Pakistan urges immediate ceasefire in Russia-Ukraine conflict, voices concern over attacks on civilians and food infrastructure **Liaquat Ali**

Islamabad: Pakistan this week voiced deep concern over the worsening humanitarian consequences of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, calling for an immediate ceasefire and a renewed commitment to diplomacy as the United Nations Security Council convened (Page-5)

COVERT

TRUTH UNFOLD

August 9 - 15 , 2026

UK launches fully funded scholarships and startup fellowships for Pakistan's future leaders **Celina Ali**

Islamabad: The United Kingdom thus week opened applications for three prestigious fully funded programmes aimed at empowering Pakistan's next generation of leaders, researchers and entrepreneurs through world-class education, research opportunities and international (Page-11)

PLA's 99th anniversary celebrated at GHQ

Pak- China reaffirm enduring strategic partnership

Celina Ali

Rawalpindi: Pakistan and China this week reaffirmed the depth of their longstanding strategic partnership on Saturday as the General Headquarters (GHQ) hosted a ceremony to commemorate the 99th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), with senior military and diplomatic leadership from both countries underscoring their shared commitment to defence cooperation, regional peace and the continued expansion of bilateral ties.

The commemorative event, held at GHQ in Rawalpindi in Saturday afternoon, brought together Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Field Marshal Asim Munir, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong, China's Defence Attaché to Pakistan Major General Wang Zhong, officials of the Chinese Embassy and senior officers representing Pakistan's Army, Navy and Air Force, reflecting the close institutional relationship between the armed forces of the two neighbouring countries.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Field Marshal Asim Munir addressed the gathering and reaffirmed the enduring strength of Pakistan-China relations, describing the friendship between the two nations as "unique, time-tested and steadfast despite evolving regional and global challenges."

The military chief said the Pakistan Armed Forces and the PLA had consistently stood together as trusted partners, bound by mutual confidence, unwavering support and a common commitment to safeguarding regional peace, stability and shared strategic interests.

Highlighting the close defence relationship between Islamabad and Beijing, he observed that military cooperation between the two countries had evolved into one of the defining pillars of the broader Pakistan-China strategic partnership, contributing significantly to regional security and mutual trust.

Field Marshal Munir also paid tribute to the People's Liberation Army for its contributions to China's national defence, socio-economic development and efforts aimed at promoting international peace and security.

The ISPR stated that the ceremony reflected the longstanding military-to-military relationship between Pakistan and China, which has steadily expanded over the years through joint exercises, defence technology cooperation, professional exchanges, counterterrorism collaboration and strategic consultations.

Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong, speaking at the event as the guest of honour, expressed appreciation to the Chief of Defence Forces for hosting the anniversary ceremony and praised the close friendship that continues to bind the two countries.

According to the military's media wing, the ambassador acknowledged the immense contributions and sacrifices rendered by the Pakistan Armed Forces in combating terrorism and maintaining regional stability.

He reiterated China's unwavering support for Pakistan and reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to further strengthening the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership, describing bilateral relations as an enduring example of mutual trust, strategic cooperation and shared development.

The participation of senior military officials and diplomats from both sides highlighted the institutional depth of Pakistan-China defence engagement, which has remained one of the strongest dimensions of bilateral relations for decades.

The anniversary celebrations came at a time when Islamabad and Beijing have significantly expanded cooperation across defence, diplomacy, economic development and emerging technologies, reflecting the growing scope of their strategic partnership.

Pakistan and China have witnessed sustained high-level engagement throughout the year, with both governments repeatedly reaffirming support for each other's core national interests while advancing cooperation under the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC 2.0).

A major milestone in bilateral relations was achieved during Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's official visit to China in May, when the two sides agreed to further deepen their All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership through enhanced defence collaboration, closer security coordination and accelerated implementation of CPEC 2.0.

The two countries also pledged to strengthen cooperation against terrorism, improve security arrangements for Chinese nationals and projects operating in Pakistan, and maintain close coordination on regional and international issues of mutual concern.

Earlier in January, Pakistan and China held the seventh round of the Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Beijing, where both countries reaffirmed their policy of zero tolerance for terrorism, agreed to expand security cooperation and reiterated their commitment to aligning national development strategies under CPEC 2.0.

The dialogue also underscored the importance of maintaining close coordination on regional peace and stability, particularly regarding developments in Afghanistan and broader regional security dynamics.

Beyond defence and diplomacy, bilateral cooperation has increasingly diversified into emerging sectors including agriculture, livestock, mineral development, technology transfer, industrial collaboration and human resource development.

Since the beginning of the year, Chinese enterprises have signed multiple agreements and memoranda of understanding with Pakistani partners aimed at boosting agricultural investment, livestock improvement, mining cooperation, scientific research and industrial modernization.

Both countries have also intensified collaboration in innovation, vocational training, higher education and talent development as part of efforts to broaden the economic foundations of CPEC's next phase and promote sustainable long-term growth.

Pakistan's OGDCL partners with Canadian firm to deploy advanced technology for boosting heavy oil production

Abida Shaheen

Islamabad: Pakistan's state-owned Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) this week signed a strategic agreement with Canada's Synergetic Oil Tools Inc. to introduce advanced oilfield technology aimed at enhancing production from the country's heavy crude oil wells, marking another step in Islamabad's efforts to strengthen domestic energy output and reduce dependence on imported petroleum.

The agreement was signed in Islamabad in the presence of OGDCL Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Ahmed Hayat Lak, Synergetic Oil Tools President and Chief Executive Officer Brian Herman, and Canadian High Commissioner to Pakistan Tarik Ali Khan.

Under the partnership, the Canadian company will deploy its proprietary Passive Energy Tool technology at OGDCL's heavy oil fields. The technology is designed to improve production from highly viscous crude reservoirs by enhancing fluid flow characteristics, reducing the need for frequent well interventions, minimizing operational downtime, lowering production costs and decreasing reliance on chemical treatments during extraction.

Announcing the development, OGDCL said the agreement would facilitate the deployment of innovative production technology to optimize output from Pakistan's heavy oil reserves, contributing to greater efficiency and improved recovery rates.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Canadian High Commissioner Tarik Ali Khan said the collaboration reflects Canada's commitment to supporting Pakistan's energy sector through the introduction of world-class technology and technical expertise capable of improving heavy crude oil extraction and production.

The initiative comes as Pakistan intensifies efforts to expand indigenous oil and gas production in order to reduce its growing dependence on imported energy, which continues to place substantial pressure on the country's foreign exchange reserves and external account.

According to official figures, Pakistan spent approximately Rs4.4 trillion (around US$16 billion) on petroleum imports last year, with the bulk of its crude oil and refined fuel supplies sourced from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.

Increasing domestic hydrocarbon production has become a central component of the government's broader energy security strategy, which seeks to lower import costs, strengthen energy self-sufficiency and improve the country's balance of payments.

The agreement with Synergetic Oil Tools also complements wider reforms underway in Pakistan's energy sector. In recent months, the government has accelerated efforts to modernize refining infrastructure, improve operational efficiency and attract foreign investment into the petroleum industry.

Last month, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb held discussions with US-based industrial technology company Honeywell regarding refinery modernization initiatives, while government officials have also reaffirmed their commitment to advancing a long-delayed US$6 billion refinery upgrade programme aimed at enhancing Pakistan's refining capacity and reducing reliance on imported petroleum products.

The latest partnership underscores Pakistan's strategy of leveraging international technological expertise to unlock the potential of its domestic hydrocarbon resources while strengthening long-term energy security and supporting sustainable growth in the upstream oil and gas sector.

PPP to hold PML-N accountable: MNA Natasha Daultana

Liaquat Ali

Islamabad: Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader and Member of the National Assembly Natasha Daultana said this week that the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) was becoming increasingly isolated politically following the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) elections, alleging that the electoral process had been marred by widespread rigging and demanding accountability over the outcome.

In an interview, Daultana said the people had witnessed what she described as "massive rigging" during the Azad Jammu Kashmir elections, arguing that the credibility of the electoral process had been seriously undermined.

She maintained that the developments surrounding the elections had raised significant concerns that required transparent explanations, adding that the public deserved clear answers regarding the conduct of the polls.

"The PML-N stands increasingly isolated. The people have witnessed the massive rigging in the AJK elections, and serious questions demand answers," Daultana said.

The PPP leader warned that her party would now adopt a more assertive political stance toward the ruling coalition, saying the time had come for the PML-N to be held accountable for its actions.

