engagement of Iran as equal protagonist partner to ensure a secure and stable Gulf region.

There is already a growing realization in the Gulf States that though they have considerable capacity to defend and protect their citizens and economic infrastructure, reliance on external military support and security relationships to effectively thwart and nullify the drone-missile attacks, fell far short of their expectations and anticipated objectives. On the contrary, it aggravated the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of their economic and strategic interests on the one hand and on the other augmented Israel's designs to perpetuate its dominance in the region. The major challenge for the Gulf States is not to acquire greater military capacities to defend or deter but to find a durable and robust solution and stable regional environment which would prevent the recurrence of the crisis.

Historical experience suggests that as opposed to confrontation and conflict, a continuing process to engage the states with different interests and security perspectives will be the most plausible option to move forward and initiate and maintain persistent dialogue, build trust and confidence, and identify areas of convergence and common interest. This process will go much beyond the temporary adjustments dictated by the moment and help develop a mutually acceptable strategic order. A credible, tested and tried precedent already exists - the Helsinki process leading to Helsinki Accord of 1975 concluded by 35 nations to effect detente between the Western and the Soviets blocs.

While the complexion and complexity of the dynamics in the Gulf region and set of players are admittedly different, the fundamental

imperative, however, remains the same i.e., a process of iterative meetings and exchange of communication based on good to lead to confidence-trust building, establishing principles, and, over time, improving working relations to initially reach modest agreements and ultimately culminating into a robust regional security order.

These countries, while working together, will have to judiciously contextualize the *Regional Security Order Framework* within the global reality and interests of the major powers especially of the United States, Europe, Russia and China as a complement and not as a competition to safeguard their collective security and economic objectives.



Prof. Dr. Mohammad Nizamuddin Chairman KITAAS/Member BOD
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Beyond Displacement: Refugee Challenges and Policy Priorities for Pakistan

The forced displacement of people is one of the most pressing humanitarian and development issues of today. Millions are displaced by conflict, persecution, political instability, human rights abuses and climate related disasters. At the end of 2025, UNHCR estimates there are some 117.8 million forcibly displaced persons, including refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), worldwide. While some improvement has been seen at the global level compared to the drastic deterioration in recent years, the displacement rate is still very high and sustainable solutions are needed that are

more than just emergency humanitarian support.

The situation of Pakistan is very unique in the context of displacement in the world. It has been home to millions of Afghans seeking refuge from conflict and instability for over 40 years. In 2026, Pakistan was still a host to a large number of Afghan refugees, despite significant return movements. Long refugee stay is a result of Pakistan's humanitarian engagement, but has also created intricate situations for the host communities, public institutions and refugees themselves.

The main issues are access to education, healthcare, shelter, employment and social protection. Uncertain legal status, poverty and limited livelihoods opportunities, social exclusion of refugees and added pressure on public services and infrastructure of host communities. Internal displacement caused by natural disasters, climate change and security-related events is also a challenge faced by Pakistan. Therefore, displacement cannot only be seen as a humanitarian crisis; it is also a development, human security, social cohesion and resilience challenge.

Hence, a holistic policy solution is required for Pakistan. First, better evidence-based planning and service provision requires robust registration and data systems. Second, the access to education, health services, vocational training, and livelihoods should be reinforced for vulnerable IDPs. Third, development interventions must simultaneously serve the interests of host communities, but especially in countries that are under pressure on the infrastructure, employment and public services. Fourth, there is a need for more sharing of responsibility globally, through continued financial and technical support to countries of origin for refugees.

The history of Pakistan proves that a temporary solution will not suffice to address forced displacement. Humanitarian protection, development planning, climate resilience, social cohesion and international cooperation can all play a role in a forward-looking framework that respects human dignity and responds to socioeconomic concerns of host communities. This can contribute to the transformation of displacement management from the short-term emergency response to sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development.



Muhammad Firas Shams
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The Brain That Rewires Itself: Inside the Science of Neuroplasticity

Neuroscience spent most of the twentieth century believing something false. In its telling, the adult brain never changed. Wiring set in childhood was destiny. Once damaged, brain tissue stayed damaged, and once formed, habits calcified into permanent fixtures. That assumption has now collapsed. In its place stands one of the more hopeful findings in modern biology: the brain can physically rewire itself across an entire lifespan. Scientists call this capacity neuroplasticity. A century-old idea about a changeable brain has become one of the more consequential concepts in medicine, education, and the executive suite.

