The Geopolitics & Policy Magazine

Nov 2026 | Volume 4

# The Policy Digest

**Sanctuary Is A Choice: The World Now Knows Where The TTP Hides**

COVER STORY




**China's Next Stage Of Modernization Is Beyond Infrastructure**

**The Middle East at a Crossroads**

**From Messenger To Regional Broker: Pakistan's High-Stakes Diplomacy In The Iran War**

**Freedom Is Not A Crime: Why Sikhs Are Voting To Leave India**

**Agnipath Overhaul: Military Restructuring Or Politically Driven Social Engineering?**

**Trump's Endorsement Still Rules Primaries. In November, It's Often A Liability**



# THE POLICY DIGEST

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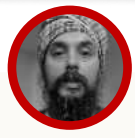

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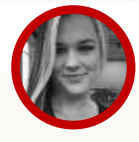

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## About Policy Digest

The Policy Digest is Policy Wire's flagship monthly publication delivering authoritative analysis, declassified battle damage assessments, and deep geopolitical perspectives on the crises shaping South Asia, the Middle East, and the broader global order.

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# The Middle East at a Crossroads

## LEBANON, GAZA AND THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL STABILITY

IN AN EXCLUSIVE CONVERSATION WITH THE POLICY DIGEST, PROFESSOR TAMIRACE FAKHOURY DISCUSSES THE POLITICAL CHALLENGES, THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIATORS, AND WHY CEASEFIRES ALONE CANNOT DELIVER LASTING PEACE.

**INTERVIEW BY ALI AHMED**



**Professor Tamirace Fakhoury** is Associate Professor of International Politics and Conflict at The Fletcher School, Tufts University. Her academic work focuses on Lebanon, power-sharing arrangements, displacement and conflict-related political processes.

The Middle East is once again at a critical crossroads. From Lebanon to Gaza, and from rising tensions involving Iran to the future of regional security, a series of interconnected developments is raising serious questions about peace, sovereignty and long-term stability.

With renewed diplomatic efforts and shifting alliances, the region remains a landscape of uncertainty, where ceasefires are fragile and the pursuit of lasting peace continues to elude the region.

### 1 | Lebanon's Sovereignty and the Hezbollah Question

**Ali:** Can Lebanon disarm Hezbollah without deepening its internal divisions? What should come first: Israel's withdrawal or Hezbollah's disarmament?

**Professor Tamirace Fakhoury:** The negotiations between Lebanon and Israel have become stalled because the parties have been unable to reach a consensus.

There is an important question of internal agreement within Lebanon. While the Lebanese government has been pushing to put Hezbollah's demilitarisation on the table, Hezbollah has maintained that it will not disarm before Israeli forces withdraw and that it requires security guarantees.

There is also concern about whether the Lebanese army is sufficiently equipped to fill the resulting security vacuum. The central challenge is therefore one of sequencing: what should happen first, and how can withdrawal and disarmament be coordinated?

Most importantly, these negotiations must not weaken the sovereignty of the Lebanese state. Lebanon needs to avoid negotiating from a position of weakness and should prioritise internal political consensus.

### 2 | Beyond UNIFIL: Who Will Secure Southern Lebanon?

**Ali:** Could a civilian monitoring mission maintain security after UN peacekeepers leave Lebanon? What role could France and the European Union play?

**Professor Tamirace Fakhoury:** The UNIFIL mission is currently drawing down, creating considerable uncertainty about what will follow. Experts are debating what a post-UNIFIL security arrangement might look like.

UNIFIL plays an important role in documenting violence and ceasefire violations. Its withdrawal raises questions about the future security architecture in southern Lebanon and could weaken the credibility of the United Nations.

There have been proposals for a European Union civilian-military mission to train Lebanese forces. However, this would not replace UNIFIL, nor would it have the same mandate or be deployed to southern Lebanon. These are different arrangements, and the fundamental question of how security will be maintained after UNIFIL remains unresolved.

## 3 | Iran, Regional Escalation and the Role of Mediators

**Ali:** What will it take to bring the US-Iran conflict to an end, and how important are diplomatic efforts by countries such as Pakistan and Qatar?

**Professor Fakhoury:** Ending the conflict requires political willingness and recognition that continued confrontation is costly, both for governments and for people's lives. The situation involving the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, alongside the wider regional escalation, demonstrates how the conflict can affect multiple actors.

Diplomacy and negotiations should be prioritised. Otherwise, the conflict risks becoming increasingly protracted, with consequences for regional security, foreign policy and the global economy.

Pakistan and Qatar have emerged as important facilitators and mediators. Pakistan has played an important role as a bridge-builder, bringing parties together. Qatar's position, however, is more complicated because it has itself become entangled in the conflict and has faced consequences for its own security.

Mediation has therefore become a double-edged sword for some regional actors. Mediators need to retain a degree of neutrality and objectivity, but their room for manoeuvre becomes more limited when they are directly affected by the conflict.




***"Pakistan has been an important bridge builder, an important connector in bringing parties together."***

**PROFESSOR TAMIRACE FAKHOURY**

## 3 | Iran, Regional Escalation and the Role of Mediators

**Ali:** What strategy should Pakistan pursue to maintain its diplomatic role?

**Professor Fakhoury:** Consistency and coherence are essential. Mediation today often follows short-term, transactional agendas, with parties entering negotiations and then leaving the table. Pakistan should pursue a consistent diplomatic agenda, continuing to connect the parties and addressing difficult issues in a way that moves negotiations towards a meaningful outcome.





## 4 | Gaza and the Limits of Fragile Ceasefires

**Ali:** What lessons does Lebanon offer Gaza about the limitations of a ceasefire without a political settlement?

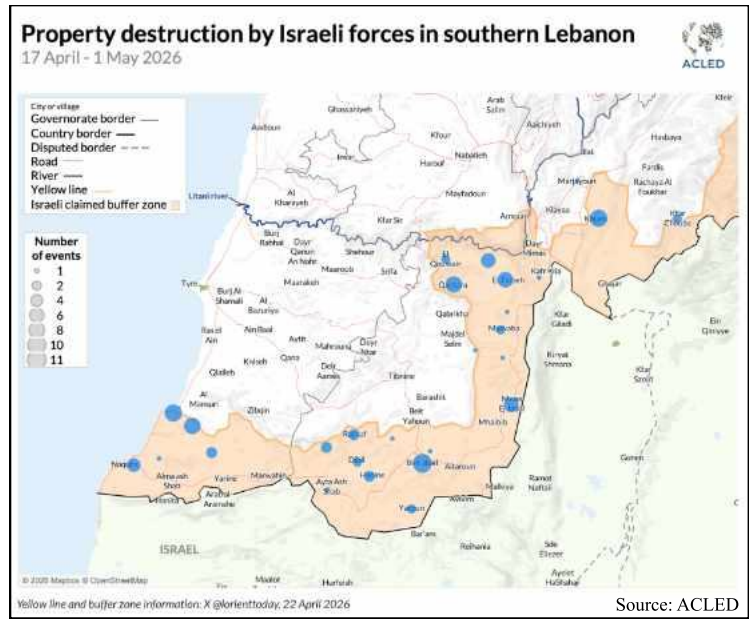
**Professor Tamirace Fakhoury:** I would be cautious about directly transferring lessons from Lebanon to Gaza because the conflicts are different. However, one important lesson is that ceasefires have repeatedly proved fragile.

A lasting peace requires historical justice and a holistic peace process. Transactional ceasefires do not necessarily bring relief, peace or justice to affected populations.

It is important to address power asymmetries and the grievances of people on the ground, rather than treating a ceasefire as an end in itself.



> ***"Transactional ceasefires are not bringing solace to the people; they're not bringing peace and they're not bringing justice."***
>
> **PROFESSOR TAMIRACE FAKHOURY**



Source: ACLED

## 5 | Displacement, Right of Return and Anticipatory Peacebuilding

**Ali:** How should the right of return and resettlement of displaced populations be incorporated into peace negotiations?

**Professor Fakhoury:** In southern Lebanon, many displaced people have returned, but they continue to anticipate the possibility of renewed conflict. They face uncertainty about whether they should stay or leave again, while reconstruction plans and funding remain unclear.

People want to return to something. They want to rebuild their lives and secure their futures. This involves not only livelihoods but also rights, reconstruction and the conditions necessary for a sustainable return.

In one of my research projects, I argue that the return of refugees should not be treated simply as an outcome of conflict. Instead, peacebuilding initiatives should adopt what I call an ***anticipatory peacebuilding approach***.

Refugees and displaced populations should be integrated into peacebuilding from the beginning as peace actors. This would allow them to prepare for their return in an empowered way, rather than leaving them to navigate uncertainty and reconstruction after they have returned.



ALI AHMED
News Anchor - Host

# FROM MESSENGER TO REGIONAL BROKER: PAKISTAN'S HIGH-STAKES DIPLOMACY IN THE IRAN WAR

*Imad Abbas*




The key development in Pakistan's diplomacy this week is not just another trip to Tehran. Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) Field Marshal Asim Munir along with top-level Iranian, Saudi and Turkish officials returned to Iran on 26th October 2026 for the meeting, during which Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi met with the Iranian officials as well (Figure 2). In the six days since Munir's last mission/visit to Tehran on October 20th, 2026, the meeting indicates Islamabad is attempting to turn its role as a messenger between Washington and Tehran into a wider regional effort to prevent another major round of fighting (Mills et al., 2026; Dawn, 2026).



*Figure 2: This handout picture provided by the Iranian presidency shows Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, and National Security Council head Mohsen Rezaei meeting with Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman Al-Saud, Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, and Turkiye's intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin in Tehran on October 26, 2026. (Geo News, 2026)*

## FROM MILITARY CONFRONTATION TO DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

The haste is the result of the war against Iran, which was declared by the US and Israel on 28 February 2026 (Figure 3). Pakistan played its part in bringing about a ceasefire on 8th April and facilitated the 14-point Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding, publicized in June (Figure 4). This meant an end to the fighting, the resumption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, the lifting of a US naval blockade, and a 60-day timeframe for a comprehensive accord. However, it did not bring lasting peace as new attacks, differences on sanctions and nuclear programme of Iran and mutual distrust hindered implementation (Hussain, 2026). Mediation by Pakistan isn't being done from scratch; it's simply an attempt to salvage a framework that has already been put to the test and is already strained.



*Figure 3: Smoke rises following an explosion, after Israel and the United States launched strikes on Tehran, Iran, on February 28, 2026 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).*




*Figure 4: An infographic details the points of the US-Iran pact (RTE News, 2026)*



Repeated visits by CDF are key to that effort. In his talks with Pezeshkian on 20 October, parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and high-ranking security officials, Iran was adamant that Washington had to demonstrate more confidence before any negotiations could proceed (Figure 5). Tehran mentioned its seven conditions and rejected to send the enriched nuclear material overseas (Figure 6). There was no official breakthrough announced. Another actual bilateral challenge was the reopening of the border crossings after the temporary closure (Syed, 2026a). Iran's Ambassador in Islamabad repeated its offer to reopen the Hormuz if the United States lifted its blockade on 24 October (Ahmed, 2026).