Daultana said the PPP had exercised restraint and played a constructive role in ensuring political and parliamentary stability despite being in the opposition.

She said the party had repeatedly extended cooperation to the government on important parliamentary matters, including supporting federal budgets, facilitating the passage of legislation and helping maintain quorum in the National Assembly whenever required.

"Now, the PPP will hold the PML-N accountable, not just with words. For too long, the PPP has helped sustain the government by supporting its budgets, passing its legislation, and helping ensure quorum in the National Assembly," she said.

Daultana's remarks signal a potentially tougher approach by the PPP towards the government at a time when political tensions have intensified following the AJK elections.

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IRON BROTHER - 铁兄弟

Iran-Pakistan connectivity drive complements regional trade vision

Gwadar Pro

Islamabad: Pakistan and Iran are deepening economic integration through enhanced cooperation between Gwadar and Chabahar ports, new border infrastructure and expanded regional connectivity—efforts expected to complement broader trade networks and align with China's BRI.

The momentum built during a Tehran meeting between Chabahar Free Zone CEO Mohammad Saeid Arbabi and Pakistan's Ambassador Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, where both sides explored mechanisms to expand bilateral trade, investment, logistics and transit cooperation.

Discussions focused on leveraging the Chabahar-Gwadar corridor and accelerating the proposed Rimdan-Gabd Joint Free Zone to facilitate cross-border investment and commerce. Both sides stressed the need to fully utilise ports, free zones and border crossings to boost bilateral trade and strengthen economic integration within the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

Arbabi described Chabahar as Iran's only oceanic free zone on international transport corridors, adding that closer ties with Gwadar could enhance logistics efficiency, attract investment and strengthen regional supply chains. He said the two ports should be viewed as complementary, not competitive, and proposed an independent joint border crossing between Rimdan and Gabd to cut transport time, raise cargo capacity and help achieve the shared goal of US$10 billion in bilateral trade.

Ambassador Siddiqui welcomed the proposals, reaffirming Pakistan's commitment to expanding trade through Gwadar, Chabahar and the Rimdan-Gabd region, and noting that better border cooperation would boost prosperity for communities on both sides while reinforcing longstanding ties.

Separately, Sistan-Baluchestan Governor Mansour Bijar said recent talks with Pakistani authorities yielded positive outcomes, including support for barter trade arrangements and progress on removing rail, road and air transport obstacles, extending border operations and facilitating cargo movement. Key understandings include launching a maritime link between Chabahar and Pakistani ports, resuming passenger flights, strengthening rail connectivity and establishing joint mechanisms to implement bilateral agreements, with expert-level negotiations to begin within days.

China-made electric buses roll into Gujrat as Punjab expands green transport partnership with Beijing

Gwadar Pro

Gujrat: Pakistan's transition to environmentally sustainable urban transport gained fresh momentum this week as Punjab launched a fleet of China-manufactured electric buses in Gujrat, underscoring the growing role of Chinese technology in the province's green mobility push.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by Deputy Commissioner Noor-ul-Ain Qureshi, MPA Abdullah Yousaf, and other senior officials. Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif inaugurated the Green Electric Bus Service via video link, marking the arrival of modern, clean-energy public transport under the provincial government's expanding mass transit programme.

The first phase deploys 11 China-made buses on the Gujrat–Mangowal and Gujrat–Daulat Nagar routes, with authorities planning to expand the fleet to 28 by September and add new routes to improve district-wide connectivity.

The buses feature wheelchair ramps for elderly and disabled passengers, enhancing inclusivity, while a flat fare of Rs20 ensures affordability. The deployment also aligns with broader Pakistan–China cooperation in clean technologies and sustainable urban development, with Chinese manufacturers playing a key role in the country's transport modernisation efforts.

Beyond cutting pollution, the electric fleet is expected to lower long-term operational costs, reduce fossil fuel imports, and support climate resilience. Officials said that fleet expansion would improve commuting for thousands and encourage wider adoption of clean transit across Punjab.

China donates $2 million reproductive health package to Pakistan under Global Development Initiative

Gwadar Pro

Islamabad: China this week reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Pakistan's healthcare sector by donating US$2 million worth of reproductive health and family planning supplies and medical equipment, an initiative expected to improve maternal and newborn healthcare services for more than 300,000 women and girls across underserved districts.

The assistance was provided by the Government of China in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as part of Beijing's broader commitment to advancing healthcare cooperation under the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and South-South Cooperation Programme.

The equipment was formally handed over to Pakistan's Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination during a ceremony held at the Rural Health Centre (RHC) Tarlai in Islamabad.

Minister of State for National Health Services Malik Mukhtar Ahmad Bharat received the donation from Zhang Datuo, Second Secretary at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, in the presence of UNFPA Pakistan Deputy Representative Dr. Gulnara Kadyrkulova, Director General of the Population Programme Wing Dr. Shabana Saleem, and District Health Officer Islamabad Dr. Syeda Rashida Batool.

The Chinese assistance package includes reproductive health kits, midwifery equipment, two-rod contraceptive implants, clean delivery kits and newborn baby kits, all aimed at strengthening maternal, newborn and reproductive healthcare services in some of Pakistan's most underserved regions.

The supplies will be distributed across 10 districts, including Kech, Loralai and Khuzdar in Balochistan; Hyderabad in Sindh; Rahim Yar Khan and Kasur in Punjab; Charsadda in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; Gilgit in Gilgit-Baltistan; and Kotli in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Besides supplying medical equipment, the programme also includes specialised training for healthcare professionals to improve the quality of reproductive health services, strengthen maternal care and expand access to modern family planning options.

The initiative is expected to strengthen Pakistan's maternal and newborn healthcare system while improving health outcomes in remote and disadvantaged communities through modern equipment, better-trained medical staff and expanded access to essential reproductive health services.

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August 9 - 15 , 2026

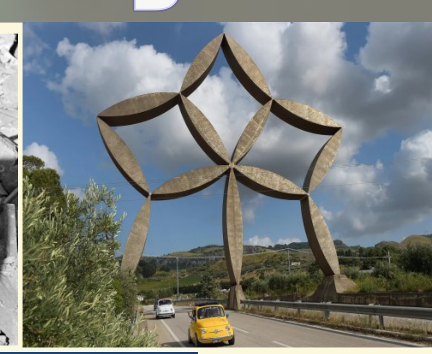
Sicily's Gibellina transforms tragedy into a global centre for contemporary art

His Excellency Ugo Ciarlatani,
Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan, and Mrs. Ciarlatani

Newswire

Rome: In the rolling hills of western Sicily, where a devastating earthquake once reduced entire communities to rubble, the town of Gibellina has emerged as one of Italy's most remarkable examples of cultural regeneration. Designated Italy's first Capital of Contemporary Art for 2026, the town is redefining how art can preserve memory, heal collective trauma and breathe new life into communities scarred by disaster.

The story of Gibellina is inseparable from the catastrophic Belice Valley earthquake of 1968, which claimed more than 300 lives, displaced tens of thousands of people and destroyed several historic towns, including the original settlement of Gibellina. Rather than rebuilding on the ruins, authorities established a new town six miles away, envisioning a community where architecture and contemporary art would become symbols of resilience and renewal.



Today, that ambitious vision has evolved into one of Italy's largest open-air collections of modern art, with more than 5,000 artworks spread across a town of just 3,600 residents.

Among the artists contributing to the town's cultural revival is Sicilian contemporary artist Rossana Taormina, whose latest installation explores the fragility of memory through a series of fading neon signs spelling the Italian word memoria. Displayed at the Belice Epicentro della Memoria Viva museum, the work reflects both personal and collective remembrance.

Born four years after the earthquake, Taormina spent her early childhood in temporary shelters before settling in the rebuilt town. Having lost many family photographs in the disaster, she says her imagination was shaped by fragments of memory and the ruins surrounding her childhood.

"Memory and landscape have always been central to my work," she says, describing how the valley continues to influence her artistic identity despite now living in Palermo.

The museum documents the human impact of the earthquake while showcasing how contemporary artists continue to reinterpret the region's past through innovative installations.

Perhaps the valley's most internationally recognised landmark is the Cretto di Burri, created by renowned Italian sculptor Alberto Burri. Rather than reconstructing the destroyed village of Gibellina Vecchia, Burri covered its ruins with enormous slabs of white concrete, preserving the original street layout beneath a monumental land-art installation.

