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China's Balancing Act  
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ASEAN Summit  
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Global Hunger Issue  
UN Reports Acute Food Crisis

## RISE OF COAS AS FIELD MARSHAL



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# After Conflict, Pakistan and India Now Engage in Diplomatic Battle for Global Support



Following recent military hostilities, Pakistan and India have shifted their rivalry to the global diplomatic stage, launching parallel campaigns to present their narratives to the international community.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif arrived in Türkiye on Sunday, beginning a four-nation diplomatic tour that will also include Iran, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan. The aim is to strengthen regional ties and express gratitude to friendly nations for their support during the crisis with India.

Simultaneously, Pakistani delegations—comprising current and former diplomats and lawmakers—are preparing to travel to the United States and Europe to present Islamabad's stance. Reports suggest that former foreign minister and PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari may lead one of the teams. The group heading to Washington is expected to engage with the UN Secretary-General, U.S. lawmakers, policy think tanks, and media outlets.

On the Indian side, a delegation led by prominent MP and former UN official Shashi Tharoor has already visited the U.S., as New Delhi intensifies its lobbying efforts.

In international diplomacy, personal engagement remains critical. This is why Prime Minister Shehbaz is directly engaging regional allies, while experienced legislators are being deployed to present Pakistan's case abroad.

Pakistan's diplomatic outreach is backed by a strong set of arguments. Notably, India rushed to accuse Pakistan of involvement in the Pahal-gam attack without presenting credible evidence. To date, New Delhi has not provided Pakistan or the international community with any proof of its claims.

Further undermining India's credibility, it was New Delhi that initiated aggression through "Operation Sindoor." Pakistan's measured response, dubbed "Operation Bunyanum Marsoos," was strictly defensive in nature. India's provocative actions—especially in a region with nuclear capabilities—highlight a dangerous level of irresponsibility.

Moreover, Indian threats to unilaterally alter the Indus Waters Treaty violate established bilateral agreements and pose yet another potential flashpoint in the already tense South Asian region.

These points must be emphasized by Pakistani envoys as they seek to build international understanding and counter India's narrative.

While Pakistan defended its territorial integrity on the battlefield, it must now match that resolve in the diplomatic arena. However, sustainable peace in South Asia remains possible only through dialogue.

India, for now, appears reluctant to engage, as hawkish rhetoric from ruling party factions and sections of the media has fueled anti-Pakistan sentiment and war hysteria. Yet, without a structured peace process, continued hostility is inevitable.

Though India typically rejects outside involvement in its disputes with Pakistan—as seen in its reaction to former U.S. President Donald Trump's mediation comments—escalating tensions could eventually force global powers to intervene, particularly if the risk of nuclear conflict becomes real.

In the end, diplomacy—not war—is the only path toward lasting peace in the subcontinent.

# The Rise of Field Marshal Asim Munir: Legacy, Leadership, and Strategic Triumph



By Romana Afsheen

In a historic move, the Government of Pakistan has promoted Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Syed Asim Munir to the rank of Field Marshal, the country's highest honorary military title. This rare promotion, announced on May 20, 2025, underscores the state's recognition of General Munir's leadership during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, launched in response to recent Indian military aggression. With this elevation, Munir becomes only the second military officer in Pakistan's history to receive the prestigious title — the first being Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan in 1959.

This article explores the significance of the Field Marshal title, revisits the legacy of Ayub Khan, provides insight into General Munir's distinguished career, and examines the military and geopolitical impact of Operation Bunyanum Marsoos.

## Understanding the Rank of Field Marshal

In most military traditions, the rank of

Field Marshal is reserved for those who have demonstrated exceptional strategic leadership, decisive victories in war, and enduring contributions to national defense. It is a five-star honorary rank, standing above a general and is largely symbolic in peacetime, often without operational command responsibilities. Yet, its conferment is laden with meaning — it reflects extraordinary merit, visionary command, and national gratitude.

In Pakistan, the title has historically been elusive. The only precedent was Mohammad Ayub Khan, who led the army through significant periods of transition and eventually became the President of Pakistan. Ayub's elevation in 1959 reflected not just his military role, but also his central place in statecraft during the early years of the republic.

In this context, General Asim Munir's elevation after a successful military campaign rekindles a tradition of honoring wartime excellence, particularly at a time when Pakistan's defense forces have been tested in conventional conflict.

## The Historical Precedent: Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan

To understand the weight of the Field Marshal rank in Pakistan, one must revisit the military and political career of Ayub Khan.

Appointed the first native Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army in 1951, Ayub Khan served in the role until 1958, when he staged a military coup and assumed the presidency. A year later, in 1959, he was awarded the rank of Field Marshal — a decision that remains controversial due to the political dimension of his military power. His regime laid the foundation for military influence in Pakistan's political landscape, initiating an era of military-bureaucratic dominance.

Unlike Ayub's promotion, which some critics argue was politically motivated, General Asim Munir's elevation is rooted in his command during a national crisis, giving it clearer military legitimacy.



## Operation Bunyanum Marsoos: Strategic Turning Point

The immediate context for General Munir's promotion is his leadership during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos — a large-scale military operation launched to counter recent hostilities initiated by India.

While full operational details remain classified, the campaign is widely described as a defining military moment for Pakistan. It was conceived and executed in response to coordinated Indian military aggression, believed to be along the Line of Control (LoC) and adjoining sectors. Pakistan's military response under General Munir's leadership was swift, calculated, and strategically sound, successfully pushing back the adversary and maintaining territorial integrity.



The operation's name, Bunyanum Marsoos (translated from Arabic as “a firm structure”), symbolized unity, cohesion, and resilience of the armed forces. It was not only a defensive success, but also restored morale, reaffirmed Pakistan's deterrence, and conveyed a powerful message of military readiness.

Government sources indicated that the operation involved joint coordination across the three branches of Pakistan's military, with the army playing the primary role. Munir, as COAS, was reportedly instrumental in designing the battlefield strategy, logistics, counteroffensive planning, and psychological warfare dimensions.

The federal cabinet, chaired by Prime

Minister Shehbaz Sharif, acknowledged this leadership, issuing an official statement:

“The Government of Pakistan has approved the promotion of General Syed Asim Munir (Nishan-i-Imtiaz Military) to the rank of Field Marshal for ensuring the security of the country and defeating the enemy based on the high strategy and courageous leadership during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos.”

## The Man Behind the Uniform: Who is Asim Munir?

Before rising to Pakistan's highest military office in November 2022, General Asim Munir had accumulated a career spanning three decades, marked by a wide range of critical command and intelligence roles.

### Military Origins

Munir's journey into the Pakistan Army began through the Mangla Officers Training School — an alternative pathway to the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA). He was commissioned into the Frontier Force Regiment, a unit with a long history of excellence in both peacetime operations and wartime deployments.

What followed was a stellar career, filled with challenging assignments that prepared him for strategic leadership.

### Command Experience in Conflict Zones

As a brigadier, Munir commanded forces in Pakistan's Northern Areas, a region where

counterterrorism, border security, and high-altitude warfare require exceptional leadership. This experience honed his operational acumen and deepened his understanding of asymmetric threats and logistical complexities.

### Role in Intelligence Services

One of the most defining aspects of General Munir's career is his leadership of both of Pakistan's top military intelligence agencies — an unprecedented distinction.

- In 2017, he served as the Director-General of Military Intelligence (MI).
- In 2018, he was appointed as the Director-General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

As DG ISI, Munir played a key role in regional counterintelligence, managing delicate security issues related to India, Afghanistan, and internal militancy. His intelligence background has contributed to a strategic mindset that blends tactical awareness with geopolitical calculation.

### Senior Leadership and Army Chief Appointment

After his intelligence tenure, Munir commanded the Gujranwala Corps, a key strike corps of the Pakistan Army. Later, he served as Quartermaster General at the General Headquarters (GHQ), responsible for army-wide logistics and infrastructure.

In November 2022, he was appointed as Pakistan's 17th Chief of Army Staff, succeeding General Qamar Javed Bajwa. His promotion came at a time of significant political uncertainty and regional tension.

His appointment was also symbolically important:

- Munir is the first COAS to have held both top intelligence positions (MI and ISI).
- He is also the first Sword of Honour recipient — the academy's highest merit — to become army chief.

## A Commander of War and Principle

What sets General Munir apart from other

generals is his reputation for integrity, strategic discipline, and operational clarity. Known for maintaining a low public profile, Munir has largely avoided political entanglements. His tenure has so far been marked by a focus on institutional reform, modernization, and preparedness, culminating in the decisive response during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos.

His style is often described as deliberate, measured, and mission-focused. Within army circles, he is respected for his professionalism and sense of duty, and among civilian leaders, he is regarded as a reliable steward of national security.

## Geopolitical Implications of His Promotion

Munir's elevation to Field Marshal sends a strong signal to domestic and international observers:

1. To India: It reinforces Pakistan's military readiness and command stability.
2. To internal stakeholders: It is a vote of confidence in the army's leadership during war.
3. To the international community: It communicates continuity in military professionalism and strategic doctrine, especially as Pakistan faces an evolving security landscape in South Asia.

## Honoring Sacrifice: Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir Honors Martyrs at GHQ Ceremony

Following his historic promotion, a Special Guard of Honour ceremony was held at the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi on May 21, 2025, to honor Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir. During the event at Yadgar-e-Shuhada, Munir laid a floral wreath and offered Fateha in remembrance of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives defending Pakistan.

Field Marshal Munir dedicated this honor to the entire Pakistani nation, emphasizing the relentless service and sacrifices of the armed forces, law enforcement personnel, and civil veterans. He especially paid

tribute to the martyrs, describing them as a "wall of steel" who stood firm against Indian unprovoked and unlawful aggression.

"This honour is a tribute to the entire Pakistani nation and the valiant men and women of the Armed Forces of Pakistan, particularly the martyrs who stood like a wall of steel against Indian unprovoked, cowardly, and unlawful aggression," he stated.

This military confrontation was sparked by a recent attack in Indian-occupied Kashmir that tragically took the lives of 26 tourists. In response to unprovoked Indian strikes on Pakistani cities on the nights of May 6 and 7, Pakistan launched the retaliatory Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos, successfully targeting multiple Indian military sites. The conflict resulted in the downing of six Indian fighter jets, including three Rafale aircraft, and dozens of drones. After nearly 87 hours, a ceasefire was brokered by the United States, bringing the confrontation to a halt.



The clashes resulted in the martyrdom of 53 individuals, including 13 armed forces personnel and 40 civilians, underscoring the high cost of defending Pakistan's sovereignty.

### A Defining Signal in Military and Political Realms

General Syed Asim Munir's elevation to Field Marshal marks a momentous shift in the contours of Pakistan's military leadership. Beyond being an honorary title, it reflects a calculated recognition of his command during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos—a campaign that reshaped Pakistan's defense narrative in response to

regional threats.

This move also signals a consolidated civil-military understanding. By bestowing the rank through an official government announcement, the state underscores the value it places on seasoned, intelligence-informed, and strategically sound leadership. It balances ceremonial prestige with an affirmation of democratic process and institutional continuity.

## Strengthening National Security Doctrine

The promotion reaffirms Pakistan's evolving security doctrine: one that values anticipatory defense and integrated threat response. General Munir's leadership during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos demonstrated that modern military effectiveness requires foresight, cross-agency coordination, and dynamic battlefield adaptation.

His extensive intelligence

background—having led both the ISI and MI—has been central to this transformation. It introduced a more holistic view of national defense, where conventional troop strength is complemented by real-time data, covert capabilities, and strategic foresight. This orientation toward intelligence-led defense has increasingly shaped the military's posture on both internal and external fronts.

## Repercussions Across South Asia's Strategic Theatre

Munir's promotion also alters the regional





strategic calculus. In a region defined by historic rivalries and recurring military brinkmanship, his enhanced stature acts as both a deterrent and a reassurance. It projects a message of readiness, not escalation; of capability, not confrontation.

Operation Bunyanum Marsoos showcased Pakistan's ability to preempt and neutralize threats without triggering wider conflict. That doctrine—assertive defense within controlled parameters—has since been interpreted by neighboring states as a refinement of Pakistan's military doctrine. With Munir's promotion, this refined posture gains institutional permanence.

## Global Readership and Defense Community Perception

Internationally, military analysts see the elevation as a rare yet decisive move, acknowledging strategic acumen over political theatrics. Analysts from think tanks in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing have noted that Pakistan's approach to security has matured, particularly in balancing hard power with operational intelligence.

Unlike countries where such promotions

are ceremonial or post-retirement honors, Munir's elevation is deeply intertwined with an active operational context. It suggests that Pakistan sees value in institutional memory and continuity of command, especially when facing non-linear warfare and multi-domain threats.

## Field Marshal: Comparative Perspective and Global Usage

The rank of Field Marshal has been used sparingly across global militaries, often reserved for transformational commanders. In the UK, figures like Bernard Montgomery; in India, Sam Manekshaw; in Egypt, Abdel Hakim Amer—all received the title for decisive roles in reshaping their nations' military trajectory.

In Pakistan, the position was last held by Mohammad Ayub Khan in 1959. The return of this rank now, after more than six decades, is not merely symbolic—it restores a thread of military history at a time when strategic recalibration is crucial.

What sets Munir apart is the distinct combination of operational command, intelligence leadership, and institutional reform. He is not just a wartime commander but a

defense strategist shaped by both field and covert domains.

## Institutional Reforms and the Pursuit of Modernization

General Munir's tenure as COAS has ushered in several transformative initiatives within the Pakistan Army. Emphasis has been placed on force interoperability, leveraging digital technologies, and enhancing asymmetric response capabilities. The military under his watch has expanded cyber defense units, drone surveillance capabilities, and real-time decision-making structures.

A particular area of focus has been counter-intelligence and internal threat neutralization—ensuring that strategic depth is not compromised from within. These internal reforms often go unpublicized, but they remain integral to ensuring long-term security in an increasingly digitized battlefield.

Training regimes have also shifted from conventional drills to simulations that incorporate cyber, space, and electronic warfare. These efforts signal an institutional pivot: from legacy models of warfare to multi-domain readiness.



## National Morale and Civilian Confidence

Among Pakistan's broader public, especially its youth and military families, General Munir's elevation has been received as a moment of national pride. His career arc—rising from the Mangla Officers Training School to the apex military rank—symbolizes institutional meritocracy.

Public tributes have focused not only on his achievements but also on his demeanor: a commander who leads from the front, maintains institutional discipline, and avoids political theatrics. His persona, shaped by discretion and diligence, resonates in a country where national morale often hinges on symbols of integrity and professionalism.

The media narrative has, for once, been largely unified across platforms—praising the government's timing and the merit-based nature of the promotion. It reinforces the idea that civilian and military stakeholders can jointly uphold national interests through structured acknowledgment of service.

## The Road Ahead: Expectations and Strategic Challenges

With increased rank comes greater responsibility. While Field Marshal Munir will no longer hold operational command after retirement, the honor places him in a unique advisory role—one where his strategic insights will continue to inform future military planning.

The region remains volatile: border skirmishes with India, instability in Afghanistan, and the spillover of global power competition into South Asia. Navigating this landscape will require adaptive doctrines, not just reactive measures. Munir's legacy, already cemented through Bunyanum Marsoos, will likely extend through mentorship, strategic consultation, and institutional memory.

Domestically, balancing military preparedness with economic pressures remains a delicate task. Resources are finite, yet threats—both kinetic and cyber—are expanding. Under Munir's influence, the

military may continue its shift toward force efficiency, inter-agency collaboration, and reliance on strategic alliances rather than sheer numbers.

## Reimagining the Role of Honorary Military Ranks

While Field Marshal is a ceremonial rank in modern times, in Pakistan's current context it holds unique significance. It bridges history with the present—reminding institutions and citizens alike of the caliber required for such an elevation.

It also provides a blueprint for future appointments. By linking the title to verifiable strategic outcomes rather than politics or symbolism, the government sets a precedent: military honors are earned through impact, not incumbency.

institutional reform, and wartime strategy — and marks a milestone in Pakistan's military history that transcends ceremonial symbolism. It recognizes a commander who has not only demonstrated battlefield acumen during Operation Bunyanum Marsoos but also upheld the institutional integrity and strategic coherence of the Pakistan Army in times of internal and external pressure.

Unlike the promotion of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, which was mired in political controversy, Munir's rise is firmly rooted in operational legitimacy and wartime leadership. It signals a return to the foundational values of merit, professionalism, and national service. His journey — from the Northern Areas to the intelligence corridors and finally to the apex of military command — reflects a career defined by discipline, foresight, and an unwavering



This reimagining could also influence other services—paving the way for recognition systems that reward strategic innovation in the navy, air force, and even civilian defense agencies.

## Conclusion: A Legacy Built on Strategy, Service, and Steadfastness

Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir's promotion represents a rare convergence of honor, history, and hard-earned leadership. It reflects a distinguished military career that spans field command, covert operations,

commitment to Pakistan's sovereignty.

