After decades of failure, can we finally fix our education system?

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Arguably, the most consequential failure of political leadership in independent Bangladesh has been in the field of education. The result is today's disarray across all sub-sectors of education, which holds the future of our nation hostage. The burning question is whether a newly elected government will recognise the seriousness of the situation and embark on a path of educational renewal.

Education has been a priority only rhetorically for elected and non-elected governments of Bangladesh since its birth. The major contenders in the upcoming parliamentary election—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami—have included education in their election promises—a sundry list of targets yet to add up to a vision of a much-needed educational transformation. More critically, given the history of promises and plans unfulfilled, questions loom as to whether and how the targets will be realised.

At present, we do not have an education sector plan. What we have are partial sub-sector projects. An example is the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP), the fourth phase of which is ongoing. Though described as a sector-wide approach, it covers only government primary schools, leaving behind various non-state institutions and madrasas, which together serve, mostly very poorly, about 40 percent of the primary school-age children.

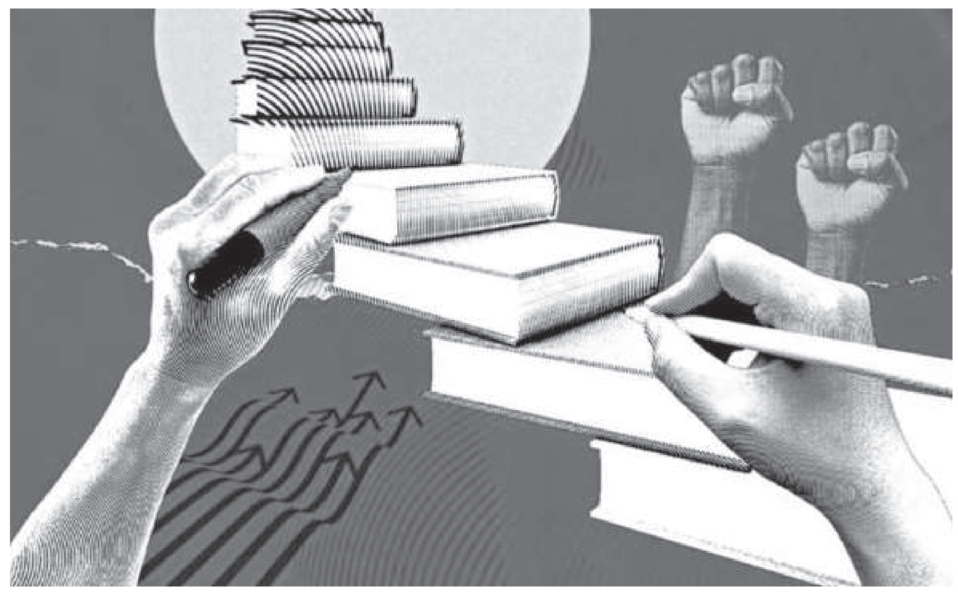
Of the primary school children, around 80 percent reportedly complete the level. However, an assessment has shown that more than half of them do not acquire a functional level of literacy and numeracy even after completing five years of primary education. Nevertheless, there has been a compulsory primary education law since 1990, and the government also pledged to provide primary education to all for free.

On the other hand, the state has no plan for universal secondary education. At present, about two-thirds of appropriate-age children enrol in secondary schools of all types up to grade ten and roughly half of them complete the level. The numbers of enrolment and completion say nothing about students' actual learning, which is widely recognised as seriously deficient.

A rapid expansion of madrasa education—both Alia madrasa, supported by the government, and the Qawmi madrasa, which is outside the purview of state supervision—has happened since the 1980s. Driven by poor performance and higher costs, many children moved to both of these types of madrasas from mainstream schools during the Covid and post-Covid periods. However, the quality of teaching, learning environment and, critically, the relevance of what is taught in madrasas to prepare young people for life and work remain questionable.

There has been growth in the number of institutions and students in vocational and technical education, general higher education and professional education. In each of these subsectors, the major criterion for justifying the investment and judging the outcome is the employability of the graduates. However, there is no systematic approach to assessing these sub-sectors by this criterion, such as periodic tracer studies of graduate employment in respective fields.