From above, the vast geometric structure resembles a cracked white blanket draped across the Sicilian countryside. Visitors walk through narrow pathways following the exact routes of the former streets, transforming remembrance into a physical experience.

The project was championed by the late mayor Ludovico Corrao, whose vision extended beyond reconstruction. Convinced that beauty could restore hope after tragedy, he invited many of Italy's leading architects, sculptors and artists during the 1970s and 1980s to redesign the new town.

His daughter, Antonella Corrao, now co-president of the Fondazione Orestiadi, says art became the community's answer to suffering.

"There had been too much pain and destruction," she explains. "Only art could save the soul of Gibellina."

The rebuilt town reflects that philosophy. Giant sculptures line its streets, striking modern buildings punctuate the skyline and expansive public squares replace conventional urban planning. Visitors encounter monumental stars, sculptural monuments, abstract murals and bold architectural experiments that blur the boundary between public space and artistic expression.

The Capital of Contemporary Art programme has accelerated this transformation by opening previously inaccessible cultural venues to the public.

One highlight is the long-unfinished Teatro di Consagra, originally designed by sculptor Pietro Consagra. Left incomplete for decades, the dramatic wave-shaped concrete structure has now been repurposed as an exhibition venue, hosting multimedia installations by internationally acclaimed artists.

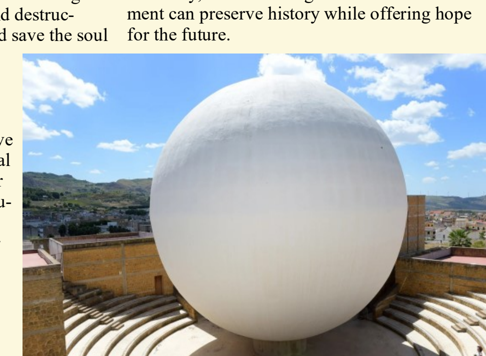
Artistic director Andrea Cusumano believes Gibellina should not simply be viewed as an outdoor museum but as a living community where art becomes part of everyday life.

While many public spaces remain underused, organisers hope this year's exhibitions, performances and artist residencies will encourage residents to reclaim the town's unique architectural landscape.

The regeneration of the wider Belice Valley is also gathering pace. Nearby Poggioreale Vecchia, another town abandoned after the earthquake, is preparing to reopen sections of its historic centre following extensive restoration work. Among its first attractions will be a multimedia museum housed in a restored aristocratic residence, where recovered photographs have been transformed into immersive digital exhibitions recounting everyday life before the disaster.

Local authorities believe cultural tourism can become a catalyst for broader economic revival, creating employment opportunities and encouraging younger generations to remain in the region.

Nearly six decades after the earthquake reshaped western Sicily, Gibellina stands as a powerful example of how art, memory and community can coexist. More than a monument to tragedy, the town has become a living laboratory of creativity, demonstrating that cultural investment can preserve history while offering hope for the future.



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Germany's 'China Shock 2.0' blame counterproductive

Wang Lin

According to German media reports, Tanja Gönner, chief executive of the Federation of German Industries, has touted the "China Shock 2.0" narrative, claiming that the German industry is facing broad and far-reaching impacts as a result.

In recent years, Germany's industrial system and even its economic model have faced mounting challenges. While Gönner and others have identified some of the symptoms, they have failed to find the right remedy. Treating domestic problems by blaming external factors and shifting responsibility onto China will not save the German industry.

For a long period of time, Germany built an export-oriented industrial model based on relatively low energy costs, advanced high-end manufacturing capabilities and open global markets. This model not only created millions of jobs but also secured Germany's important position in the European and global economy. However, in recent years, factors including the restructuring of global energy supplies, the accelerating pace of technological and industrial transformation, and growing complexity in the global trade environment have placed pressure on the German economy. Growth has remained sluggish, and the industrial sector in particular is undergoing a severe structural test.

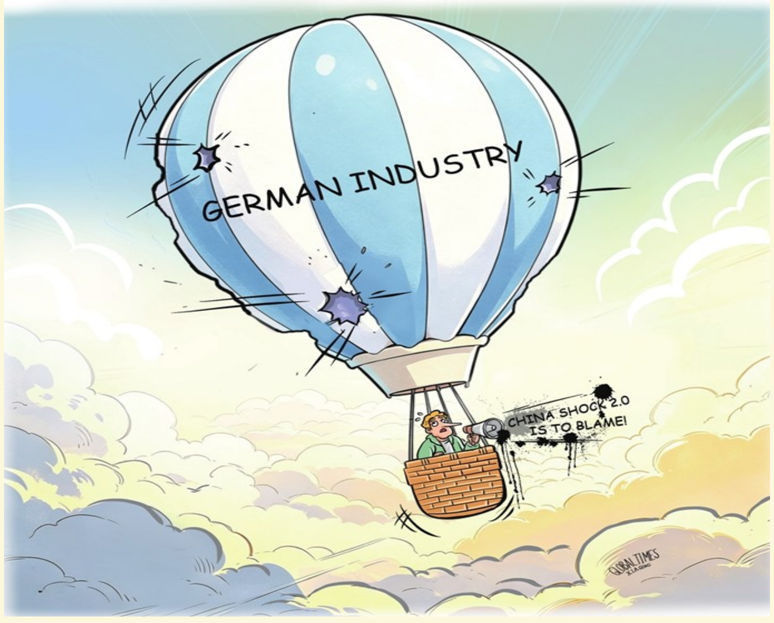
First, changes in the energy supply landscape have pushed up industrial production costs. For years, Germany relied heavily on low-cost natural gas from Russia. However, after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Germany moved to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and turned to alternative energy sources that are more expensive and involve more complicated transportation. Germany's green transition also requires substantial investment. The share of renewable energy in Germany's electricity consumption is expected to rise from 42 percent in 2021 to 80 percent by 2030. Yet domestic infrastructure for renewable energy, power grids and energy storage has not kept pace with the transition, further driving up energy costs and reducing supply stability. Some energy-intensive companies have been forced to suspend operations or even relocate.

Second, the new wave of technological and industrial transformation is reshaping Germany's traditional manufacturing strengths. Emerging digital technologies are rapidly penetrating the manufacturing sector. The automobile industry provides a typical example. Germany has accumulated deep expertise in traditional areas such as mechanical engineering and industrial automation. Yet, it lacks sufficient technological support and talent reserves in areas such as AI and digital platforms. These challenges, combined with shrinking labor supply, have further constrained Germany's technological innovation and industrial upgrading.

Third, changes in the external environment have hit Germany's export-driven economic model. In recent years, sluggish global growth, rising protectionism and increasing geopolitical risks have created new challenges. The US tariff measures against economies including the EU, as well as Western sanctions against Russia, have significantly affected Germany's industrial system, which relies heavily on exports and global supply chains. Meanwhile, the rapid development of emerging economies in related sectors has also narrowed the international market space for German industries.

Finally, Germany's domestic investment environment has become less attractive. The German government has sought to address economic challenges through increased administrative intervention and expanded welfare spending, which has in turn placed greater pressure on public finances and businesses. Complex regulatory procedures have weakened companies' willingness to invest, particularly in emerging industries where technological cycles are moving rapidly.

In response to its economic difficulties, the German government has introduced a series of measures since 2025, including launching a special fund to improve transport, power grid and digital infrastructure, and a 46-billion-euro corporate tax relief package to boost investment in digitalization, green technologies and advanced manufacturing. Yet, analysts generally believe that the reform package still lacks a clear strategic approach to addressing energy issues that are of greatest concern to consumers and businesses.



The challenges facing the German industry are not merely a cyclical downturn in specific sectors, but a profound structural test. The foundations supporting Germany's traditional industrial model are all under pressure. Short-term stimulus measures or support for individual industries are unlikely to fundamentally reverse the situation. Simply attributing Germany's structural difficulties to the so-called "China Shock 2.0" will not solve the problem; it may even prove counterproductive.

Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter's theory of "creative destruction" highlights innovation as an inherent force driving economic development. Germany needs to continue promoting technological innovation and industrial restructuring, accelerate digital and intelligent transformation of manufacturing, improve energy and digital infrastructure, enhance the investment environment, and rebuild international competitiveness through open cooperation. Through these combined efforts, Germany can cultivate new sources of economic growth and inject fresh momentum into its industrial development.