Geopolitically, the move sends a calculated message. It reaffirms Pakistan's readiness in the face of regional threats, projects continuity in command, and assures both allies and adversaries of the army's preparedness under tested leadership.

In honoring Munir with the nation's highest military title, Pakistan has not only recognized the man but also endorsed the values he embodies — strategic clarity, operational courage, and institutional steadiness. In a region often characterized by volatility, the promotion stands as both a tribute to the past and a signal of strength for the future.

## Pakistan vows to crush Indian-sponsored cross-border terror



By Javed Mahmood

After defeating India in the recent battle, Pakistan has decided to crush the Indian-sponsored cross-border terrorism. For this purpose, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has visited Turkiye and Iran, a day after China-Pakistan and Afghanistan held crucial meetings in Beijing, wherein they decided to tackle the terrorism monster with iron hands. The Pakistan government has stepped up its efforts to mop up international support to eliminate the Indian-backed terrorism in the wake of a recent terrorist attack on a children's school bus in Balochistan. Eight students have lost their lives in the attack, while dozens sustained injuries. After this tragic incident, Pakistan has openly blamed India for sponsoring the bloodshed of Pakistani schoolchildren through Indian proxies in Balochistan.

In the last week of May, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited Turkiye and Iran and sought their support to nip in the bud the cross-border terrorism.

### Pakistan and Iran vow to discourage terrorism

Pakistan and Iran renewed their shared commitment to lasting peace in South Asia, emphasizing that fostering friendly relations with neighboring countries remains a key pillar of both nations' foreign policies.

The reaffirmation came during a meeting between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Iranian President Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian, held at a reception hosted at the historic Sadabad Palace in Tehran. The meeting was part of the prime minister's multi-nation diplomatic tour, which includes visits to Turkiye, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates—aimed at expressing gratitude to Muslim allies for their support during the recent tensions between Pakistan and India and to seek their support to overcome cross-border terrorism.

Both leaders agreed on the need to enhance bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, and regional security. They underscored the importance of unity and coordination in the face of geopolitical challenges and reaffirmed their resolve to maintain peace across the region. Prime Minister Shehbaz noted that Pakistan emerged from the conflict with India with strength and dignity, crediting “the brave actions of our outstanding armed forces, supported wholeheartedly by the people of Pakistan.”

Reiterating Pakistan's commitment to peaceful dialogue, he said, “We seek peace and are ready to sit at the table to resolve all outstanding issues—including the Kashmir dispute—in line with United Nations Security Council resolutions, which even the Indian parliament once acknowledged during the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru.”

He further stated that Pakistan is open to constructive dialogue on key issues



such as water sharing, trade, and counter-terrorism—provided India shows seriousness and sincerity. At the same time, he made clear that Pakistan would firmly defend its sovereignty in the face of any aggression.

## Turkiye and Pakistan to deepen defence ties to combat terrorism

Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reaffirmed their shared commitment to deepening the comprehensive and strategic partnership between Pakistan and Türkiye during a high-level meeting held in Istanbul on Sunday. During the official two-day visit, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with President Erdogan in a warm and cordial atmosphere, where both leaders reviewed the entire spectrum of bilateral relations. They pledged to strengthen collaboration in areas of mutual interest and to jointly work for regional peace, sustainable development, and the prosperity of their peoples.

The engagement underscored the historical and brotherly relationship between the two nations, rooted in shared values, mutual respect, and a unified vision for progress. Prime Minister Sharif, accompanied by Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir and other senior officials, expressed profound gratitude to the Turkish leadership and people for their steadfast support during recent regional tensions in South Asia. He particularly appreciated Türkiye's firm stance and public solidarity with Pakistan.

Highlighting Pakistan's recent achievements, the Prime Minister praised the courage of the Armed Forces and the patriotism of the people, which contributed to the country's successes in operations like Marak-e-Haq and Bunyanum Marsoos. The leaders emphasized expanding economic cooperation through joint ventures and increased investment, especially in renewable energy, IT, defence production, infrastructure, and agriculture. Both sides committed to fully implementing decisions made during the 7th High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) session held in Islamabad in February 2025, and reiterated the goal of

reaching \$5 billion in annual bilateral trade.

In addition to bilateral matters, Prime Minister Sharif and President Erdogan also discussed key regional and global developments. They reaffirmed mutual support on core issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, and voiced deep concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, urging an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian aid access. President Erdogan hosted a formal dinner in honor of Prime Minister Sharif and his delegation, which included Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, Minister Attaullah Tarar, SAPM Tariq Fatemi, and Ambassador Dr. Yusuf Junaid.



## Pakistan Army pledges to dismantle India-backed terrorist proxies

A day after a deadly blast in Khuzdar claimed the lives of six people, including four children, Pakistan's military leadership has pledged to dismantle all India-backed terrorist proxies with full force and determination. The statement followed the 270th Corps Commanders' Conference (CCC), chaired by Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi on May 22, 2025.

According to a military communiqué, the conference began with prayers for the martyrs of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos and for the victims of the recent terror attack in Khuzdar, which was attributed to

Indian-sponsored elements. The participants strongly condemned the targeting of civilians—especially children—labeling it a blatant violation of humanitarian and international norms. The commanders held detailed discussions on the security threats posed by terrorist groups allegedly supported by India in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They noted that following its military setback during the Pahalgam incident, India had intensified its use of covert tactics and non-state actors to destabilize Pakistan.

The forum declared that Pakistan will not allow external forces to undermine its peace

and stability. It emphasized that the armed forces, in collaboration with intelligence and law enforcement agencies, would take decisive action against all enablers and perpetrators of terrorism.

The military huddle took place amid heightened tensions with India, following the deadly Pahalgam attack in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), which killed 26 tourists. India accused Pakistan of orchestrating the attack without providing any evidence and launched a series of unprovoked missile and drone strikes that killed at least 53 individuals, including 13 Pakistani military personnel and 40 civilians.

In retaliation, Pakistan downed over 90 Indian drones and six fighter jets, including three Rafales, before launching Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos—a large-scale military response targeting Indian military sites. These strikes were described as

“precise and proportionate,” carried out to counter India’s continued aggression across the Line of Control (LoC). The conflict ended on May 10 after 87 hours of hostilities, following a ceasefire brokered by the United States.

The military also paid tribute to the martyrs of Marka-e-Haq, the name given to the recent period of conflict with India. The commanders reaffirmed that the sacrifices of these individuals would not be in vain and reiterated their commitment to safeguarding the nation. The forum congratulated Field Marshal Asim Munir on his elevation and praised his leadership and contributions to national defense. The session also reviewed the internal and external security landscape, including the successful conclusion of Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos.

The meeting also assessed regional dynamics, including the security situation along the LoC, the Working Boundary, and the Eastern Border. Serious concerns were expressed over ongoing human rights violations in IIOJK, which were seen as fueling unrest and violence. The forum urged global intervention to preserve peace and security in South Asia and reaffirmed full diplomatic and moral support for the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

Field Marshal Munir praised the operational readiness and high morale of the forces, emphasizing the need for continued vigilance. He reiterated the army’s role in maintaining internal stability and securing the nation’s borders, expressing gratitude for the enduring trust of the Pakistani people. The conference concluded with a firm commitment to defend the country

terrorists were neutralised,” the ISPR said.

In a second operation in the Tank district, security forces killed two more militants in a similar exchange of fire. The third operation occurred in the general area of Bagh in Khyber district, where troops successfully eliminated three additional terrorists. Weapons and ammunition were recovered from the killed militants, who were reportedly involved in multiple terrorist activities across the region. Following the operations, sanitisation efforts were carried out to ensure no other threats remained in the vicinity. “Pakistan’s security forces remain resolute in their mission to eradicate Indian-sponsored terrorism from the country,” the statement added.

## Signs of Progress Amid Persistent Threats

Pakistan has faced a resurgence in terrorist activity since the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan bearing the brunt of cross-border and domestic militancy. However, the first quarter of 2025 showed signs of improvement. According to data from the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), militant and insurgent fatalities outpaced the combined losses of civilians and security personnel — a reversal from previous quarters.

The CRSS report noted a nearly 13% drop in overall violence compared to the final quarter of 2024, along with fewer civilian and military fatalities. Despite this progress, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan remain the most volatile regions, accounting for 98% of all terrorism-related deaths. The report warned of escalating violence, including more sophisticated and daring attacks, such as the unprecedented hijacking of the Jaffar Express. If current trends continue, projections estimate over 3,600 fatalities by the end of 2025 — potentially making it one of the deadliest years for Pakistan in recent history. Balochistan alone accounted for 35% of all fatalities in the first quarter of 2025, marking a 15% rise in violence compared to the previous quarter. While other provinces have seen relatively lower levels of violence, the increasing boldness of militant operations underscores the ongoing challenge.



Commanders commended the professional conduct and unity of Pakistan’s armed forces, as well as the public’s steadfast support. They acknowledged the role of Pakistani media and digital platforms in countering Indian disinformation and bolstering national morale. The youth of Pakistan were lauded for their patriotic spirit, while the political leadership was praised for steering the country through the crisis with clarity and resolve. The military noted that history would remember Pakistan’s swift and strategic defense against Indian aggression.

Reaffirming the country’s commitment to sovereignty, the forum stated: “No one can coerce Pakistan through threats or force. The nation will take all necessary steps to protect its vital interests.”

and uphold national unity against all threats.

## India-backed terrorists killed in the operation

At least nine Indian-sponsored terrorists were killed in three separate intelligence-based operations conducted by Pakistani security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, according to a statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) on Sunday. The first operation took place in the Dera Ismail Khan district, where troops launched a targeted offensive based on intelligence regarding the presence of militants. “During the operation, troops engaged the terrorists’ hideout, and following an intense exchange of fire, four Indian-sponsored



## Mad Modi

Following a series of humiliating battlefield setbacks against Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has drawn international concern after issuing a direct and aggressive threat toward the people of Pakistan. During a political rally in Gujarat, Modi warned Pakistani civilians to choose peace with India or face violent consequences—a statement that many observers have condemned as provocative and dangerously inflammatory. The context for Modi's remarks is critical. In early May, India suffered significant military losses during a confrontation with Pakistan.

Among the most notable blows was the confirmed destruction of six Indian Air Force aircraft, including three of the highly prized Rafale fighter jets—seen as a symbol of India's air power modernization. The losses have triggered intense criticism of Modi's military leadership and handling of regional tensions.

Speaking before a crowd of supporters in his home state, Modi's frustration over these defeats was apparent. Addressing Pakistan's civilian population directly, he stated, "To rid Pakistan of the disease of terrorism, the people of Pakistan must step forward. The youth of Pakistan must come forward. Live a life of peace, eat your bread in comfort, or else, my bullet is there." Indian news agency circulated footage of the speech, prompting immediate backlash from Pakistani media figures and commentators. Many accused Modi of discarding diplomatic norms and openly violating principles of international law by suggesting collective punishment of a civilian population.

This rhetoric follows an earlier deadly event on May 7, when Indian forces launched an attack that killed at least 40 Pakistani civilians. India claimed the victims were terrorists. However, Modi's latest comments have cast doubt on that assertion, implying that civilian suffering may have been intentional—a move that could constitute a war crime under international law.

Pakistan responded to the attack by launching retaliatory missile strikes on May 10, targeting 26 Indian military installations.

The scale and precision of the response stunned Indian officials. Colonel Sofia, an Indian military spokesperson, acknowledged the Pakistani assault during a press briefing and expressed India's willingness to consider de-escalation.

Later the same day, U.S. President Donald Trump intervened and announced a ceasefire agreement between the two nuclear-armed nations. While the ceasefire may have temporarily paused hostilities, Modi's belligerent tone has raised serious questions about his government's commitment to peace and restraint. The escalation and Modi's incendiary remarks have not only heightened tensions in South Asia but have also placed India's leadership under international scrutiny for its approach toward regional stability and civilian protection.



## China announces full support for Pakistan

China has reaffirmed its strong support for Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity following the recent four-day military confrontation between Pakistan and India over a deadly attack in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).

Speaking in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China welcomed efforts by both nations to resolve their differences through dialogue, as he held wide-ranging talks with Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar.

Dar's visit to China follows a sharp escalation

in hostilities between India and Pakistan after a deadly April 22 attack in Pahalgam, IIOJK, which claimed the lives of 26 tourists. India immediately blamed Pakistan, a charge Islamabad denied, instead offering to cooperate in an independent, international investigation.

Tensions surged when India launched missile strikes inside Pakistani territory on May 6, followed by drone attacks and airbase strikes. Pakistan retaliated on May 10, prompting U.S. President Donald Trump to step in and broker a surprise ceasefire, which has held for over a week.

During Tuesday's meeting, both foreign ministers reaffirmed the strength of the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership and the "ironclad friendship" between China and Pakistan, according to a joint news release.

They also discussed the evolving security situation in South Asia, future cooperation under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) 2.0, and their shared commitment to regional peace, development, and stability.

## Digital ad campaign launched in Washington to highlight Indian Occupied Kashmir

A Kashmir advocacy group launched a digital ad campaign in Washington, D.C., displaying messages on mobile billboard trucks praising former U.S. President Donald Trump for his role in easing tensions between nuclear-armed India and

Pakistan. The campaign also called for international intervention to resolve the long-standing Kashmir issue.

The initiative was led by the World Kashmir Awareness Forum (WKAF), which expressed gratitude for Trump's mediation and emphasized the need for a lasting solution to the Kashmir conflict. One of the messages on the trucks read, "Ceasefire without addressing the Kashmir issue cannot last."

Other electronic messages included:

- "Hostilities ended due to President Trump's intervention — he deserves the Nobel Peace Prize"
- "Kashmir needs a final resolution — President Trump, your leadership is needed"
- "Talks on Kashmir must begin — thank you, President Trump, for highlighting the issue"
- "Kashmir conflict requires urgent attention — Trump's mediation is essential"
- "Kashmiris mourn the violence and long for peace — President Trump, help ensure rational dialogue"
- "Pressure on India to negotiate must continue."
- "Kashmir dispute threatens global peace — the world looks to President Trump for leadership"

- "When Kashmir becomes a nuclear flashpoint, it's no longer a bilateral matter, but a global crisis"

Dr. Ghulam N. Mir, President of the WKAF and Chair of the Kashmiri Diaspora Coalition (KDC), stated that 77 years of intermittent warfare between India and Pakistan had brought the two nations to the brink of nuclear conflict just a week ago.

He blamed the tensions on India's continued occupation of Kashmir and the Kashmiri people's persistent struggle for self-determination.

He praised the U.S. for historically supporting the Kashmiri cause and said Trump had now become a key figure in this ongoing battle for peace and justice.

Dr. Imtiaz Khan, a Kashmiri-American academic, remarked that while the recent flare-up has temporarily subsided, tensions remain high. He credited Trump's timely diplomacy for preventing an all-out war, which could have had catastrophic consequences for nearly half the global population.

"We are fortunate to have President Trump — a leader known for his ability to handle complex international crises with calm and wisdom," he said. "India's aggressive posturing is growing daily, and unless serious attention is paid, a grave humanitarian disaster could unfold."

Dr. Ghulam Nabi Fai, Chairman of the

World Forum for Peace and Justice, echoed the praise for Trump, saying his mediation efforts prevented a large-scale conflict. "Without his leadership, millions could have suffered, and future generations might have faced the fallout of a nuclear war," he noted.

Dr. Fai emphasized that the people of Kashmir see Trump as a beacon of hope. "They believe his commitment to peace and problem-solving can lead to a fair and lasting resolution. The person who helps resolve this crisis will earn immense global respect — that could be you, Mr. President," he said.

Sardar Zarif Khan, advisor to the President of Azad Kashmir, acknowledged the brief yet intense conflict, saying it underscored persistent tensions in South Asia. He hailed Trump's intervention as a step toward peace. "We hope this ceasefire opens doors for continued dialogue and stronger bilateral relations," he added.

Additional voices from the Kashmiri-American community, including Sardar Zubair Khan (Voice of Justice in Kashmir), Sardar Shoaib Irshad (Kashmir American Welfare Association), and Raja Liaquat Kayani (Kashmir House, Washington), reiterated their appreciation for Trump's mediation. They stressed that his involvement helped avert a potential nuclear catastrophe and brought global attention back to the Kashmir conflict.





# China's Balancing Act: Mediation Between the Taliban and Pakistan Amid Rising Regional Tensions



By Kanwal Munir

## Introduction

In May 2025, Beijing hosted a pivotal trilateral summit involving three key players in the South and Central Asian region: Pakistan, the Taliban-led government of Afghanistan, and China. This high-level diplomatic engagement brought together Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, and Chinese officials led by Yue Xiaoyong, China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan. While such trilateral meetings have taken place before, this particular round held critical importance amid escalating regional instability, a surge in terrorist activities, and shifting geopolitical dynamics.

