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No, the 1971 issues are not resolved

Pakistan FM's comment brings doubt amid warming relations

We disagree with Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar's assertion that the 1971 issues stand resolved between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Speaking to journalists after a meeting with Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain on the final day of his two-day visit, he claimed that the matter was settled once in 1974 and again in the early 2000s during then-president Pervez Musharraf's visit to Bangladesh. The truth couldn't be further from that. We do not know where Mr Dar was getting his facts from, but history and media reporting over the years show a constant pattern of Pakistani authorities ignoring demands for an official acknowledgement and apology for the 1971 genocide, the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis or "Biharis," or Bangladesh's rightful share of pre-1971 assets. That the country's official messaging should still rely on evasion is quite painful to see, especially as the two countries embark on a new era of bilateral relations.

Even if we leave aside the need for factual corroborations, an apology for atrocities committed against a nation should be apologetic enough to convince. It shouldn't cause further consternation. That said, Mr Dar's reference to the 1974 Tripartite Agreement signed in New Delhi deserves to be read within the right context. The agreement was hailed at the time as an act of reconciliation in a sharply divided subcontinent. But it also left crucial issues unresolved. Bangladesh, under pressure from India and Pakistan, released 195 senior Pakistani officers accused of war crimes on Islamabad's assurance, albeit verbal, that they would face justice at home—an assurance that was never honoured. Moreover, Pakistan's statement condemning crimes "that may have been committed" stopped short of admitting to atrocities, creating space for denial and rehabilitation of those responsible. The agreement also didn't address the issue of sharing the assets and liabilities of pre-1971 Pakistan.

How, then, did it settle our unresolved issues? A selective reading of history may serve parochial interests at home but the fact remains that Pakistan has neither acknowledged the genocide nor apologised for it in unequivocal terms. More than five decades on, school textbooks in Pakistan still feed students with simplistic or rather distorted narratives, blaming India and international conspiracies for East Pakistan's fall while erasing our struggle and suffering. But the genocide, mass displacement, or systematic sexual violence inflicted on innocent civilians were not accidents of war but deliberate acts of annihilation. Any meaningful progress in our relations requires Pakistan to confront its past honestly, just as some other nations have done in the face of historical crimes.

That said, we welcome the efforts both countries are presently making to forge a partnership rooted in the needs of the present. Mr Dar's visit has produced agreements on various issues. Such steps are vital, but they must rest on a foundation of trust and respect. In the spirit of increasing warmth in bilateral ties and freeing itself from a historical burden, Pakistan should positively consider Bangladesh's demands for a genuine apology for the genocide and return of $4.52 billion as the latter's share of pre-1971 assets. Only then can both be free to forge a true and lasting partnership. For us, raising the issue of genocide is not to impede the revival of this relationship but only to put it on a firmer footing.

Protect children from rape, sexual abuse

State must take effective measures to prevent these crimes

We are alarmed by the sharp rise in child rape cases across the country during the first seven months of 2025. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), cases have surged by nearly 75 percent compared to the same period last year. During this time, 306 girls were raped, up from 175 in the same period of 2024 and even exceeding the year's total of 234 cases. Even more horrifying are the ages of the victims: 49 were toddlers aged under 6, 94 were between 7 and 12, and 103 were teenagers. In 60 cases, the ages were not specified. During these seven months, 30 boys were also raped. The whole picture is deeply disturbing, laying bare the failure of the state and society to protect our children.

Evidently, child rape and abuse remain pervasive, with nearly nine out of ten rape victims in the country being children, according to another ASK report. Many incidents also go unreported due to social stigma and family pressure. Even when cases are filed, they often remain unresolved due to weak legal follow-ups, delays in investigation, and pressure from perpetrators to settle out of court. One example of the weakness in our legal system is the gruesome rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Magura. While the main perpetrator in this case was convicted, his accomplices were released. Although the Magura incident saw sheer outrage, with many taking to the streets demanding justice, we must keep in mind that such outcry is rare. The lack of public pressure could be one of the reasons why many cases do not end in conviction. Apart from rape, children also face other forms of violence, such as sexual harassment by stalkers and even by their teachers and close relatives, which highlights just how vulnerable they are to potential abuse.