The writer is a professor at the School of Foreign Studies of Northwestern Polytechnical University

Will fewer Chinese students make the US 'safer'?

Global Times

A US think tank's report claims that restricting visas for Chinese students will "greatly benefit American students and national security." In essence, normal educational exchanges are being politicized and weaponized, with "national security" used as a pretext for discriminatory restrictions. When a report frames the decline in the number of international students as a "victory," what it truly reveals is not a "threat" from others, but its own anxiety.

A report released on August?3 by the US-based Center for Immigration Studies shows that the US Department of State issued far fewer F-1 student visas to Indian and Chinese nationals between May and August?2025 compared to previous years. The May-August window is chosen precisely because the bulk of each year's F-1 visas are issued during this period. Astonishingly, the report argues that if this downward trend continues, it will "greatly benefit American students and our national security," while recycling the tired old trope that Chinese students are linked to "espionage."

How exactly do international students "threaten US national security"? The report offers zero evidence. Student-visa policy has become deeply divisive and highly politicized in the US. Since last year, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have arrested foreign students, triggering widespread panic across the US international-student community. Some Americans advocate for openness to sustain academic competitiveness; others fear international students crowd out job opportunities. Some view international students as drivers of innovation, while others paint them as security threats. This is a reflection of the growing populist and polarized nature of US society.

It is true that visa approvals for Chinese students have dropped sharply. This is not because "espionage" has emerged among Chinese students; it is the direct outcome of a series of US political moves: suspended visa interviews, sweeping social-media vetting, multilayered intensified background checks, plus public announcements of "enhanced scrutiny" targeting students from specific countries. Put plainly, normal educational exchanges are being politicized and weaponized, with discriminatory restrictions imposed on students of particular nationalities in the name of "national security." Repeatedly hyping up the so-called "threat" is nothing more than a tactic by some Americans to manufacture an imaginary enemy for domestic political purposes, forcing innocent international students to pay the price for US own partisan battles.

Fewer international students will not automatically expand educational access for American students. International students are heavily concentrated in graduate programs and STEM majors. A significant number work as research assistants and teaching assistants, helping to keep laboratories running on a day-to-day basis. Many international students pay full tuition fees, and the revenue generated from their tuition helps universities maintain courses, laboratories, scholarships, and faculty positions.

According to data from the US Department of Commerce, international students contribute about $55 billion to the US economy every year through tuition payments and living expenses, supporting more than 400,000 jobs. A report by the Association of International Educators found that the decline in new international student enrollment in the fall of 2025 alone resulted in nearly $1.1 billion in economic losses for the US and the loss of about 23,000 related jobs.

US President Donald Trump has also repeatedly said publicly that he welcomes Chinese students, and has warned that "US colleges would struggle without Chinese students." The real factors affecting employment opportunities for young Americans are deeper structural issues, including industrial structure, education-to-workforce alignment, and labor costs - not international students who study and work legally in accordance with US regulations.

Educational exchange is a two-way street. Chinese students studying in the US have not only gained advanced knowledge but also brought Chinese perspectives and creativity to American campuses. Likewise, American scholars who come to China have benefited greatly from these exchanges. To portray such mutually beneficial interactions as a "threat" posed by one side to the other is simply a resurgence of Cold War thinking. The US became a global center of technological innovation over the past several decades in large part because it attracted talent from around the world. If political confrontation and fear lead the US to cut off the flow of talent, it will undermine its own capacity for innovation - a point that many clear-headed voices within the country have repeatedly emphasized.

Some in the US are quick to invoke "national security," as though keeping Chinese students out would somehow make the country safer. That logic does not withstand scrutiny. Security has never been achieved through isolation or self-imposed closure. We firmly oppose any stigmatization or discriminatory treatment of Chinese students studying abroad.

For nearly five decades since the establishment of China-US diplomatic relations, educational exchange has remained one of the areas of bilateral ties with the broadest public support. China has consistently supported normal international educational cooperation, but it will not accept any Chinese citizen studying in the US being subjected to unfair treatment at any time or in any place. Whatever policy adjustments Washington chooses to make, it must not make Chinese students pay the price, smear them, or undermine the normal educational and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Scientific and technological progress depends on international exchange and cooperation, while academic advancement thrives on the exchange and cross-fertilization of ideas. What truly makes a country strong has never been walls, but its ability to attract talent and foster innovation. When a report frames the decline in the number of international students as a "victory" and claims that it "benefits American students and national security," what it truly reveals is not a "threat" from others, but its own anxiety.

Global Times

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Pakistan urges immediate ceasefire in Russia-Ukraine conflict, voices concern over attacks on civilians and food infrastructure

Liaquat Ali

Islamabad: Pakistan this week voiced deep concern over the worsening humanitarian consequences of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, calling for an immediate ceasefire and a renewed commitment to diplomacy as the United Nations Security Council convened an emergency session to discuss the escalating hostilities.

Addressing the 15-member Security Council during the meeting requested by Ukraine, Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, warned that the intensification of military operations was exacting a devastating toll on civilians while also threatening critical global food and energy infrastructure.

The Pakistani envoy stressed that the repercussions of the conflict extend far beyond the battlefield, disproportionately affecting developing countries through disruptions in food supplies, energy markets and international trade.

"The ripple effects of such actions negatively impact lives and livelihoods far beyond the conflict zone, especially in the Global South," Ambassador Asim told the Council, underscoring Pakistan's concern over the wider economic and humanitarian implications of the war.

His remarks came after senior UN officials briefed the Security Council on the deteriorating situation in Ukraine, warning that intensified attacks, particularly on Black Sea ports and maritime infrastructure, were disrupting global shipping routes, undermining food security and increasing risks for millions dependent on grain exports from the region.

Pakistan also expressed alarm over reports of attacks targeting humanitarian workers and facilities supporting relief operations.

"We are alarmed by the reported targeting of humanitarian actors and associated infrastructure," Ambassador Asim said, describing attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure as "reprehensible."

Reaffirming Pakistan's longstanding support for the protection of civilians during armed conflicts, the envoy urged all parties to fully comply with their obligations under International Humanitarian Law. He cautioned that violations of these legal commitments not only deepen human suffering but also fuel mistrust, heighten the risk of further escalation and diminish prospects for a negotiated settlement.

Calling for restraint and meaningful diplomatic engagement, Pakistan reiterated that dialogue remains the only sustainable path towards ending the conflict and restoring peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan, Indonesia seek stronger trade partnership through direct business linkages and expanded commercial engagement

Abdullah Jan

Rawalpindi: Pakistan and Indonesia are stepping up efforts to broaden their economic partnership by promoting direct business-to-business cooperation, addressing trade imbalances and creating fresh opportunities for exporters and investors from both countries.

The renewed push for stronger commercial engagement was highlighted during a visit by Indonesian Ambassador Chandra W. Sukotjo to the Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI) this week, where discussions focused on unlocking the untapped potential of bilateral trade and encouraging greater participation of the private sector.

Both sides viewed the upcoming 41st Trade Expo Indonesia, scheduled for October 14-18, as a key platform to accelerate commercial cooperation and establish long-term partnerships between businesses from the two countries.

During the meeting, Ambassador Sukotjo reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to expanding trade and investment ties with Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of stronger engagement between entrepreneurs, exporters and industry representatives. He informed the business community that Indonesia had simplified visa procedures for Pakistani business travellers and was also considering reducing visa fees to facilitate greater commercial mobility.

The ambassador extended a formal invitation to Pakistani companies to participate in the Trade Expo Indonesia, where exhibitors from diverse sectors including food and beverages, agriculture, fashion, industrial products and furniture will showcase their products. The exhibition is expected to provide Pakistani exporters with greater access to Indonesia as well as wider ASEAN markets.

Despite longstanding economic relations, bilateral trade between Pakistan and Indonesia remains below US$5 billion annually, a figure both governments and business leaders believe falls significantly short of its actual potential.

RCCI President Usman Shaukat noted that considerable room exists to increase trade volumes and diversify economic cooperation beyond traditional commodities.

He said both countries were exploring collaboration in a broad range of high-value sectors, including agriculture, halal food products, textiles and garments, pharmaceuticals, information technology and renewable energy, with the objective of creating a more balanced and sustainable trade relationship.

Shaukat also highlighted the growing potential for Pakistani exports of halal-certified meat, fresh fruits and seafood, describing these sectors as promising areas for expanding bilateral commerce and strengthening supply chain cooperation.