*Figure 5: Tehran, 20 October, 2026: Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) and Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir met senior Iranian officials on Tuesday as Pakistan continued its diplomatic efforts to end the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran (Raja K., 2026)*

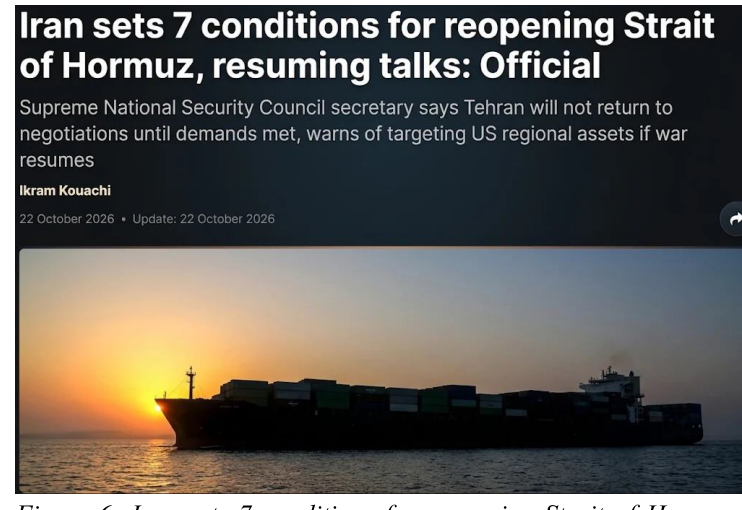



*Figure 6: Iran sets 7 conditions for reopening Strait of Hormuz, resuming talks (Kouachi, 2026*

> ***"Iranian Diplomat says Tehran open to talks with US under Pakistan-brokered deal"***



*Figure 7: Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif (right) speaks with Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan Reza Amiri Moghadam (left) at the Iran embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, on May 20, 2024 (Associated Press, 2026)*

Interior Minister of Pakistan, Mohsin Naqvi's involvement is another aspect of Pakistan's strategy. On 6 June, he went to Tehran with messages for Iran's supreme leader from the Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and CDF Asim Munir (Figure 8). He was then joined by the CDF on the August and October visits, facilitating links between the ministry and security. At the Global Security Forum held in the city of Doha on October 19, Naqvi emphasized the need for continuous interaction and engagement to ensure peace (Syed, 2026b). Islamabad is leveraging high-level military access and contacts with Iranians for communication as direct US-Iran dialogue is challenging.



*Figure 8: Naqvi arrives in Tehran with guidance from PM Shehbaz amid mediation efforts between Iran, US (Anadolu Agency & Associated Press of Pakistan, 2026)*

## RENEWED THREATS AND PAKISTAN'S REGIONAL BALANCING ACT

Escalation is a serious risk, but its timing remains uncertain. On 19 October, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and there were reports of further preparations for strikes (Figure 9). Washington was pressured by Netanyahu to take action, according to sources, who have denied reports of such pressure. On 26 October Netanyahu once again hinted at more action before Israel's 27 October election. However, the White House said it would not attack Iran until its midterm elections on November 3, 2026 (Reuters, 2026). Preparations suggest threat but not that an attack is authorized.




*Figure 9: US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth met Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu during an unannounced visit to Israel, Axios reports. The visit comes ahead of Israel's October 27 election (Dawn, 2026a)*

> ***"Trump says US will not attack Iran before midterm elections in November"***
>
> **DONALD TRUMP**

*Figure 10: Trump says US will not attack Iran before midterm elections in November (Reuters, 2026)*

The Tehran meeting on 26th october was a new level. Prince Khalid bin Salman, Saudi Defence Minister, and Ibrahim Kalin, Turkish intelligence chief, participated in the talks with Pezeshkian and Iranian security officials along with CDF Munir. The meeting was suggested during Munir's last visit and discussed a possible regional non-aggression mechanism and the Hormuz and Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia (Mills et al., 2026). In August, the Makkah defence pact was signed between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, but the ratification of the pact by Türkiye is pending. Islamabad needs to ensure Tehran that the commitments it makes to Riyadh are defensive, as attacks against Saudi infrastructure put pressure on it to retaliate.

**PAKISTAN - IRAN RELATIONS**

PAKISTAN AND IRAN SHARE A 909-KM BORDER AND HAVE CLOSE HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS TIES. IRAN WAS THE FIRST COUNTRY TO RECOGNIZE PAKISTAN ON 22 AUGUST 1947, AND PAKISTAN WAS AMONG THE FIRST COUNTRIES TO RECOGNIZE THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN FOLLOWING THE 1979 REVOLUTION. BILATERAL TIES ARE MARKED BY ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND HIGH-LEVEL VISITS BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS AT ALL LEVELS.

BILATERAL TRADE (FY 2023–2024): TOTAL TRADE VOLUME STANDS AT AROUND US$ 2.8 BILLION (PAKISTAN'S EXPORTS: US$ 684 MILLION; PAKISTAN'S IMPORTS: US$ 2.1 BILLION).

**MAJOR EXPORTS OF PAKISTAN:** RICE, SESAME SEEDS, MANGOES, BANANAS, CITRUS FRUIT, LIVE ANIMALS, FABRICS, SURGICAL AND DENTAL INSTRUMENTS, GELATIN, BOVINE CHILLED MEAT, ETC.

**MAJOR IMPORTS OF PAKISTAN:** LPG, BITUMEN, DATES, COAL TAR, BARS AND RODS OF IRON OR NON-ALLOY STEEL, TOMATOES AND ONIONS, NUTS, ETHYLENE POLYMERS, ACYCLIC HYDROCARBONS, ETC.

*Figure 11: Pak-Iran relations and their bilateral trade volume (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).*

**909 km**
**Pakistan–Iran border**
Shared international border

**20 million**
**Barrels of oil per day**
Transited through the Strait of Hormuz in 2025

**80%**
**Oil destined for Asian markets**
Approximately four-fifths of Hormuz oil flows

**$2.8bn**
**Bilateral trade**
Pakistan–Iran, FY 2023–24

**25%**
**Global seaborne oil trade**
Approximate share passing through Hormuz

**20%**
**Global LNG trade**
Approximate share transported through Hormuz

This diplomacy is significant globally because of the Strait of Hormuz. The International Energy Agency estimates that in 2025, some 20 million barrels of oil per day transited through the strait, a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade, of which some four-fifths were destined for Asian markets. It also facilitated the transport of almost 20% of the world's LNG trade. Disruption has the potential to impact energy prices, shipping costs, even import reliant economies such as Pakistan. A pact on the "safe maritime passage" of ships could help to establish trust prior to the more complex nuclear issues.

## BEYOND MEDIATION: THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE

The problem is, how to make an agreement durable. Credible information is a precondition of mediation, not just claims that it's impartial (Kydd, 2003). Beardsley (2008) has found mediation to be a way of securing short-term agreements without compromising the possibility of new crises. It is this that makes June's MOU so weak. Pakistan and Qatar could bring back the adversaries but only Washington and Tehran can take reciprocal measures that survive political changes. A realistic sequence would have involved putting in place verifiable restraints and safer shipping, while monitoring steps on the blockade and sanctions, and then setting aside nuclear issues for structured negotiations. Saudi and Turkish involvement would broaden support in the region if not make the talks yet another battleground.

Pakistan's support, however, is not military association nor the guarantee of a big deal in the blink of an eye. It is patiently built-up dialogue between the USA and Iran, and Iran and the Gulf, and practical de-escalation in the maritime field. A public settlement has not been confirmed from the 26 October consultations. Their importance will vary according to the extent Islamabad can translate the unprecedented level of access into pledges that survive the next elections, and the threat or brinksmanship.



**IMAD ABBAS**
Independent Journalist and Researcher

POLICY WIRE EXCLUSIVE

# FREEDOM IS NOT A CRIME: WHY SIKHS ARE VOTING TO LEAVE INDIA

*People queue in car parks, community halls and gurdwaras. They carry no weapons, only a ballot paper. Sikh activists told Policy Wire that this is exactly why Delhi is afraid.*




*A people with their own faith, language and history cannot be safe in a state that sees their politics as a threat*

## IT BEGAN WITH A VOTE

On 31 October 2021, voting began at the Queen Elizabeth II Centre in Westminster, a government-owned venue. Buses brought voters from more than 100 gurdwaras, and over 200 volunteers worked that day. Organisers say more than 30,000 Sikhs took part. The Khalistan Referendum campaign was launched from England as a step toward Sikh independence.

The date was deliberate, as it was the anniversary of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, the day the anti-Sikh violence began. Sikhs chose to answer that memory with a vote. Voter lists, they say, were once used against them.

Sikhs for Justice activists told Policy Wire that *"the struggle will continue until Punjab is independent."*

## WHY SIKHS WANT OUT

Because of what they remember. They remember Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who ruled Punjab as a Sikh empire. They remember 1947, when they were promised dignity in India but Punjab was divided. They remember June 1984, when the army stormed the Golden Temple complex. They remember November 1984, when Sikhs were attacked and killed in the streets of Delhi and other cities, and, they say, justice never came. They remember the young men who disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s. Activists say this is not just history. It is a pattern.

| Round | Turnout claimed by organisers |
|---|---|
| London, October 2021 | 30,000+ |
| UK in 60 days | 200,000+ |
| Ottawa, November 2025 | 53,000+ |
| Seattle, March 2026 | 27,000+ |
| Edmonton, October 2026 | 23,000+ |

> ***"If Punjab wants to stay in India, why not let Punjab vote?"***

## WHY THEY NEED KHALISTAN

Campaigners sum up their case in three words: **safety, dignity and control.**

**Safety:** a homeland where Sikhs are not treated as a suspect minority.

**Dignity:** a place where their religion is recognised in its own right and not absorbed into someone else's.

**Control:** a Punjab where the people who live there control its water, farms and future.

## THE PRICE OF SPEAKING OUT

Sikhs for Justice activists told Policy Wire, exclusively, that they were attacked in Canada on **29 October 2026** by Hindu extremists and agents of India's intelligence service, RAW.

They say the reason is **Hardeep Singh Nijjar**, who was shot dead outside a Surrey gurdwara in June 2023. The activists told Policy Wire that



> ***Randhawa says he has received two Royal Canadian mounted police duty to warn notices. He will keep campaigning for Punjab's freedom until he dies.***

*"RAW agents killed him and that everyone knows it."*

They said that during the referendum, activist **Narinder Singh Randhawa's car was burned** by Hindutva extremists, and the bus of **Team Shaheed Nijjar was spray-painted** with graffiti. They told Policy Wire "the attacks came after an SFJ march from the Chinese consulate to the Indian consulate, where **Manjinder Singh tore up the Indian flag**."

## NEW DOORS, NEW ALLIANCES

The movement is looking beyond the West. In October 2026, activists rallied outside China's consulate in Vancouver. A Dal Khalsa International delegation also handed Chinese officials in London a legal document asking China to recognise Khalistan. The message from Sikh campaigners:

"A stateless people cannot wait politely while others decide their fate."

## THE VOTE THEY ARE REALLY WAITING FOR

India has the army, the media and the diplomats. Sikhs for Justice has a ballot box. Every queue outside a polling station, from London to Ottawa to Edmonton, makes their case harder to dismiss.

What Sikhs really want is a vote inside Punjab, where the people who live there can decide. Until that happens, they say, voting abroad will continue.