To address the situation, a stronger role from law enforcement and the judiciary is essential so that offenders cannot get away with impunity or feel emboldened. It is also crucial to strengthen victim and witness protection laws to encourage reporting. Silence around male rape should also be broken through open conversations at home, in schools, and in religious spaces, with support from respected voices in society. Community-based child protection groups can be formed to help prevent abuse at the grassroots level. Equally importantly, families must teach children about personal boundaries, respect, and potential dangers. Schools, too, should incorporate safety education into the curriculum and train teachers to safeguard children effectively.

How to stay resilient when trade slows and aid shrinks

MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

The global economy is entering a more fragmented and protectionist phase. Economies around the world are raising tariffs, tightening trade-defence tools, and tying industrial policies to local content rules—that is, a certain percentage of domestically sourced goods must be present in production. For low-income countries, these changes coincide with shrinking aid budgets and a slowdown in global growth. This has created heightened risks for export-led development models that depend on predictable market access and concessional finance. The world of trade and development finance is becoming less reliable and more uncertain than it was even a decade ago.

What distinguishes today's protectionism is not only its scale but also its scope. The World Trade Organization (WTO) reports that by 2024, import restrictions affected $2.94 trillion of global imports, equal to 11.8 percent of total trade, up from 9.9 percent the previous year. This shows that restrictions are accumulating without meaningful reversal. In April 2025, the WTO lowered its trade outlook, warning that new tariffs and higher trade-policy uncertainty would lead to a 0.2 percent contraction in global merchandise trade in 2025, with only a modest recovery expected the following year. These cuts to projections are unusually steep and linked explicitly to policy choices, rather than to cyclical economic weakness, showing how policy-driven trade frictions now impact global commerce.

Meanwhile, official development assistance (ODA) is also weakening. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals that ODA fell in 2024 for the first time in six years. Also, in 2024, donor countries spent 17.3 percent less of their aid budgets on refugee costs within their borders compared to 2023. The OECD projects that ODA to poorer countries could fall by another 9 to 17 percent in 2025. For low-income economies, this means that aid flows are shrinking precisely when trade is becoming more expensive and uncertain, while debt and climate-related pressures are intensifying.

The broader economic context does little to offset these headwinds. According to June 2025 Global Economic Prospects of the World Bank, global growth is forecasted to slow to 2.3 percent in 2025, with most economies expanding more slowly than they did last year. In parallel, the April 2025 report of the WTO indicates that reciprocal tariffs and policy uncertainty would deepen trade contraction in 2025, impacting low-income and least developed countries the most.

Advanced economies are dealing with this new environment by combining protectionist measures with industrial promotion. Tariff shields are being paired with subsidy-heavy reindustrialisation strategies in areas such as green technology, semiconductors, and critical minerals. Emerging economies are responding in different ways. Aided by diversification and a deepening manufacturing base, Vietnam has sustained rapid export growth in 2025 despite tariff uncertainty. However, the country remains exposed to policy swings in its major markets. Thus, countries which are most able to plug into diversified value chains can still thrive even as global rules fray.

Regional integration has also emerged as an important coping strategy. In Africa, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is seen as a mechanism to open alternative markets, deepen regional value chains, and reduce over-reliance on any single external partner. As the agreement progresses beyond pilot programmes, the speed of regulatory and trade-facilitation reforms will determine how quickly firms can take advantage of the new opportunities.

For low-income countries, navigating this growing protectionist world begins with recognising that old assumptions about trade and aid can no longer be relied upon. Protecting and diversifying market access is crucial. Countries must maximise the use of existing trade preference schemes, negotiate improvements in rules of origin, and invest in the compliance infrastructure needed for standards, traceability, and sustainability reporting. UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report 2024 emphasises that in a low-growth and high-debt environment, development strategies should be reoriented toward building productive capacities and moving up value chains to reduce vulnerability to sudden shocks in preferences. At the same time, investment in trade facilitation and services has become a priority. Both the WTO and the World Bank underscore the resilience of services and digitally delivered trade. By modernising ports, customs systems, and digital infrastructure, low-income countries can raise their competitiveness, attract investment, and offset some of the pressures from tariffs and shrinking aid.