The discussions reflected the shared commitment of Pakistan and Indonesia to deepen economic engagement through enhanced private-sector collaboration, increased market access and broader regional trade connectivity.

Pakistan, Kazakhstan accelerate digital cooperation with focus on artificial intelligence and technology partnerships

Abida Shaheen

Islamabad: Pakistan and Kazakhstan this week reaffirmed their commitment to expanding cooperation in digital technologies, artificial intelligence and telecommunications as both countries move to implement agreements reached during recent high-level engagements and strengthen collaboration between their technology sectors.

The commitment was reiterated during a meeting between Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Pakistan, Yerzhan Kistafin, and Pakistan's Federal Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunication, Shaza Fatima Khawaja, where the two sides reviewed the progress achieved in bilateral digital cooperation and explored new avenues for partnership.

Both sides expressed satisfaction over the steady advancement of collaboration in information technology and telecommunications, highlighting the growing momentum generated by the agreements signed during the State Visit of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Islamabad earlier this year.

Particular attention was devoted to the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Kazakhstan's Ministry of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Development and Pakistan's Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication, which aims to deepen institutional cooperation and facilitate joint initiatives in emerging technologies.

The meeting also highlighted the establishment of the first Kazakhstan-Pakistan Artificial Intelligence Center at GIFT University in Gujranwala as a significant milestone in bilateral technological cooperation and a practical outcome of the expanding partnership.

In addition, both sides discussed prospects for strengthening cooperation between Kazakhstan's Astana Hub and Pakistan's Ignite National Technology Fund while encouraging greater interaction between technology companies, innovation centres and startups from the two countries.

Minister Shaza Fatima reaffirmed Pakistan's strong interest in expanding digital cooperation with Kazakhstan and promoting direct engagement among government institutions, innovation agencies and private-sector technology firms.

The discussions concluded with both countries expressing their determination to continue implementing existing agreements and launching mutually beneficial projects in artificial intelligence, digital innovation and advanced technologies, reflecting the growing importance of technology-driven cooperation in Pakistan-Kazakhstan bilateral relations.

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When 'Aukat' became permission

Ali Rehman Malik

A GIRL WITH FOUR ANNAS, A VILLAGE POLICEMAN, AND THE BLUE TICK BESIDE YOUR NAME

When Aukat Became a Number

Ali Rehman Malik

Decades ago, a young girl travelled to school in Pakistan with four anna's in her pocket. Some days, in the heat, she was desperately thirsty but could not afford water. Yet she did not believe that the child with more money was a better kind of child.

In another village, a boy watched a police officer arrive. Before the officer spoke, the atmosphere changed. People stood differently. They listened differently. The uniform seemed to enlarge the man wearing it. The boy saw not only a job, but a path out of being treated as small.

Urdu has a word that sits between those two children: Aukat. At its most ordinary, Aukat can refer to means, capacity, standing or social position. In everyday life, however, it often becomes something more consequential. It becomes permission.

Apni aukat mein raho. Know your place.

Meri aukat yeh nahin hai. Main kya kahun? This is not my station. Who am I to say anything?

That is the point at which a social estimate becomes an internal censor. The hierarchy no longer has to silence a person. The person anticipates the verdict and withdraws before the encounter has even occurred. This changes participation before capacity can be observed. Someone decides not to speak, apply, lead, challenge or imagine too much because people like them are not expected to do such things. Their absence is then treated as evidence that they had nothing to contribute. Assigned rank produces self exclusion. Self exclusion produces absence. Absence is misread as incapacity. The original estimate appears confirmed. Aukat manufactures some of the evidence later used to justify it.

This is not only a Pakistani habit. Pakistan simply gives an unusually honest word to a human movement. The Gospel of John preserves the dismissive question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

The question is not really about geography. It is a social estimate pretending to be realism. The place is treated as the measure of what can emerge from it. But no society gets to decide in advance what can come out of where. That is why ancestry can be weighted so differently. In one society, a public figure may describe himself as the child of a bus driver and use that history as evidence that the ladder remains open. In another, ordinary working class parentage may be invoked to drag someone backwards after every achievement. Same social fact; Opposite weighting.

At the top, ancestry supplies a premium. A recognised surname makes someone a plausible leader before they have demonstrated much at all. At the bottom, ancestry supplies inherited shame. A parent's work is used to diminish the weight of everything the child has subsequently become. Inherited prestige and inherited inferiority are the same social grammar moving in opposite directions.

This also helps explain the tenderness and pressure inside a familiar Pakistani sentence:

Parh likh ke bara aadmi banna hai. Study and become a big man. The phrase carries parental love, sacrifice and hope. Yet it is revealing. Education is being asked to do more than develop capacity. It must make the child socially large enough that the world can no longer treat him as small. This is why a government position, a profession, land, migration or a relationship with power can become more than a route to income. They can become routes out of humiliation. Security, respect, access and ordinary human standing have been concentrated inside a narrow range of offices, professions, families and assets. Pakistan has created a dignity bottleneck. The young person who competes for the civil service or the military may not love the hierarchy. He may simply want a life in which he is not exposed to it from below. The office promises not only salary, but standing, protection and the ability to make the surrounding system respond. A fair route into public service matters. Merit can break inherited rank at the gate. But if the office itself carries superior humanity, merit may simply reproduce the hierarchy it interrupted. A fairer queue for the chair does not answer why the chair contains so much dignity in the first place. Then social media opens another route.

The old public sphere had gatekeepers. Editors, broadcasters and institutions decided who could enter. Social media opened the gate, but human attention did not become infinite. So power migrated towards the next scarce resource. Social media democratises entry and aristocratises attention. Everyone may publish, but the platform controls the acoustics. Some voices carry across the entire field. Others can speak all day and barely reach the person standing beside them.

Visible metrics turn social standing into an interface. The blue tick, the followers count and the views. The likes and the reposts. The blue tick is a tiny convoy. It enters the feed with right of way. The sentence no longer arrives alone. Beside it sits a public instruction about how seriously the speaker should be taken.

This person matters. This person has already been validated. Pay attention before deciding whether the words deserve attention. But attention is evidence of salience, not substance. A million followers may come from expertise, beauty, inherited celebrity, outrage, entertainment, advertising, timing or algorithmic luck. The interface collapses those radically different causal histories into one visible score. That score then helps reproduce itself. Prior attention creates engagement. Engagement creates distribution. Distribution creates more attention. The number is both the result of earlier status and the cause of future status.

Social media does not merely measure digital Aukat. It helps manufacture it. The deeper error is that societies keep converting different forms of advantage into one universal currency. Wealth becomes intelligence. Office becomes superior humanity. Ancestry becomes competence. Fame becomes truth. Visibility becomes permission to matter. These things should not be freely exchangeable.

Human dignity is not a ranking. Functional authority is. Competence is specific to a domain and must remain open to revision. Attention tells us what is visible, not what is true. Wealth gives purchasing power, not moral weight.

Authority can and often must be asymmetrical. Human worth cannot. Everything may need a place. No person should be sentenced to one.

The girl with four annas possessed no title, convoy, famous surname or number beside her name. She had inherited something less visible: love, discipline, faith and a refusal to believe that money determined the substance of a human being. The point is not what later happened to her. The point is that she mattered while she was still thirsty. The world had already calculated her Aukat. The calculation did not become sovereign inside her.

Pakistan will not change simply by producing more big men. It will change when an ordinary person no longer has to become one before being heard.

The writer is a Barrister and the Chairman of the Institute of Research and Reforms (IRR) International and the Rehman Malik Foundation. He tweets/posts @AliRehmanMalik3

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Germany presses ahead with EUDI Wallet rollout despite concerns over Europe's readiness

Covert Report

Berlin: Germany is pressing ahead with the implementation of the European Union Digital Identity Wallet (EUDI Wallet), maintaining its commitment to launch the system in January 2027 despite growing concerns that many EU member states remain unprepared for a coordinated rollout and that the project could deepen, rather than reduce, digital fragmentation across Europe.

The German government has continued to expand testing of the digital identity ecosystem through hackathons, pilot projects, developer sandboxes and industry partnerships while investing €79.3 million (US$91 million) in the initiative through 2026. Officials insist the project remains on schedule, dismissing criticism over its phased development as a reflection of agile implementation rather than disorder.

However, experts have questioned whether the first version of Germany's wallet will deliver the full functionality originally envisioned under the EU framework.