The meeting underscored China's growing influence in Afghanistan and its desire to play a stabilizing role in the region. Beijing's diplomatic clout and economic engagement are being leveraged to ease tensions between Islamabad and Kabul,

most notably over the issue of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This article provides a comprehensive analysis of China's mediation efforts, the entrenched challenges posed by the TTP and other militant groups, the evolving India-Taliban relationship, and the broader strategic implications for the region.

## Beijing: The New Diplomatic Hub for Afghan Affairs

The decision to hold the trilateral talks in Beijing underscores China's strategic ambition to supplant the United States as the foremost external power broker in Afghanistan. While most countries remain cautious in their dealings with the Taliban regime, China has adopted a more pragmatic and direct approach, cementing a diplomatic relationship that sets it apart on the global stage. Notably, China is the only country to have its ambassador, Zhao Sheng, formally present credentials to the

Taliban's acting Prime Minister, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, a gesture that amounts to de facto recognition. Moreover, Chinese President Xi Jinping symbolically acknowledged the Taliban's envoy during a ceremonial event for foreign diplomats, reinforcing Beijing's willingness to engage with the Taliban as a legitimate governing authority.

China's deepening involvement in Afghanistan is driven by a combination of security, economic, and geopolitical interests. Foremost among these is Beijing's concern over the potential for Islamist militancy to spill over into its restive Xinjiang region. Additionally, China views Afghanistan as a crucial piece in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), envisioning the war-torn country as both a hub for infrastructure connectivity and a source of valuable mineral resources. By embedding itself diplomatically and economically in Afghanistan, China is working to secure long-term strategic leverage in the heart of Asia.

## The Persistent TTP Dilemma

At the core of the recent trilateral dialogue in Beijing is the contentious issue of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a banned extremist group responsible for hundreds of attacks on Pakistani soil, including high-profile assaults on military, police, and civilian targets. The TTP's resurgence in recent years has become a severe national security concern for Islamabad, particularly following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, which emboldened militant outfits across the region. Pakistani officials claim that the TTP operates with relative freedom from sanctuaries inside Afghanistan, taking advantage of the Taliban's control over the country's territory and institutions.

What complicates matters is the historical and ideological proximity between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. Both groups emerged from a similar Deobandi ideological framework and share a long-standing relationship forged during years of joint struggle and mutual support. While the Afghan Taliban insists it does not allow Afghan soil to be used against any other state, Pakistan maintains that the Taliban regime is not only harboring the TTP but also allowing it to expand its logistical and operational capabilities. Repeated cross-border attacks and targeted killings have only exacerbated tensions between Kabul and Islamabad.

China, with its strong diplomatic ties to both Pakistan and the Taliban, has stepped in as a mediator to de-escalate this volatile situation. Beijing's involvement is driven by its broader goal of regional stability, especially in the context of protecting its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and curbing extremism that could affect its Xinjiang region. However, despite its leverage and access, China's efforts have yielded little in the way of concrete commitments from the Taliban.

One of the key stumbling blocks remains the Taliban's perception of the TTP as a strategic buffer. For the Taliban leadership, the TTP is more than ideological kin—it serves as a tool of regional influence and a counterbalance against Pakistani pressure. Curbing the TTP's activities would not only weaken their bargaining position but

could also trigger internal dissent within the Taliban ranks, some of whom sympathize with or even support the TTP's objectives.

Moreover, without formal international recognition and guarantees for the longevity of their regime, the Taliban are unlikely to take bold actions that could alienate influential militant allies. The lack of progress in Chinese mediation efforts underscores this complex calculus. Beijing may hold significant economic and diplomatic sway, but it is not immune to the entrenched power dynamics that define the Taliban's internal and external strategies.

These groups have found safe haven in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for two key reasons. First, they share a common ideological commitment to jihad against their respective home governments. The Taliban's hardline Islamist ideology aligns with these groups' agendas, making Afghanistan an ideal base for militant collaboration. Second, the Taliban offer them unprecedented freedom and protection—something few, if any, regimes would risk providing. These groups are allowed to operate freely, train recruits, and strengthen logistical networks under the Taliban's watch, often in exchange for loyalty and occasional tactical cooperation.



## Afghanistan: A Militant Haven

The TTP is just one component of the broader militant ecosystem in Afghanistan. The Taliban have also provided sanctuary to several other regional terrorist organizations, including:

- Jaish al-Adl, targeting Iranian interests.
- The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), active in Central Asia.
- The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), linked to militancy in China's Xinjiang region.
- Jamaat Ansarullah, opposing the government of Tajikistan.

This makes post-2021 Afghanistan a haven for terrorism, reinforcing international concerns about regional security and fueling fears of a resurgence of transnational jihadist threats. Although these groups have not yet launched large-scale cross-border operations, their presence alone is destabilizing. Their ability to radicalize, recruit, and prepare for future conflicts presents a ticking time bomb for regional powers. Moreover, their existence strengthens the Taliban's hand, offering them tools of asymmetric warfare and diplomatic leverage. For China, the threat is particularly acute with TIP, which Beijing sees as a direct national security threat. As long as these groups remain sheltered, regional peace will remain elusive.



## China's Diplomatic Calculus

China's engagement in Afghanistan is both a challenge and an opportunity—one that reflects its broader ambitions to reshape the geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia. On one hand, Beijing views Afghanistan as a strategic corridor for the expansion of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly for enhancing connectivity with Central Asia and accessing the vast untapped reserves of rare earth minerals and other valuable natural resources. Afghanistan's location and mineral wealth make it a potentially vital economic node in China's long-term infrastructure and investment plans. Chinese companies have already shown interest in mining contracts, infrastructure development, and the establishment of trade routes that would link Afghanistan more closely to China's western regions.

On the other hand, China faces serious security challenges in its engagement with Afghanistan. The presence of extremist groups—especially the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)—poses a direct threat to China's Xinjiang province. Beijing is deeply concerned about Afghanistan being used as a base for anti-China militant operations or as a breeding ground for separatist ideologies.

By brokering talks between Pakistan and the Taliban, China aims to position itself as a regional power capable of conflict resolution and stability-building. A successful outcome would enhance China's reputation as a diplomatic heavyweight and enable more seamless regional integration. However, failure would not only hinder its ambitions in Afghanistan but also undermine its credibility as an alternative to U.S.-led international diplomacy.

## The Ambassadorial Breakthrough

One of the most tangible outcomes of the Beijing trilateral summit was the agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan to restore full diplomatic relations. For over a year, both nations had only maintained a skeletal diplomatic presence, with chargé d'affaires serving in their respective capitals. Strained by cross-border tensions,

refugee expulsions, and TTP attacks, the diplomatic freeze reflected the broader deterioration in bilateral relations.

Following the summit, sources confirmed that both countries agreed in principle to appoint full ambassadors, with announcements expected soon. This development is being viewed as a confidence-building measure and a potential turning point in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. It is also a diplomatic win for China, which played a key facilitating role.

Observers in diplomatic circles have welcomed this step, describing it as a potential gateway to more structured and constructive dialogue. It opens avenues for bilateral discussions on trade, border management, counterterrorism cooperation, and the handling of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.



## The India Factor: A Growing Concern for Beijing and Islamabad

An undercurrent of the trilateral talks was the growing relationship between India and the Taliban. India has traditionally supported non-Taliban factions and was critical of the Taliban regime during its previous tenure. However, recent developments indicate a shift in New Delhi's approach.

India has provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, maintained backchannel communications with the Taliban, and signaled interest in development projects. While these moves are ostensibly aimed at

stabilizing Afghanistan, they have raised alarms in Beijing and Islamabad. Both see India's engagement as a strategic maneuver to counter their influence in the region.

The timing of the trilateral meetings, coinciding with heightened India-Pakistan tensions, suggests a coordinated attempt by China and Pakistan to thwart India's growing presence in Kabul. Their objective appears to be creating wedges in the India-Taliban relationship and steering the Taliban away from New Delhi's orbit.

## Geopolitical Stakes: China vs. India in South Asia

The China-India rivalry is playing out on multiple fronts, and Afghanistan is rapidly emerging as another critical theater in this

intensifying geopolitical contest. As China deepens its engagement in Afghanistan through diplomacy, economic initiatives, and mediation efforts, India is quietly positioning itself to counterbalance Beijing's growing influence. If China succeeds in mediating the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) issue and successfully normalizes Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, it will significantly bolster its standing as a regional powerbroker. Such a development would grant China considerable diplomatic leverage in South and Central Asia, a scenario that India would naturally seek to prevent.

India, which has maintained quiet but persistent contact with the Taliban, could

use its influence to delay or derail cooperation on the TTP issue. By presenting itself as a more appealing alternative partner—especially in areas such as development assistance, trade, and diplomatic recognition—New Delhi may try to wedge itself between Kabul and Beijing. Moreover, India's strong relations with the United States, Iran, and several Central Asian republics provide it with a multi-pronged strategy to challenge China's advances in the region.

Some analysts argue that India may not be acting alone. Other countries that view China's expansionism with suspicion might covertly support India's growing engagement with the Taliban as part of a broader effort to contain Beijing. This dynamic transforms China's regional mediation role into part of a larger global chessboard, where diplomatic victories and failures are not merely bilateral, but symbolic of broader power shifts.

## Looking Ahead: Risks and Opportunities

While the Beijing trilateral summit has yielded some diplomatic headway, notably the in-principal agreement on ambassadorial appointments between Pakistan and Afghanistan, several critical risks remain that could easily jeopardize the fragile progress made. Chief among these is the Taliban's persistent reluctance to curb

the activities of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a group that continues to stage deadly attacks inside Pakistan. Despite mounting international pressure and China's mediation, the Taliban view the TTP as a strategic asset rather than a liability, making cooperation on this front extremely complex. Additionally, the Taliban's ongoing support and sanctuary for other regional terrorist groups further complicates the security landscape and raises serious concerns for neighboring states, especially Pakistan and China.

Moreover, the broader geopolitical environment adds another layer of volatility. The strained and unpredictable India-Pakistan dynamic could lead to escalations that overshadow or undo the gains achieved in Beijing.

For China, continued engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan will require a delicate balance of incentives and pressure. Infrastructure investments, trade partnerships, and the promise of diplomatic recognition may encourage the Taliban to cooperate. At the same time, Beijing must be ready to manage security risks, particularly those involving cross-border terrorism or instability spilling into Xinjiang.

For Pakistan, restoring diplomatic ties with Kabul opens the door to structured engagement, yet Islamabad must recalibrate its expectations and invest in robust internal

security strategies to deal with the TTP independently if diplomacy fails.

As for the Taliban, the trilateral talks present a rare chance to inch closer to international legitimacy. But this opportunity comes with strings attached. Meaningful progress will require concessions not only on terrorism but also on human rights, inclusive governance, and adherence to global norms—areas where the Taliban continue to face widespread criticism. Without such compromises, the road to international acceptance will remain out of reach.

## Conclusion

The May 2025 trilateral summit in Beijing marked an ambitious diplomatic effort led by China to stabilize one of the most volatile regions in the world. While tangible results remain limited, the restoration of full diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a step in the right direction.

China's role as mediator underscores its growing clout in regional affairs. However, success will depend on sustained engagement, realistic expectations, and a nuanced understanding of the underlying security and political dynamics. The path ahead is fraught with challenges, but with careful diplomacy, it may still lead to a more stable and cooperative regional order.





# China and Russia's Lunar Nuclear Power Plant: A Strategic Leap in Space Exploration



By Hina Kashif

In a groundbreaking development, China and Russia have formalized a partnership to construct a nuclear power plant on the Moon, marking a significant advancement in lunar exploration. This initiative, part of the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS), aims to establish a sustainable human presence on the Moon by 2036. The agreement positions China and Russia at the forefront of space exploration, potentially surpassing the United States in lunar capabilities.

## The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS)

The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) is designed to be a sophisticated and multifunctional scientific base on the Moon, with its primary location set near the lunar south pole—a region believed to hold significant reserves of water ice and offering extended periods of sunlight, both critical for sustaining long-term missions. This strategically chosen site enhances the feasibility of prolonged human presence by

supporting essential life support systems and energy generation. Developed as a joint initiative led by China and Russia, the ILRS aims to facilitate advanced space science experiments, in-situ resource utilization, and the testing of technologies necessary for deep space exploration. In addition to serving as a platform for robotic and potentially crewed missions, the ILRS is intended to operate as a long-term international hub that will support broader ambitions of lunar colonization and pave the way for collaborative interplanetary missions, including eventual expeditions to Mars.

## Technical and Operational Details

The nuclear reactor planned for the ILRS is a joint venture between China and Russia, with Russia reportedly taking the lead in reactor technology. According to Yuri Borisov, the head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, the construction is expected to be completed autonomously,

without direct human intervention on the lunar surface. This means robotic systems and possibly AI-guided machinery will be responsible for transporting, assembling, and activating the reactor.

This approach serves several purposes:

- Reduces risk to human life, particularly in the early phases of lunar colonization.
- Cuts logistical costs by minimizing the need for human life-support infrastructure during the reactor's setup phase.
- Demonstrates advanced robotics and AI capability, signaling technological leadership on a global stage.

Borisov has stated that the necessary technological systems for such an undertaking are “almost ready,” suggesting that China and Russia are nearing a readiness level to test and deploy autonomous construction techniques on the Moon.

The reactor is expected to become opera-

tional sometime between 2033 and 2035, providing continuous power not only to life-support and operational systems but also to enable the scientific experiments and industrial processes that will form the backbone of the ILRS.

## Implications for Space Technology and Strategy

The deployment of a nuclear power source on the Moon marks a significant evolution in space infrastructure. Unlike solar-powered missions, which often operate with limited energy budgets and during restricted time windows, nuclear power allows for round-the-clock operation, regardless of environmental conditions. This is vital for both the safety of astronauts and the integrity of sensitive scientific instruments.

Furthermore, the ILRS nuclear power plant could serve as a testbed for future missions to Mars and beyond, where solar energy is even less reliable due to greater distance from the Sun and environmental challenges such as dust storms. If successful, the technology used to power the ILRS could be scaled up or adapted for use on Mars, in deep space habitats, or even on future interplanetary spacecraft.

## Environmental and Safety Considerations

While nuclear power offers clear advantages, it also raises serious safety and environmental concerns, particularly in the context of the Moon's pristine and unprotected environment. China and Russia will need to ensure:

- Shielding of radioactive materials from lunar dust and potential meteorite impacts
- Fail-safes against radiation leaks that could endanger astronauts or contaminate scientific experiments
- Sustainable disposal or storage plans for nuclear waste, which could persist in the lunar environment for thousands of years

To address these challenges, engineers are likely to use sealed fission units, possibly incorporating low-enriched uranium and passive cooling systems to minimize risk.

These designs draw from small modular reactor (SMR) concepts already under development for use on Earth and are favored for their portability and containment efficiency.

## Setting a Global Precedent

By undertaking the first construction of a nuclear power plant on another celestial body, China and Russia are asserting a bold new direction in space infrastructure development. This leap not only enhances the functionality and autonomy of the ILRS but also sets a precedent for future extraterrestrial settlements that will need scalable, long-term energy solutions.

It also raises important questions for the international community:

- Should there be global treaties or regulations governing the use of nuclear energy in space?
- What mechanisms are needed to prevent militarization or misuse of nuclear technology off Earth?
- How can transparency and safety standards be ensured across competing space programs?

These are debates that the ILRS initiative is already beginning to provoke—and will likely intensify as the project moves closer to reality.

## Technological and Operational Considerations

The proposed timeline for the reactor's installation spans from 2033 to 2035. Roscosmos, Russia's space agency, has indicated that the necessary technological solutions for autonomous construction are nearly ready. The reactor is expected to support the ILRS's operations, including life support systems, scientific experiments, and infrastructure development.

## International Collaboration and Participation

The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS), while jointly spearheaded by China and Russia, is envisioned as a truly global endeavor. Unlike earlier space initiatives that were often confined within rigid geopolitical alliances, the ILRS represents a new model of multilateral cooperation, one that aims to include a diverse array of nations regardless of their historical involvement in space exploration. This inclusive approach signals a strategic shift in how lunar missions are conceptualized and executed in the 21st century.

China and Russia have repeatedly emphasized that the ILRS is not an exclusive partnership, but rather a collaborative platform open to all countries and international organizations that are willing to contribute constructively. As of 2025, 17 countries have signed cooperation agreements to support the ILRS in various capacities. Among them are nations such as:

- **Egypt** – With growing interest in space-based technologies for telecommunications and Earth observation, Egypt's involvement reflects its aspirations to become a regional space power in Africa and the Middle East.
- **Pakistan** – A longstanding strategic partner of China, Pakistan has expressed interest in expanding its space capabilities through collaboration with CNSA, aligning ILRS participation with broader technological and diplomatic goals.
- **Venezuela** – With economic and political support from both China and Russia, Venezuela sees space cooperation as a path to scientific development and a demonstration of solidarity within the Global South.
- **Thailand** – As part of its long-term space strategy under the Geo-Informatics and Space Technology Development Agency (GISTDA), Thailand is seeking deeper integration with international space initiatives, particularly those led by Asian partners.
- **South Africa** – As one of the continent's most scientifically advanced nations, South Africa brings both experience and ambition to the table, and its role in ILRS comple-



- ments its leadership in space science across Africa.