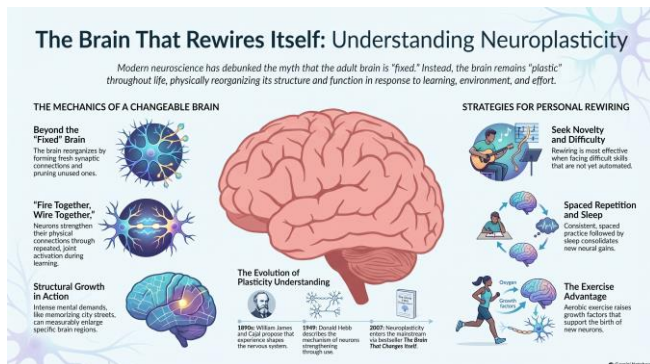
The word itself is older than most people realize. In 1890, the American philosopher William James used "plasticity" in *The*

Principles of Psychology to describe how experience shapes the nervous system. A decade later, the Spanish histologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal pushed the idea further. He earned the title "father of modern neuroscience" through obsessive, hand-drawn maps of individual neurons. Cajal proposed something bolder: learning leaves a physical trace on brain tissue. Because his neuron doctrine treated the brain as discrete, connected cells rather than one continuous web, plasticity finally had an anatomical home. Connections, in this view, could strengthen, weaken, or shift.

Then the idea went quiet. For decades, plasticity sat at the margins of neuroscience, mentioned but rarely tested. Jerzy Konorski, a Polish neurophysiologist, coined the term 'neural plasticity' in 1948. A year later, Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb went further, arguing that neurons strengthen their connections through repeated, joint activation. Fire together, wire together, as the shorthand goes. Michael Merzenich later showed that adult sensory maps in the brain reorganize themselves after injury or training. Eric Kandel traced the mechanism down to single synapses, work that earned him a Nobel Prize. By 2007, the science had matured enough for a general audience. Psychiatrist Norman Doidge proved it, turning *The Brain That Changes Itself* into a bestseller.

Strip away the history, and the definition turns out simple. Neuroplasticity names the brain's capacity to reorganize its own structure and function: forming fresh synaptic connections, pruning ones it no longer needs, and, in select regions, growing entirely new neurons. Experience drives the change. So does learning, injury, and a shifting environment. No single mechanism explains it. Instead, a family of processes operates here, some finishing in milliseconds, others unfolding across years.

The practical payoff is substantial, and increasingly well documented. Stroke patients recover lost function because intensive, repetitive therapy retrains undamaged regions of the brain to take over the work. Taxi drivers prove the same point. Under Eleanor Maguire's research, London cabbies who spent years memorizing the city's tangled streets ended up with measurably larger hippocampi. Skill acquisition works the same way. Musicians, athletes, and language learners all rewire the same neural circuitry that stroke patients rely on for recovery. Cognitive behavioral therapy leans on this machinery too, treating anxiety, depression, and OCD by deliberately reshaping maladaptive thought patterns.



The science has also left the clinic. MIT Sloan's executive education arm now teaches a course called Neuroscience for Business, built explicitly around neuroplasticity and meant to train leaders to rewire their own thinking. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck built something similar. Her growth-mindset research rests on one premise: abilities are plastic, not fixed. From there, versions of that framework filtered into elite prep schools, MBA leadership curricula, and corporate coaching programs. Ordinary public schools rarely offer the same instruction, at anything close to the same depth.

Applying the science personally requires no secret technique. Sustained, focused attention on a genuinely difficult skill matters

most, followed by spaced repetition rather than last-minute cramming. Sleep consolidates the gains. Regular aerobic exercise helps too, raising brain-derived neurotrophic factor and supporting new neural growth. Novelty matters as well. The brain rewires fastest when facing something not yet automated. Neuroplasticity offers no shortcuts. It offers something sturdier: proof that effort is never wasted.



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The Fens and the Indus

How a damp English market town helped make a country, and how that country repaid the favor?