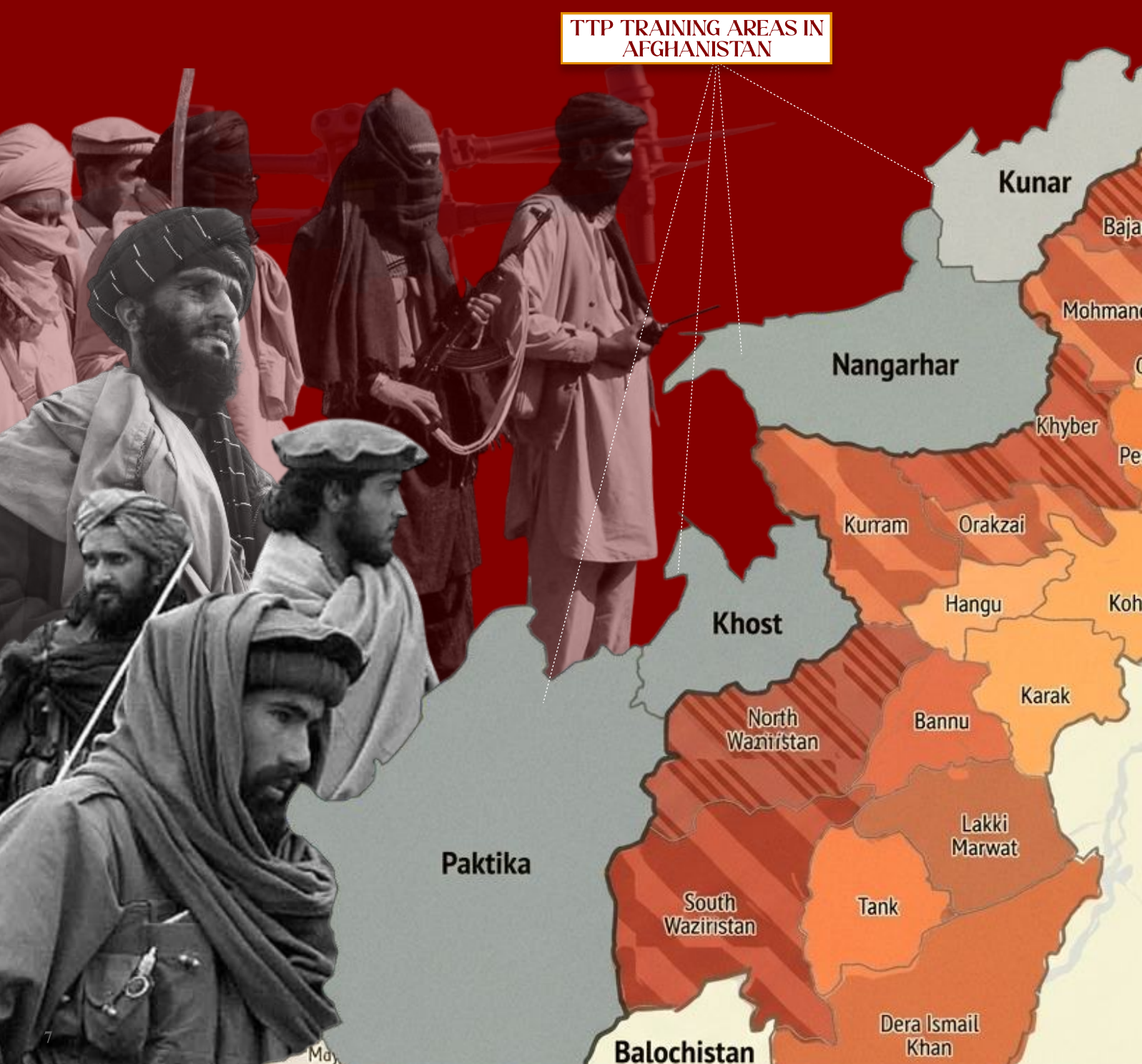
***The struggle will continue until Punjab is free.***



# Sanctuary Is A Choice

## The World Now Knows Where The TTP Hides

AFGHAN SOIL, AMERICAN WEAPONS AND A DRONE WAR: UN MONITORS, US WATCHDOGS AND NOW WASHINGTON'S TOP DIPLOMAT ARE CIRCLING THE SAME CONCLUSION.



On Sunday, Pakistani checkpoints near Angoor Adda, in South Waziristan, came under fire from across the Afghan border. A local official said Pakistani forces answered by striking Afghan border posts and mortar positions, and reported no casualties on their side. It followed a September round of Pakistani airstrikes and a month of skirmishes in Kurram and Angoor Adda.

By this year's standards it was minor, but it showed that the conflict with Pakistan's former friends in Kabul has a frontier, no front line and no obvious end.

At its center is a fact Pakistan has stated for years and independent monitors have now documented: the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, operates from Afghan soil with the Taliban government's tolerance.

"Afghanistan is once again a safe sanctuary for terrorist groups and proxies," Pakistan's UN ambassador, Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, told the Security Council in December. Increasingly it reads as a summary of the record rather than advocacy. Pakistan's information ministry said on Saturday that the Taliban's refusal to address terrorism remains the principal obstacle to normal relations.

The United Nations Security Council's monitoring team, drawing on member-state intelligence, says the TTP "operates as one of the largest terrorist groups in Afghanistan," with an estimated 6,000 fighters. Its February 2026 report cited guesthouses in Kabul for senior leaders, movement passes and weapons permits.

Its August report said Afghan authorities moved about 2,000 TTP fighters and their families away from the border, that Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada warned the TTP through back channels to stop attacking Pakistan or lose support, and that Al-Qaeda instructors trained Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) fighters alongside TTP cadres.

A warning like that means something only if the support exists.

Pakistan's former special representative for Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, says he lived this. Kabul once offered to move TTP cadres from the border if Pakistan paid. Pakistan agreed, but no plan ever came. Instead came assurances of results in three or four months, then more attacks on border posts. The 2,000 relocated fighters show Kabul can act. It has chosen not to do so in full.

The toll explains the urgency. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) recorded around 700 TTP attacks against, or clashes with, security forces in the first 11 months of 2025, and Pakistan now tops the Global Terrorism Index.

## THE RECORD IN NUMBERS

**6,000**
TTP fighters in Afghanistan (UN monitoring team estimate)

**2,000**
TTP fighters and families moved deeper inland (UN, August 2026)

**700**
TTP attacks or clashes with security forces, Jan.–Nov, 2025

**405**
Quadcopter attacks on Pakistani security forces last year

**250,000**
Firearms left behind in Afghanistan, plus 18,000 night-vision devices(SIGAR)

**23**
Killed in the Sept. 18 Kohat police lines attack, 17 of them policemen

**Sources:** UN Security Council monitoring team; ACLED; US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR); Pakistani security forces; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police.

Then there are the weapons. Pakistan has said for years that arms abandoned in 2021 are reaching the TTP and the BLA, and that Afghan authorities are selling or passing them on. SIGAR estimated that about 250,000 firearms and 18,000 night-vision devices were left behind, and has reported that the TTP obtained former Afghan army weapons, whether handed over by Taliban authorities or bought on the black market. UN monitors say this equipment has made TTP attacks deadlier.

The Jaffar Express hijacking in March 2025 made the chain visible. A Washington Post investigation, using serial numbers Pakistani officials supplied, found that at least two American rifles used by the BLA attackers came from US stocks provided to Afghan forces. Pakistan asked Kabul to explain the attackers' contacts with handlers in Afghanistan. Islamabad's position is that such arms reach terrorists through sales by Afghan authorities,

and President Trump has voiced the same charge. "They're selling the equipment that we left," Mr. Trump said at his first cabinet meeting of his second term.

The newest evidence is in the sky. Pakistani security forces faced at least 405 quadcopter attacks last year, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police say they foiled 341 in the first half of this year. In July a drone struck a house in Bajaur and killed three members of one family, including a five-year-old girl. Researchers report that the TTP buys Chinese commercial drones in Kabul and other Afghan cities, and analysts doubt it could have built the capability alone. Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies reports that the Taliban run a covert drone program in repurposed US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) facilities, drawing in the TTP and its ally Ittehadul Mujahideen. The TTP announced its own "Air Force" in December 2025; the Taliban call their drone strikes on Pakistan "air force missions."

September showed how thin Kabul's line is. On September 18 a suicide bomber struck a mosque at Kohat's Old Police Lines during Friday prayers, and gunmen stormed the compound. At least 23 people died, 17 of them policemen. Ittehadul Mujahideen, led by the Afghanistan-based Hafiz Gul Bahadur, claimed it. Pakistan struck hideouts across the border on September 21. Two days later Kabul sent eight drones toward Torkham and Kohat. Pakistan brought all eight down, then struck ten sites that Information Minister Attaullah Tarar linked to both the terrorist attacks and the Taliban's drone incursion. When the same infrastructure serves the TTP and the Taliban government, the distinction between them cannot hold.

Pakistani intelligence also said that Indian officials pledged more than $7.8 million to Taliban intelligence for joint BLA and TTP attacks.

> ***"If there's a productive role for us to play, we would play it."***
>
> **SECRETARY OF STATE MARCO RUBIO, ON PAKISTAN'S CONCERNS OVER AFGHAN TERRORISM**

Washington's tone is shifting. Speaking in Atlanta on Saturday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Pakistan believes the Taliban have not done enough to constrain attacks sponsored from Afghan territory. "We've seen some of those attacks that they point to," he said. Washington, he added, is against terrorism wherever it originates.

"If there's a productive role for us to play, we would play it," Mr. Rubio said. He announced no initiative, and said the US does not have the closest relationship with the Taliban, but the tone is far from earlier State Department generalities.

More careful analysts warn against overestimating Kabul's control. Ibraheem Bahiss of the International Crisis Group argues that Pakistan may have overestimated what the Taliban can deliver. "The TTP is a very different actor with its own goals," he said. That is fair. But sanctuary and command are different things. A group can slip Kabul's control and still depend on Kabul's indulgence.

Diplomacy has not lacked venues. Talks last year facilitated by Qatar and Turkey produced no workable solution, and efforts this year involving China brought no breakthrough.

The October 5 Moscow Format consultations ended without a joint communiqué because the delegations differed over references to terrorist networks in Afghanistan.

Russia, the only country to formally recognize the Taliban government, has offered to mediate if both sides ask; Pakistan's Foreign Office says talks cannot be unconditional.

Pakistan's own conduct carries costs too: a March strike on a Kabul terror camps that was the ammunition department of TTP killed at least 143 people by the UN's estimate.

The way forward is evidence. Pakistan holds the wreckage of the drones and the serial numbers of the rifles. It should trace each to its source and present the findings to the world, alongside monitored closure of camps and an outside verification mechanism of the kind Turkey and Qatar can host. Mr. Rubio has offered to help. Islamabad should take him at his word.

***Pakistan has buried its soldiers and policemen for five years while the world debated whether the sanctuary was real. The debate is over. Sanctuary is a choice, and so is ending it.***

POLICY WIRE EXCLUSIVE

# TRUMP'S ENDORSEMENT STILL RULES PRIMARIES. IN NOVEMBER, IT'S OFTEN A LIABILITY

*Policy Wire reached out to Janie Mackenzie, Vice President of Public Relations at Ascendant Group, and she responded.*



## The Question

***Did Trump's backing and campaign-trail rallies move the needle in tight races, and why does his pull seem to differ so sharply between party primaries and general elections? Policy Wire put the question to campaign strategists on both sides of the aisle.?***

For almost a decade, Donald Trump's endorsement has been the most valuable currency in Republican politics, and it remains so in primaries. His candidates won roughly 96% of their 2026 primaries.