The initial release will enable digital identification and credential presentation but will not yet include qualified electronic signatures, pseudonymous authentication or payment authorization features, all of which are expected to be introduced at a later stage.

Technical specialists have described Germany's approach as a "minimum viable" implementation designed primarily to satisfy the baseline requirements of the European Union while postponing more advanced capabilities. Critics argue that launching a limited version risks undermining public confidence in the broader digital identity initiative.

Concerns have also emerged over security, governance and privacy protections embedded within the proposed architecture. During discussions in the German Bundestag, technology experts highlighted issues ranging from transparency and post-quantum cybersecurity preparedness to the reliance on signed data credentials and cloud-based trust mechanisms.

An independent study commissioned by Germany's national consumer federation warned that the current credential model could potentially enable different service providers to combine user information over time, raising concerns about cross-platform tracking and long-term privacy protection.

Additional criticism has focused on provisions within Germany's proposed Digital Identities Act, which would allow the Federal Ministry for Digital Affairs to authorize new identity verification methods through ministerial regulation without requiring parliamentary approval. Experts cautioned that such provisions could potentially permit the return of video-based identity verification systems previously phased out over security concerns while weakening parliamentary oversight.

Privacy advocates have also questioned the handling of biometric information within the wallet framework. While the European Commission ultimately decided against mandatory biometric storage for all users, member states are required to include a biometric photograph while allowing citizens to opt out of storing it. However, not all EU countries are expected to adopt identical approaches,

potentially creating inconsistencies in privacy protections across the bloc.

The broader challenge extends beyond Germany. Industry assessments indicate that fewer than half of the European Union's 27 member states are expected to have fully operational digital identity wallets ready by the end of 2026. Separate evaluations have suggested that only a handful of countries are likely to meet the implementation deadline with complete certification and operational capability.

Germany's own testing environment has also identified delays in onboarding public and private service providers capable of accepting the new digital identities, highlighting another obstacle to achieving seamless interoperability across Europe.

Public awareness remains another major hurdle. Consumer surveys conducted in France and Germany found that more than half of respondents had never heard of the EUDI Wallet, underscoring concerns that even a successful technical launch could struggle without stronger public engagement and communication.

European officials increasingly acknowledge that the January 2027 deadline is likely to mark the beginning of a gradual, phased implementation rather than a fully harmonized digital identity system across the bloc. Germany has similarly stated that its national wallet will continue to evolve through iterative updates, with additional verification methods and digital services being introduced over several years.

While policymakers continue to promote the EUDI Wallet as a cornerstone of Europe's future digital economy, experts warn that uneven implementation, differing national approaches and limited public awareness could leave Europe operating with another fragmented digital ecosystem before full interoperability is eventually achieved.

Bulgaria expects €109 million EU recovery payment as anti-corruption reforms unlock funding

Covert Report

Sofia: Bulgaria expects to receive an additional €109 million from the European Union this week under its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Deputy Prime Minister Atanas Pekanov said, expressing confidence that the country can ultimately secure more than 90 percent of the funding available under the programme despite years of implementation delays.

Speaking in a televised interview, Pekanov said Bulgaria has already received slightly more than 70 percent of its allocated recovery funds and that accelerating reforms remains the government's top priority to maximize access to European financing.

According to the deputy prime minister, the latest payment was unlocked after Bulgaria swiftly adopted key anti-corruption legislation that had been identified by the European Commission as a prerequisite for further disbursements.

He said the government enacted the Law on Counteracting Corruption among Persons Holding Public Office along with legislation strengthening accountability mechanisms for the Prosecutor General, satisfying commitments that had delayed the release of additional EU funds.

Pekanov noted that more than €400 million had previously been frozen because reforms linked to the country's Anti-Corruption Commission had not been completed. The risk was removed after parliament approved the necessary legislation, appointed members of the commission and enabled the institution to begin operations.

He described the establishment of the anti-corruption framework as one of the government's first major commitments and said it had helped restore confidence among European institutions regarding Bulgaria's reform agenda.

Despite the positive developments, the deputy prime minister acknowledged that Bulgaria could still face a financial penalty related to the fifth payment under the recovery plan after the Supreme Court of Cassation failed to appoint one of the required members of the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Pekanov said the exact scale of any deduction would become clearer in September but expressed hope that any penalty would remain limited. He also voiced optimism that the Supreme Court would revisit the issue and complete the appointment process.

The deputy prime minister stressed that Bulgaria now faces a tight implementation timetable, with all projects financed under the Recovery and Resilience Plan required to be completed by the end of August.

He said construction projects, infrastructure works, equipment deliveries and all agreed structural reforms must be finalized before the deadline to ensure full compliance with the programme's requirements.

Among the flagship projects nearing completion is Sofia's Georgi Asparuhov metro station, which Pekanov cited as one of several major investments supported through the European recovery mechanism.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan forms part of the European Union's post-pandemic recovery programme, providing member states with grants and financing linked to the implementation of economic reforms, governance improvements and strategic public investment projects. Bulgaria continues to work towards meeting all remaining milestones to maximize access to the funds before the programme concludes.

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Portugal's river basins remain resilient despite Europe's worsening water crisis

Celina Ali

Islamabad: Portugal's river basins have maintained healthy water reserves despite worsening drought conditions and declining river levels across much of Europe, offering a rare positive outlook as many countries grapple with mounting water shortages.

Official data from Portugal's National Water Resources Information System (SNIRH) showed that nearly all mainland river basins recorded above-average water levels at the end of July, with only the Lima and Mondego basins in the north falling slightly below their historical averages.

The figures indicate that Portugal has so far avoided the severe hydrological stress affecting several European nations, where prolonged heatwaves and reduced rainfall have significantly depleted rivers, reservoirs and freshwater supplies.

Among Portugal's best-performing river basins, the Oeste basin reached full capacity with water reserves at 100 percent, followed by the Mira basin at 94.3 percent and the Barlavento basin at 86.7 percent.

These levels highlight the country's comparatively favourable water storage situation at the height of the summer season.

The Lima basin recorded the lowest water level at 51.9 percent of capacity, below its long-term average of 65.3 percent. The Mondego basin stood at 74.3 percent, slightly below its normal level of 78.2 percent. Other relatively lower-performing basins included the Ave at 66 percent and the Douro at 71 percent.

Portugal's reservoir network also remained in a strong position. Of the 60 reservoirs monitored nationwide, 21 held more than 80 percent of their total storage capacity by the end of July. Significantly, no reservoir reported water availability below 40 percent, underscoring the overall resilience of the country's surface water resources.

While reservoir and river conditions remain encouraging, meteorological data suggest that parts of the country continue to face dry conditions. The Portuguese Institute of the Sea and the Atmosphere (IPMA) reported that, as of June, around 61.1 percent of Portugal was experiencing mild drought, while a further 2.7 percent was under moderate drought.

Experts caution, however, that meteorological drought—caused by reduced rainfall—and hydrological drought, which affects rivers, reservoirs and dams, do not occur simultaneously. Hydrological impacts generally emerge later, meaning water reserves can remain relatively stable even during prolonged periods of below-average rainfall.

Portugal ambassador to Pakistan H.E. Paulo Miguel Guedes Domingues

Despite the favourable status of rivers and reservoirs, environmental specialists have warned that Portugal's underground water reserves present a less optimistic picture.

Aquifers, which serve as critical long-term freshwater sources, are reported to be at historically low levels after years of sustained pressure from climate change, groundwater extraction and recurring drought.

Unlike surface reservoirs, depleted aquifers require extended periods of consistent rainfall over multiple seasons to recover fully. Consequently, authorities continue to urge households, businesses and agricultural users to adopt responsible water conservation practices despite the reassuring reservoir statistics.

The contrasting conditions between Portugal's relatively healthy river systems and Europe's broader water crisis illustrate the growing complexity of climate-related water management, reinforcing the need for sustainable resource planning even in countries currently benefiting from comparatively robust water reserves.

Pakistan excluded as US makes visa bond programme permanent

Abida Shaheen

Islamabad: Pakistan has been excluded from a new United States visa bond programme that requires selected foreign visitors from designated countries to deposit up to US$20,000 as a refundable financial guarantee before receiving a visitor visa, according to the latest rules issued by the US government.

The programme, which came into effect on August 1, applies to citizens of 50 countries, but Pakistan is not among those included. In South Asia, Bangladesh and Nepal are covered by the new policy, while India has also been excluded.