Cambridge does not usually count itself among the founders of nations. It prefers to take credit for gravity, DNA and the ducking of undergraduates in the Cam. Yet a fair case can be made that the idea, the name and some of the intellectual ambitions of Pakistan took shape within a mile of King's College Chapel. The relationship has lasted almost a century. Like most good partnerships, it has run both ways.

Start with the poet. Muhammad Iqbal arrived at Trinity College in 1905, a young lecturer from Lahore eager to test himself against Western philosophy. He studied under the Hegelian J.M.E. McTaggart and took a degree before going on to Munich for his doctorate. Cambridge did not make him a nationalist. If anything, it made him a sceptic of the materialist West he found there. But his time in England sharpened a question he would ask for

the rest of his life: how could Muslims of the subcontinent keep their spiritual identity in a modern political order? His Allahabad address of 1930, which imagined a consolidated Muslim state in north-west India, bears the marks of a mind trained to argue with Europe on its own terms.



Iqbal's residence during his bachelor's at Cambridge

Next comes the man who gave the idea a name. Choudhry Rahmat Ali, a law student at Emmanuel College, published a pamphlet in 1933 called "Now or Never". In it he coined the word "Pakistan", an acronym built from Punjab, Afghanistan (the North-West Frontier), Kashmir, Sindh and Baluchistan. Senior Muslim politicians at the Round Table Conferences dismissed it at first as a student's fancy. Fourteen years later it was on the map. Rahmat Ali's own story ended sadly. He fell out with the new state's leadership, went back to Cambridge and died there in 1951, poor and largely forgotten. He is buried in the city's Newmarket Road cemetery, a quiet grave that Pakistani visitors still seek out.



If Iqbal supplied the philosophy and Rahmat Ali the brand, Abdus Salam showed what the new country's talent could do. Salam came to St John's College in 1946 on a scholarship, took a double first in mathematics and physics, and then earned a doctorate in theoretical physics at the Cavendish Laboratory. In 1979 he shared the Nobel prize in physics for his work on unifying the electromagnetic and weak forces. He was the first Pakistani, and the first Muslim, to win a Nobel prize in science. Even so, he spent decades pushing for scientific capacity in poor countries, most visibly through the International Centre for Theoretical Physics that he founded in Trieste. Cambridge gave Salam his tools. He used them to argue that the developing world should make science, not just consume it.

The traffic continues today, and it now flows in more interesting directions. Kamal Munir, a professor of strategy and policy at Cambridge Judge Business School and one of the university's pro-vice-chancellors, is part of a generation of Pakistani academics who shape institutions rather than just pass through them. His research on how industries and technologies change, from digital photography to financial markets, has made him a prominent voice on inequality and on how British universities treat people from under-represented backgrounds. Pakistanis who once came to Cambridge as supplicants now sit near the top of it.

The biggest exchange, though, happens in classrooms, not colleges. Pakistan is one of the largest markets anywhere for Cambridge International's O and A-level examinations. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani pupils sit these papers every year. For the country's urban middle class, a Cambridge certificate is a passport to universities abroad and a hedge against a patchy national system. For Cambridge, Pakistan is a major source of

revenue and reputation. Private education networks built around these qualifications have turned the Cambridge curriculum into a sizeable industry of their own. Critics say the system deepens a two-tier society, in which the rich study Shakespeare while the poor study in Urdu with few textbooks. They have a point.

Other names fill out the picture. Mahbub ul Haq, the economist behind the UN's Human Development Index, studied at King's. Majid Khan captained Cambridge at cricket. Aitzaz Ahsan, the lawyer and politician, read law at Downing. Each took something from the Fens and brought something back.

The balance sheet is lopsided, but not in the way one might think. Cambridge gave Pakistan a vocabulary, a name and a model of scientific seriousness. Pakistan gave Cambridge some of its most original minds, a steady flow of fee-paying students and a reminder that the university's reach goes well beyond its colleges. For the country to get full value from the relationship, the challenge now is at home. It needs to build universities that the next Salam need not leave in order to flourish.



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Rewriting the Prescription: Pharmacist's Path to Innovation

Pharmapreneurship represents an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm that can transform pharmacists from conventional medicine-oriented professionals into innovators, entrepreneurs, researchers, technology adopters and contributors to national economic

development. For Pakistan, it offers an opportunity to connect Academia, Corporate Industry and Policy Hubs within a coordinated pharmaceutical innovation ecosystem.