These countries are contributing in ways that reflect their respective technological capabilities and strategic priorities. Some may provide scientific payloads or data analysis support, while others might engage in joint research, education, or policy formulation. Importantly, ILRS is designed to be modular and scalable, allowing partner countries to join at different stages of development—whether during the early robotic missions or the later phases involving human deployment and permanent infrastructure.

This broad coalition challenges the long-standing dominance of U.S.-led space coalitions, such as the Artemis Accords. Whereas the Artemis program, led by NASA and supported by Western allies including Japan, Canada, and the European Union, emphasizes rules-based governance and private sector participation, the ILRS offers an alternative geopolitical and technological framework. It appeals particularly to countries that feel sidelined by the Western-led space ecosystem or those seeking more autonomy in defining their space agendas.

Moreover, China and Russia are leveraging the ILRS to promote their vision of sovereign technological development and mutually beneficial cooperation. By avoiding the stringent entry conditions often associated with U.S.-based space partnerships, the ILRS provides an accessible platform for emerging space nations to gain hands-on experience and access advanced space technology.

The inclusion of developing and middle-income countries in such a major space project also has important diplomatic and symbolic value. It reinforces a narrative of inclusivity and shared progress, enabling nations with limited space budgets to participate in humanity's push beyond Earth. For many of these countries, participating in the ILRS is not just about science—it's about prestige, influence, and technological uplift.

The collaborative spirit of ILRS may also foster new institutional mechanisms for international cooperation in space. While the current framework is based on bilateral and multilateral memorandums of under-

standing, it is expected that in the coming years, a formal governance structure will be established—one that defines partner roles, data sharing protocols, funding responsibilities, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

In the long term, this model of South-South and East-South cooperation could reshape global space governance. If successful, the ILRS could become a symbol of a multipolar space order, where no single country or alliance holds a monopoly over space exploration and colonization. This evolution reflects the broader geopolitical realignment taking place on Earth, where emerging powers are increasingly asserting themselves not just in trade and diplomacy, but also in the final frontier—space.



## Implications for U.S. Space Policy

The announcement of the ILRS and its nuclear power plant coincides with significant developments in U.S. space policy. NASA's proposed 2026 budget includes substantial cuts to lunar exploration programs, notably eliminating the Gateway lunar space station project. This reduction in funding raises concerns about the United States' position in the evolving space race and its ability to maintain leadership in lunar exploration.

## Historical Context and Future Prospects

The history of lunar exploration is deeply rooted in the geopolitical rivalries of the

20th century, particularly during the Cold War. The United States, through NASA, emerged as the pioneer in human space-flight with the historic Apollo program. The successful landing of Apollo 11 on the Moon in July 1969 marked a crowning achievement not only in space science but also in asserting American technological supremacy over the Soviet Union. For decades, this milestone established the U.S. as the uncontested leader in lunar and deep-space exploration.

However, after the conclusion of the Apollo missions in the early 1970s, human exploration of the Moon stagnated. Although NASA continued its space science missions and built the International

Space Station (ISS) in collaboration with international partners, efforts specifically aimed at returning to the Moon or building permanent infrastructure remained sporadic and often underfunded.

In contrast, the early 21st century has witnessed a paradigm shift in space exploration. New players have entered the arena, and the motivations driving lunar missions have evolved. Space is no longer just a theater for demonstrating political might—it is now viewed as a critical frontier for economic development, scientific discovery, and long-term human sustainability beyond Earth.

Among the emerging space powers, China and Russia have positioned themselves as serious contenders in the modern space race. China's space program, under the China National Space Administration

(CNSA), has made remarkable progress in a short span. The Chang'e lunar missions, particularly Chang'e-4's successful landing on the far side of the Moon in 2019, have showcased China's technological sophistication and its capacity for high-risk, high-reward exploration. Chang'e-5, which returned lunar samples to Earth in 2020, further solidified China's credibility in planetary science.

Russia, once a formidable space competitor during the Soviet era, has been revitalizing its space ambitions through renewed partnerships and ambitious goals. Though its progress has been more measured, Russia's deep engineering heritage and its collaboration with China on projects such as the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) signal a renewed strategic intent.

The ILRS represents more than just a scientific installation—it is a long-term geopolitical maneuver. By planning a permanent and autonomously constructed nuclear-powered lunar base, China and Russia are laying the foundation for a sustained human and robotic presence on the Moon. This initiative is being developed independently of U.S.-led efforts such as NASA's Artemis program, which aims to return American astronauts to the Moon by the late 2020s. However, recent budgetary constraints—such as the 2026 proposal to eliminate NASA's Gateway lunar outpost—may hinder American momentum, providing China and Russia an opportunity to leap ahead.

Looking to the future, the success of the ILRS could serve as a springboard for a wide range of transformative advancements in space exploration:

- **Lunar Resource Utilization:** The Moon is believed to contain valuable resources, such as helium-3 (a potential fuel for future nuclear fusion reactors), rare earth elements, and water ice at its poles. These resources could support in-situ resource utilization (ISRU) strategies, reducing the cost of deep-space missions and supporting sustainable human presence.
- **Deep Space Exploration:** A fully operational, nuclear-powered lunar base could function as a launchpad or staging ground for missions to Mars and beyond. By developing and testing long-duration life-support systems, energy technologies, and surface operations on the Moon, space agencies can mitigate the risks of interplanetary travel.
- **New International Alliances:** The ILRS has already attracted interest from countries such as Egypt, Venezuela, Pakistan, and South Africa. This marks a significant shift in international space collaboration, suggesting the potential emergence of a China-Russia-led space bloc, in contrast to the traditionally U.S.-aligned partnerships under NASA and ESA (European Space Agency).

- **Scientific Innovation:** Establishing a permanent presence on the Moon would open unprecedented opportunities for astronomical observation, geological studies, and technological experimentation under extreme conditions. The Moon's lack of atmosphere makes it an ideal location for telescopes, particularly for low-frequency radio astronomy.
- **Redefinition of Global Space Governance:** As multiple nations and private actors assert interests in the Moon, new legal frameworks and diplomatic agreements will be necessary to manage resource rights, territory claims, and shared infrastructure. Projects like ILRS challenge existing norms established under the Outer Space Treaty and push the need for updated space governance mechanisms.

In conclusion, the cooperative effort by China and Russia to build a nuclear-powered lunar station is not merely a scientific venture—it is a strategic endeavor with far-reaching implications. It could redefine the balance of power in space, inspire a new era of competition and cooperation, and accelerate humanity's journey toward becoming an interplanetary species. If successful, the ILRS may well serve as the blueprint for future colonization efforts on Mars and elsewhere, ushering in a bold new chapter in human history.





# ASEAN Summit 2025: A Strategic Pivot in the Shifting Indo-Pacific Landscape



By Romana Afsheen

## Balancing Global Power Rivalries While Preserving Regional Unity

The 2025 ASEAN Summit marks a critical juncture for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as it grapples with intensifying global power rivalries, evolving strategic alliances, and internal cohesion dilemmas. Against the backdrop of a world shaped by the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating U.S.-China tensions, a resurgent Russia, and growing interest from Gulf nations, ASEAN must navigate a complex and often contradictory international landscape. This year's summit, hosted with considerable anticipation and scrutiny, provides a vital platform for Southeast Asia's leaders to articulate their shared interests, reassert ASEAN centrality, and recalibrate foreign policy strategies.

## ASEAN's Foreign Policy Legacy: Neutrality and Pragmatism

Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has emphasized the principles of non-align-

ment, mutual respect, and consensus-driven diplomacy. These principles, codified in key ASEAN declarations, have enabled the organization to manage external pressures while fostering internal harmony among its diverse member states.

However, the global environment in 2025 is vastly different from the Cold War era that shaped ASEAN's early years. Today, the region sits at the intersection of major strategic interests: China's economic and military rise, America's Indo-Pacific re-engagement, Russia's eastward pivot, and the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) economic outreach. ASEAN must therefore adapt its foundational foreign policy principles to contemporary realities.

## China's Deepening Footprint in Southeast Asia

China continues to exert enormous influence in Southeast Asia through trade, infrastructure investment, diplomatic outreach, and strategic posturing. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved into a long-term engine for connectivity projects across the region. From high-speed rail

networks in Laos and Thailand to port development in Malaysia and the Philippines, China's economic diplomacy remains robust.

Yet, China's assertive stance in the South China Sea continues to complicate regional relations. Several ASEAN members—including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia—have overlapping territorial claims with Beijing. Incidents involving Chinese coast guard vessels, military patrols, and artificial island construction have generated significant mistrust. During this year's summit, leaders from these nations called for increased maritime cooperation, the demilitarization of disputed zones, and the adoption of a binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea—a longstanding diplomatic aspiration.

Despite tensions, ASEAN countries remain reliant on China economically. China is ASEAN's largest trading partner, and economic recovery strategies in the wake of the pandemic have only deepened this interdependence. The challenge lies in maintaining this economic partnership while resisting potential coercion and protecting sovereignty.

## The United States: Strategic Re-engagement

In recent years, the U.S. has intensified its engagement with ASEAN under its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy. This pivot reflects a growing recognition of ASEAN's importance in maintaining a rules-based order and counterbalancing China's regional dominance.

The U.S. approach in 2025 emphasizes multilateralism, economic collaboration, and defense partnerships. Key initiatives include:

- The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which aims to enhance digital trade, supply chain resilience, and green energy cooperation.
- Enhanced Maritime Cooperation, including naval visits, coast guard training, and intelligence sharing with ASEAN partners.



- People-to-People Diplomacy, involving educational exchange programs, civil society linkages, and cultural partnerships.

At the summit, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed support for ASEAN centrality and reiterated Washington's commitment to the region's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet, skepticism persists. Some ASEAN members worry about the sustainability of U.S. commitments given Washington's internal political divisions and its global military commitments, including in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

## Russia's Expanding Influence

Though traditionally a peripheral actor in Southeast Asia, Russia's role has expanded significantly in recent years, particularly in the domains of military cooperation, energy investment, and diplomatic engagement. Russian arms sales to ASEAN countries—especially Vietnam and Myanmar—remain a cornerstone of bilateral relations.

Additionally, Russia has cultivated partnerships in the fields of nuclear energy, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. Notably, in 2024, Russia signed a defense technology agreement with Indonesia and proposed trilateral energy ventures involving ASEAN and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

At the 2025 summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attended as a special guest, advocating for a "multipolar

and Qatar have accelerated economic and strategic outreach to Southeast Asia.

This is reflected in growing investments in infrastructure, technology parks, and logistics corridors—particularly in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia. UAE's DP World, for instance, is involved in expanding port facilities in Indonesia and Vietnam. Qatar is exploring food security partnerships, while Saudi Arabia has initiated clean energy joint ventures.

Beyond economics, the GCC is investing in soft power tools. Several scholarships, cultural exchanges, and religious outreach programs are under way, particularly in Muslim-majority ASEAN states like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. These efforts are received with mixed feelings—some see it as a welcome diversification of ASEAN's external partnerships, while others caution against allowing religious and ideological influence to spill into policymaking.

During the summit, ASEAN and GCC representatives formally announced the formation of the ASEAN-GCC Strategic Dialogue Platform—a multilateral mechanism to promote investment, education, energy cooperation, and counterterrorism strategies. This represents a major step in ASEAN's diversification of its diplomatic portfolio.

## ASEAN's Internal Challenges: A Fractured Unity?

While ASEAN tries to present a unified external front, internal fissures remain visible. The diversity among member states—politically, economically, and ideologically—makes consensus difficult. Myanmar's military regime remains the most pressing internal issue.

Since the 2021 coup, ASEAN has struggled to address the escalating humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. The Five-Point Consensus—adopted in 2021 as a roadmap to peace—has largely failed to achieve traction. At this year's summit, the issue resurfaces with urgency. ASEAN leaders debated the bloc's principle of non-interference, with calls from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia for a firmer stance on

world order" and expressing support for ASEAN's efforts to reduce dependence on any single power. While Russia's influence is nowhere near that of the U.S. or China, its growing presence adds complexity to ASEAN's diplomatic balancing act.

## GCC Nations: The New Strategic Stakeholders

Perhaps the most notable emerging trend at ASEAN 2025 is the deepening engagement between ASEAN and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE),



human rights violations.

In contrast, countries like Cambodia and Thailand favored continued engagement without punitive measures, arguing that isolation may worsen the crisis. The impasse highlights ASEAN's institutional limitations in crisis management and reflects broader tensions between state sovereignty and collective responsibility.

## ASEAN Centrality: Still Relevant?

Despite internal divisions and external pressures, ASEAN continues to assert the doctrine of “centrality”—the idea that it must remain the primary platform for regional dialogue and cooperation. The formation of multiple ASEAN-led forums—including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)—is testament to its role as a diplomatic convener.

Yet, ASEAN centrality is increasingly being challenged by minilateral and bilateral arrangements. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS, and China's bilateral security partnerships risk marginalizing ASEAN-led institutions. Whether ASEAN can adapt and strengthen its institutional capacity will determine if it remains the nucleus of Indo-Pacific diplomacy or becomes merely a bystander.

## Strengthening Economic Resilience and Regional Integration in a Post-Pandemic World

As ASEAN nations grapple with the mounting complexities of geopolitical competition and external power engagement, the 2025 ASEAN Summit also turned the spotlight onto an equally pressing priority: economic resilience and regional integration. While diplomacy forms the cornerstone of ASEAN's external affairs, it is economic cooperation that underpins the bloc's internal strength. This year's summit, themed “Shared Prosperity through Regional Innovation and Connectivity,” sought to position ASEAN as a proactive force in shaping global supply chains, harnessing the digital economy, and advancing sustainability amid accelerating global transitions.

## Post-Pandemic Recovery and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint

Three years after the world began emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN economies have largely stabilized. However, the aftershocks remain visible in supply chain vulnerabilities, inflationary pressures,

and the struggle to diversify growth engines. To counter these challenges, ASEAN has placed renewed focus on its AEC Blueprint 2025, which outlines strategic goals to create a highly integrated and cohesive regional economy.

At the summit, key economic indicators showed mixed performance: countries like Vietnam and the Philippines posted impressive GDP growth rates exceeding 6%, while Malaysia and Thailand faced sluggish recoveries due to global demand slowdowns. Nevertheless, ASEAN collectively remains the fifth-largest economy in the world, with a population of over 660 million and a growing middle class that makes the region an attractive investment destination.

- Leaders reaffirmed commitment to completing Phase II of the AEC Blueprint, focusing on:
- Eliminating non-tariff barriers
- Promoting cross-border data flows
- Harmonizing customs and standards
- Facilitating investment in underserved regions

In his opening address, Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong emphasized the need to “future-proof” ASEAN economies by deepening integration, not just within the region but also globally, through



forward-looking trade policies and innovation ecosystems.

## Digital Economy and E-Commerce as Growth Catalysts

A significant portion of the summit was dedicated to accelerating the digital transformation of ASEAN economies. Southeast Asia is currently one of the fastest-growing internet economies in the world. According to estimates, the region's digital economy is expected to exceed USD 400 billion by 2030, driven by mobile-first consumers, rapid fintech adoption, and expanding e-commerce ecosystems.

Key digital economy initiatives discussed at the summit include:

- The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), now in final drafting stages, aims to establish a unified digital market by 2030.
- Implementation of cross-border payment interoperability among ASEAN countries using QR code-based systems. Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have already piloted such systems, improving intra-ASEAN travel and trade efficiency.
- Public-private partnerships to invest in digital infrastructure, including 5G deployment, data centers, and AI research hubs.

The summit also saw the launch of the ASEAN Start-Up Innovation Challenge, where tech entrepreneurs from member states pitched scalable solutions in agriculture, education, and healthcare. These efforts reflect ASEAN's strategy to nurture a vibrant regional digital ecosystem capable of competing globally.

## Green Growth and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Another highlight of the summit was ASEAN's renewed commitment to sustainable development and climate resilience.

Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity. As global pressure mounts to cut carbon emissions, ASEAN leaders acknowledged the need for a "green pivot."

The ASEAN Green Deal, proposed during the summit, outlines a common framework to:

- Promote renewable energy cooperation, especially solar, hydro, and wind projects
- Phase out coal dependency through multilateral financing schemes
- Implement sustainable urban development plans with smart city projects
- Enhance food and water security through climate-adaptive agricultural policies

Indonesia, as this year's chair, led the dialogue on transboundary haze pollution, calling for stricter enforcement of regional environmental standards. Meanwhile, Vietnam unveiled a plan to become carbon neutral by 2050, with support from Japan and the European Union under the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP).