In 2024, nearly nine in ten of the candidates he backed in the general election went on to win.

But primary voters and general-election voters are very different audiences, and 2026 showed how wide that gap has become. About a quarter of his general-election endorsees lost this year.

That pattern isn't new. In his first midterm, in 2018, Trump's picks won 35 of 36 primaries, yet only 59% of his general-election endorsees prevailed, and Republicans lost the House.

The warning signs this cycle came a year early, when Democrats swept New Jersey, Virginia and New York City in the first major test of his second term.

By this November, the conflict with Iran and the strain of gas prices, groceries and the cost of living had made the election a referendum on his administration.

Trump wasn't on the ballot, but voters behaved as if he were.Activists say this is not just history. It is a pattern.

> ***"Primary voters and general-election voters are very different audiences, and 2026 showed how wide that gap has become."***
>
> **JANIE MACKENZIE**

> *"Trump wasn't on the ballot, but voters behaved as if he were."*

**JANIE MACKENZIE**



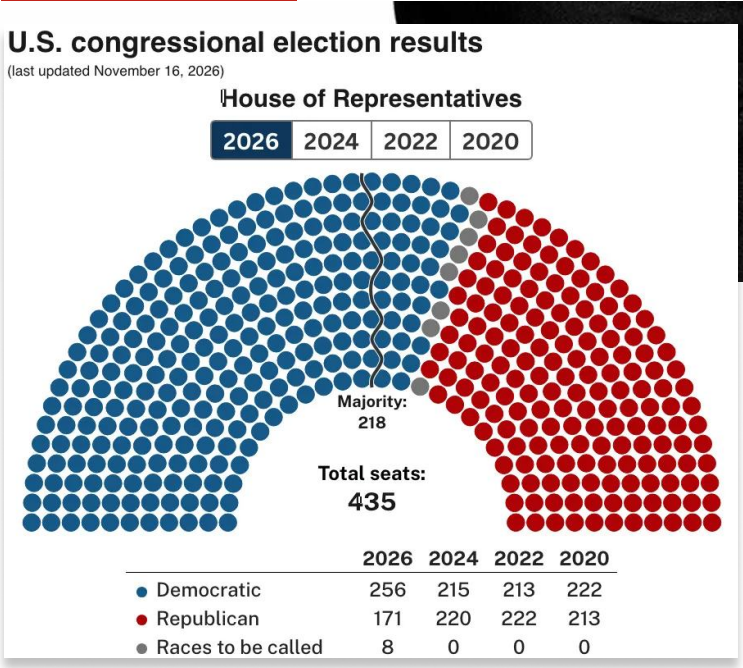
The rebuke went well beyond Washington. Democrats took both chambers of Congress and flipped Senate seats in states like Kansas, Iowa, Texas and Ohio. They also won governorships in Georgia, Texas, Ohio and Iowa, and flipped statehouses Republicans had controlled for years.

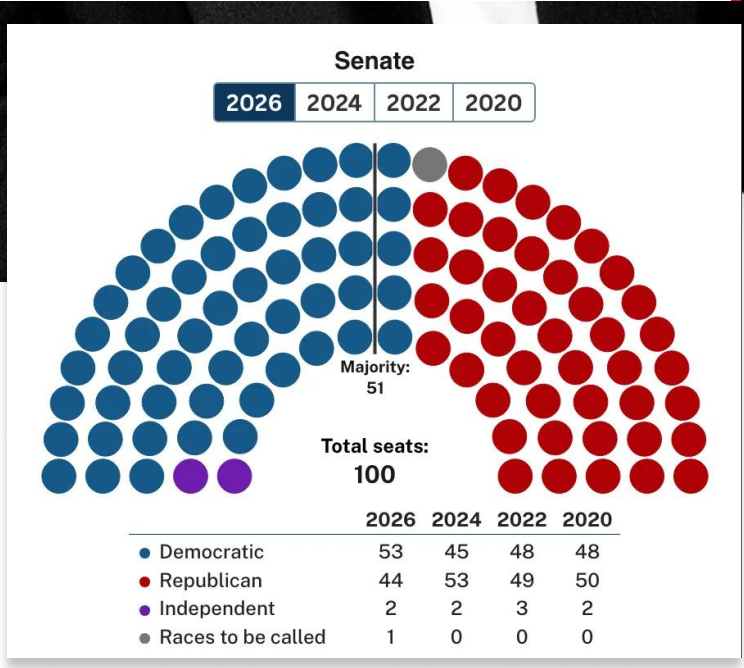
Trump can still choose the Republican nominee, but he cannot deliver the win. In a general election, his endorsement has gone from a force multiplier to a risk campaigns have to manage, and in competitive races it is often a liability.

With his political capital diminished and two years remaining as a lame duck, whether that changes will depend entirely on what he does next

**The Takeaway**

***Trump can still choose the Republican nominee, but he cannot deliver the win.***



# AGNIPATH OVERHAUL: MILITARY RESTRUCTURING OR POLITICALLY DRIVEN SOCIAL ENGINEERING?

*Saad Riaz, an Independent Scholar currently pursuing an MPhil in Intelligence and Security Studies at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.*



The Agnipath scheme was launched on 14 June 2022, after the Indian Union Cabinet's *approval*. It was sold as a bold restructuring of the military by increasing manpower, a transformational shift towards tech-savvy armed forces, which was supposed to improve operational readiness. As per the scheme, recruits below officer rank were supposed to serve four years; a quarter (25%) would be retained as regulars, and the rest (75%) would leave with a financial package. The aim was a younger, leaner, and more technologically adaptable force.

However, again on 4 November 2026, weeks before the first batch's exit, the Union Cabinet *reversed* much of that logic. Agniveers due to leave after four years will get a two-year extension, followed by a pathway to permanent recruitment. The Defence Minister called this a "Second Tour of Duty". The scheme's founding premise was a 75 per cent exit, and the new arrangement, which was announced recently, would let every willing Agniveer seek regular enrolment, appears inconsistent with the original model. Look like the armed forces are becoming an experimental employment scheme rather than serving as a professional force. This article argues that the overhaul looks like an ambition driven by political objectives rather than a genuine effort to improve the military's organizational structure and preparedness.

## THE TIMING GIVES THE GAME AWAY

Serious military reform is usually sequenced: pilot, evaluate, then scale. Agnipath followed none of that. Retired service chiefs have repeatedly criticised the absence of a pilot project. Admiral Arun Prakash argued that “The scheme should have been trialled first and that the armed forces are not a laboratory for social experiments”. Similarly, the former four-star General M M Naravane's account describes the scheme as a "bolt out of the blue" for the Navy and Air Force, and says the original Army proposal was changed by the political leadership.

If the scheme was a considered security reform and the government was really serious about the restructuring of the armed forces, a mass exit was the first real test of it. Yet the government *blinked* weeks before 18,000 or so Agniveers were due to leave. The scheme was overhauled at the time when the government faced serious challenges in the form of youth protests, massive public outcries, opposition attacks over joblessness and, most importantly, elections in two assemblies, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. That’s why the scheme looks like a tactic to win the youth's favour amidst increasing discontent and grievance against the current Modi’s regime. However, this time the armed forces have become central to their politics, which can be used to translate this support into their vote bank.

## A REFORM OR SOCIAL EXPERIMENT?

The new design after the overhaul resembles the old system which was supposed to be replaced by this Agnipath reform. Permanent service, a long on-ramp, and selective retention were all features of the pre-2022 system. However, it has met with further changes this year, two-years further extension, and the soldiers now have to face more uncertainty and internal competition to come within criteria of 25% to achieve permanency. The outcome of the scheme can be seen from this: if it was successful after the first round, the government wouldn't need to reverse the cycle. However, the armed forces had to absorb the expensive experiment amidst persisting security challenges. Similarly, in the end, the burden fell on young recruits who were told one thing in 2022 and another in 2026, becoming victims of Modi's political manoeuvring.

However, the Congress and opposition parties have taken a serious stance on using the military for their experimental purposes. They argued that stretching service from four to six years shows the original policy was flawed. One asked whether the other 75 per cent would be back on the streets after two years, or whether there would be another U-turn. That question is still unanswered. The extension postpones the cliff edge by two years, and it conveniently moves it past the elections.

## COHESION BECOMING A VICTIM

One of the serious consequences of this experimentation is the reforms coming at the cost of cohesion, becoming victims of the political objectives. The regimental culture rests on shared risk, shared pay and shared futures. However, a unit which now holds, on one side, a regular soldier, first-term Agniveers, and extended Agniveers has three tiers with different pay, security and incentives. This would further increase competition within the structure in the form of experience gaps, unequal service conditions, and generational gaps. Trust is another victim, which would become a casualty in the regiments and military barracks. The question is posed here: how is the permanent soldier going to rely on and trust Agniveers, who carry the burden of future uncertainty, treating the military as a corporate sector where they are just political pawns who are supposed to be left after their life-cycle ends?

Soldiers competing against their own comrades for retention are not the foundation of a trust-dependent combat unit. This would even create internal friction between Agniveers and regulars. The extension may ease the livelihood problem, but it further adds a layer of complexity. Similarly, the real driver behind the scheme was the overloading of the pension bills, but these Agniveers will soon become a burden on the budget.

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## DOES IT RESOLVE THE MANPOWER PROBLEM, OR IS IT A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT?

Agnipath was justified as a fix for shortages, as it was supposed to recruit 45,000 to 50,000 Agniveers every year. The soldier and officer shortfall was around 1.01 lakh in 2024, as per *official* government reports. However, recruitment further fell after its introduction, and the extension reflects difficulty attracting fresh recruits. The current soldiers' shortfall further increased despite launching this scheme. The *deficit* across the armed forces is around 1.81 lakh, an 8% increase despite this scheme. Therefore, the whole scheme looks like an overhaul of previous recruitment procedures, by replacing them with the Agnipath scheme, under which soldiers are now recruited with future uncertainty. Similarly, the deeper shortage of officers remains untouched.

The scheme treats the armed forces as a site for experimenting with employment and fiscal policy, when combat effectiveness should be the only yardstick. Similarly, the scheme's overhaul looks like managing the electoral constituencies in the provinces such as Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh where the BJP's political grip is weakening. Youth from these provinces see the military as a route to a dignified and stable job. However, offering them this path targets political signal. Even Rahul Gandhi criticized this by calling Agniveers "use and throw labourers", and he promised to scrap the scheme, making this an issue of electoral liability.