A significant step in this direction has already been initiated. Shahid Javed Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP), in collaboration with Ameers Organica/ Premeir WM, has successfully introduced the Pharmapreneurship initiative at Khaldunia Institute of Technology and Applied Sciences (KITAAS), Minhaj University Lahore, the MED-WEB Forum and through social media links.

The overwhelming response from students, academics and professionals is encouraging BIPP and partners to move towards 3-credit-hour semester-based sessions, supported by a micro credential prospectus, subject to the necessary approvals from the relevant authorities. This emerging academic response demonstrates the potential for Pharmapreneurship to develop as a structured professional learning pathway.

At the academic level, Pharmapreneurship can equip Pharm-D graduates and pharmaceutical researchers with entrepreneurial, technological, regulatory, intellectual-property and commercialization skills. Universities can become innovation hubs where pharmaceutical knowledge and research are translated into products, services, start-ups, digital-health solutions, green technologies and patient-centred healthcare models.

At the corporate level, Pharmapreneurship can strengthen collaboration among pharmaceutical manufacturers, hospitals, community pharmacies, SMEs, biotechnology and nutraceutical enterprises, technology firms and investors - accelerating research commercialization, local value addition, employment and export opportunities.

At the policy level, it can support a national framework for pharmaceutical innovation, entrepreneurship, R&D, sustainable healthcare and human-capital empowerment, with enabling mechanisms for incubation, financing, regulation, intellectual property and market access.

Its wider economic significance lies in transforming pharmacists from job seekers into opportunity creators, while supporting innovation, import substitution, local manufacturing, exports, skilled employment and productivity, thereby contributing to Pakistan's economic resilience and GDP growth.



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Powerless and Penalised: Pakistan's Electricity Crisis

For the vast majority of Pakistanis, the brutal summer heat is not just a seasonal discomfort, it is a matter of survival, made exceedingly worse by the onslaught of load shedding. The sweltering heat, combined with long periods of outages, poses unbearable hardships for citizens, the majority of whom lack basic amenities, let alone the luxury of air conditioning. According to data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) surveys and various Gallup Polls, air conditioners remain a distant luxury, owned by only about 8% of elite households in the country. The overwhelming majority of the public relies solely on basic fans and water-based air coolers to endure the brutal, scorching heat. At the regional level, the UAE provides almost 100% air-conditioning coverage to its citizens, whereas India, with a much larger population, still manages to provide 8% to 10% of its population with air-conditioning facilities.

Notwithstanding these atrocious and uninhabitable living conditions, planned and unannounced power outages remain unabated. In a glaring example of administrative failure reported by the daily Dawn in its August 29, 2026 issue, the government issued a public apology for night-time load shedding, which, according to them, was caused by delayed Regasified Liquefied Natural Gas (RLNG) cargoes, offering little more than hollow advice for citizens to 'moderate their electricity usage.



'Not surprisingly, night-time outages continue unabated in many regions of the country. Obviously, the reasons for load shedding are more complex and long term than merely a temporary stoppage in supply of RLNG.

The sweltering heat, compounded by long hours of load shedding, results in catastrophic consequences for the general public. A landmark study by the Swiss scientific publisher MDPI analyzed two decades of mortality data in Pakistan. It highlights a grim reality: when maximum temperatures cross the 35°C–40°C threshold, the country's mortality rate spikes by 27%.

Another study published in the well-known journal *Pre-hospital and Disaster Medicine*, analyzing the devastating 2015 Karachi heat wave, looked directly at the impact of living without power. It concluded that a massive 60% of the reported deaths occurred among people living in conditions with insufficient electricity and water provisions. The bottom line is that medical research data such as those from the World Health Organization (WHO), and epidemiological studies of major Pakistani heat waves, all point to load shedding not just as a contributing factor, but as the primary catalyst that turns a hot day into a major calamity, especially for the 92% of the population who do not enjoy the luxury of seeking shelter in an air-conditioned environment. When power goes out, it is not just a minor inconvenience; it is a physical and psychological punishment inflicted directly upon the working and middle classes.