The US State Department said the decision follows a review of a visa bond pilot programme introduced in 2025, which officials said successfully reduced visa overstays and improved compliance with American immigration regulations. Based on the results, Washington has now made the programme a permanent feature of its visa policy.

Under the revised regulations, US consular officers may require selected applicants seeking B-1 business or B-2 tourist visas from countries covered by the programme to post a refundable bond ranging from US$10,000 to US$20,000 before a visa is issued.

The updated policy raises the maximum bond amount from US$15,000 under the pilot programme to US$20,000, while removing the previous minimum bond option of US$5,000.

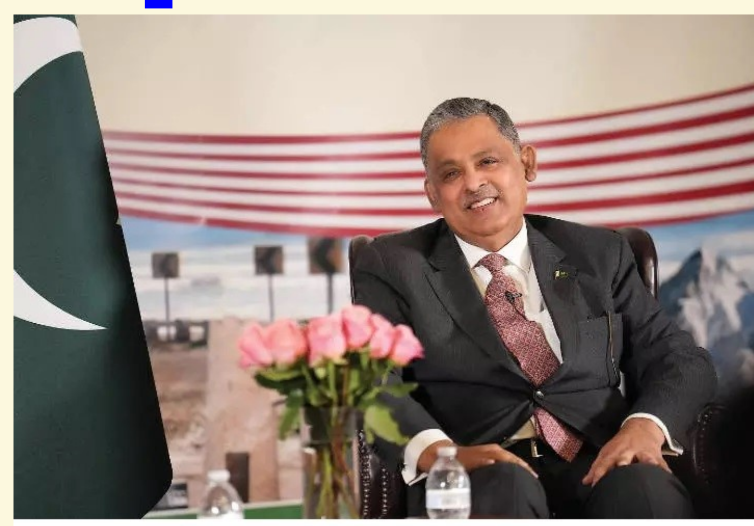
US officials said the programme demonstrated a significant improvement in visa compliance during its trial phase. According to the State Department, citizens from the 50 designated countries recorded 45,488 visa overstays in 2024, but during the first ten months of the pilot programme, the number of overstays fell to fewer than 50 cases.

Officials also noted that the bond requirement appeared to discourage applications from individuals considered less likely to comply with US immigration rules, contributing to a reduction in visa issuances among participating countries.

Diplomatic sources confirmed that Pakistan is not included among the countries subject to the visa bond requirement, meaning Pakistani applicants will continue to follow the existing US visitor visa application process without being subject to the new financial guarantee.

The programme covers countries across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific, with approximately 30 African nations included on the list.

The refundable bond is intended to encourage compliance with US immigration laws. Visitors who depart the United States before the expiration of their authorised stay and fully comply with visa conditions will receive their deposits back. However, those who overstay their visas or violate immigration rules may forfeit the bond.



Rizwan Saeed Sheikh, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States

The State Department clarified that the requirement will not automatically apply to every applicant from the designated countries. Instead, consular officers will determine on a case-by-case basis whether a visa bond is necessary before issuing a visitor visa.

Punjab seeks deeper JICA partnership to strengthen women protection services

Liaquat Ali

Lahore: The Punjab government this week reaffirmed its commitment to expanding cooperation with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to further strengthen women protection services across the province through enhanced institutional capacity, technical assistance and survivor-centred support programmes.

The commitment was expressed by Punjab Women Protection Authority (PWPA) Chairperson Hina Pervaiz Butt during a meeting with JICA President Dr. Akihiko Tanaka, who led a high-level Japanese delegation to the Punjab Women Protection Authority.

Welcoming the delegation, Hina Pervaiz Butt said Pakistan and Japan share a longstanding partnership that has contributed significantly to strengthening women protection mechanisms in Punjab. She noted that JICA's technical cooperation has enhanced the operational capacity of Women Protection Centres through specialised training, improved institutional coordination and the adoption of survivor-focused service delivery models.

She said the Punjab government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif, is working to establish a more responsive, accessible and effective protection system for women across the province. She also acknowledged Japan's continued support in advancing initiatives aimed at safeguarding women's rights and improving institutional responses to gender-based violence.

Dr. Akihiko Tanaka reaffirmed Japan's commitment to supporting Pakistan, particularly Punjab, in strengthening mechanisms to combat gender-based violence. He said JICA would continue to provide technical cooperation, capacity-building initiatives and institutional support to help improve women protection services.

The JICA president also appreciated the progress made by the Punjab Women Protection Authority under its ongoing collaboration with the Japanese agency, describing the partnership as an important step towards building stronger institutions and expanding support services for women.

Punjab Social Welfare and Bait-ul-Mal Secretary Sara Omar said the collaboration with JICA has delivered encouraging results and underscored the need to further expand training programmes to strengthen institutional capacity and improve service delivery across the province.

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to continuing cooperation aimed at enhancing women protection systems, promoting institutional reforms and improving access to quality support services for survivors of gender-based violence in Punjab.

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EU seeks united response after mass migrant crossings into Spain’s Ceuta enclave

Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan H. E. Mr Raimundas Karoblis

Covert Report

Brussels: The European Union this week called for a coordinated response to border security following the mass arrival of tens of thousands of migrants into Spain’s North African enclave of Ceuta, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen describing the protection of the bloc’s external frontiers as a “shared European responsibility.”

The appeal came as Spain continued efforts to return thousands of migrants who entered Ceuta after swimming or crossing around border controls from neighbouring Morocco, triggering renewed debate over migration management, border security and European solidarity.

In a letter to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, von der Leyen praised Spain’s handling of the crisis and urged greater cooperation among EU member states to strengthen border protection at vulnerable entry points.

“The protection of all our external borders is a shared European responsibility,” she said, calling for united action, enhanced surveillance and, where necessary, the use of physical barriers to safeguard the EU’s external frontiers.

The Commission president also indicated that the European Union was prepared to deepen cooperation with Morocco, describing Rabat as a strategic partner in combating migrant smuggling and irregular migration. She suggested that Brussels could expand technical, financial and operational assistance to Morocco, particularly in relation to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, including improved border management systems and early-warning mechanisms.

The latest migration surge prompted an emergency video conference of EU interior ministers to discuss immediate policy responses and broader measures to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Although the overwhelming majority of the estimated 50,000 people who entered Ceuta have already been returned to Morocco, Spanish authorities said several thousand migrants remain in the enclave while processing continues. Officials have also reinforced border infrastructure, including the installation of an additional security barrier near one of the principal crossing points.

The incident has exposed divisions within the European Union over migration policy. Several member states adopted temporary border controls following the crossings, while some governments argued for tougher restrictions within the Schengen free-travel area. Spain criticised what it described as a lack of solidarity from certain European partners and called for coordinated discussions rather than unilateral measures.

Migration analysts argue that the Ceuta crossings were driven less by structural migration pressures than by misinformation circulating online, including false claims that Spain had opened its borders. The rapid spread of such rumours is believed to have encouraged thousands of mostly young Moroccan men to attempt the dangerous crossing within a short period.

Experts note that the situation differs significantly from the 2015 European migration crisis, which was largely driven by conflicts such as the Syrian civil war and involved substantial numbers of asylum seekers. Instead, the recent events are viewed as an isolated but politically sensitive episode that nevertheless reignited concerns about border security across Europe.

The crisis has also renewed debate over the EU’s recently adopted migration framework, which allows failed asylum seekers to be transferred to designated safe third countries, known as “return hubs.” While the legal framework has been approved, no such agreements have yet been implemented.

Von der Leyen said discussions among interior ministers would mark only the first stage of the EU’s response, with migration and external border management expected to feature prominently at the European Council summit scheduled for October.

The developments underscore the continuing challenge facing the European Union as it seeks to balance humanitarian obligations with effective border management while maintaining unity among member states on one of the bloc’s most contentious policy issues.

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UK launches fully funded scholarships and startup fellowships for Pakistan's future leaders

Celina Ali

Islamabad: The United Kingdom thus week opened applications for three prestigious fully funded programmes aimed at empowering Pakistan's next generation of leaders, researchers and entrepreneurs through world-class education, research opportunities and international collaboration.

According to the British High Commission, applications are now being accepted for the Chevening Scholarships, the Chevening Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies Fellowship, and the Commonwealth Startup Fellowship, offering outstanding Pakistanis the opportunity to study, conduct research and strengthen entrepreneurial ventures in the UK.

