

Thaw in Pakistan ties a welcome direction

It should apologise for ‘71 role to smoothen transition

It is encouraging to see constructive discussions at the first foreign-secretary-level talks held between Bangladesh and Pakistan in 15 years. Given the complex and often strained history between the two countries, the meeting marked a gradual thawing of relations as both sides sought to build on earlier interactions between the two heads of state in September and December. At the meeting, among other topics, Dhaka notably raised two historically unresolved issues: it asked for \$4.52 billion as Bangladesh's share of pre-1971 assets and dues as well as a formal apology for the genocide committed during the Liberation War. It also requested the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh. In response, the Pakistani delegation expressed a willingness to continue discussions.

We must say that while economic imperatives likely, and rightly, drive ongoing efforts, addressing these issues is vital to a solid foundation for bilateral relations. Pakistan's pre-1971 role remains a deep wound for Bangladeshis and a stumbling block to building a truly fruitful partnership. There may be debates about the number of civilians killed by Pakistani forces, but the repressions and brutalities we suffered during our independence struggle are a matter of historical record. For us, asking for a formal apology or reparations is not about seeking revenge, it's about the need for admission of a historic tragedy and fostering genuine reconciliation. That said, we must also be prudent given the complexities involved.

For context, apologies issued by Japan for wartime atrocities in South Korea and China were often seen as insufficient as they were deemed vague, lacking legal reparations, or undermined by subsequent statements and actions of politicians. This highlights the difficulty of securing apologies that are both meaningful and enduring. Nevertheless, sustained diplomatic pressure has, at times, prompted renewed gestures of atonement from Japan. We must learn from such examples and engage with Pakistan accordingly. On Pakistan's side, a formal apology would also help its own collective reckoning as much as it would mend ties with us. The economic aspect of Bangladesh's demands could prove to be more challenging, however. As of April 4, Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves stood at \$15.75 billion. Meeting the demand for \$4.52 billion would mean parting with more than a quarter of those reserves—an unfeasible prospect at the moment. We, therefore, need to approach the issue with patience and strategic foresight.

It's important to remember that both sides have much to gain from an improved relationship. Bangladesh's exports to Pakistan stood at \$61.98 million in FY2024, while imports from Pakistan were \$627.8 million—a gap that greater cooperation can help address. However, these imports are still considerably lower than those from China and India. Enhanced trade ties with Pakistan could diversify our sourcing markets and offer competitive advantages. Already, direct shipping has begun between Bangladesh and Pakistan, while trade and visa procedures are getting easier, with direct flights on the cards.

Of course, sensitivities rooted in something as crucial as 1971 will not vanish overnight. But a future-oriented approach—combining constructive dialogue, historical reckoning, and acknowledgement of mutual benefits—can go a long way. The first steps in that direction have already been taken. We hope that the scheduled visit of Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar later in the month would further normalise Bangladesh-Pakistan relations.

Make public hospitals more patient-centric

CMCH's MRI machine out of service for three years

It is quite perplexing that the prime public health facility in Bangladesh's port city does not have a functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine. According to a news report, Chittagong Medical College Hospital's (CMCH) only MRI machine has been out of service for three years now, forcing patients to go to private facilities for the test. Thus, instead of paying Tk 3,000-5,000 for MRI scans at the CMCH, they are spending Tk 9,000-20,000 for the diagnosis at private facilities.

This is not the first time that inadequacy and unavailability of essential equipment have been reported at public hospitals. Often, the reason behind the unavailability is not a shortage of funds. Rather, the hospital authorities' mismanagement, inertia, and perhaps even a lack of compassion for general patients leave medical equipment without maintenance and timely repair. Some machines even remain unused for years because of a lack of trained operators. In the case of the MRI machine at the CMCH, the hospital authorities' refusal to pay the supplier Tk 1 crore for a comprehensive maintenance contract after the expiry of the warranty period in 2020 resulted in patients paying higher prices for MRI scans elsewhere.

Apparently, the CMCH authorities wanted to save Tk 35 lakh by offering the supplier Tk 65 lakh. What happened instead was that patients bore the burden of their failure to negotiate a deal. If a minimum of 12 patients at the CMCH require MRI scans daily, then a minimum of Tk 12.5 crore has been spent by general patients, out of pocket, over the three years just to get MRI scans. This raises the question: what public money did the CMCH save by not accepting the supplier's terms? While easier terms and even change of suppliers are indeed options that can be explored, did the authorities carry out a patient-centric cost-benefit analysis at any stage? Ironically, Tk 3.5 crore has now been allocated to repair the machine, with specialists from the supplier company as well as engineers from the National Electro-Medical Equipment Maintenance Workshop and Training Centre working for the last two months to repair the broken machine.