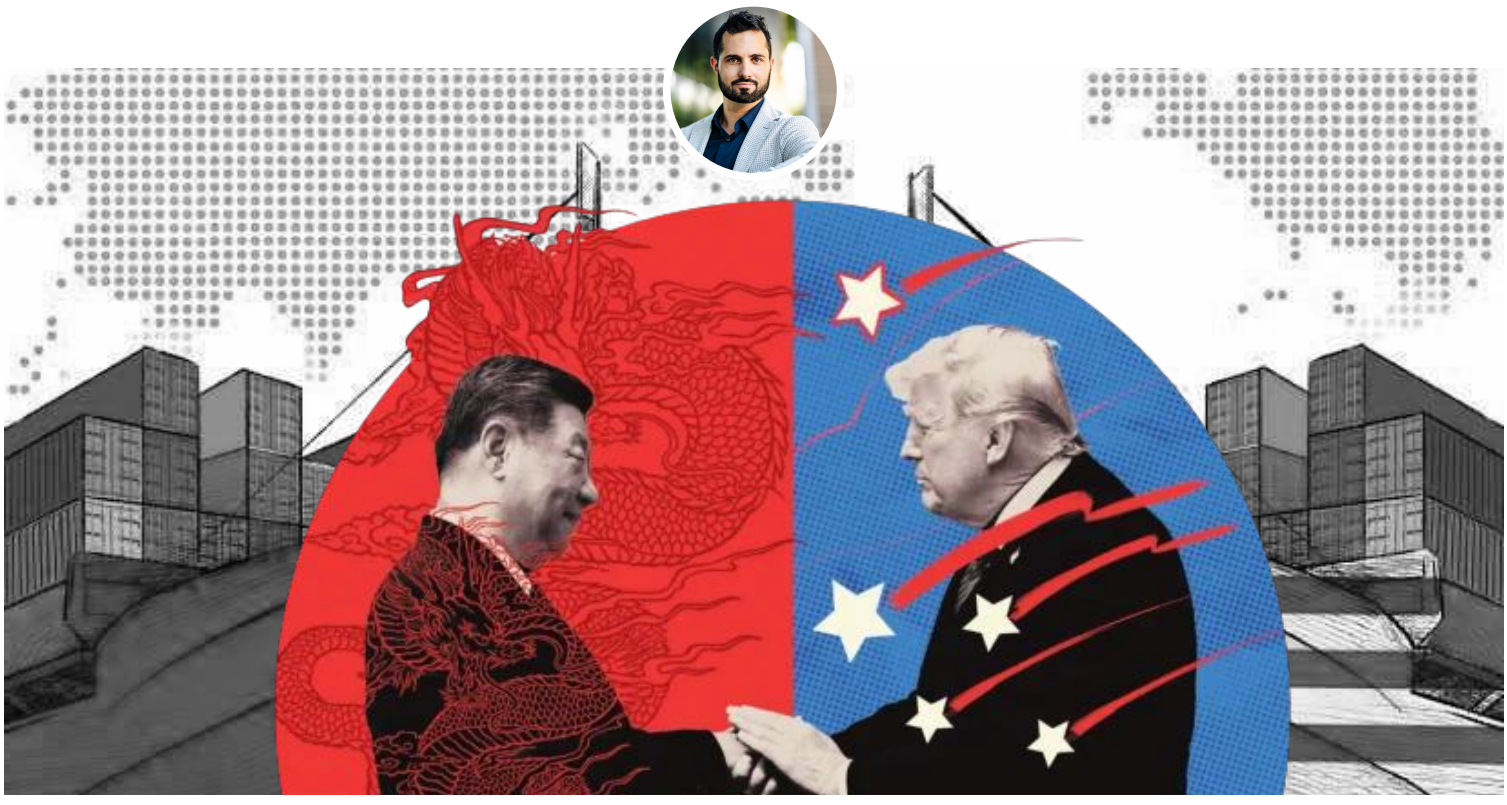
## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this scheme represents the politicization of the Indian military by the BJP government, launched to distract from core issues like unemployment for vote-bank gains. Extending the policy amid peak youth grievances further appears to be a political maneuver rather than an effort to stabilize the armed forces, leaving unit cohesion, officer shortages, and unclear future selection procedures unresolved.

POLICY DIGEST EXCLUSIVE

# WHEN THE TRUCE ENDS: CRITICAL MINERALS, NOT TARIFFS, ARE THE REAL PRESSURE POINT

*Policy Wire reached out to Arnold Platz, Founder & CEO of General Future Holding, and he responded.*



## The Question

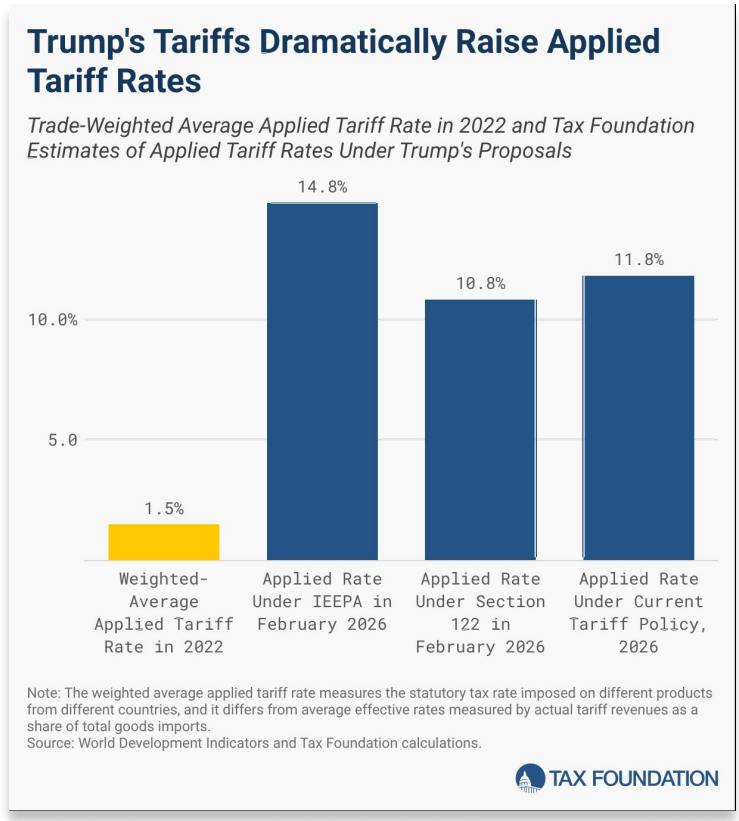
***What happens when the US-China tariff truce ends?***

**1** **Nobody is treating the truce as permanent.** Since it was agreed, most companies I work with have used it as a window, not a solution: building inventory, adding second suppliers and moving critical steps out of single-country dependence. The truce bought time, and the smart companies spent it.

**2** **Critical minerals are the real pressure point.** Tariffs raise costs, but export controls on rare earths and other critical metals can stop production entirely. If those controls come back after the truce, the companies that secured alternative sources, including recycled metals, will keep running. The others will feel it within weeks.

**3** **Recycling has become strategic.** A year ago, recovering metals from scrap and e-waste was a sustainability topic. Now our customers ask about it as supply security: a source of copper, rare earths and precious metals that no export control can switch off.

**4** **Day-to-day trade won't stop.** Even in the worst periods of the last few years, goods kept moving between China, Europe and the US. What changes is the cost and the paperwork. Businesses are preparing for a more expensive, more complicated relationship, not a broken one.



> *"The truce bought time, and the smart companies spent it."*
>
> ARNOLD PLATZ

## The Question

***Iran war, gas prices and household budgets***

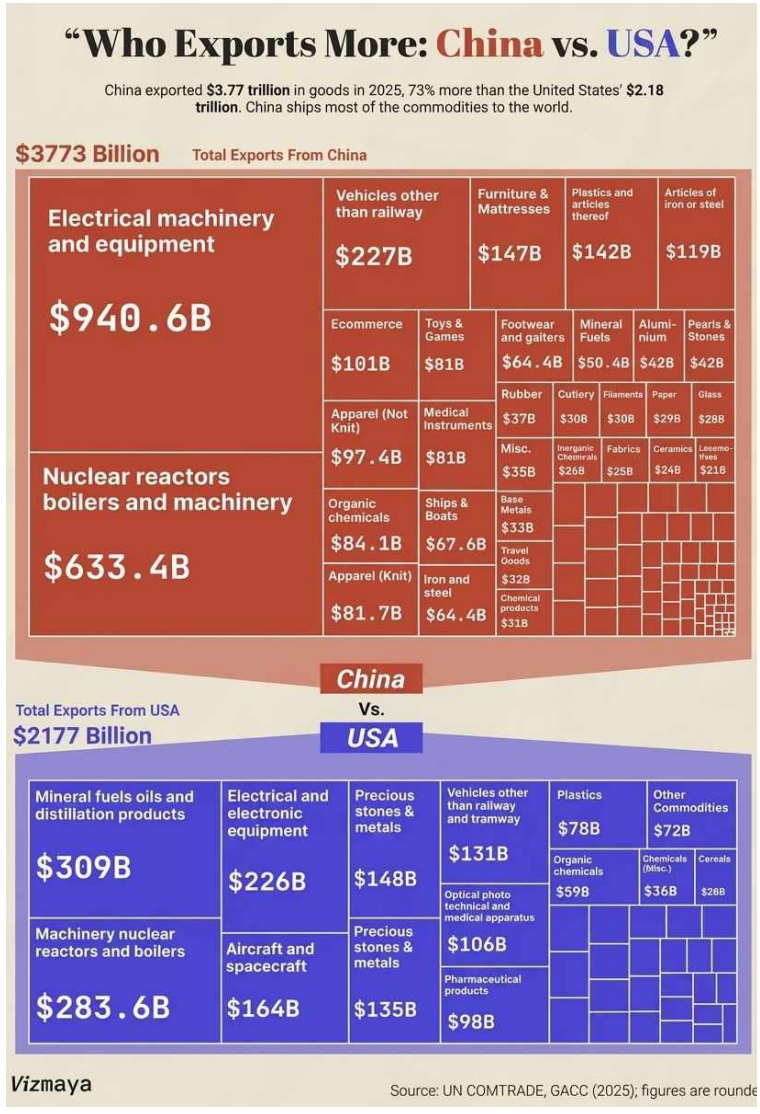
High energy prices don't stop at the pump. In my business, metals recovery and processing across 40 countries, energy and diesel are among the largest costs. When they rise, the cost of transporting, processing and refining everything goes up with them, and that ends up in the price of food, electronics and almost everything households buy, usually months later.

1. **The second-round effect is the real household cost**. The pump price is visible, but the bigger hit comes later, through higher transport, manufacturing and food costs. That's why energy shocks keep inflation sticky long after oil prices calm down.

2. **Small businesses are squeezed from both sides.** Large companies hedge, renegotiate contracts and pass costs on. Small businesses pay more for fuel and deliveries but often can't raise prices without losing customers, so their margins take the hit first.

3. **Households carry the most.** They can't hedge or renegotiate, which is why energy shocks hit lower-income families hardest and weigh on consumer confidence for months.

4. **Short-term fixes rarely help for long.** Gas tax holidays and reserve releases ease the headline, but they don't change the underlying supply. Policy that reduces dependence on a single chokepoint, whether that's oil through Hormuz or critical metals through China, is what actually protects household budgets over time.




> *"The pump price is visible, but the bigger hit comes later, through higher transport, manufacturing and food costs."*
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POLICY DIGEST INTRODUCES

# POLITICS, GOVERNANCE/ COMMENTARY

**A PLATFORM FOR POLITICAL VOICES, EXPERT OPINIONS AND INFORMED COMMENTARY ON ELECTIONS, LEADERSHIP, PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS.**



# Trump's Influence, Public Trust And The Challenges Facing Republicans

**A CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE, CEO OF HIREME, DEMOCRAT AND MARINE VETERAN**



POLICY DIGEST REACHED OUT TO GEORGE TO DISCUSS DONALD TRUMP'S INFLUENCE ON REPUBLICAN POLITICS, THE CHALLENGES FACING CANDIDATES, THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF POLICY DECISIONS, AND THE PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS. IN HIS RESPONSE, GEORGE EXAMINES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL LOYALTY, PUBLIC TRUST AND THE EVERYDAY CONCERNS OF AMERICAN FAMILIES.