The programmes are designed to equip participants with advanced knowledge, global networks and leadership skills while fostering stronger people-to-people ties between Pakistan and the United Kingdom.

The Chevening Scholarships, the UK government's flagship international awards programme, provide fully funded one-year master's degrees at leading British universities for individuals who demonstrate exceptional leadership potential, professional achievement and a commitment to creating positive change in their communities.

The Chevening Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies Fellowship is intended for mid-career academics and professionals, enabling them to undertake independent research at the University of Oxford while engaging with scholars from around the world.

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Startup Fellowship targets high-potential entrepreneurs, providing mentorship, business development support and access to UK expertise to help innovative startups expand and compete internationally.

British High Commissioner to Pakistan Jane Marriott said Pakistan possesses immense talent and that the programmes are designed to help exceptional individuals transform their ideas into meaningful impact.

"Pakistan has no shortage of talent, and these programmes help outstanding Pakistanis develop the skills, networks and ideas needed to lead institutions, grow businesses and tackle some of the world's biggest challenges," she said.

The High Commission stressed that applicants must submit original personal statements reflecting their own experiences, ambitions and achievements. It warned that the use of artificial intelligence to generate application responses is prohibited and could result in immediate disqualification.

All three programmes provide comprehensive financial support, including international airfare, tuition fees, visa costs and monthly living stipends, ensuring that successful candidates can focus entirely on their academic, research or entrepreneurial pursuits.

Beyond financial assistance, participants will gain exposure to diverse cultures, develop lifelong professional networks and establish enduring links with fellow scholars, innovators and policymakers from across the globe.

The British High Commission noted that Pakistan has a vibrant Chevening alumni community of more than 2,000 professionals serving in government, business, academia, media and civil society, reflecting the programme's long-standing contribution to strengthening UK-Pakistan relations. Worldwide, the Chevening network includes more than 20 current or former heads of state or government.

Applications for Chevening Scholarships are available through the official Chevening application portal, while applications for the Chevening Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies Fellowship can be submitted online. The Commonwealth Startup Fellowship is accepting applications until September 1, 2026.

High Commissioner of United Kingdom to Pakistan Jane Marriott

Deputy high commissioner of UK to Pakistan H.E. Matt Cannell

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“It does not matter how slowly you go, as long as you do not stop.” Confucius

COVERT
TRUTH UNFOLD
August 9 - 15 , 2026

“If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.” Mark Twain

Italy’s Leonardo raises 2026 outlook after strong first-half performance driven by defence demand

Newswire

Rome: Italian aerospace and defence group Leonardo this week upgraded its financial guidance for 2026 after reporting a sharp increase in new orders, stronger profitability and improved cash generation during the first half of the year, reflecting sustained demand across its defence and security businesses.

The company announced that new contracts surged 45% in the first six months of 2026, prompting management to raise its full-year forecasts for orders, core operating profit and free cash flow.

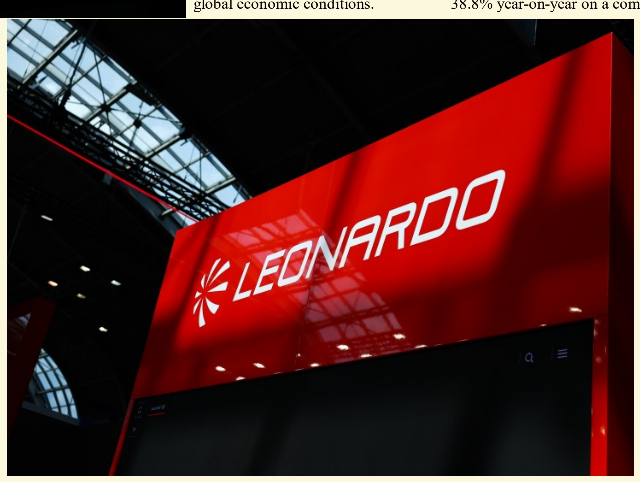
Leonardo said its strong momentum continued into the second quarter, supported by robust commercial performance across all business divisions, alongside rising profitability and healthy cash generation.

The revised outlook also incorporates the expected contribution from the €1.6 billion acquisition of Iveco Defence Vehicles (IDV), completed in March, which has strengthened Leonardo’s position in the military land systems sector.

Under the updated guidance, the company now expects new orders of €28.2 billion in 2026, significantly higher than its previous forecast of €25 billion, which had excluded the IDV acquisition. On a comparable basis, the earlier target stood at €26.2 billion.

Leonardo also increased its forecast for earnings before interest, taxes and amortisation (EBITA) to €2.21 billion, compared with its original estimate of €2.03 billion. Including the IDV acquisition, the earlier projected figure had been €2.15 billion, making the revised target another improvement in expected operating performance.

The company maintained its revenue forecast of approximately €22.1 billion for the full year, indicating continued confidence in steady business growth despite challenging global economic conditions.



However, Leonardo revised its year-end net debt projection to €2.2 billion, up from the previous estimate of €800 million, primarily reflecting the cash outflow associated with the acquisition of Iveco Defence Vehicles. The company noted that the updated debt estimate does not yet include the financial impact of the recently announced acquisition of Raft by its U.S.-based subsidiary, Leonardo DRS.

Chief Executive Lorenzo Mariani, who assumed leadership of the company in May, said the group’s expanding order book, rising revenues and improving operating profitability demonstrated its ability to successfully execute programmes, expand production capacity and respond to evolving market requirements.

Mariani added that Leonardo remains focused on pursuing additional mergers and acquisitions while strengthening strategic partnerships to support the company’s long-term growth strategy.

During the January-June period, new orders increased 38.8% year-on-year on a comparable basis, while revenues rose 8.2% despite adverse currency movements affecting contributions from the company’s U.S. operations, particularly Leonardo DRS in the electronics segment.

Net debt at the end of the first half reached €3.25 billion, an increase of nearly 50% from a year earlier, largely due to financing the IDV acquisition.

The improved guidance underscores Leonardo’s confidence that sustained defence spending, expanding production capabilities and strategic acquisitions will continue to drive growth as governments across Europe and other regions increase investments in defence and security.

Leonardo's chairman H.E.Stefano Pontecorvo

France tightens foreign investment rules to safeguard strategic industries

Covert Report

Paris: France this week significantly strengthened its foreign investment screening regime by lowering the threshold that triggers government scrutiny of acquisitions in strategically important companies, a move aimed at protecting national security and strengthening economic sovereignty amid rising geopolitical tensions.

Under a decree issued by Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, non-European investors seeking to acquire stakes in French companies operating in sensitive sectors will now face stricter state oversight.

Previously, the French Ministry of the Economy reviewed transactions only when a non-European investor sought to acquire 25% or more of a French company listed on a regulated market outside the European Union. Under the new rules, government approval will now be required for acquisitions of 10% or more, substantially expanding the scope of state supervision over foreign investments.

Announcing the measure, Prime Minister Lecornu said safeguarding France’s strategic businesses was essential to protecting national sovereignty while ensuring companies continue to grow in a secure economic environment.

He stressed that France’s responsibility was not only to support the development of its industries but also to preserve national strategic interests in an increasingly uncertain global landscape.

According to the Prime Minister’s Office, the tighter screening mechanism is intended to prevent opportunistic acquisitions by non-European investors that could threaten national security or place strategically important French companies under undue foreign influence.

Despite the enhanced oversight, the government said it would seek to avoid unnecessary obstacles to investment and corporate fundraising. To balance security concerns with market efficiency, the new review process will operate under an accelerated procedure designed to provide investors with timely decisions.

Under the revised framework, foreign investors will be required to notify the French Treasury Directorate-General of planned transactions involving qualifying share purchases. The Ministry of the Economy will then have 10 days to determine whether the proposed investment warrants a more comprehensive national security review.

The strengthened investment screening regime forms part of France’s broader efforts to reinforce economic security in response to a rapidly evolving international environment marked by heightened geopolitical competition and increased strategic rivalry.

The policy also reflects recommendations contained in a parliamentary report calling for a fundamental shift in France’s approach to economic security. The report argued that the country’s existing investment protection framework should be reinforced as foreign acquisitions assume greater strategic significance in the current geopolitical climate.

By lowering the investment threshold for government intervention, France joins a growing number of countries tightening oversight of foreign acquisitions in sectors considered critical to national security, technological leadership and economic resilience, while seeking to maintain an attractive environment for legitimate international investment.