Resorting to load shedding is like rubbing salt into the wounds of an already heavily burdened population facing harsh economic realities. To make matters worse, consumers are being forced to pay for the system's incompetencies. As highlighted by Dawn in their September 30, 2026 issue, electricity consumers are facing a massive PKR 25 billion extra fuel cost,

translating to a PKR 2.58 per unit tariff hike that will take effect in their October bills. While this pushes the average base tariff to nearly Rs 47 per unit, the actual cost inflicted upon the consumer skyrockets much higher. Based on the Ministry of Energy's own tariff structures, multiple layers of taxation add roughly 20 percent to final bills.

According to regional economic data widely cited by dailies like *The Express Tribune*, this officially makes Pakistan's electricity the most expensive in South Asia—costing nearly three times more than the average tariffs in India and Bangladesh. Ironically, according to Dawn's 30th September 2026 report, authorities cite a 242 percent surge in imported RLNG costs, transferring this penalty onto the public while ignoring that 73 percent of the summer's grid supply actually came from cheap local sources, such as hydropower and nuclear power.

It does not help when, instead of trying to mitigate the tough challenges being imposed on the public, controversial and insensitive policies, such as revenue-based load shedding, are introduced. According to this policy, distribution companies (DISCOs) intentionally plunge entire neighbourhoods into darkness—sometimes for up to 18 hours a day, particularly in rural and low-income areas of Pakistan—simply because those areas have high rates of power theft or unpaid bills.

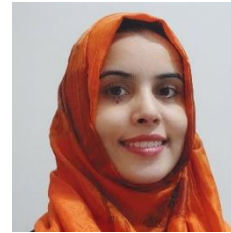
Denying electricity to paying consumers is a direct violation of their fundamental rights, since a paying customer cannot legally be punished for a neighbour's theft.

The curse of load shedding cannot be cured by punishing compliant consumers, nor can we save the grid by stalling the adoption of solar and other green energy alternatives. Rather than taking punitive action against law-abiding citizens, the authorities need to carry out an in-depth SWOT (strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the issues faced by the grid network. Currently, the regulatory approach seems focused entirely on extracting more money from the public. As reported by Dawn on September 26, 2026, NEPRA is proposing sweeping new rules to charge staggering infrastructure fees—just to provide electricity to new multi-story buildings and businesses. On top of this, they are seeking the power to hit consumers with up to a year's worth of heavy penalty bills over suspected meter tampering.

Whereas meter tampering is a crime which can never be condoned, there is also a need to assess the system's structural weaknesses, such as outdated T&D systems; confronting the financial threats posed by controversial IPP contracts and pilferage caused by internal inefficiencies. Furthermore, there is a need for our policymakers and other stakeholders to prioritise alternate sources of electricity generation and avail huge opportunities presented by the decentralisation of solar power

The end objective should not be to penalise citizens, but to take an honest approach towards making grid stations efficient and reliable while simultaneously prioritising and promoting cheaper and cleaner green energy alternatives. Turning the national grid into a reliable public service—rather than an agonising liability—must be the ultimate priority.



Atr-un-Nisa

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Outside the Table: The BRICS Summit, New Delhi's Chairmanship, and Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma

Pakistan's position outside BRICS was again highlighted by the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi, where decisions were taken on issues ranging from development finance and local-currency trade to global governance and regional conflicts. Held on 12 to 13 September 2026 under India's chairpersonship, the summit marked the grouping's 20th anniversary and concluded with a 140-point New Delhi Declaration and more than 50 initiatives.

For Pakistan, the summit is significant not only because of what BRICS decided, but also because Pakistan had no seat at the table. The declaration condemned the 2025 Pahalgam attack at a summit chaired by India, leaving Pakistan without an opportunity to present its position within the forum. At the same time, BRICS continued to develop an economic architecture that could increasingly influence trade, finance and development cooperation among emerging economies.

The expanded 11-member BRICS grouping now represents close to half of the world's population, around 40 per cent of global GDP and approximately 26 per cent of global trade. Its growing economic weight has been accompanied by efforts to strengthen practical cooperation. Leaders supported greater membership and local-currency lending through the New Development Bank and launched the BRICS-NDB Knowledge Portal. The BRICS Payment Task Force was also tasked with improving cross-border payment interoperability and promoting

local-currency trade. Intra-BRICS merchandise trade has reportedly risen from about US\$84 billion in 2003 to nearly US\$1.2 trillion in 2024.