Additionally, the ASEAN Sustainable Finance Taxonomy, a regionally aligned classification system for green and sustainable investments, received its second version update. This aims to direct capital towards eco-friendly infrastructure, low-emission transport, and clean technology.

## Supply Chain Resilience and Strategic Autonomy

In the wake of COVID-19 and ongoing U.S.-China trade disruptions, the issue of supply chain resilience has become central to ASEAN's economic agenda. As global companies reconfigure their production bases to reduce overdependence on China—a phenomenon often referred to as "China Plus One"—ASEAN countries are positioning themselves as attractive alternatives.

At the summit, ministers discussed the creation of an ASEAN Strategic Supply

Chain Fund, designed to invest in key nodes of production and logistics across member states. The fund would target sectors such as semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and electric vehicles (EVs), ensuring critical goods can continue to flow even in times of geopolitical or climate-induced disruption.

Thailand, already a major auto manufacturing hub, proposed the creation of an ASEAN EV Corridor, linking supply chains across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Singapore emphasized the importance of digital traceability systems and AI-powered logistics to monitor trade flows and manage contingencies in real-time.

## Regional Trade Agreements: RCEP and Beyond

Trade liberalization remains a vital tool for ASEAN's economic strategy. The 2025 summit underscored ASEAN's commitment to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the world's largest free trade agreement, comprising 15 Asia-Pacific economies. RCEP offers reduced tariffs, harmonized rules of origin, and greater market access across a region that accounts for roughly 30% of global GDP.

ASEAN leaders called for greater utilization of RCEP provisions, especially by micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which form the backbone of regional economies. The ASEAN Secretariat was tasked with launching an awareness campaign to educate businesses on navigating the RCEP regulatory framework.

Moreover, the bloc is in exploratory talks with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to establish new preferential trade arrangements. As part of ASEAN's external economic diplomacy, such diversification efforts aim to avoid overreliance on any single market or economic bloc.

## Women, Youth, and Inclusive Development

While growth and integration remain central, the summit also addressed inclusive development—ensuring that the



benefits of economic progress reach all layers of society. In 2025, ASEAN adopted a new Framework on Gender and Development, which promotes female participation in STEM, political representation, and entrepreneurship.

Youth delegates from across the region also convened at the ASEAN Future Leaders Forum, held alongside the main summit. Participants engaged in discussions about digital literacy, climate action, and civic engagement. They presented a joint declaration calling on ASEAN leaders to invest in youth-centric policies that reflect generational priorities like climate justice, mental health, and skills training.

The Philippines proposed the creation of an ASEAN Youth Digital Skills Initiative, which aims to train over 10 million young people by 2030 in coding, cybersecurity, data analytics, and AI ethics.

## Tourism, Travel, and Cultural Diplomacy

With pandemic-era travel restrictions largely lifted, ASEAN tourism is on a strong rebound. Countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia are leading the recovery, but all ASEAN members are seeing growing interest from tourists and investors. To capitalize on this momentum, leaders endorsed the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy 2025–2030, emphasizing

ing regional branding, smart tourism technologies, and sustainable heritage conservation.

A pilot project for a common ASEAN visa, particularly for long-term business and leisure travelers, was also presented, modeled loosely on the European Schengen model. While still in early stages, this proposal signals ASEAN's willingness to facilitate greater people-to-people connectivity across borders.

Cultural diplomacy also featured prominently in the summit. The ASEAN Cultural Capital 2025 title was awarded to Luang Prabang, Laos—a move aimed at boosting soft power and preserving regional heritage. Cross-cultural performances, art exhibitions, and interfaith dialogues were held to highlight the region's shared history and diversity.

## Security Architecture, the Myanmar Dilemma, and the Future of ASEAN Unity

As ASEAN reinforces its economic and digital integration, security challenges—both traditional and non-traditional—continue to shape the regional landscape. The 2025 ASEAN Summit emphasized that peace and stability are vital preconditions for prosperity. This

segment of the summit saw frank discussions on maritime disputes, transnational threats, and the evolving crisis in Myanmar—issues that test ASEAN's foundational principle of consensus-based diplomacy.

### Evolving Regional Security Architecture

In a region where sovereignty remains a sensitive issue, ASEAN has long walked a tightrope between maintaining strategic autonomy and navigating the gravitational pull of great power rivalry. The Indo-Pacific continues to be a contested geopolitical theater, and ASEAN's capacity to manage this tension rests largely on its own security frameworks.

At the summit, ministers reaffirmed the role of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and its "Plus" format (which includes dialogue partners such as the U.S., China, India, Japan, and Australia) in fostering transparency and mutual confidence among regional militaries.

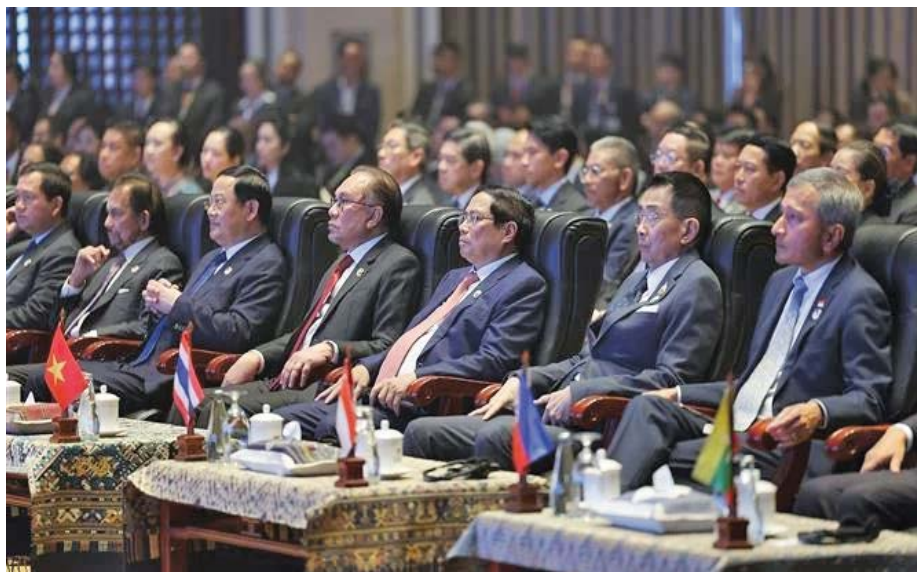
Two important proposals were advanced:

- The ASEAN Peace and Security Charter, designed to elevate the bloc's preventive diplomacy mechanisms. It calls for institutionalized early warning systems and a stronger mandate for the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC).
- A regional mechanism to combat cyber threats and hybrid warfare,



- including a new ASEAN Cyber Shield Initiative, which would include a joint task force to tackle disinformation, financial cybercrime, and critical infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Defense ministers from Indonesia and the Philippines also proposed rotational ASEAN military drills focused on humanitarian assistance, disaster response (HADR), and peacekeeping. While not all members were enthusiastic about joint exercises that might be seen as provocative, the idea of enhanced interoperability gained broad traction.



## Maritime Security and the South China Sea

The South China Sea remains ASEAN's most sensitive flashpoint. While ASEAN does not collectively take sides in sovereignty claims, member states including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei are claimants in overlapping areas with China.

At this year's summit, tensions spiked following several recent incidents involving Chinese coast guard vessels and Filipino resupply ships near Second Thomas Shoal. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. delivered a pointed address, stating:

"We must draw a red line against the coercive use of force in our waters. Freedom of navigation is not negotiable."

ASEAN leaders reiterated their call for the early conclusion of a Code of Conduct (COC) with China—a negotiation that has

dragged on for over two decades. While a draft text exists, differences remain over whether the COC will be legally binding and enforceable.

In parallel, Indonesia hosted a special Track 1.5 maritime dialogue, involving academics, military experts, and diplomats to promote joint maritime domain awareness and sustainable fisheries management. A proposal was floated to establish a Regional Maritime Safety Center under the ASEAN Secretariat to handle emergency response coordination and incident reporting.

The summit also addressed blue economy cooperation, underlining the economic potential of the maritime domain beyond geopolitics—especially for coastal communities dependent on sustainable fishing, marine biotechnology, and clean ocean industries.

## The Myanmar Crisis: ASEAN's Strained Unity

Perhaps no issue has tested ASEAN's cohesion in recent years as much as the crisis in Myanmar. Since the February 2021 military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, the country has descended into widespread violence, with over 4,000 civilians killed and millions displaced.

At the 2025 summit, the junta remained barred from sending political representation, in line with ASEAN's decision to engage only with "non-political representa-

tives" until meaningful progress is made on the Five-Point Consensus. That consensus—agreed in 2021—called for cessation of violence, humanitarian access, and inclusive dialogue, but has largely failed to gain traction.

This year, Thailand and Malaysia led efforts to expand the mandate of the ASEAN Special Envoy on Myanmar. Proposals included:

- Granting the envoy access to all stakeholders, including ethnic armed groups and the National Unity Government (NUG).
- Establishing humanitarian corridors to deliver aid via ASEAN-affiliated NGOs.
- Creating a reporting mechanism to monitor ceasefire violations in real-time.

While some member states pushed for tougher actions, including potential sanctions or expulsion, others—particularly Cambodia and Laos—advocated a more measured approach, citing ASEAN's principles of non-interference.

Civil society groups from the region, however, expressed frustration at ASEAN's perceived inaction. Youth-led protests outside the summit venue in Jakarta called for ASEAN to stop "legitimizing tyranny" and to recognize the NUG as Myanmar's legitimate government.

Despite internal disagreements, ASEAN reiterated its commitment to finding a "Myanmar-led and Myanmar-owned" resolution. The summit communiqué stated:

"ASEAN remains united in its resolve to support the people of Myanmar in their aspirations for peace, democracy, and development."

**ASEAN Centrality and Global Partnerships**

As major powers jostle for influence in Asia, ASEAN continues to assert its role as the anchor of regional multilateralism. Maintaining ASEAN Centrality—the idea that ASEAN should lead the architecture of Asia-Pacific cooperation—was a recurring theme at the summit.



ASEAN's external partners reaffirmed this principle during the 18th East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Plus Three meetings. The United States, represented by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, voiced support for ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook, which emphasizes inclusivity, transparency, and the rule of law.

China, for its part, promised to accelerate Belt and Road projects in the region, including rail connectivity in Laos and energy pipelines across Myanmar and Thailand. Japan and South Korea also pledged investment in digital infrastructure and green energy.

New proposals for ASEAN-EU Blue Partnership, ASEAN-Africa Connectivity Dialogue, and an ASEAN-Pacific Islands Green Energy Initiative reflected ASEAN's expanding diplomatic footprint beyond traditional partners.

Significantly, ASEAN also invited observers from Central Asia and South America to its first ASEAN Global Dialogue Forum, indicating a move to position the bloc as a bridge-builder between Global North and South.

## ASEAN's Institutional Reform: Toward a Rules-Based Bloc?

Several members raised the need for institutional reform within ASEAN itself. Critics

argue that the "ASEAN Way"—consensus, non-interference, and informality—is no longer sufficient to deal with today's complex challenges.

Suggestions for reform included:

- Moving toward qualified majority voting on select economic and environmental issues
- Establishing a Dispute Resolution Mechanism with binding authority under the ASEAN Charter
- Strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat with more resources, autonomy, and technical staff

While no formal changes were enacted at this summit, a high-level task force was created to review the ASEAN Charter by 2026, potentially setting the stage for the bloc's most significant internal transformation since its inception.

## Conclusion: A Test of Relevance in a Turbulent World

The 2025 ASEAN Summit may be remembered as a turning point—not for any singular breakthrough, but for the accumulation of incremental commitments in a time of volatility. From economic integration and digital innovation to security coordination and principled diplomacy, ASEAN is navigating multiple fault lines in the

international system.

Yet the question remains: Can ASEAN move from a reactive coalition to a proactive regional leader?

The summit's outcomes suggest a bloc that is cautiously adapting—still constrained by its principles, yet increasingly aware of the need to evolve. Economic initiatives like the DEFA, sustainability efforts through the ASEAN Green Deal, and regional security coordination point to a more agile, connected, and pragmatic ASEAN.

The Myanmar crisis remains a litmus test for ASEAN's credibility. Until a unified and effective response emerges, critics will continue to challenge the bloc's commitment to its own values.

But even amid these challenges, ASEAN's ability to convene diverse voices, forge consensus, and maintain relative peace in one of the world's most dynamic regions is no small feat. The summit proved that while ASEAN may not be perfect, it remains indispensable.

As Indonesian President Joko Widodo aptly summarized in his final remarks:

"We are not a bloc of the past. We are shaping the future—together."

With foresight, courage, and cooperation, ASEAN may well emerge as the indispensable hub of the Indo-Pacific century.



# Global Hunger Crisis Deepens: UN Report Highlights Alarming Surge in Acute Food Insecurity



By Hina Kashif

The United Nations has issued a stark warning regarding the escalating global hunger crisis. According to the 2025 Global Report on Food Crises, released on May 16, 2025, over 295 million people worldwide experienced acute food insecurity in 2024—the highest number on record. This marks a significant increase from 281.6 million in 2023, continuing a troubling six-year upward trend. The report attributes this surge to a combination of escalating conflicts, climate-related disasters, and economic instability, compounded by a sharp decline in humanitarian aid funding.

## Unprecedented Levels of Hunger and Malnutrition

The report reveals that nearly a quarter of the population in 53 of the 65 countries assessed faced crisis-level or worse hunger. Famine conditions, classified as Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 5, have more than doubled, with 1.9 million people now facing starvation—a

significant increase from the previous year. Particularly severe situations have been reported in Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan, Haiti, and Mali, where conflict and other crises have pushed families to the brink of survival.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the urgency of the situation, stating:

“From Gaza and Sudan to Yemen and Mali, catastrophic hunger driven by conflict and other crises is pushing families to the edge of starvation.”

He further highlighted the paradox of global food production, noting that one-third of all food produced globally is lost or wasted, even as hunger and malnutrition spread faster than the international community can respond.

### 1. Conflict and Violence: The Leading Cause of Hunger

Armed conflict and political violence remain the most significant drivers of food crises globally. As of 2024, over 140 million

people across 20 countries and territories are experiencing acute food insecurity directly due to conflict-related disruptions.

#### Sudan: A Nation in Collapse

The humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan has intensified sharply amid the country's civil war, which reignited in 2023. The internal conflict between rival military factions has devastated the nation's food systems. Agricultural production has ground to a halt in many regions, marketplaces have been destroyed, and critical food supply routes have become impassable due to fighting.

According to the 2024 report, an additional 8.6 million people in Sudan are now facing emergency levels of food insecurity compared to 2022. Many regions are no longer accessible to humanitarian actors, and internally displaced populations are surviving in makeshift camps with limited access to food, clean water, or healthcare.

#### Gaza: Starvation Under Siege

Perhaps the direst example of conflict-in-



duced hunger is found in the Gaza Strip. Since the escalation of hostilities in October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli blockade, the situation has rapidly deteriorated. The Global Report on Food Crises projects that 1.1 million people in Gaza—a staggering 80% of those globally at risk of imminent famine—could descend into famine conditions by July 2024.

The deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid, including food, fuel, and medicine, has turned Gaza into what experts call “the most acute food crisis in modern history.” Entire neighborhoods have been razed, agricultural infrastructure decimated, and civilians left without reliable access to water, food, or sanitation. Infants and young children are particularly vulnerable, with thousands at risk of starvation and disease.

Conflict remains a key factor in food crises in other regions as well, including Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Haiti. Armed violence disrupts every aspect of food security—production, transportation, markets, and access—while also displacing millions, placing immense pressure on host communities and humanitarian systems.

## 2. Climate Shocks: Natural Disasters Disrupting Lives and Livelihoods

Climate-related disasters are becoming increasingly destructive and frequent, contributing significantly to food insecurity in 18 countries and affecting over 77 million people in 2024 alone. These include droughts, floods, cyclones, wildfires, and unseasonal weather patterns that destroy harvests, kill livestock, and displace entire communities.

### 2023: Hottest Year on Record

According to the latest global climate assessment, 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded, with climate extremes worsening across all continents. These changes in weather patterns are no longer isolated events—they are recurring and compounding crises that strain already vulnerable agricultural systems.

In East Africa, for instance, successive years of failed rains have devastated pasto-

ralist communities. Livestock mortality has soared, and chronic drought has left millions in Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia dependent on emergency food aid. At the same time, South and Southeast Asia have experienced catastrophic flooding, destroying rice crops in Bangladesh and Vietnam and displacing thousands.

### Climate Displacement

The destruction of homes, farmland, and water systems due to climate shocks is forcing more people to leave their homes. These climate-displaced populations often lose access to traditional food sources and face limited access to markets or humanitarian support in their new locations. As these shocks grow more frequent, communities have less time to recover between disasters, further entrenching poverty and hunger.