**Q HOW DO YOU ASSESS DONALD TRUMP'S INFLUENCE ON REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES, PARTICULARLY WHEN IT COMES TO WINNING PUBLIC TRUST BEYOND THE PARTY'S BASE?**

**George**

CEO of HireMe and a Democrat, I believe Trump's influence exposes the difference between winning a party's nomination and earning the public's trust. In a Republican primary, his endorsement can bring recognition, fundraising opportunities, and credibility with his most committed supporters. But a general election brings a broader audience. Those voters want to know whether a candidate understands their community and will exercise independent judgment. Trump can help a candidate win over the party faithful. That does not mean he helps them win over the neighborhood.

**Q WHAT CHALLENGES DO REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES FACE WHEN DECIDING WHETHER TO STAND WITH TRUMP OR DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM HIM?**

**George**

Republicans in competitive races faced a difficult choice. Staying close to Trump reassured his supporters but tied candidates to his administration's record. Creating distance risked alienating voters they still needed. Rallies can energize volunteers and turnout, but they can also mobilize opponents and turn a local contest into a referendum on the president. A packed venue tells you the people inside

are enthusiastic. It does not tell you whether the campaign gained support among the people outside. I would not attribute every Republican defeat to Trump. Candidate quality, spending, and local concerns matter. The question is whether his involvement expands the coalition needed to win.

## Q FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE AT HIREME, HOW HAVE TRUMP'S POLICIES AFFECTED EMPLOYMENT, BUSINESSES AND THE FINANCIAL STABILITY OF AMERICAN FAMILIES?

**George**

Through my work at HireMe, I look at policy through its consequences for employment and family stability. My assessment is that Trump's biggest liability became the distance between his promises and people's daily lives. Tariffs added costs for businesses and consumers. The war in Iran increased pressure on fuel prices, affecting workers commuting to jobs and employers paying for deliveries. Immigration restrictions can compound those pressures when they disrupt lawful hiring or access to experienced workers. Construction delays affect housing. Healthcare staffing shortages affect patients. You cannot talk a family into feeling financially secure.

## Q WHAT DID TRUMP'S RESPONSE AFTER THE ELECTION REVEAL ABOUT THE GAP BETWEEN POLITICAL PRIORITIES AND THE CONCERNS OF ORDINARY AMERICANS?

**George**

His response after the election reinforced that concern. Trump used his first public appearance to showcase the White House ballroom project. To me, that captured the disconnect. Families wanted answers about their bills, and he was discussing his building. My assessment is that the insults and constant confrontation had worn thin with voters who wanted practical results. Political combat does not pay the rent or get a patient an appointment. Republican candidates standing beside him had to answer for that gap in priorities.

## Q AS A MARINE VETERAN, WHAT IS YOUR POSITION ON PETE HEGSETH'S 2025 DECISION CONCERNING THE MEDALS OF HONOR ASSOCIATED WITH WOUNDED KNEE?

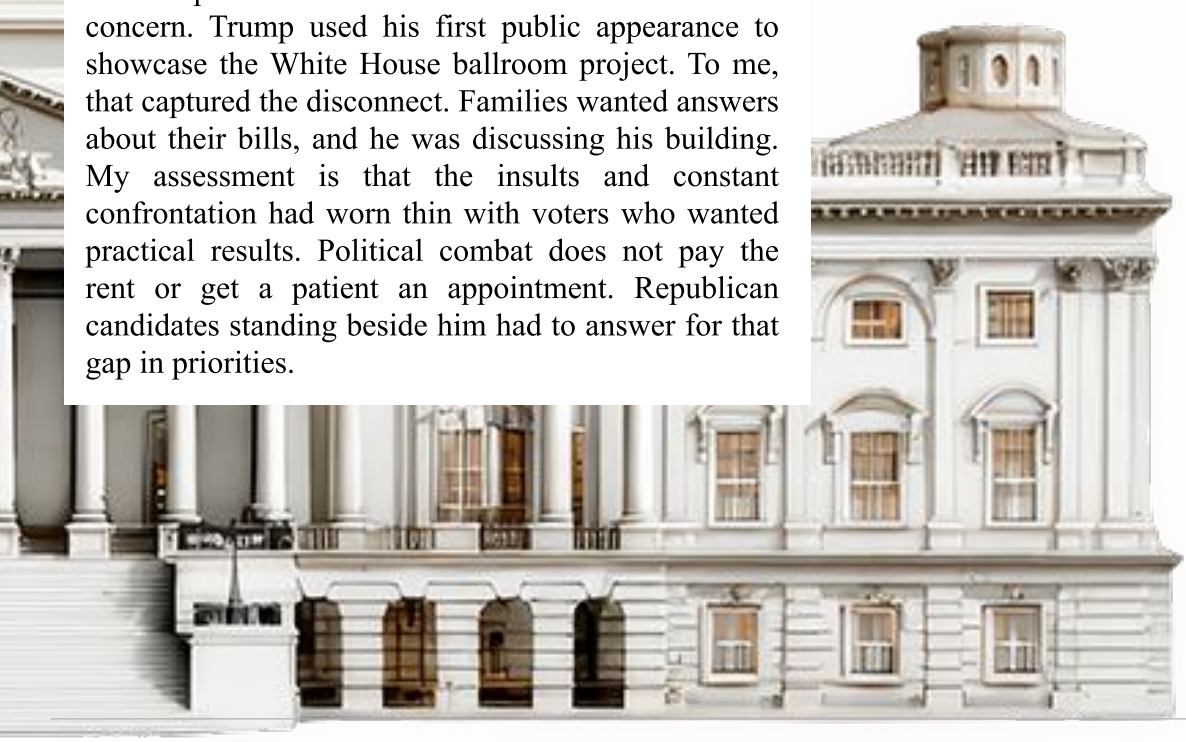
**George**

As a Marine veteran, I also take issue with Hegseth's 2025 decision to retain existing Medals of Honor associated with Wounded Knee, where Lakota people, including women and children, were killed. Respecting military service includes confronting that history honestly. I would not claim that decision drove the election, but it illustrates my concern about the administration's judgment. Leaders must be willing to examine mistakes and change course. Defending every decision makes it harder to regain lost trust.

## Q DO YOU BELIEVE TRUMP CAN WORK WITH DEMOCRATS, AND WHAT WOULD MEANINGFUL POLITICAL COOPERATION LOOK LIKE?

**George**

Trump's stated willingness to work with Democrats will be tested by what he is willing to negotiate. He retains veto power, giving him substantial leverage over legislation. My concern is that cooperation could become conditional on Democrats accepting his terms, followed by blame when they refuse. Both sides should explain what they proposed, what compromises...



# Trump's Political Influence: From Endorsements To Election Day

VICTOR A. LOPEZ | CEO, IMPERIO STRATEGIES



VICTOR A. LOPEZ, AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND CAPITAL STRATEGY EXPERT, OUTLINES THREE KEY DIMENSIONS OF TRUMP'S INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN ELECTIONS: PRESIDENTIAL ENDORSEMENTS, CAMPAIGN RALLIES, AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTIONS.



## Q HOW VALUABLE ARE PRESIDENTIAL ENDORSEMENTS IN HELPING CANDIDATES WIN ELECTIONS?

**Victor A. Lopez**

An endorsement can bring a candidate national attention, fundraising opportunities, and support from an established voter base. But the real test is whether that support expands a candidate's appeal or simply reinforces voters who were already committed.

## Q DO CAMPAIGN RALLIES TRANSLATE INTO ACTUAL ELECTORAL SUPPORT?

**Victor A. Lopez**

Rallies can energize supporters, generate media attention, and strengthen campaign momentum. However, crowd enthusiasm and electoral support are not necessarily the same thing. The question is whether that energy translates into votes.



## Q HOW DOES TRUMP'S INFLUENCE DIFFER BETWEEN REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES AND GENERAL ELECTIONS?

**Victor A. Lopez**

Trump's influence can carry different implications at each stage. A candidate appealing to the Republican base may perform differently when competing for independent and undecided voters in a general election.

# THE IRAN WAR'S HIDDEN ECONOMIC COSTS: WHY FALLING GAS PRICES MAY NOT BRING RELIEF TO AMERICAN FAMILIES

*In an exclusive written response to PW, independent economics and national security researcher Robert J. Green explains why diesel shortages, fertilizer costs and damaged refining infrastructure could keep household budgets under pressure long after gasoline prices decline.*



Gasoline prices in the United States are beginning to ease, but the economic fallout from the Iran conflict may persist much longer. While motorists are seeing some relief at the pump, rising transportation costs, disrupted energy supplies and agricultural pressures continue to threaten household budgets and small businesses.

To understand the broader economic consequences, PW approached Robert J. Green, an independent economics and national security researcher, asking how the Iran conflict is affecting US gasoline prices, inflation and consumer confidence, what American families and small businesses should expect in the coming months, and what policymakers can realistically do to ease the pressure.

Green, whose research focuses on the economic dimensions of national security and supply-chain vulnerabilities, argues that falling gasoline prices should not be mistaken for a broader economic recovery.

"Families should not read falling gas prices as the all-clear," Green told PW.

According to Green, the crisis is unfolding on three different economic timelines: fuel prices, food production and refining infrastructure.

Gasoline represents the fastest-moving component. As oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz recover and markets respond to prospects of reduced hostilities, prices can decline relatively quickly. AAA reported a national gasoline average of $4.36 per gallon on October 8, a record for that time of year, before prices fell to approximately $3.98 by November 10.

However, Green identifies diesel as a more persistent threat. Diesel powers freight transportation, tractors and distribution networks, making it essential to the movement of goods across the economy. Its elevated cost can eventually appear in grocery bills and other consumer prices.

US Energy Information Administration data reinforce those concerns. Distillate inventories, which include diesel and heating oil, fell to approximately 99.3 million barrels in the week ending October 30, their lowest level since 2003.

International supply disruptions are adding pressure. The International Energy Agency reported that combined diesel exports from Russia and the Middle East were approximately 1.3 million barrels per day lower in September than a year earlier, with losses only partially offset by increased shipments from other producers.

Green also warns that food inflation follows a slower trajectory. Fertilizer costs associated with the spring energy shock can influence agricultural production and future harvests, meaning consumers may continue

experiencing higher food prices even after gasoline becomes more affordable.

For small businesses, sustained diesel and supply-chain costs could further squeeze profit margins. Families, meanwhile, may remain cautious about spending as the benefits of lower gasoline prices are offset by persistent costs elsewhere.



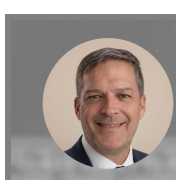
The third challenge is damaged refining capacity. Green argues that rebuilding disrupted facilities requires extensive repairs and construction, making immediate supply normalization unrealistic.

On policy responses, Green offers a restrained assessment. Governments may ease logistical disruptions and provide temporary support, but diplomatic progress alone cannot immediately restore inventories or damaged infrastructure.

In his assessment, the more immediate constraint is the availability of diesel and other middle distillates rather than crude oil itself. The implications extend beyond energy markets. If transportation and agricultural costs remain elevated, consumer confidence could recover more slowly than gasoline prices suggest.