The summit's agenda extended beyond economics. Members called for reform of the UN Security Council, supported the aspirations of Brazil and India for permanent seats, and backed efforts to revive the WTO's two-tier dispute settlement system. The declaration also addressed the conflicts in West Asia, expressing concern over attacks on civilian and nuclear infrastructure and supporting the protection of nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards. It reiterated support for a two-state solution to the Palestine question and backed South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice.

Several new initiatives were also announced in areas including digital public infrastructure, health, smart manufacturing, energy, food security, infectious-disease monitoring and skills development. China will assume the BRICS chairpersonship in 2027 and host the next summit.

Saudi Arabia's participation illustrates the flexible nature of engagement with BRICS. Although invited to join as a full member, it has not formally accepted membership and attended the New Delhi summit as an invited country, represented by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan. This approach reflects how middle and regional powers can engage with emerging multilateral platforms while maintaining flexibility across other diplomatic arrangements. The summit also provided space for bilateral diplomacy. Chinese President Xi Jinping's first visit to India in seven years created an opportunity for discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi as both countries sought to manage longstanding tensions and improve bilateral relations.

This summit highlights developments within BRICS, where Pakistan has no representation. As the bloc evolves into a platform for

economic and diplomatic coordination, its focus on development finance, payment systems and local-currency trade could affect emerging economies broadly. Pakistan must assess these shifts while maintaining its engagement across other regional and international platforms.



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The Silent Death of Original Thought

Humanity has never had wider access to knowledge. We may be paying for it with a habit just as valuable: thinking for ourselves. Not long ago, I caught myself defending an opinion in conversation and could not trace it to a single thought of my own. I had read it, absorbed it, and adopted it.

The danger of Artificial Intelligence (AI) lies deeper than its ability to produce human like answers. We are growing so used to receiving finished thoughts that we may stop doing the hard work of forming our own. The real threat is not that AI replaces human intelligence. It is that people gradually surrender the exercise of theirs.

This shift was already underway before AI. Social media taught us to consume opinions at extraordinary speed. A confident person presents a view about relationships, success, gender roles, discipline, education, or society. The argument does not need to be completely true. It only needs to sound convincing. Thousands of comments then reinforce it, and repetition gives the impression of collective agreement.

Psychology has documented this for decades. In the 1950s, Solomon Asch showed that people

will often give an obviously wrong answer to match a group. More recently, Lorenz and colleagues (2011, PNAS) found that even mild social influence can undermine the "wisdom of crowds" by making individual judgments converge. The wisdom of crowds depends on independent judgment. When people simply absorb and reproduce one another's opinions, the crowd becomes an echo chamber rather than a source of collective intelligence.

Ordinary life offers plenty of examples. Someone watches a video, reads the comments, absorbs several interpretations, and later voices a position as though it grew entirely from personal reflection. Even condolences harden into copied templates, because we hunt for the "right" words instead of finding our own. Gradually, our opinions become a blend of voices met online: personal in expression, borrowed in origin.

Why does this happen? Because thinking is uncomfortable. Original thought requires uncertainty. It means sitting with a question before the answer arrives, making an imperfect argument, discovering that we may be wrong, and reconsidering what we once believed. Technology lets us bypass much of that discomfort.

We are not necessarily thinking less because we cannot. We are thinking less because we increasingly do not have to. AI accelerates this tendency. If a machine can generate our ideas, structure our arguments, write our first draft, summarize our reading, and explain anything instantly, why struggle through the process ourselves? Used intelligently, AI extends human reasoning. Used passively, it turns reasoning into a service we consume.

Early research points in this direction. A 2025 MIT Media Lab study of essay writing found weaker brain connectivity of the participants who wrote with ChatGPT than those who wrote unaided. A 2025 Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon

survey also showed that the knowledge workers linked greater confidence in AI to less critical thinking effort. These studies are small or early, and they show association rather than proof. Still, the direction deserves attention.

The same applies to algorithmic feeds. Endless short form content compresses complicated questions into attractive conclusions and rewards repetition over originality. The result is not simply information overload. It is a reflection deficit: enormous amounts of information entering the mind, with too little time for the mind to transform information into independent judgment.