## 3. Economic Instability: The Silent Driver of Hunger

While less visible than bombs or floods, economic instability has emerged as a powerful force behind rising global hunger. The report identifies economic crises—including inflation, currency devaluation, and disruptions in global trade—as the primary drivers of food insecurity in 15 countries, affecting a total of 155 million people.

### Inflation and Devaluation

Skyrocketing inflation in several low- and middle-income countries has drastically eroded household purchasing power. In nations like Lebanon, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Argentina, local currencies have depreciated significantly, making imported

food—often the only source of essential staples—unaffordable for large segments of the population.

For example, in Lebanon, food inflation reached over 200% in late 2023, while in Ethiopia, the cost of basic staples like teff and wheat rose by more than 50% within six months. As prices climb and wages stagnate, more families are forced to reduce both the quantity and quality of their food intake, leading to malnutrition and long-term health consequences.

### Global Market Shocks

Economic instability has also been driven by broader geopolitical disruptions. Ongoing trade tensions, tariff wars, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused supply chain disruptions and price volatility in global food markets.

The war in Ukraine, which disrupted exports of wheat, fertilizer, and sunflower oil from one of the world’s major breadbaskets, continues to reverberate. Countries that depend heavily on these

## Humanitarian Aid in Gaza: A Crisis of Starvation and Disease Amidst Blockade

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has reached catastrophic levels, with over 65,000 children facing imminent death due to malnutrition and disease, according to Gaza authorities. This dire crisis is primarily attributed to Israel’s ongoing genocide, which has severely restricted the flow of essential humanitarian aid into the region.

## The Blockade's Impact on Food Aid

Since the onset of Israel war and genocide on Palestine from October 2023, Israel has imposed stringent restrictions on the entry of food and medical supplies into Gaza. As of September 2024, data revealed that 83% of required food aid was blocked from entering Gaza, a significant increase from 34% in 2023. This obstruction has led to a dramatic reduction in the daily caloric intake of Gaza's population, with many residents now subsisting on one meal every other day.

The blockade has also disrupted the operations of bakeries, leaving them non-operational for extended periods and depriving civilians of their primary source of bread. Such measures have exacerbated food insecurity, pushing the population towards the brink of famine.



## Health Crisis: Starvation and Disease

The lack of access to adequate nutrition has led to widespread malnutrition, particularly among children. Approximately 50,000 children aged between 6 to 59 months urgently require treatment for malnutrition. Without immediate intervention, these children face life-threatening conditions.

In addition to malnutrition, the blockade has hindered the delivery of medical supplies, leading to shortages of essential medicines and medical equipment. For instance, 65% of the required insulin and half of the necessary blood supplies are

unavailable in Gaza. This shortage has compromised the ability to treat chronic conditions and manage medical emergencies.

The destruction of water and sanitation infrastructure has further compounded the health crisis. Over 70% of sewage pumps and all wastewater treatment plants have been destroyed, leading to the accumulation of untreated waste near populated areas. Consequently, waterborne diseases such as acute diarrhea, skin infections, and hepatitis A have surged, affecting more than a quarter of Gaza's population.

## Legal and Ethical Concerns

International organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the United Nations, have condemned Israel's actions

as violations of international humanitarian law. The deliberate obstruction of food and medical aid, along with the destruction of civilian infrastructure, constitutes collective punishment and is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions.

The International Criminal Court is considering issuing arrest warrants for senior Israeli officials for depriving the civilian population in Gaza of "objects indispensable to human survival," including clean water and medical supplies. These actions have been characterized as war crimes, and there is growing international pressure for accountability.

## International Response and Calls for Action

The international community has expressed grave concern over the humanitarian situation in Gaza. In May 2025, leaders from the United Kingdom, France, and Canada issued a joint statement condemning Israel's military actions in Gaza and warning of potential sanctions. They described the humanitarian situation as intolerable and criticized Israel's limited allowance of aid into Gaza as grossly inadequate.

Despite these calls for action, the blockade remains in place, and humanitarian aid continues to be obstructed. The situation is further complicated by political dynamics and security concerns, making it challenging to implement effective solutions.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is a result of deliberate actions that have led to widespread starvation, disease, and suffering. The blockade and obstruction of aid violate international law and have devastating consequences for the civilian population. Immediate and sustained international pressure is required to lift the blockade, allow unrestricted humanitarian access, and ensure the protection of civilians. Failure to act will result in further loss of life and a deepening humanitarian catastrophe.

The situation in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of conflict and the importance of upholding international humanitarian principles. It is imperative that the international community takes decisive action to address the crisis and prevent further suffering.

## A Call for Global Action

In response to the escalating crisis, international organizations and governments are calling for urgent action to address the underlying causes of food insecurity. This includes investing in sustainable agriculture, improving food systems, and enhancing crisis preparedness. The report emphasizes the need for coordinated efforts to transform food systems and boost agricultural and rural development, alongside greater crisis preparedness and critical lifesaving assistance at scale, where people need it most.



As the world faces an unprecedented hunger crisis, the international community must prioritize collective action to address the root causes and provide support to those in need. The time to act is now, to prevent further loss of life and to build a more resilient and equitable global food system.

## Britain, Canada, and France Threaten Sanctions Against Israel Over Gaza Offensive

The leaders of the United Kingdom, Canada, and France have issued a joint warning to Israel, threatening sanctions if it does not cease its renewed military offensive in Gaza and lift restrictions on humanitarian aid. The Israeli military announced the commencement of a new operation on Friday, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stating that Israel aims to take control of the entire Gaza Strip. International experts have already warned of an impending famine in the region.

In a joint statement, the British government condemned Israel's denial of essential

humanitarian assistance to the civilian population, describing it as unacceptable and potentially in violation of international humanitarian law. The statement also expressed opposition to any attempts to expand settlements in the West Bank and indicated that the three countries would not hesitate to take further action, including targeted sanctions, if Israel does not alter its course.

In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu accused the leaders of London, Ottawa, and Paris of rewarding the October 7 genocidal attack on Israel and inviting more such atrocities. He emphasized that Israel will defend itself by just means until total victory is achieved, reiterating Israel's conditions to end the war, which include the release of the remaining hostages and the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip.

Since the start of March, Israel has blocked the entry of medical, food, and fuel supplies into Gaza in an effort to pressure Hamas into freeing the hostages taken during the October 7, 2023, attack. The United Kingdom, France, and Canada have criticized this blockade, calling it a violation of international humanitarian law and urging Israel to allow the free flow of aid into Gaza.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated significantly, with Gaza's Health Ministry reporting over 53,000 Palestinians killed in the ongoing conflict. Humanitarian organizations and 21 countries, including the UK, France, and Canada, have criticized the limited aid as insufficient and urged Israel to fully reopen access and cease military actions. Critics have raised ethical concerns about the U.S.-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation's aid distribution plan, perceiving it as a mechanism for forced population displacement.

The United Kingdom, France, and Canada have expressed their support for efforts led by the United States, Qatar, and Egypt for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. They have also reiterated their commitment to recognizing a Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution to the conflict.

Hamas has welcomed the joint statement, describing the stance as "an important step" in the right direction toward restoring the principles of international law.

The conflict, which began with the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack, has resulted in significant casualties on both sides and continues to strain international relations.



# Water Wars - Is this the beginning of an Indo-Pak conflict War in South Asia?

*(Water is a public health issue and a household concern today)*



By Zeeshan A. Shah

The Earth is blue, not green. According to science, 70% of our planet's surface is covered by the ocean, leaving the remaining portion to fight for. Why does the human race fight for space and territorial dominance? Simply because to conquer is the oldest ambition known to mankind.

Every year on World Water Day today, we pledge to save water to survive. In the age of cyber wars and climate change, we are at a loss of water resources, with imminent threats of water wars as many continents from Africa to Europe, Asia to Middle East face a developing water crisis.

Water Wars were predicted time and again, with battle lines drawn by nations over water resources making water the new weapon of war. According to reports, over 6000-7000 deaths take place each year due to local land and water disputes, leading to civilian casualties and mass migrations.

The world is entering a more decisive phase of water wars. From a historical perspective, Syria, Iraq and Turkey occupy a conflict zone over shared rivers- the Tigris and Euphrates. In Africa, the same situation persisted in the construction of the Renaissance Dam over the Blue Nile. In Yemen's war, over 5 million residents have faced devastating consequences, due to water scarcity after was ravaged the nation.

In the Middle East, the largest dam in Iraq -the Mosul Dam that controls major water arteries is now the center of battle between Daesh and Kurdish Iraqi forces, whereby water cut-offs and dam takeovers are used as tools to control and manipulate governments. A devastating battle for resources in Israel -Palestine war is currently under-way where deadly attacks on water resources have left deep scars on the land and its people where women and children have been ruthlessly slaughtered and further deprived of drinking water leading to mass

casualties, with no hope in sight.

Analysts have indicated that the civil war in Syria was a direct result of the intense drought of 2007 with over 0.5 million people massacred and 20 million people displaced, in the event that triggered a major water war. Starting on 2011, the war finally ends in 2025 with sanctions being lifted on Syria's new government.

During the Gulf war of 1991, American forces destroyed water resources and infrastructure, leading to the rise of Daesh and a huge water crisis, as a by-product of the American Invasion. So far, America has not won any of the wars they started.

In South Asia alone, there are clear signs of a water dispute which could culminate in a full-blown water war. The recent incident of war games in the skies is an example of how escalations occur. Less than a month back, India provoked Pakistan with a



false flag operation that went south. The result saw major fire power from Pakistan resulting in the first major air battle between the two nations since 1971.

In a one-day fly over operation that practically destroyed India's fleet of French Rafhael Air Fighters – the most advanced fighter planes in the world, Pakistan's response was celebrated with triumph and jubilation. While India suffered a major loss, the stock price for French Rafael planes plummeted by 30%, after Pakistan Air Force took down 3 Rafhael fighter jets in the skies, leaving China to occupy tech space after testing their tech-prototypes in the cyber wars, supporting Pakistan.

Not all the wars are fought in the skies.

There is another type of war going on between India and Pakistan – a nuclear flashpoint in South Asia. This could be the beginning of a water war that could affect hundreds of millions of people. Earlier this month, India once again threatened to break away from the 1991 water Accords with Pakistan by cutting off water resources from the two major river arteries, that supply water to Pakistan.

The construction of dams on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan could dry out fresh water banks, with frequent activity on the Indian border to construct dams. In fact, by deliberately choking Chenab River during Pakistan's dry season, India is clearly violating international law and the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). Our cities and farmers are being deprived of water. Pakistan has to respond on this economic warfare with the end objective to force India to release water as per IWT.

It's a 3 part-strategy to apply for Pakistan: 1) Legal path – Forcing India to abide by rulings of the ICJ, UNSC, World Bank. 2) Diplomatic Pressure- Rally OIC, UN, China, Russia and Iran to condemn India's water terrorism. 3) Military Action on India. A likely option 3 scenario could occur with Pakistan hitting Indian Air Defense and securing Salal Dam (nearest reservoir) close to Sialkot-Punjab, pushing into Jammu and Kashmir and restores flow. The Missile shield (Nasr/Babar) would deter Indian counter attack leading to a quick bounce back to border for Pakistan and mission success.

Failure of the Indus Water Treaty would definitely lead to extended war between both nations however abiding by IWT is vital for both nations.

Facts reveal that the total combined volume of water in all 3 rivers on the Western Front is approximately 180 million acre-feet (MAF). Moreover, the total combined reservoir capacity of India on all three rivers is approximately 1.8 million (1% of total water). The Indus Water treaty allows up to 3.6 million acre-feet (2%). Hence, India's current storage capacity is even less than what is allowed.

In this scenario, India can cut water-flow for a short-time only, till reservoirs fill up completely which may take 5- 7 days maximum with minimal threat to the crops across the border in Pakistan. Due to risk of flooding on both sides of the border, India may not release water in large quantities as it may cause excessive flooding within India itself before floods reach Pakistan.

Pakistan needs to play the game right. Researchers predicted that 200-300 million people in Pakistan are feared to be running out of safe drinking water. The race to acquire equitable distribution of water





resources must be a priority for Pakistan. Till date, there has been no water policy approved by the government of Pakistan which must be done immediately.

In 1991, as per the water accord, it was documented that downstream water supply to Pakistan would be mandatory and a survey will also be conducted to oversee the exact amount of water supply required based on high malnutrition and water scarcity in the province. Moreover, flash floods of 2022 left people devastated and destroyed infrastructure in Pakistan.

Some of immediate required measures for Pakistan include 1) *Review the Water Accord of 1991* – Through possible construction of new dams. For example, Tarbela Dam was commissioned forty years back, where Sindh received an additional 7.0 million-acre-feet (MAF) of water that led to the cultivation of over 27 lakh acres of land. 2) *Infrastructure investments* – by repairing existing water supply avenues and build water treatment plants. 3) *Water Conservation* – Through social media awareness

campaigns launches in populated areas of major cities to minimize water-wastage. 4) *Harvesting rainwater* – At individual and community levels to sustain available water. 5) *Desalination* – By exploring extra source of freshwater in coastal areas and building desalination plants 6) *Good governance* – By implementing transparent laws that may govern water management practices. 7) *Partnerships* – Private partnerships with government to ensure water service delivery to end consumers.

Quoting a famous book, “*The Price of Thirst*” – water Scarcity and the coming chaos, the author documented three big challenges that every government has to resolve- the rise of extremism, privatization of water resources and water scarcity must be addressed to eradicate potential waters wars.

A UN report has confirmed that by 2025, the world would face the global water shortage of 40%, where global demand for water will increase by 55% by 2050. Safe drinking water is shrinking globally, with a

multiplied damage due to rising climate change as over 90% of the world countries share river basins and lakes. Today, a 100 liters of waters per person per day is barely enough.

Questions remain. *Are banks financing water projects for public utilization? Are government adopting water policies and implementing water laws? Is there a country water policy for Pakistan and other poor nations? In the 1950s, 2.5 billion people. By 2050, 40% of global youth will migrate to Asia, another 50% may decide to migrate to Africa. Global GDP will triple, natural resource consumption will double and we will see increased climate risk. Without water, there will be no future growth for many emerging nations, including Pakistan.*

The right to clean and safe drinking water is the primary challenge for both nations and igniting a water war by India would be harmful for India as well. The matter should be immediately tabled for action through bilateral talks between the two governments government to prevent the next big war in South Asia.





# Pakistan's Policy Efforts Bear Fruit, says IMF



By Javed Mahmood

The authorities' policy efforts have continued to bear fruit. Financial and external conditions have continued to improve, with a current account surplus in the first eight months of FY25 and reserves exceeding program projections. Inflation has recently declined to historical lows, although core inflation remains elevated at around 9 percent. The economic recovery is continuing, although growth in FY25H1 was somewhat lower than anticipated. Program Performance. The 37-month Extended Arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF), approved on September 25, 2024, is on track.

All seven QPCs and five of the eight ITs were met at end-December. Most continuous and other SBs were met. Completion of the first EFF review would make available SDR 760 million (about US\$1 billion) bringing total disbursements to SDR 1,520 million.

## EFF Policies

Continued strong and timely program implementation remains critical to

safeguard recent hard-won economic stability and support sustainable growth. The FY25 primary surplus target is on track, but further fiscal reforms are necessary to strengthen revenue mobilization and reduce debt, while creating space for social and development spending. Monetary policy should remain tight and data-dependent to ensure that inflation stays moderate, within the SBP's target range. A more flexible exchange rate remains critical to absorb shocks and support the rebuilding of reserves.

Efforts to ensure energy sector cost recovery via timely tariff adjustments remain necessary, supported by broader reforms to restore viability and reduce the sector's high costs. Structural reforms to improve governance and the trade and investment environment need to deepen, to support stronger, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

## RSF Request

The proposed arrangement under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF), with access set at 49.2 percent of

quota (equivalent to SDR 1 billion), aims to reduce Pakistan's balance of payments stability risks stemming from climate vulnerabilities.

## Reform Measures

The reforms aim to: (i) prioritize resilience to natural disasters and strengthen public investment processes at all levels of government; (ii) make the use of scarce water resources more efficient, including through better pricing; (iii) strengthen coordination of natural disaster response and financing between federal and provincial governments; (iv) improve the information architecture, for and disclosure of, climate-related risks by banks and corporates; and (v) support Pakistan's efforts to meet its mitigation commitments and reduce related macro-critical risks.