Available evidence indicates that the majority of vocational-technical graduates are not employed in their respective areas of training at an adequate salary, presumably because of the poor quality and low market-relevance of the training. The National University, the affiliating body for about 2,500 colleges enrolling three-quarters of general higher education students, produces graduates who face an uncertain future in the job market. At least a third of them wait for years before being hired, and many end up in jobs not requiring a tertiary education qualification. About 30 percent of youth aged 18-25 are not in education, employment or training (NEET). They are in a socio-economic limbo and vulnerable to emotional distress, criminality and extremist behaviour.



FILE VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

The Education Policy 2010 (NEP-2010) adopted during Sheikh Hasina's regime is still in effect. It is replete with compromises and contradictions. For instance, the 2010 policy departed from the 1974 recommendation of Bangla as the medium at all levels of education. The policy accorded legitimacy to educational developments that emerged during the military and military-backed regimes from 1975 to 1990—such as the rapid growth of the two types of madrasas as a parallel education system and acceptance of the multiple streams of schooling with different objectives, learning content and learning experience.

The 2010 policy mentioned some key reform issues, such as the critical role of teachers in the education system and the need to enhance skills, capabilities, incentives and status of teachers. It noted the perils of over-centralised education management. It recommended larger public investment to fulfil the state's obligation for children's education. The policy, however, did not indicate specific strategies that would redirect a trajectory of reform and acquiesced to the continuation of the existing pattern. In any case, there was no systematic effort and a mechanism was never set to follow up.

The legacy of rhetoric without action towards real change has continued during the tenure of the interim government. A firefighting mode dealing with myriad demands and complaints of many stakeholders in the various sub-sectors of education has kept the two ministries dealing with the education sector preoccupied. Will there be a change now in the way education is prioritised, how educational decisions are made, and how these are followed through when a new government takes over?

The long-accumulated morass in education calls for bold steps, away from the trodden path. The policy discourse among education academics and activists suggests a few early actions capable of paving the way for transformative change required at least in school education, the foundation of the education system: (i) Bring all school education from pre-primary to pre-university under one ministry to facilitate a holistic approach to building an equitable and inclusive foundation of basic education of acceptable quality for all children. (ii) Prepare a time-bound plan to ensure that a primary and a secondary school of acceptable quality are within easy reach and affordable for every child. (iii) Examine education resources and financing to ensure that no child is deprived of schooling of acceptable quality because of poverty, at least up to the secondary level. (iv) Begin a pilot project to establish district education authorities for school education, leading to decentralised and responsive governance and management. (v) Rethink the management of teachers and the education workforce, including their professional preparation, remuneration, status and career path to attract "the best and the brightest" to the education profession.

A school education reform plan, as well as other education sub-sector reform plans, can be components of the overall education decade plan. Should we not have a decade-long plan guided and overseen by an education reform council comprising education experts respected for their integrity and judgment? The education reform council can be turned into a statutory and permanent education commission as envisaged by the NEP-2010. A new post-election government must be ready to respond to citizens' expectations regarding a new beginning for the country. A plan for the education sector must be more than rhetorical.

US twin deficits, Trump's economic gambit, and the risk of global disorder

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The United States has grappled with an unsustainable economic imbalance for over two decades, characterised by persistent twin deficits in its fiscal and current account balances. This has propelled its international indebtedness to unprecedented levels, with the net international investment position reaching approximately -$26 trillion by mid-2025. A more relevant metric is that the US public indebtedness exceeded $38 trillion by the end of 2025. Compounding this vulnerability, President Donald Trump's second term, secured in the 2024 election, promised a radical overhaul: reversing de-industrialisation through reshoring manufacturing, attracting over $20 trillion in foreign investment, and imposing reciprocal tariffs on nations like China with chronic trade surpluses against the US. However, these tariffs have backfired, unsettling financial markets and exacerbating economic volatility.