Is this really new? People have always borrowed ideas from books, teachers, and traditions. But borrowing used to come with friction: we had to read, argue, and wrestle with an idea before making it ours. What is different now is speed, scale, and the removal of struggle. When the struggle becomes optional, it is the first thing to disappear.

This is particularly significant for universities and future leaders. Education cannot shrink to locating information or producing polished answers. Its deeper purpose is to develop judgment: to teach people to question evidence, recognize assumptions, tolerate uncertainty, construct arguments, and disagree intelligently.

The response is not to reject technology. It is to establish boundaries around its use. Create before you refine. Write your own argument before asking AI to improve it. Treat AI as a mirror that challenges your assumptions, exposes weaknesses, and supplies counterarguments. Never make it the source of your thinking.

Step away from the feed. Read deeply. Hold conversations without reaching for instant answers. Allow yourself to be bored. Pay attention to lived experience. The future of

leadership will not belong simply to those who use technology most efficiently. It will belong to those who can use technology without surrendering their capacity for independent thought.

The question we should therefore ask is not whether AI can think. It can produce remarkably sophisticated answers. The question is whether we will continue to think when we no longer have to.



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The Ozempic Economy and Political Humor

Is today's economy becoming an Ozempic economy? Leaner on paper, celebrated in headlines but dangerously dependent on quick fixes. Like the drug that promises rapid weight loss without understanding the roots of health problems. Our economy acts in similar ways and thrives on cosmetic adjustments, photo ops, austerity measures and digital distractions while leaving structural inequalities intact.

This bleeds further down economics into politics. When the average man thinks that the war memes introduced during the Iran-US war are funny and that it helps monitoring the situation while being informed, it demonstrates the Ozempification of the economy. French philosopher Guy Debord explains his phenomenon as the society of the spectacle where life is essentially reduced to a spectacle and is displaced by a representation of life itself. The spectacle becomes a mode of governance.

Memes become the medium through which people monitor the situation or even enforce change through those mediums such as the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) in India and its recent protests. The institutional governance itself is being replaced by the spectacle because when the oil prices hike up, or transparency and accountability disappear under the facade of the establishment, it is easier to amuse. Seriousness requires accountability and accountability demands consequence. Memes require none, which is why we can see the white house constantly fitting itself in the ongoing trends, preferring virality over responsibility.

This technique is not new. In medieval times, jesters occupied a peculiar liminal space in courts. The jesters could openly mock the nobility, critique political decisions and deliver unfavorable news to the monarch without triggering the severe reprisals that standard courtesans would have to face. The sociopolitical function of the jester extended far beyond superficial comedy. They embodied a paradox; licensed irreverence within rigid hierarchy which is seen as resistance in the contemporary era through trending memes. They say that history repeats for those who fail to understand it but despite ample knowledge of this people are still amusing themselves to death; a phenomenon best explained by Neil Postman. Why govern when you can simply entertain the masses?

The Ozempic economy now is relying on quick fixes and treating the symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes. Attention is now being monopolized into capital as AI agents are trained and optimized to stay informed of the "spectacle." Governance today is expected like a jester's performance but unlike medieval jesters, the spectacle is not a marginal figure; it is the system itself.

Thus, the Ozempic economy is about a society

that has outsourced governance to entertainment, where the jester's mask has become the face of power itself. The danger is hollowing out of seriousness, the refusal to confront reality, and the normalization of distraction as policy.



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Why Sanctions Haven't Broken Iran?

The United States and its allies have used economic sanctions as their primary weapon against Iran for several years, hoping that enough financial pain would eventually force Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions and limit its regional influence. But it hasn't worked, at least not in the way sanctions architects intended. And the reasons why tell us something important about the limits of economic coercion as a foreign policy tool.

Since the 1979 hostage crisis, when the Carter administration froze roughly \$12 billion in Iranian assets, sanctions on Iran have grown from a narrow, unilateral response into one of the most extensive coercive regimes in modern diplomatic history. Trade barriers, banking restrictions, energy sector bans, and multilateral UN resolutions have all been deployed in an effort to reshape Iran's behavior.