## Fiscal and External Performance

Financial and external conditions have continued to improve, but growth

softened more than expected in FY25H1: Economic activity and inflation. Following 2.5 percent GDP growth in FY24, growth slowed somewhat in H1, recording 1.3 percent and 1.7 percent (YOY) in FY25 Q1 and Q2, respectively, reflecting lower yields from the major Kharif crops and still-subdued industrial activity. Inflation fell to 0.7 percent External conditions and the FX market. The current account recorded a surplus of US\$0.7 billion in the first eight months of FY25, a significant improvement from the US\$1.7 billion deficit in the same period of FY24. This reflects strong remittances and resilient exports, which offset higher imports. Gross international reserves exceeded program targets and stood at

of tight monetary policy and easing of commodity prices, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) cut the policy rate by a cumulative 1,000 bps between June 2024 and January 2025, before holding it at 12 percent in (YOY) in March driven by tight macro policies and, principally, lower food and energy prices. However, core inflation is still elevated at around 9 percent. Private sector credit growth has moderated, containing growth in monetary aggregates, and following a temporary spike during FY25Q2 (25 percent Q-o-Q), reflecting banks' efforts to circumvent a tax on their income from government securities.

## Fiscal developments

Fiscal performance in FY25H1 was strong,



US\$10.7 billion at end-March 2025, down from a peak of US\$12 billion in November, reflecting ongoing government debt service. The SBP continued foreign exchange purchases, benefiting from the generally improved financial conditions, which were also reflected in a broadly stable exchange rate since program approval.

Sovereign bond spreads declined sharply over the past year and stabilized at around 600 bps in March before rising by more than 300 bps following the April 2 tariff announcements. There has been no discernible parallel market pressure and interbank and open market rates remain aligned. Effective January 1, 2025, the SBP adopted a new regulatory framework for Exchange Companies.

## Monetary policy

Following the rapid disinflation on the back

continuing the discipline observed in FY24. The general government recorded an underlying primary surplus of PKRs 2,264 billion (2.0 percent of GDP). FBR revenue grew by 26 percent year-on-year but fell short of end-September and end-December targets due to lower-than-expected sales tax and import duties amid subdued imports and growth. Direct tax collection overperformed, partially offsetting the shortfall in indirect taxes, alongside stronger non-tax and provincial tax revenues. Provinces met their aggregate primary surplus commitments. BISP spending met its targets, while expenditures on subsidies, grants, health, education and federal PSDP were below budget projections due to administrative delays.

## Energy sector

The flow of power sector circular debt (CD) strongly overperformed September and

December, rising PRs 166 billion from end-June through February 2025 (well below the March IT of PRs 554 billion), with the stock standing at PRs 2,530 billion (2.2 percent of GDP) by end-February. This was driven by strong collection performance; lower interest charges on arrears amid falling interest rates; and timely and favorable intra-year tariff adjustments, which countered higher-than-expected losses and supported a reduction in electricity tariffs by roughly PRs 5/kWh between July 2024 and March 2025. In the gas sector, continued timely gas tariff adjustments also contained net CD flow to PRs 28 billion during July–December 2024, limiting the stock to PRs 2,842 billion (2.7 percent of GDP), a provisional estimate.

## Program Performance

The authorities met all seven quantitative PCs for end-December 2024: the floors on (i) net international reserves of the SBP; (ii) targeted cash transfer spending; and (iii) the number of new tax returns from new filers; and the ceilings on (iv) net domestic assets of the SBP; (v) the SBP's FX swap/forward book; (vi) the general government primary budget deficit; and (vii) government guarantees. They also met both continuous PCs on (i) zero new flow of SBP credit to the government; and (ii) zero external public payment arrears.

## Indicative targets

The majority of ITs were met at end-December, including the ceilings on: (i) the aggregate provincial primary budget deficit; (ii) net accumulation of tax refund arrears; and (iii) power sector payment arrears; and the floors on: (iv) revenues collected by provincial revenue authorities; and (v) the weighted average maturity of local currency debt securities. However, the ITs at end-December were missed for the floors on (i) government health and education spending; (ii) net tax revenues collected by the FBR; and (iii) net tax revenues collected from retailers under the Tajir Dost scheme.

## Structural benchmarks

Nine SBs were met, including on approval of a National Fiscal Pact, improving safeguards for monetary policy operations and approval of amendments to bank resolution and deposit legislation. Three



continuous SBs on not granting tax amnesties, seeking ex-ante parliamentary approval for any non-budgeted expenditures, and the maximum average premium between the interbank and open market rates were also met. The SB on provincial Agricultural Income Tax (AIT) legislation was not met at end-October, but this legislation was subsequently passed in February 2025, while another two SBs were missed due to delays in passing amendments to the Civil Servants and Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF) Acts, respectively. Finally, two SBs relating to resolving undercapitalized banks and to captive power producers were missed, but subsequent policy actions are expected to accomplish the underlying objectives.

## Outlook And Risks

The baseline macroeconomic projections reflect a moderately lower outlook for near-term activity, including due to the impact of higher US tariffs on Pakistan (Box 1), while inflation and current account deficits are also revised down.

## GDP and Inflation

FY25 growth is revised down to 2.6 percent based on the weaker activity in H1 and broader global uncertainty, but the recent monetary easing is expected to support an acceleration in FY25H2 and beyond. FY25 inflation is also revised down, although it is projected to increase notably in the coming months due to adverse base effects, with a durable return to the target range (5–7 percent) expected during FY26 provided policy remains appropriately tight.

- **Balance of Payments.** The current account deficit (CAD) for FY25 is now projected at about US\$0.2 billion (0.1 percent of GDP), helped by resilient exports and a stronger remittance outlook, as improved macro and FX stability has supported a rebound in remittance inflows through formal channels. Over the medium term, the CAD is expected to widen modestly to around 1 percent of GDP as imports rebound. Gross international reserves are expected to continue to strengthen, supported by financing committed by multilateral and bilateral creditors, as well as prospective RSF disbursements (US\$1.3 billion). Access to external commercial financing is expected to remain limited during the

program, with a small “Panda” bond issuance anticipated in FY26, ahead of a gradual return to the Eurobond/Global Sukuk market assumed in FY27, reflecting a restoration of policy credibility.

## Fiscal Indicators

The FY25 primary deficit target is within reach, although reflecting the anticipated lower nominal GDP in FY25, nominal tax revenues have been revised down, and efforts to accelerate revenue collection will continue in the coming months. Offsetting expenditure savings are expected to deliver

main immediate risk relates to policy slippages given pressures to ease policies and provide tax and other concessions and subsidies to connected interests. An intensification of political or social tensions could also weigh on policy and reform implementation. Finally, climate-related risks are substantial, driven by both Pakistan’s high exposure to natural disasters and large adaptation and mitigation needs.

## EFF Policy Discussions

The authorities remain committed to achieving an underlying general



the programmed FY25 nominal EFF primary balance. Ongoing revenue mobilization and spending rationalization efforts, including with considerable CD assistance, are expected to support the fiscal path for FY26 and beyond.

- **Public debt.** Under the baseline, public debt remains sustainable over the medium term. Notwithstanding the continuation of fiscal consolidation and progress with lengthening maturities of domestic debt, near-term risks of sovereign stress remain high, reflecting Pakistan’s very large gross financing needs and past challenges in obtaining external financing.

Downside risks have declined somewhat but remain high. Uncertainties around the impact of recent tariff announcements on Pakistan’s economic and financial conditions are significant, with risks skewed to the downside. More broadly, geopolitically driven increases in commodity prices, tightening in global financial conditions, weakening of remittances, or higher trade barriers in other trading partners could adversely affect external stability. The other

government primary surplus of 1.0 percent of GDP in FY25. The nominal fiscal targets have been recalibrated to reflect the weaker outlook for nominal GDP, while preserving the original objectives in percent of GDP terms. The fiscal position relies more on federal non-tax revenue, projected at 3.0 percent of GDP. Provincial tax authorities have also demonstrated robust performance, supporting the overall fiscal effort. Achieving the FY25 primary balance target will require:

- **Strengthening tax revenue collection** to ensure general government revenue reaches 12.3 percent of GDP in FY25, including FBR collections of 10.6 percent of GDP (PRs 12,332 billion). To support this effort, revenue administration measures to reduce the compliance gap will continue, focusing on compliance risk management (CRM), digital value chain monitoring, and detection of irregularities in sales tax returns, as well as closer monitoring of irregular import patterns and strengthened faceless customs assessments. The authorities are also actively pursuing the

resolution of outstanding litigation cases (PRs 367 billion of a total of PRs 770 billion under dispute in these cases), including those before the Supreme Court (PRs 43 billion), High Courts in Islamabad, Sindh, and Lahore (PRs 217 billion), and the Appellate Tribunal Inland Revenue (PRs 104 billion). The Supreme Court has completed its initial hearing, with a final decision expected by mid-April. A favorable ruling could effectively resolve related cases worth an estimated PRs 120 billion. Resolving these cases will help clarify the legal basis for federal taxation of the disputed claims, thereby supporting future revenue by reducing uncertainty and discouraging future litigation.

- Containing primary expenditure to PRs 15,958 billion (13.8 percent of GDP), while preserving space for priority social spending. Expected savings relative to the budget include PRs 54 billion from unnecessary energy subsidies reflecting overperformance and PRs 188 billion from unused contingency allocations. An additional PKRs 87 billion will be withheld from the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) allocation as a contingency to cover gaps that could emerge if litigation cases are not resolved favorably or on time, as the timing and outcome of these cases (currently expected in May and June) are uncertain. While fiscally prudent, this measure could slow the implementation of ongoing development projects. Proportional expenditure cuts will be applied in the event of a revenue shortfall.

## Provincial and Federal Tax reforms

In a significant achievement, provinces have amended their AIT regimes to align with federal income tax rules, with implementation starting January 2025 and collection in September 2025 (end-October 2024 SB). With support from both the World Bank and the IMF, provinces are now preparing implementation plans to operationalize the new legislation, including compliance measures and communication/information campaigns. Progress also continues transitioning the goods and services tax (GST) on services to a negative list, effective FY26, and on moving to a capital-based property tax. As a pilot initiative, all tax policy proposals for

the FY26 budget will undergo cost-benefit analysis, with a full review of tax expenditures also being conducted so that cost-ineffective measures to be phased out starting July 1, 2025. Strengthening tax administration. Compliance risk management (CRM) systems are now operational in the Large Taxpayer Offices (LTOs) in Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore (end December 2024 SB), and have also been extended to the Corporate Tax Units. The FBR has integrated internal data and will incorporate third-party information, with the final goal of developing an automated CRM system. While the Tajir Dost scheme (FBR initiative to bring traders and retailers into the tax net through simplified registration and fixed monthly tax liabilities) has underperformed, recent



increases in withholding taxes on unregistered retailers have yielded positive results, including a 51 percent year-on-year increase in filers among retailers, wholesalers, and traders, and a 38 percent increase in filers with positive tax liabilities as of January 2025.

A new indicative target (new IT) on income tax revenue from this group has been introduced to monitor progress on bringing retailers into the tax net. To further improve compliance, a bill has been submitted to Parliament proposing the elimination of the “non-filer” category, which, if approved, would restrict non-filers from engaging in key economic transactions such as vehicle and real estate purchases. In parallel, efforts to improve compliance and expand the tax base will be monitored under a modified QPC on the number of new taxpayers with a positive tax liability.

## Federal-provincial fiscal relations

On September 30, 2024, the federal government and all provincial governments signed the National Fiscal Pact. The pact is an ambitious effort to rebalance spending responsibilities and better align provincial and federal taxation policies. Provinces agreed to the devolution of specific expenditures from the federal to provincial governments in line with the 18th Constitutional Amendment. Provinces have also committed to enhancing tax collection, and implementation efforts are underway. Starting in FY26, all new PSDP projects impacting just one province are expected to be financed directly from provincial budgets. The federal right-sizing

exercise is progressing, with Phase IV currently underway and implementation of Phase I recommendations nearly complete (September 2024 SB). The right-sizing committee is expected to finalize recommendations for all ministries by the end of June 2025. Ambitions over the extent of federal streamlining under the federal government’s right-sizing efforts, however, may need to increase so that they (as outlined in the National Fiscal Pact) correspond to the extent of the reallocation of expenditure mandates under the 18th constitutional amendment. Staff also recommended that the authorities develop a framework to guide provincial investment of their accumulated cash surpluses in government securities through non-competitive bidding.



# Bridging the Divide: The Digital Gender Gap in Pakistan and Its Impact on Women's Earning Potential and Empowerment

By Kainaat Asad

In a world defined by digital connectivity and innovation, access to digital technologies is no longer a privilege but a requirement. However, in Pakistan, a large portion of its population—namely, women—are still excluded from the digital revolution. The digital gender divide in Pakistan can be understood as the difference between men and women in access to, use of, and enjoyment of digital technologies like mobile phones, internet use, and digital competencies. This divide profoundly impedes the participation of women in the digital economy, gain access to learning resources, and the exercise of agency both in private and public domains. While there have been gains in the expansion of the internet and mobile penetration, Pakistan remains one of the nations with the biggest digital gender gap. This situation is especially acute in rural settings and among poorer communities.

The gender digital divide in Pakistan is not simply a matter of technology but indicative of underlying inequality in society. The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023 states that just 21% of Pakistani women have access to a smartphone, while virtually 50% of men possess one. Besides, only 19% of women access mobile internet services compared to more than 40% of men. In rural settings, the differences are even more pronounced—only 13% of women claimed to have used the internet during the previous three months. This disparity arises due to a sophisticated combination of cultural, economic, and structural barriers that sustain women's digital exclusion.

Conservative gender norms in most regions of Pakistan limit women's access to digital technologies. A widespread concern is that the internet and smartphones will expose women and girls to "immoral" content or bring shame to families. Such perceptions frequently lead to families refusing



women access to digital devices or censoring their use. This limitation is not so much about regulating information as about a general tendency to restrict women's autonomy. Access to the digital world gives women the ability to access education, employment, and health for themselves—qualities that can subvert traditional gender hierarchies. By withholding digital access from women, society reinforces their dependency and erasure.

Financial dependence is the other key cause of the digital gender gap. Most women in Pakistan, especially in poor families, do not have their own income and so cannot afford a smartphone or an internet subscription. Even if the device is in the household, men are likely to be favoured for its usage.

A study by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) with UN Women finds that economic restrictions are a main factor behind women's exclusion from the digital sphere since digital instruments and services tend to be seen as non-essential for women. Lack of economic autonomy thus manifests itself in the form of digital marginalization.

Digital literacy is a major impediment to bridging the gender gap. Most women, particularly in rural regions, have minimal exposure to digital tools and no training to utilize them. Public education systems hardly offer computer literacy or digital skills courses, especially for girls. Even in urban areas, access to formal digital literacy programs is minimal.

A World Bank report of 2021 stressed that without deliberate attempts to educate women and girls in digital skills, current inequalities will only widen in the digital era. This gap in education feeds a vicious cycle wherein women are kept digitally excluded and economically dependent.

Women who do get access to online platforms tend to be threatened by cyber harassment in the form of blackmail, trolling, and defamation. This discourages women from engaging in online spaces and prevents the use of social media for networking or entrepreneurship. As per a study by Digital Rights Foundation, more than 70% of Pakistani women internet users have faced online harassment of some kind. Ineffective implementation of the

cybercrimes law and insufficient education in digital safety only make the situation worse.

The digital gender divide continues to enforce economic exclusion. Without internet access, women cannot learn new things, find work, or start online businesses. Even talented and ambitious women have few options for fulfilling their capabilities. This exclusion is especially unforgiving to women-headed families and widows who must earn but are met with many socio-digital hindrances.

Women also experience emotional and psychological trauma. The limitation of digital liberty contributes to a feeling of loneliness and low self-esteem. Numerous women feel as if they are outsiders in a world that becomes more and more centered on connection. When basic rights like expression, information, and economic engagement are withheld, the outcome is not exclusion but systemic oppression.

During disasters or health emergencies, women without access to digital media are the last to be informed about life-saving information. During political unrest or election periods, women cannot participate or make choices, thereby being disenfranchised.

The digital gender divide directly constrains women from benefiting from the gig economy, being part of e-commerce, or becoming digital entrepreneurs. New windows of opportunities are opened through the digital space through remote employment, freelancing, online instruction, and small enterprises, but women in Pakistan remain underrepresented within these.

For instance, freelance websites like Upwork and Fiverr have provided a means of income for thousands worldwide. Yet Pakistani women make up less than 20% of the nation's freelancers. Likewise, online shopping platforms like Daraz and Instagram businesses are controlled by urban, tech-aware men or a small number of privileged women who have the proper support.

In addition, digital exclusion restricts access to financial services. Most women are unbanked or do not know about mobile banking and digital wallets, which are

essential for online business operations. Digital platforms have become essential tools for civic participation, political engagement, and activism. Women's exclusion from these spaces results in underrepresentation in public debate and decision-making. Social media platforms, which otherwise could amplify women's voices, are inaccessible to most. The digital divide silences not just women but also robs the country of their input to policy, innovation, and social development.

Gender gaps in digital access also create health and access disparities. In the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, health information regarding hygiene, symptoms, and vaccination was largely communicated digitally. Women who did not have smartphones or the internet were less aware and more exposed. Telemedicine and digital health platforms, capable of revolutionizing women's healthcare, particularly in rural locations, are not utilized fully because they have limited access and digital literacy.