For Green, the central economic reality is straightforward: ***"The pump corrects in weeks, the plate corrects in seasons."***

As American households prepare for the coming months, the real measure of economic relief may be found not only at gas stations but also in grocery aisles, freight costs and the financial resilience of small businesses.



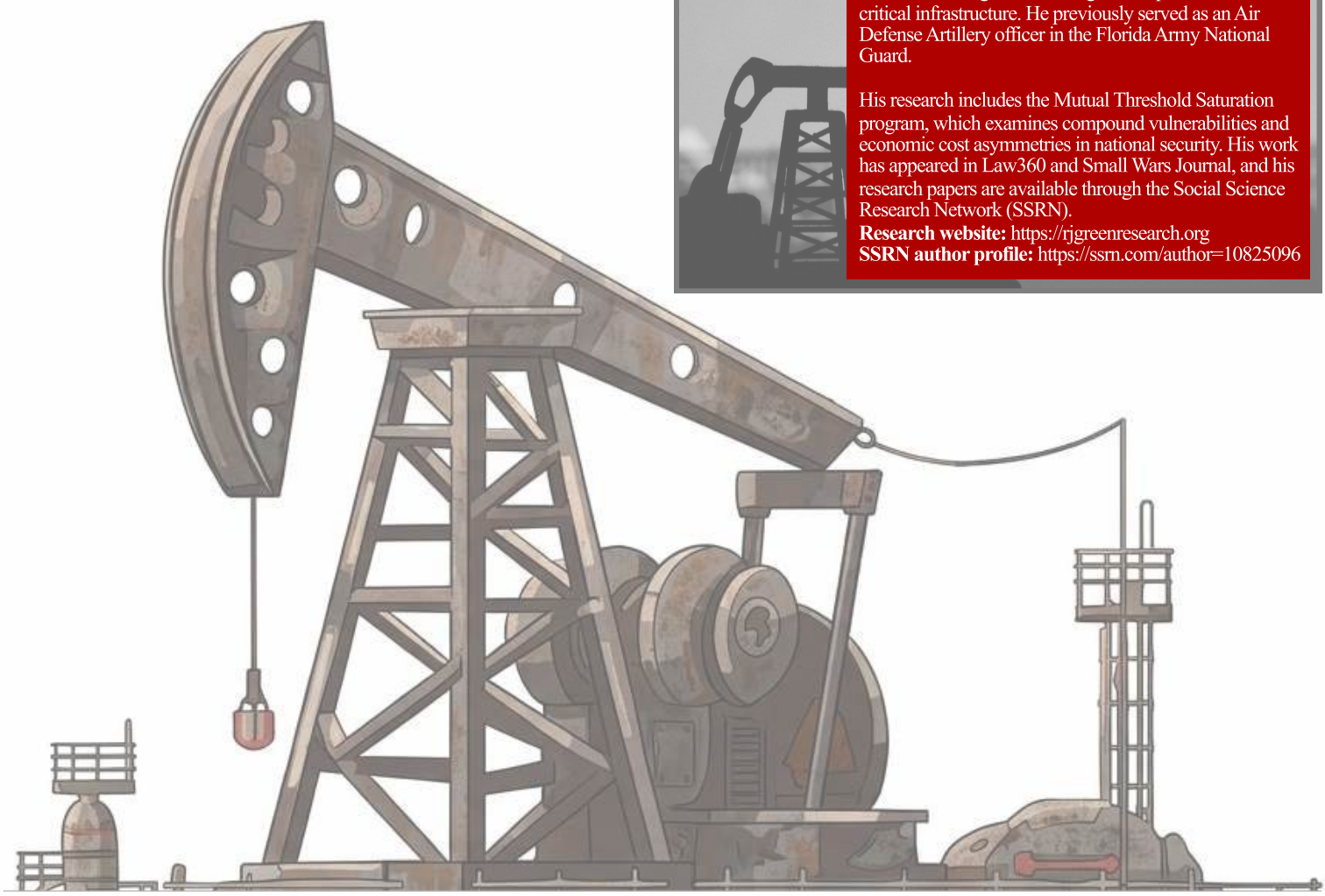
**About the ROBERT J. GREEN**

Robert J. Green is an independent economics and national security researcher whose work examines the relationship between economic security, critical infrastructure, supply-chain vulnerabilities and national defense.

He has nearly three decades of experience as a systems and software engineer working in transportation and critical infrastructure. He previously served as an Air Defense Artillery officer in the Florida Army National Guard.

His research includes the Mutual Threshold Saturation program, which examines compound vulnerabilities and economic cost asymmetries in national security. His work has appeared in Law360 and Small Wars Journal, and his research papers are available through the Social Science Research Network (SSRN).

**Research website:** https://rjgreenresearch.org
**SSRN author profile:** https://ssrn.com/author=10825096



# CHINA’S NEXT STAGE OF MODERNIZATION IS BEYOND INFRASTRUCTURE

*Jiang Tao*




Covering China's rapid transformation—from industrial policy to technological leaps—often means confronting dizzying numbers. In global headlines, that narrative is almost universally framed by scale: thousands of kilometres of high-speed track, record-breaking bridge spans, and millions of tonnes of concrete.

Yet beneath the physical spectacle lies a far quieter, more consequential shift: the transition from simply connecting places to synchronising an entire national economy. It represents a fundamental pivot to resource redistribution—testing whether a continent-sized nation can turn geographical depth into an economic asset, and whether these invisible links can sustain its next phase of growth.

Nowhere is this shift clearer than in the digital sphere.

## BRINGING RESOURCES TO WHERE THEY MATTER MOST

China’s economic engine, top universities, and AI labs are clustered along its east coast. But the power-hungry infrastructure needed to train models and store data requires cheap land, cool climates, and immense amounts of electricity—assets that lie thousands of kilometres inland.

Beijing’s answer is the "East Data, West Computing" initiative. Launched in 2022, the strategy is less about laying cables and more about spatial rebalancing: rerouting non-urgent computing workloads away from congested coastal power grids to cavernous server clusters in resource-rich interior provinces.

That dynamic is visible in Ulanqab, Inner Mongolia, a key northern node for the initiative. Known for decades simply as China's agricultural "potato capital," the city now styles itself as a "capital of tokens," using plateau chills and green power to host clusters of data centres.

On a recent inspection of the hub, President Xi Jinping called for the efficient, green, and secure development of computing infrastructure, stressing the need to ensure the efficient operation of completed projects and finish the follow-up construction on schedule.

Ulanqab is not an isolated case, but part of a nationwide realignment.

The scale is growing rapidly. By July 2026, China's total intelligent computing capacity had reached 2.45 million petaflops, according to the National Data Administration. And more than 85 percent of that capacity is now concentrated within eight national computing hubs and three designated computing-energy coordination zones—the initiative's primary geographic nodes.

For inland provinces, hosting the digital economy's server farms offers a rare leap up the value chain, driving local demand for high-speed fibre, green microgrids, and specialised engineering.

For such resource-rich areas, the opportunity is to move beyond supplying land, energy or raw materials and to participate in more sophisticated economic activities.

But capacity alone does not guarantee value. The earlier utilization figures illustrate why the next challenge is to ensure that infrastructure serves genuine demand. Better coordination can help turn investment into productive capacity rather than leaving expensive assets underused.

## ENERGY AS A FOUNDATION FOR GROWTH

Electricity is another essential part of the equation.

China's total electricity consumption reached approximately 10.37 trillion kilowatt-hours in 2025. While total power use grew by about 5 percent year-on-year, electricity use in information transmission, software and information technology services increased by 17 percent. Such is the pace at which the energy needs of the digital economy are growing.

At the same time, China's energy resources and centers of demand are unevenly distributed. Many western and northern regions have strong wind and solar potential, while the eastern coastal regions contain major industrial clusters and population centers.

Large renewable energy bases and long-distance transmission networks are helping connect these resources with consumers. Linking cleaner electricity with computing facilities and advanced manufacturing could create new opportunities for resource-rich inland regions.

The logic is straightforward. Energy supports computing; computing supports businesses; and businesses can use these resources to improve production, develop new services and innovate.

Each system becomes more valuable when it works with the others.

Of course, the benefits depend on efficient investment, reliable power supplies and genuine demand. But the broader direction is significant: infrastructure can help transform geographical advantages into new sources of industrial growth

**China's electricity consumption growth in 2025**

IT and information services **17%**

Total electricity consumption **5%**

IT-related electricity consumption growth was approximately 3.4 times the overall growth rate. **3.4x**

**2.45M**
Petaflops
China's intelligent computing capacity, July 2026

**85%+**
Computing
Capacity concentrated in eight national hubs and 3 coordination zones

## INFRASTRUCTURE AS A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

In China, infrastructure has never been treated merely as civil engineering; it is the foundational scaffold of national development. That rationale explains why it is anchored in China's Five-Year Plans. The core premise has stayed consistent: geographical friction can be dismantled when vital resources become easier to access, cheaper to move, and more rationally distributed across a continent-sized territory.

What is shifting is the substance of what gets built. The era of focusing overwhelmingly on traditional "hard" infrastructure has expanded into what is termed "new infrastructure" . These digital conduits are explicitly designed to reinforce the real economy—serving as the nervous system for smart factories, automated supply chains, and green manufacturing.

The next chapter now unfolding will be measured not only by what China builds, but by how effectively it turns those connections into opportunities for sustainable growth.

Readers interested in this theme may listen to this episode of Stories of Xi Jinping. It adds a layer of texture that writing alone cannot provide.



**JIANG TAO**

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# Pakistan-China Trade Relations:

**BEYOND CPEC: CAN PAKISTAN TURN ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH CHINA INTO AN EXPORT ENGINE?**



**Dr. Lubna Umar**
Academic, researcher, writer, and editor



## MOVING FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

**$25.25B**
Bilateral trade Pakistan–China, 2025

**$22.40B**
China's exports to Pakistan 2025

**$2.85B**
China's imports from Pakistan 2025

**0.11%**
Pakistan's share of China's imports

Pakistan and China have built one of South Asia's most consequential economic relationships, anchored in long-term diplomatic cooperation, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and an expanding network of trade and investment arrangements. Yet the central question is no longer whether the partnership can finance roads, power projects, and ports. It is whether it can help Pakistan sell more competitive products, develop industrial capabilities, and earn sustainable foreign exchange. The transition from infrastructure-led cooperation to export-led growth is the defining economic test of this relationship in 2026.

In 2025, China's global merchandise trade reached approximately US$6.36 trillion, comprising US$3.77 trillion in exports and US$2.59 trillion in imports (GlobalTradeData, n.d.; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2026). In comparison, bilateral trade with Pakistan stood at approximately US$25.25 billion, with China exporting US$22.40 billion to Pakistan and importing only US$2.85 billion (ChinaData, n.d.; Trading Economics, 2026a, 2026b). Pakistan thus accounted for merely 0.11% of China's global imports and 0.59% of its exports (author's calculations based on the reported figures), highlighting a substantial imbalance in bilateral trade. Pakistan's exports to China remained concentrated in copper, cotton, minerals, seafood, oilseeds, and cereals, reflecting limited product diversification and value addition (ChinaData, n.d.; Trading Economics, 2026b). These figures reveal a considerable gap between the countries' strategic partnership and their commercial engagement. Given the scale of China's import market, Pakistan has significant opportunities to expand exports through agricultural processing, value-added manufacturing, improved quality standards, and targeted

market access. Realizing this potential, however, requires stronger domestic production capacity, export competitiveness, and sustained trade facilitation.