The saga of CMCH's MRI machine shows how our healthcare system continues to fail patients as decisions are not made with their best interests in mind. We urge the government to focus more on health sector reforms, initiating a comprehensive overhaul so that public healthcare becomes more accessible, efficient, and patient-friendly.

Stop scapegoating the curriculum



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Ever so often, education authorities unveil yet another revolutionary curriculum reform, promising to transform Bangladesh's youth into critical thinkers equipped for the global economy. The fanfare is predictable: glossy publications, enthusiastic press conferences, international consultants nodding approvingly. Meanwhile, in many (if not most) classrooms within a five-kilometre radius from the announcement ceremony, 60 students are crammed into a space designed for 30, memorising passages verbatim for their upcoming exams. Their teacher, untrained in the previous curriculum revision, is already anxious about implementing yet another change.

This national obsession with curriculum reform is not just ineffective, it is a charade masking deeper systemic failures while producing the illusion of progress. The curriculum is a favourite scapegoat, a convenient target for change that allows the authorities to appear progressive while avoiding the messy, politically challenging work of addressing the structural

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foundations that determine whether any curriculum should succeed or fail.

Consider the much-celebrated creative question method. Designed to foster higher order thinking, it has instead mutated into another memorisation exercise, with students memorising creative answers from guidebooks. It collapsed not because the curricular concept was flawed, but because teachers (themselves products of a regressive iteration



FILE VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

of the curricular legacy) received inadequate training, classrooms remained overcrowded, and the examination system continued to reward regurgitation rather than genuine creativity.

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have trumpeted the distribution of millions of free textbooks in January each year as a signature achievement, without addressing why the same textbooks gather dust as students rely on commercial guidebooks that better prepare them for exams.

This disconnect stems from a failure to recognise that the curriculum exists within an ecosystem. Curriculum is not equivalent to content delivery. It is also an experience to be facilitated. When we introduce digital learning objectives into a curriculum without ensuring reliable electricity supply at schools, when we prescribe student-centred pedagogy to teachers handling classes of around 70 students, when we mandate English communication while teachers themselves struggle with the language beyond declaring a patient dead before/after the doctor's arrival, we are engaging in educational fantasy, not reform.

The coaching centre culture exemplifies this dishonesty. These shadow institutions thrive not despite our curriculum reforms but *because* of them—they promise to translate the ideal curriculum into the practical reality of examination success. Their existence is a rational market response to the system's hypocrisy, where what is officially taught bears little resemblance to what is tested and valued. The madrasa education modernisation efforts follow the same

flawed pattern. We revise religious education curricula to include modern subjects without addressing the pedagogical approaches, teacher qualifications or institutional cultures that determine whether these subjects are meaningfully taught.

Breaking this cycle requires confronting uncomfortable realities. First, no curriculum reform succeeds without a parallel investment in the human infrastructure of education. Teacher preparation isn't a supporting element of curriculum reform; it is part of the reform. Second, examination systems that reward memorisation will always undermine curricula designed for critical thinking. Third, the socioeconomic realities of Bangladesh, where education represents economic survival, mean that unless reforms address the connection between educational outcomes and life opportunities, they will remain theoretical exercises.

To redress, this author has a five-course wish list: a) establish a five-year moratorium on new curriculum changes to focus instead on implementing the existing curricula effectively; b) redirect curriculum reform budgets towards sustained, practice-based teacher development programmes; c) transform assessment systems to evaluate the ability of application, analysis, and problem-solving rather than recall; d) reduce class sizes by increasing the number of teachers rather than continually revising what those overwhelmed teachers are expected to teach; and e) elevate the teaching profession through improved compensation, autonomy, and social standing. This final point underlines an economic truth: value begets quality.

Granted, these measures are messier, more expensive, and politically challenging compared to the clean, donor-friendly process of curriculum revision. They require confronting entrenched interests and rethinking resource allocation. Yet, they address the actual antecedents of educational quality rather than its most visible but least consequential component.

Bangladesh's aspiration towards the higher middle income status means we can no longer afford the luxury of educational theatre. The curriculum obsession is both a misdiagnosis of our educational ailments and a distraction from the cure. The next time officials proudly present a new curriculum, we should ask not what has changed on paper, but what will change in practice.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Global South will pay for Trump's trade war



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US President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs have unleashed economic chaos, rolling stock and bond markets and triggering panic around the world, especially in lower-income countries that rely heavily on exports to the United States. The result could be an entirely manufactured global recession, with the developing world bearing the brunt.