## Government and Civil Society Actions

Though the challenges are immense, some attempts have been made to fill the gap:

1. **Digital Pakistan Policy (2018):** It is meant to improve digital infrastructure and facilitate inclusion. But it does not have a robust gender-oriented strategy.
2. **UN Women and ITU Partnership:** Both of these agencies have initiated a number of programs with the aim of enhancing digital literacy for women and bringing about gender-responsive ICT policies.
3. **Girls Can Code Program:** Organized by Code for Pakistan and other local organizations, this program teaches young girls coding and computer literacy.
4. **Women-Led Startups:** Incubators such as NIC Karachi and Plan9 are increasingly supporting women-led startups, although much more is required to make these opportunities widely available.

### 1. Invest in Digital Literacy

In rural Pakistan, many girls and women

have never seen a computer or smartphone, much less learned how to use them for learning or earning. Public schools do not have computer labs, and community centers are nonexistent. To fill this gap:

- Government initiatives such as "Taleemabad" or the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) can include digital skills in their training for women.
- Small-scale digital literacy programs already implemented by NGOs such as CodeGirls Karachi and SheSkills can be scaled up across provinces to have a national impact.
- Down-farm mobile tech vans like health vans can move to remote areas and conduct on-site digital training.

## 2. Subsidized Devices and Internet

Smartphones, laptops, and internet packages are unaffordable for Pakistani women, especially lower-income and rural ones.

- The Ministry of IT and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) might partner with telecom operators to launch low-cost mobile packages for women.
- Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) might launch a "Digital Access Grant" to equip women with basic smartphones and data vouchers.
- Tax relief on smartphones for women entrepreneurs or students would also make them more affordable.

## 3. Gender-Sensitive Policies

Existing ICT and digital policies tend to be gender-insensitive and do not specifically address or prioritize women's digital inclusion.

- The National Broadband Policy and Digital Pakistan Policy must have specific quotas, targets, and budgetary allocations for women's digital access and training.
- Government ICT boards and policy institutions must have female members who can represent



- gender-specific needs.
- Policies should also support women-only internet cafes or tech spaces in conservative communities to address cultural concerns.

#### 4. Cyber Safety Measures

Online harassment is one of the leading reasons women hesitate to engage in digital spaces in Pakistan.

- Strengthen FIA's Cyber Crime Wing by increasing its female staff, improving response time, and making it accessible in all provinces.
- Launch awareness campaigns in Urdu and regional languages about reporting mechanisms and digital safety.
- Establish "Women's Cyber Help Desks" in police stations or local administrative offices to deal with gender-specific cases in a secure environment.
- Schools must incorporate digital citizenship education, such as online rights, privacy, and cyberbullying.

#### 5. Include ICT in Education

Girls' schools, especially public ones, tend to be under-equipped and under-resourced, lacking even basic access to computers.

- The Ministry of Education must include computer literacy as part of the core curriculum from middle school level onwards.
- Develop digital training modules for women teachers so they feel empowered to teach technology.
- Partner with organizations like Google for Education or Microsoft Education to implement affordable or no-cost learning tools within schools.

#### 6. Empower Female Role Models in Tech

Women working in Pakistan's technology industry are few and far between, and the successful ones usually go unnoticed to the broader audience.

- Initiate national media campaigns

highlighting stories of successful Pakistani women in freelancing, app development, e-commerce, etc.

- Utilize channels such as PTV, FM radio, and TikTok to promote digital women entrepreneurs—particularly in regional languages.
- Establish "Digital Women Awards" under the Ministry of IT to recognize achievements and generate visibility.

#### 7. Public-Private Partnerships

No individual actor can close this gap by themselves; concerted efforts are needed.

- Telecom giants such as Jazz, Telenor, and Zong can partner with learning institutions to provide free online learning platforms for women.



- Gadget companies such as Daraz, Easypaisa, and Careem can provide internships or online onboarding sessions for women entrepreneurs.
- Local universities can get associated with NGOs to provide free bootcamps among low-income groups.

#### 8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Lack of proper data leaves attempts to curb the digital gender gap directionless.

- The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) and NADRA can gather gender-disaggregated information on digital access, literacy, and usage patterns.
- A Digital Inclusion Index for women can be prepared and released annually to monitor progress.
- Independent watchdogs and research institutions can be supported to undertake impact assessments of digital inclusion programs at the district level.

The digital gender gap in Pakistan is greater than a technological lag; it is a socio-economic injustice which limits women's rights to work, education, health, and public life. Closing the gap is not only important for gender equality but for national development and economic

growth as well. Pakistan has to ensure that women are not left behind as Pakistan advances on its path of digital transition. There must be concerted efforts from the government, the private sector, civil society, and international institutions to create a digitally inclusive Pakistan where women are able to compete, lead, and contribute alongside the digital economy. It is only when women are as educated, connected, and empowered as men that Pakistan can truly boast of making headway in the digital age.

# HLB Pakistan Super League 10 (PSL 10): A Landmark Tournament Amid Challenges and Triumphs



By Kanwal Munir

## Introduction

The HBL Pakistan Super League (PSL) has firmly established itself as one of the premier T20 cricket leagues worldwide since its inception in 2016. With its 10th edition held in 2025, the PSL has not only showcased thrilling cricketing action but has also served as a powerful symbol of Pakistan's growing stature in the international cricketing community. PSL 10 stood out as an emblem of resilience, entertainment, and competitive spirit, overcoming geopolitical tensions and technological hurdles while crowning the Lahore Qalandars as champions for the third time.

This article provides a comprehensive overview of PSL 10, covering the tournament's structure, key moments, standout performers, challenges faced, and its overall impact on Pakistani cricket and beyond.

## What is the HBL Pakistan Super League (PSL)?

The Pakistan Super League (PSL), established in 2016 and sponsored by Habib Bank Limited (HBL), is Pakistan's premier professional Twenty20 cricket league. It features six franchise teams representing major cities across the country, bringing together top domestic players and international cricket stars. Over the years, PSL has rapidly gained popularity due to its thrilling, high intensity matches and competitive spirit. The league has become a vital platform for nurturing emerging Pakistani talent, helping players showcase their skills on a global stage. With a passionate and growing fan base, PSL has significantly boosted Pakistan's cricketing reputation worldwide. The 10th edition, PSL 10, was especially awaited as a

milestone season, promising elevated excitement and fierce competition. Fans and experts alike expected stand-out performances, unforgettable moments, and a celebration of the league's successful journey so far, marking a new chapter in Pakistan's cricketing history.

## Tournament Overview: Format, Dates, and Teams

### Tournament Format

PSL 10 followed a double round-robin format during the league phase, where each team played the others twice. This ensured a total of 34 matches in the league stage. The top four teams from the league advanced to the playoffs, which included:

- Qualifier: The top two teams face off; the winner advances directly to the final.



- Eliminator 1: Third and fourth-placed teams play; the loser is eliminated.
- Eliminator 2: The winner of Eliminator 1 faces the loser of the Qualifier to determine the second finalist.
- Final: The two remaining teams compete for the championship.

### Dates and Venues

- Start Date: April 11, 2025
- End Date: May 25, 2025
- Primary Venue: Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore (playoffs and final)
- Other Venues: Matches were initially scheduled across Pakistan's major cities but were partly relocated due to security concerns.

### Participating Teams

PSL 10 featured six teams representing major cities:

1. Lahore Qalandars
2. Quetta Gladiators
3. Islamabad United
4. Karachi Kings
5. Peshawar Zalmi
6. Multan Sultans

These teams featured a mix of seasoned Pakistani players and international stars from cricketing nations worldwide.

## The Road to the Final: League Stage Highlights

The double round-robin stage of PSL 10 proved to be an intense and fiercely competitive phase, with all six teams fighting hard to secure a spot in the coveted playoffs. Each match was filled with thrilling victories and nail-biting finishes that kept fans on the edge of their seats throughout the league phase.

Lahore Qalandars emerged as the most consistent team, displaying a well-rounded combination of explosive batting and disciplined bowling. Their balanced approach helped them dominate the league, earning them the top position and establish-

ing themselves as strong title contenders.

Quetta Gladiators were equally impressive, with their aggressive batting lineup capable of setting imposing targets or chasing challenging totals. Their tactical bowling strategies allowed them to outwit opponents, securing the second spot in the standings.

Islamabad United and Karachi Kings also delivered competitive performances, finishing third and fourth respectively. Both teams showed resilience and determination, making the playoff phase highly competitive and unpredictable.



On the other hand, Peshawar Zalmi and Multan Sultans, despite their potential and strong squads, were unable to maintain consistency. A few crucial defeats at key moments in the league saw them narrowly miss out on playoff qualification, ending their campaigns earlier than hoped. Overall, the league stage set the tone for an exciting and fiercely contested conclusion to PSL 10.

## Playoffs Breakdown: The Clash of Titans

The playoffs showcased high-octane cricket, with intense battles that highlighted the talent and determination of each team. The knockout phase brought together the best of the tournament in a dramatic series of matches that thrilled fans and tested the nerves of players.

## Qualifier: Lahore Qalandars vs. Quetta Gladiators

This clash featured the top two teams of the league stage. Lahore Qalandars, bolstered by the fiery pace of Shaheen Afridi and the strategic brilliance of their bowling unit, faced Quetta Gladiators, who relied on the explosive form of batsman Hassan Nawaz. In a tactical thriller, both teams traded blows with bat and ball. Quetta ultimately edged past Lahore in a tight finish, earning a direct entry into the final, while Lahore

was given a second shot at glory in Eliminator 2.

## Eliminator 1: Islamabad United vs. Karachi Kings

Islamabad United and Karachi Kings fought tooth and nail in a must-win encounter. Islamabad, showing tremendous resilience, overcame pressure moments and capitalized on Karachi's errors to clinch victory and move forward in the tournament.

## Eliminator 2: Lahore Qalandars vs. Islamabad United

In a dominant performance, Lahore Qalandars bounced back strongly, overpowering Islamabad United with a well-rounded

display of batting and bowling. Their convincing win reaffirmed their status as title favorites, securing a place in the final.

## The Grand Finale: Lahore Qalandars vs. Quetta Gladiators

The PSL 10 final, held at Lahore's iconic Gaddafi Stadium on May 25, 2025, lived up to its billing as one of the most thrilling finales in the tournament's history. A sea of fans, electric atmosphere, and high stakes made it a spectacle that truly celebrated the league's 10-year milestone.



### Match Summary

Quetta Gladiators, batting first, capitalized on their aggressive lineup to post a formidable total of 202 runs. Their innings was anchored by explosive strokeplay, putting immense pressure on Lahore Qalandars right from the start. In response, Lahore started their chase with intent but faced early setbacks, losing key wickets in the powerplay. With the run rate climbing and pressure mounting, the match seemed to tilt in Quetta's favor.

However, the defining twist came with the arrival of Sikandar Raza, who had flown in straight from England just minutes before the toss. Despite fatigue, Raza delivered under pressure, forging a crucial partnership with Kusal Perera. The duo's calm and

calculated batting dismantled Quetta's momentum. Lahore completed the chase in style, winning with six wickets in hand, and clinching their third PSL title.

### Key Performers

- **Sikandar Raza:** His match-winning innings under extraordinary circumstances earned him the All-Rounder of the Tournament title.
- **Shaheen Afridi:** With his fiery pace and consistency, he ended the tournament as the leading wicket-taker, playing a vital role in Lahore's campaign.

and accelerate when needed made him a vital asset for his team.

- On the bowling front, Shaheen Afridi of Lahore Qalandars once again proved his prowess by finishing as the top wicket-taker with 19 wickets. His lethal pace, accuracy, and match-winning spells were central to Lahore's journey to the title.
- The Emerging Player of the Tournament accolade went to Muhammad Naeem from Lahore Qalandars. His impactful performances under pressure highlighted his potential to be a future star for Pakistan.
- Despite Quetta Gladiators falling short in the final, Hassan Nawaz's consistent brilliance throughout the season earned him the coveted Player of the Series award, recognizing his game-changing contributions with the bat.

## Challenges and Controversies

### Geopolitical Tensions and Their Impact on PSL 10

PSL 10 unfolded against the backdrop of escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, which inevitably had an impact on the tournament's planning and execution. Security concerns were paramount, prompting the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to adapt its scheduling and logistical arrangements.

Several matches were either postponed or relocated to venues deemed more secure to ensure the safety of players, staff, and fans. The situation also cast uncertainty over the final, which was eventually held in Lahore only after robust security assurances were provided by the authorities.

One of the most notable effects of the geopolitical strain was the absence of Indian technicians, who traditionally operate the Hawk-Eye and Decision Review System (DRS) technology. Their inability to travel to Pakistan led to the non-availability of DRS throughout the tournament, which raised some concerns about umpiring accuracy and fairness. Despite these hurdles, PSL 10 continued

- **Hassan Nawaz:** A standout performer for Quetta, Nawaz's consistent brilliance with the bat earned him the Player of the Series award.

### Statistical Highlights

PSL 10 featured a total of 34 matches, each brimming with excitement, drama, and standout performances. The tournament saw both emerging and established stars making their mark on the grand stage, reflecting the depth and growth of cricketing talent in Pakistan.

- Sahibzada Farhan of Islamabad United emerged as the top run-scorer, amassing an impressive 449 runs with consistent performances at the top of the order. His ability to anchor innings



successfully, showcasing cricket's resilience amidst political uncertainty.

## Technological Limitations

The absence of DRS and Hawk-Eye technology during PSL 10 sparked considerable controversy, with several matches marred by disputed umpiring decisions. Without the aid of these advanced tools, on-field umpires had to rely solely on their judgment, leading to questionable LBW and edge calls that could not be reviewed. Players and fans expressed frustration, with some teams suggesting that crucial moments in tight matches were affected by errors. The lack of review options impacted the perceived fairness and smoothness of the tournament, highlighting the importance of technological support in maintaining modern cricketing standards.

## Cultural and Economic Impact

### Fan Engagement

Despite the security concerns and the absence of key technologies like DRS and Hawk-Eye, PSL 10 managed to captivate fans both in Pakistan and internationally. The passion for cricket remained undiminished, and the tournament was followed with immense enthusiasm across multiple platforms.

One of the key factors behind its wide appeal was the dual-language broadcast in both English and Urdu, which significantly broadened audience reach, making matches accessible to a more diverse viewership. The opening ceremony was another major highlight, featuring electrifying performances by popular Pakistani artists such as Ali Zafar and Shae Gill, adding glamour, cultural vibrance, and national pride to the tournament's commencement.

Additionally, social media platforms buzzed with activity throughout the league, with fans actively sharing match highlights, memes, and tributes to standout players. Hashtags related to PSL 10 frequently trended on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, creating a digital festival that mirrored the excitement on the field.

### Economic Impact

PSL 10 also had a substantial positive

economic impact on Pakistan. Hosting matches in cities like Lahore gave a much-needed boost to local tourism and hospitality sectors, with increased demand for hotels, restaurants, and transport services.

The tournament also drew increased sponsorship and advertising revenues, benefiting not only the franchises but also the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB). PSL merchandise—ranging from team jerseys to fan accessories—witnessed a significant surge in sales, further stimulating the retail sector.



## The Road Ahead: PSL's Growing Legacy

PSL 10 marked a significant milestone, celebrating a decade of thrilling and competitive cricket, while also reinforcing Pakistan's re-emergence as a safe and capable host for international sporting events. The successful organization of the final in Lahore, amidst heightened regional tensions, sent a clear and powerful message to the global sports community about Pakistan's improving security landscape and evolving infrastructure.

This landmark season has not only showcased cricketing excellence but also bolstered national pride and international confidence in the country's ability to stage major events. Building on this momentum, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) and PSL organizers are now setting their sights on the future.

One of the key priorities is to reintroduce technological aids like the Decision Review System (DRS) in collaboration with international partners. Restoring these tools is crucial to upholding the standards of fairness and accuracy that modern cricket demands, ensuring that PSL continues to grow in both credibility and global stature.

## Conclusion

The 10th edition of the HBL Pakistan Super League was much more than just a cricket tournament—it stood as a powerful

testament to resilience, national pride, and the unifying power of sports amidst challenging circumstances. Despite geopolitical tensions and technological setbacks, PSL 10 brought together players, fans, and communities across Pakistan and beyond, celebrating the country's passion for cricket. The season was marked by thrilling matches, outstanding individual performances, and moments of sheer brilliance that kept millions glued to their screens. Lahore Qalandars' triumphant clinching of their third PSL title provided a fitting climax to an unforgettable campaign. Their victory not only highlighted their dominance but also symbolized the growing strength and potential of Pakistani cricket. More importantly, PSL 10 reaffirmed Pakistan's capability to host world-class sporting events, inspiring hope for the future growth and international recognition of cricket in the country.





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