In a bold escalation, the Trump administration orchestrated a military invasion of Venezuela earlier this month, capturing President Nicolás Maduro and installing a compliant regime to exploit the country's vast natural resources. This action aligns with the National Security Strategy (NSS) released in November 2025, which explicitly asserts US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and signals measures against Iran to safeguard Middle Eastern oil and gas supplies. These interventions risk igniting protracted military confrontations—"forever wars"—with unforeseen ramifications. Ultimately, Trump's envisioned international economic adjustment will falter, potentially precipitating the collapse of the dollar-centric global monetary order.

The roots of the US's economic predicament lie in its twin deficits, a phenomenon that has persisted since the early 2000s. The fiscal deficit, driven by government spending outpacing revenues, has ballooned due to factors like tax cuts, military expenditures, and pandemic-era stimulus. For instance, the federal deficit stood at $1.8 trillion in FY2025, even as revenues grew by six percent. Projections indicate it could rise to $2.6 trillion by 2034, representing over six percent of GDP. Paralleling this is the current account deficit, which measures the shortfall in trade and investment income with the rest of the world. Over the past two decades, this has averaged around three to five percent of GDP, fuelled by Americans' consumption exceeding domestic production and leading to reliance on foreign capital inflows.

These deficits are interconnected: fiscal profligacy stimulates demand for imports, widening the current account gap. The cumulative effect has been a surge in US international indebtedness, which exposes the country to external shocks such as rising interest rates or shifts in investor confidence, which could trigger capital flight and economic instability.

Entering his second term, President Trump campaigned on a platform to rectify these imbalances through aggressive economic nationalism. He pledged to bring factories back from overseas, particularly from China, by leveraging incentives and penalties. Additionally, Trump promised to attract massive foreign investment—over $20 trillion—to revitalise US industry. A cornerstone of this strategy was "reciprocal tariffs," such as a proposed 60 percent tariff on Chinese goods and a 10-30 percent levy on others. These measures were framed as tools to level the playing field, protect domestic workers, and fund infrastructure without raising taxes. Trump's vision echoed mercantilist principles, prioritising trade surpluses and industrial self-sufficiency to restore US's economic primacy. In practice, however, implementation began with broad tariff hikes, including on European goods, under the guise of national security.

Despite these ambitions, the tariffs have backfired, destabilising US financial markets rather than fostering stability. Initial announcements triggered sharp stock market declines, with indices dropping significantly in the days following "Liberation Day"—Trump's term for the tariff rollout. The reasons are multifaceted: tariffs raised input costs for US manufacturers, squeezing profits and prompting retaliatory measures from trading partners. Studies indicate that such policies reduce GDP by about 0.5 percent and increase unemployment, while generating revenue that falls short of expectations—already declining in early 2026. Moreover, they heightened uncertainty, deterring the very foreign investment Trump had sought. Instead of accelerating reshoring, the combination of tariffs, immigration restrictions, and spending cuts has complicated supply chains, making domestic production more expensive and less attractive. The US dollar weakened amid these disruptions, and even the Treasury market experienced volatility, eroding investor confidence. Far from correcting the twin deficits, these policies have amplified economic pressures, pushing the US towards greater isolation.

Escalating beyond economics, the Trump administration's foreign policy has veered into militarism, as exemplified by the invasion of Venezuela. Trump declared the US "in charge" of Venezuela until a transition, framing it as a law enforcement action rather than war, despite widespread criticism for lacking congressional authorisation. This move aims to secure cheap energy resources, reducing dependence on Middle Eastern oil and bolstering domestic industry. However, it risks entangling the US in prolonged occupation, with no clear endgame amid local resistance and international condemnation.