The brief calm in financial markets following Trump's abrupt announcement of a 90-day "pause" on most of his "reciprocal" tariffs—excluding those on Chinese imports, which he raised to 145 percent—has proven premature. While some billionaires and loyalists may have made a killing by correctly interpreting Trump's social media posts ahead of his sudden policy reversal, the disruptions to global trade and finance caused by his tariffs continue to pose serious risks.

Moreover, despite the pause on some tariffs, a universal 10 percent tariff on all US imports remains in effect, along with sector-specific tariffs of 25 percent on steel, aluminium, automobiles, and auto parts. There are new exemptions for smartphones, computers, and other electronic devices, even as Trump has also threatened new duties on pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, copper, and lumber. Taken together, these measures will reduce the availability of imported goods, raise

prices for US consumers, and impose steep costs on exporting countries.

But ultimately, the tariffs imposed on each country will depend on future negotiations, where the US is expected to play hardball. Trump has already made clear his disdain for foreign leaders, boasting that many were "kissing my ass" and willing to "do anything" to reverse the tariffs. As a result, the final scope of Trump's tariffs remains uncertain.

Most critically, Trump's latest tariff hike on Chinese imports all but ensures that the Sino-American trade war will continue to escalate. The increase to 145 percent is largely symbolic—a tit-for-tat move after China raised its own tariffs—since the previous 104 percent rate had already made most Chinese imports commercially unviable. In effect, the administration has signalled its intent to shut down trade with China.

The implications for US consumers and domestic producers that rely on Chinese inputs are profound. Trump's open distrust of goods from Chinese-owned factories, even when routed through third countries, has forced governments hoping to maintain access to the US market to scramble for alternative sourcing and production options. The mere expectation of such shifts has already severely disrupted global supply chains.

Uncertainty has always been a major deterrent to economic activity,

and the unpredictability of the Trump administration's policies (marked by erratic decision-making, sudden reversals, and on again, off again announcements) has made future developments nearly impossible to anticipate using standard risk models. Trump's preference for shock-and-awe tactics, reminiscent of other "strongmen" like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, compounds the problem.

Rising uncertainty will inevitably discourage investment, as businesses shelve new projects and postpone planned expansions while waiting to see how events unfold. The subsequent slowdown could weigh heavily on US growth and employment, with consequences that extend far beyond the direct economic impact of Trump's tariffs.

Worse still, the US cannot win its trade war with China. The Chinese government clearly knows this and is playing the long game. At any moment, the two superpowers' economic war of attrition could spiral into a major financial crisis or even a military confrontation.

The alarm bells are already ringing. The falloff in demand for US Treasury bills, long considered the world's safest asset, signals diminishing confidence in the economic leadership of the US. Moreover, the simultaneous drop in US stocks, bonds, and the dollar points to growing doubts about the US Treasury's ability to serve as the global benchmark for asset prices, even as they remain the preferred vehicle for high-volume financial transactions.

As with previous self-inflicted economic crises, the US economy will undoubtedly suffer, but the heaviest burden will fall on the developing world. Cancelled or delayed export orders are already

undermining production and fuelling unemployment. Meanwhile, financial volatility is threatening economic stability long before the full impact of Trump's tariffs can be felt.

These developments are already reflected in the yield spreads on developing countries' sovereign bonds, particularly those of lower- and middle-income economies. In the month leading up to April 9, emerging-market sovereign dollar debt values fell by an average of 2.9 percent, while average yields rose to 7.4 percent. The sovereign bonds of debt-stressed countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Gabon, and Zambia dropped by more than 10 percent.

Unfortunately, developing countries are all too familiar with this kind of financial and economic turmoil. For decades, many have been trapped in a cycle of currency depreciation, rising borrowing costs, strained public finances, forced spending cuts, and domestic market instability that constrained investment and private-sector activity.

The lessons for developing economies are clear. Not only is globalised trade being upended, but financial globalisation is bound to become even less appealing to countries seeking stable, long-term financing to support their development goals.

Trump is determined to dismantle the global economic order, which in his view allows other countries to take advantage of the US. In response, many developing economies will likely begin to reconsider their participation in—and subordination to—an unequal system that no longer serves their interests. But the road ahead will remain perilous until a credible alternative takes shape.