The pattern across four decades and multiple US administrations, from Reagan to Bush, Clinton, Bush again, and Obama, is consistent: sanctions tighten, Iran's economy strains, and yet its core strategic priorities remain untouched. The nuclear programme continues.

Regional posture holds. Western compliance never quite arrived.

Economic research on Iran gives a clear picture of why. According to some studies sanctions have their hardest impact in the first two years, after that the economy adapts. It is seen that Iran has built its domestic industries in response to these sanctions. This isn't unique to Iran either. It reflects a broader pattern in which target economies build a kind of immunity over time.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is this: sanctions haven't just failed to break the regime; they may have made it more durable. Iran's leadership has consistently framed sanctions as evidence of Western hostility, feeding a nationalist, anti-Western narrative that shores up domestic legitimacy rather than eroding it. Meanwhile, the economic burden falls disproportionately on ordinary Iranians, while the political elite remains largely insulated from the worst of the pain. Sanctions, ironically, can become a legitimizing tool for the very government they are meant to weaken.

The other major factor undercutting sanctions is geopolitical fragmentation. Sanctions work best when they are multilateral and consistently enforced, but that consensus has never fully existed for Iran. While the US and EU have maintained tight restrictions, China and Russia have deepened trade and financial ties with Tehran, including barter-style exchanges and banking arrangements that bypass Western-controlled systems such as SWIFT. Due to an increasingly multipolar world Iran wasn't that isolated as the west expected.

None of this means sanctions are useless. They clearly impose real economic costs, and in narrow cases, such as the 1979 hostage crisis, coercive economic pressure combined with diplomacy has produced results. However,

sanctions alone cannot force a country to change its strategic goals, as their success depends on the political conditions of the targeted state.

The Iranian case suggests three things that should inform how sanctions are used elsewhere. First, sanctions need clear diplomatic pathways to avoid deepening conflict. Second, domestic politics and ideology can limit their ability to change the state behavior. Third, China and Russia now provide alternative economic support, reducing the pressure western sanctions can create.

Nonetheless, sanctions remain a useful tool for signaling disapproval and imposing real costs. However, as a mechanism for forcing authoritarian, ideologically driven states to change course, the evidence from Iran suggests they are, at best, a blunt and unreliable instrument.



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BIPP Round Up

The Shahid Javed Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP) marked an important step towards sustainable development with the installation of a solar energy system at the Khaldunia Institute of Technology and Applied Sciences (KITAAS). The project has a minimum generation capacity of 50 kilowatts and is expected to substantially reduce the institution's energy costs. Beyond its environmental benefits, the initiative carries a strong social impact. The savings from reduced energy costs will be channeled toward the

Shahid Javed Burki (SJB) Scholarship Program, providing continued financial assistance to deserving students.



While, on August 18, BIPP participated in a panel discussion titled *"Technological Advancements in Rare Earth Minerals in Pakistan"*, held as part of the 4th National School of Public Policy (NSPP) Conference. The session was moderated by Dr. Muhammad Ejaz Sandhu, Director General, BIPP, and opened with a keynote address by Mr. Wahid Arjmand Zia, Managing Director of the Punjab Mineral Development Corporation, Lahore. The panel brought together Dr. Wajah Mahmood Qazi, Pro Vice Chancellor of the Islamabad University of Health Sciences & Emerging Technologies; Dr. Amir Mahmood, Director of Space Sciences at the University of the Punjab; Dr. Suleman Aziz Lodhi, Dean of the University of South Asia, Lahore; and Mr. Rehmat Ullah, Head of the Science & Technology Cluster at BIPP. The panelists offered valuable perspectives on the potential of rare earth minerals for Pakistan's technological future.



Moreover, the solar panels installed at Sahara College, Narowal, has generated enough savings to fund 28 merit-cum-need-based scholarships for deserving students. In September, the BIPP team also interviewed and selected the first 14 recipients, and the selection process for the remaining 14 is currently underway.





Mission Statement

BIPP's mission is to improve the welfare of the citizenry with particular emphasis on identifying policy measures that will lead to inclusive, people-centered growth with equity, political stability and sustainable development besides fully harnessing the potential for regional and global integration of the country. BIPP primary areas of interest encompass social, economic, environmental and political development and security, trade and foreign policy-related issues.

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