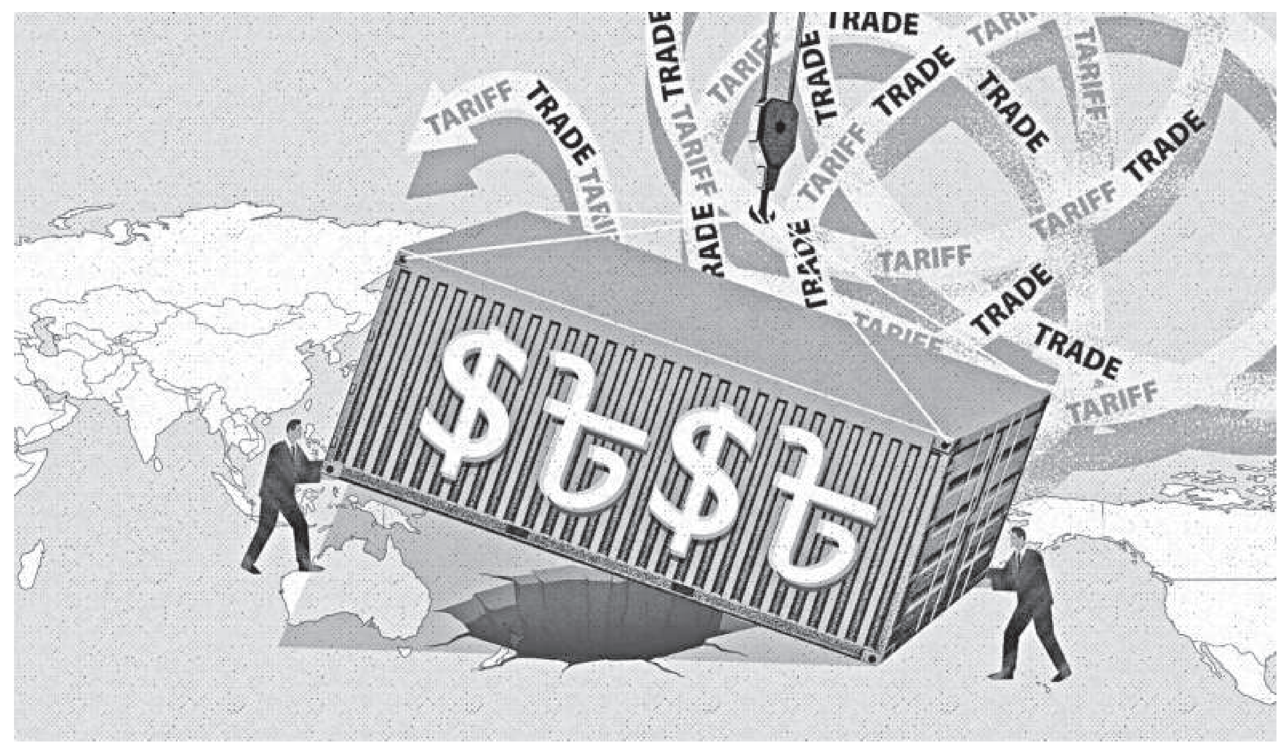
Rebuilding fiscal space and development finance is equally important. With ODA stagnating and humanitarian needs growing, domestic revenue mobilisation must improve, and subsidy reforms must be carefully sequenced to protect vulnerable groups while creating space for productive public investment. The apprehension about sharp reductions in ODA to the poorest countries highlights the urgency of diversifying financing sources and improving the quality and transparency of public spending. Another imperative is to increase flexibility in supply chains. Low-income countries should seek to participate in multiple regional arrangements, negotiate mutual recognition agreements to lower non-tariff costs, and help firms broaden their supplier bases. At the enterprise level, building the capacity to meet environmental and labour standards demanded by global buyers has become essential for maintaining access to key markets.

Bangladesh provides a vivid example of the challenges and opportunities in this new environment. The country is scheduled to graduate from the LDC category in November 2026, which means it will lose some of the special trade preferences it currently enjoys. Its export structure remains heavily concentrated in ready-made garments (RMG) and is dependent on the US and EU markets, leaving it highly sensitive to changes in preferences and buyer behaviour. RMG exports to the EU rose strongly in early 2025, underscoring Bangladesh's competitiveness. However, the impact of the new tariff regime should be closely monitored and preparations made accordingly.