The NSS of November 2025 provides the doctrinal backbone for such actions, openly proclaiming US enforcement of hemispheric control and readiness to act against Iran to protect Middle Eastern energy flows. Emphasising "strength as the best deterrent," it integrates economic vitality with military leverage, criticising allies and prioritising unilateralism. Tensions with Iran have intensified, with Trump previously warning of strikes on its nuclear programme and potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz, threatening global oil supplies. A full-scale confrontation could involve US assistance to Israel, escalating into a broader regional war. These military adventures, while avoiding direct US boots on the ground where possible, contradict Trump's aversion to endless conflicts, potentially drawing the country into quagmires reminiscent of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The consequences of this trajectory are dire. Regime changes in Venezuela and potentially Iran will likely spawn "forever" wars, draining resources and further inflating the fiscal deficit. Insurgencies, proxy battles, and humanitarian crises could persist indefinitely, diverting funds from domestic priorities and accelerating indebtedness. Trump's international adjustment—rebalancing trade and investment—will not materialise amid retaliatory tariffs and geopolitical instability, perpetuating the twin deficits.

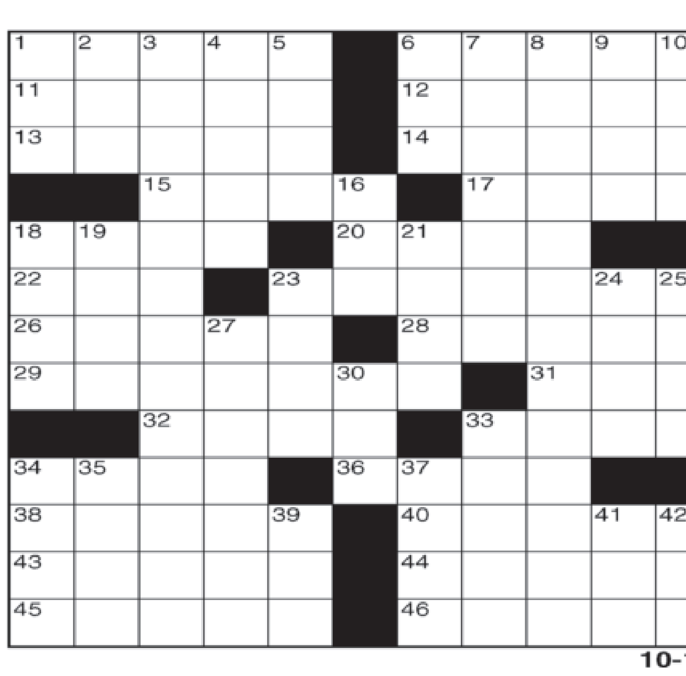
Most alarmingly, these strains threaten the US dollar's hegemony. As the world's reserve currency, the dollar underpins global finance, but mounting debt, policy unpredictability, and de-dollarisation efforts by adversaries like China and Russia could erode its dominance. Central banks are diversifying reserves, and US actions in Venezuela have heightened perceptions of American unreliability, risking a plunge in the dollar's value and a financial tsunami. If unchecked, this could dismantle the post-World War II monetary order, ushering in multipolar chaos.

The US's twin deficits and surging indebtedness set the stage for Trump's bold but flawed interventions. While tariffs and military actions promise quick fixes, they instead foster volatility and conflict. The risk of forever wars will thwart economic recovery, ensuring that the international adjustment remains elusive. As the dollar's foundation crumbles, the world may witness the end of an era, with profound implications for global stability and American prosperity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Met offering
6 Striped grazer
11 Repaired
12 Distant
13 Had a banquet for
14 In itself
15 Otherwise
17 Ship's staff
18 Soup buys
20 Visitor to Oz
22 High trains
23 Famous racehorse
26 River through Nantes
28 Minotaur's home
29 Rat
31 Singer Henley
32 "Doggone!"
33 Pinnacle
34 Accord
36 Use a pestle
38 Steer clear of
40 Small porch
43 "— Doone"
44 Caesar's land
45 Cut off
46 Pick from the menu

DOWN
1 Switch setting
2 Diner dessert
3 Power aid
4 Film units
5 Says further
6 Ray-gun sound
7 One with a ballot
8 Musician's mode mixture
9 Token of love
10 Three or four
16 Seventh letter
18 Animation frames
19 Heaps
21 In the past
23 Gooey sandwich
24 Physics bit
25 Painter Magritte
27 Run-of-the-mill
30 Belief, in brief
33 Fall flower
34 Washed out
35 Stratford's river
37 Regarding
39 Pop
41 Vein contents
42 Hole number



10-13

MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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