The government has begun preparing for these changes. Under IMF-supported programmes, Bangladesh has committed to macroeconomic stabilisation, tax and customs modernisation, and structural reforms to improve the investment climate. These reforms will lower trade costs, support diversification, and help firms meet compliance requirements in stricter markets. For the EU, Bangladesh's path after graduation depends on access to the new Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which requires ratifying and effectively implementing a larger set of international conventions, stricter monitoring, and tougher rules of origin. Securing GSP+ is essential for Bangladesh's future competitiveness in its largest export market.

Even if Bangladesh succeeds in gaining GSP+ status, broader global shifts mean the country must still adapt. Moving up the value chain is essential. This means scaling up production through technology, investing in design and branding services, and expanding into apparel-adjacent logistics and testing. These sectors are more resilient to tariff changes and can meet the growing demand for speed, traceability, and sustainability. Trade facilitation reforms must also deliver tangible results. Customs systems need full digitisation, single-window operations should be fully integrated with port systems, and clearance times must fall to levels that encourage diversification into pharmaceuticals, IT-enabled services, light engineering, and agro-processing. Diversification of export markets is another priority. Bangladesh needs to strengthen trade ties in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa to reduce dependence on the traditional markets.

In a protectionist era, preparation itself becomes a source of competitiveness, and Bangladesh must move faster to protect its hard-won gains.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

How a train to Tehran is rewriting the world's map

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ZAKIR KIBRIA

The whistle tears across Iran's sun-cracked deserts—a freight train's war cry, hauling the future on its back. This locomotive has completed its maiden run from Xi'an to Tehran, stacked with defiance. Its arrival wasn't just a delivery; it was a geopolitical quake. The China-Iran corridor, bypassing western sea lanes, had become a steel reality. And then this year we witnessed Israeli bombs lighting up Natanz while a US ambassador whispered of Truman and nuclear fire. Coincidence? No. This was the sound of old empires panicking as a new world clawed free.

Rewind a century. British strategist Halford Mackinder called Eurasia's landlocked core the "Heartland"—history's ultimate prize. His 1904 warning echoed: "Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island." The Trans-Siberian Railway first made maritime powers sweat. Now, China's overland artery—slashing China-to-Iran transit from 40 risky sea days to 15—fulfils Mackinder's prophecy. It's Heartland power reborn, dodging choke points like the Strait of Hormuz, where 45 percent of China's oil sails under Western guns.

For Iran, the corridor is its lifeblood. Despite US sanctions, it transports 90 percent of Iran's oil exports to China—a $25 billion lifeline supplying 16 percent of Beijing's crude needs. Sanctions? Bypassed. Blockades? Outflanked. This isn't just trade—it is sovereignty forged through rail tracks.

Yet, the corridor's genius lies in its connection. It locks into Russia's International North-South Transport Corridor, weaving a sanctions-proof net across Eurasia. Overnight, Iran morphs from pariah to pivotal hub—bridging China to Turkey and beyond.

So why the bombs? Israel Natanz attack followed the train's debut. Officially, Iran "raced for a nuke." Yet US spies insisted Tehran was "years away from a weapon."

Then, atomic nostalgia: A US envoy compared Trump to Truman, who nuked Japan despite evidence it wasn't needed to win the war. The ghost of 1945 haunted 2025, signalling readiness to burn cities for dominance. As CENTCOM carriers prowled Iran's coast, China warned that "regime change" risked a global energy "nightmare."

For the non-Western world, this corridor ignites hope: energy security unchained from gunboat diplomacy, development without IMF shackles, and sanction defiance. For the West, it's extinction logic: 500 years of sea-rule upended by Heartland rails, the petrodollar bleeding as China pays Iran in yuan, NATO fracturing while Ankara flirts with BRICS.

Picture the duel: A train—a steel Doctor Zhivago crawling Central Asia's steppes—embodying slow creation. Against it, the fireball over Natanz—the old order's violent spasm. Mackinder's "Great Game" reloaded: hypersonics and digital yuan replacing cavalry charges.

That whistle howling through Iran isn't noise. It's a manifesto. The Heartland stirs. Empires clutching sea-power maps hear their requiem. For billions, it's the dawn of multipolar sovereignty—where trade runs on sovereign tracks, not imperial tides. Bombs bring darkness, but gaze east: light glows on the rails of a fairer world.

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