## TRADE PREFERENCE

Both Pakistan and China signed the second phase of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA-II) in April 2019 that served as a window into tapping this trade potential. Through this agreement, China set out to remove tariffs on 313 priority export products manufactured by Pakistan that include seafood, meat and cooked foods, garments, textile products, chemicals and some engineering goods. According to data provided by the Ministry of Commerce, Pakistan, the agreement also enhanced safeguard procedures and electronic data exchange to better trade activities (Ministry of Commerce, n.d.).

Waving off these tariffs and duties doesn't serve the purpose as many other factors pose problems for Pakistani exporters. Food exporters may face the lack of appropriate and large enough cold storage, hygiene-related protocols, inconsistent grading, or even issues pertaining to documentation. Similarly, for domains such as textile and engineering, attaining technical standards, quality and scale and establishing partnership may be factors hindering exports. Pakistan has further talked with the Chinese representatives to increase the Pakistani imports at least US$7 billion so that a substantial change can be felt in the economic situation in Pakistan and that may ultimately end its dependance on IMF altogether.

## CPEC 2.0: FROM CONNECTIVITY TO COMPETITIVENESS

Pakistani officials and economists have concluded that the trade association between both countries ought to be enhanced. In the 39th annual general body meeting of Pakistan Society of Development Economists and during an international conference held in PIDE Islamabad in October 2026, researchers and experts presented elaborate researches on multiple aspects of agriculture, agri goods, livestock, industrial development, manufacturing, medium and small scale business, natural resources, technology and ICT exports, human resource, skills for global markets, creative arts, cultural industry, blue economy, sea trade, services and tourism. This conference opened a window on how these domains may be enhanced through development.

Another very important yet alarming aspect was highlighted that shed light on the productivity of the Pakistani individuals as well as organizations and business enterprises. According to experts in the field, the 0.9 million population of overseas Pakistani bring in foreign exchange worth of US$38-40 billion while the entire Pakistani population of 250 million residing in Pakistan are responsible in generating US$40-45 billion annually (State Bank of Pakistan, as reported by Associated Press of Pakistan, 2025). These figures exemplify the underutilization of the creative and economic potential of the Pakistani people. This calls out for upgrading the old and redundant ways of working and to increase their potential, especially in the domain of establishing businesses and trade to boost the economy. We shall see the fields where trade can be enhanced along with factors that may impact commercial growth.

## PRIORITY TRADE POTENTIAL

During talks between Chinese officials and Pakistan's Ministry of Planning in August 2026, CPEC 2.0 was declared as a project that takes Pakistan from infrastructure to industry and aids business to business associations. The ministry also declared a list of priority industry that includes agriculture, science and technology, IT, minerals, and development of Gawadar port (Ministry of Planning, 2026a). Moreover, in a governmental briefing in October 2026, emphasis was laid on cooperation between Pakistani and Chinese businesses from Xinjiang, trade through Khunjerab, and on renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and advanced technologies (Ministry of Planning, 2026b).

## AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PROCESSING

Agriculture presents a great opportunity for Pakistan to diversify its exports to China. Specially by adding value to the products rather than dealing in raw commodities. This is valid for domains such as food processing, fisheries, livestock, and capacity building (CPEC Secretariat, n.d.) that have been established in the 2018 CPEC agriculture cooperation framework. Moreover, there is ample potential in this regard for Pakistani traders by expanding the export of rice, sesame, fruits, vegetables, seafood, meat, and processed foods to the Chinese markets. The competitiveness may be increased by building the capacity and infrastructure in terms of storage, branding, quality packaging, upgrading standards and protocols to meet those of the international markets. This requires investing in cold storage, packaging industry, latest and modern processing facilities, safety labs following international grading systems and protocols, and networks. This may help improve the export qualities along with agricultural productivity. Another very significant factor is keeping the process environmentally sustainable. The expansion in

agricultural related exports ought to keep check on water consumption, food security, employment opportunities for locals, rather than focussing on volume of the export.

## MANUFACTURING, MINERALS, AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

Following a similar policy of value addition, manufacturing cooperation opens a window for Pakistan to enter the regional and international arena. Joint ventures with China can help develop and improve local production, technological understanding and access to international markets. Since China has developed great expertise in machinery, electronics, renewable energy technologies, working alongside them can help develop Pakistani workforce, and increase productivity. In terms of mineral cooperation, Pakistan ought to encourage investment to be filtered into processing, technical training, and building of infrastructure. In renewable energy, development of local assembly, engineering and manufacturing capability enhancement is required rather than just importing items such as batteries and solar panels. Another pertinent aspect that Pakistan needs to focus is the commercial viability, sustainability, transparency, and safety of these aspects of cooperation. Projects undertaken must prioritize community interests, economic and environmental safeguard.



## DIGITAL SERVICES AND HUMAN CAPITAL

There is an increased need for Pakistan and China to extend their economic cooperation from trade to digital services and knowledge-based industry that has not been tapped before but offers great potential. The increase in Pakistani software developers, and university graduates opens a window for cooperation in domains such as software engineering, artificial intelligence, digital commerce, joint training, technology incubation that may buttress the capacity to export skilled services.

Another very significant domain that requires focus is language and business communication. An imbalance in systems regulating communication, technical terminology, and commercial practices can negatively impact market relations. The development of translation and interpreting skills, Chinese language learning, cross cultural communication aiding negotiating skills become a fundamental requirement that help establish stronger partnerships and trade associations.

For developing these skills, universities, trade organizations and chamber of commerce should work together to formulate policies and initiate programs that cater for the communicative needs.

## BORDER CONNECTIVITY AND TRADE FACILITATION

Pakistan and China are bonded through a border that requires serious focus. This is seen through the crossing of Karakoram highway and the Khunjerab pass inking Pakistan with Western China. This border helps facilitate partial exports, small scale commerce, trade and tourism with Xinjiang. According to the Ministry of Planning, Pakistani officials are already talking about the expansion of this border for trade and developing border-trade market may help enhance and facilitate the exchange further. This may also be augmented by looking into custom related potential delays in cross-border trade activities, seasonal disruptions, and transportation costs that may hinder the effectiveness of the trade route. This calls for the need to prioritize custom procedures and trade relaxations, provide reliable logistic support and prevent local issue to impact commercial activities.

## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND POLICY PRIORITIES

Pakistan's trade constraints are largely domestic in nature and ought to be remedied by the concerned stakeholders accordingly. The unpredictable and fluctuating energy costs, low levels of productivity, inconsistency in terms of quality and regulations, limited finances and laidback mindset negatively impact exporters capacity and competitiveness in the international market. Smaller businesses are at a bigger loss as their capacity to forge networks, negotiating skills, maintaining standards and consistency in supplies keep them from remaining afloat internationally. If small businesses are to enter the competitive market, then these weaknesses must be addressed immediately and efficiently. This requires a clear-cut bilateral trade policy that is result oriented. It should identify the high potential export products based on Chinese demand, provide enterprises with regulatory frameworks, keep checks and balances based on international standards, aid in certifications and paperwork and facilitate custom led procedures to ensure successful market entry.

This is the time when a shift is necessary to move towards competitive domestic production. The success of CPEC 2.0 must be gauged through productive investment, skilled employment, value added exports and sustained commercial partnerships. Removing factors that hinder productivity and facilitating local enterprises is the first step that may lead Pakistani economy to a sustainable future.

POLICY WIRE Q&A

# LEBANON, IRAN, GAZA AND THE LIMITS OF CEASEFIRES

*Gregg Roman is the executive director of the Middle East Forum. Mr. Roman has testified before Congress and the Knesset and appears on international news channels such as Fox News, i24NEWS*



## 1 | Israel–Lebanon Framework

***"The sequence is negotiable. The end state is not."***

Israel needs to see performance, and the June 26 framework already defines it. Under that text, every Israeli pullback depends on Lebanese army deployment and verified disarmament. In the three pilot villages, Israeli officers report that private homes stay off limits to army searches and that their target coordinates go unused.

I give President Aoun's government credit. A cabinet ban on Hezbollah's military activity is on the books, and the courts are pursuing a case over 780 kilograms of explosives in a Hezbollah truck. But warrants are not disarmament. As for the strikes, open ground the army has not yet reached accounts for most of the recent targets.

Full disarmament is more realistic now than at any time since Hezbollah was founded. The group is weaker, and Iranian ports remain under American blockade. The middle ground was tried in 2006 and again in 2024, and both arrangements ended in war. The sequence is negotiable. The end state is not.

## 2 | Who Verifies?

***"A civilian mission with access is more credible than a military one without it."***

The flag matters less than the mandate. Nearly 50 countries still keep about 7,500 personnel in UNIFIL, and Hezbollah built its arsenal around that force, because peacekeepers had no authority to search private property and their reports cost nobody anything.

A successor needs three things: access to any site without notice, including homes; the right to return; and findings that trigger consequences. A clean zone means Israel withdraws. A zone that is not clean means aid and reconstruction money stop.

Washington brokered the June framework and should lead the mechanism. France as verifier has already drawn objections from Washington and Jerusalem, and a referee one party rejects verifies nothing. Building up the Lebanese army and police, the task of the support mission Brussels created in October, is where Europe adds the most. Secretary Rubio is right that the mission need not be military. A civilian mission with access is more credible than a military one without it.

## 3 | The Iran Question

***"I would welcome a deal that records results. I oppose one that substitutes for them."***

That is a false choice. Tehran negotiates only under pressure and uses each pause to raise its price. Sanctions relief, the release of frozen funds and a smaller American force all come first in its current plan. The Qatari draft has the same flaw: relief first, nuclear talks later.

I would welcome a deal that records results. I oppose one that substitutes for them. Success means three things that can be checked: shipping through Hormuz that Tehran cannot stop; the roughly 440 kilograms of enriched uranium, unchecked by inspectors since June 2025, removed or destroyed under inspection; and no rebuilt missile launchers or production lines. Until then the blockade and the American force stay, the talks get a deadline, and the threat of strikes stays credible.

On Lebanon, an end to Israeli operations there still sits among Iran's conditions. Tehran is claiming to speak for Beirut. If the Lebanese state keeps Hezbollah out of the next round, it will have shown who governs Lebanon.

## 4 | Gaza After a Year of Ceasefire

***"Hamas has to disarm itself."***

Hamas has to disarm itself. The Board of Peace roadmap has had its agreement since July, yet storage, with no handover, is how one of its senior officials then described the deal. That is not disarmament. Fighting Hamas was never the stabilization force's job, by Washington's own account. That force can hold cleared areas, without Turkey or Qatar, and if Hamas refuses, the job falls to Israel.

What Israel should offer is already in the roadmap: a pullback sector by sector as decommissioning is verified, with reconstruction to follow. Weapons first, then withdrawal, has been the Board's own stated sequence since August 3. Israel has no interest in running or settling Gaza, but security stays in its hands.

On the horizon, order matters. An August poll found 72 percent of Palestinians against Hamas disarming before a full Israeli withdrawal. Self-government for Palestinians who accept Israel's permanence is realistic, with borders agreed by both sides and nobody expelled. A state as a reward for October 7 is not.

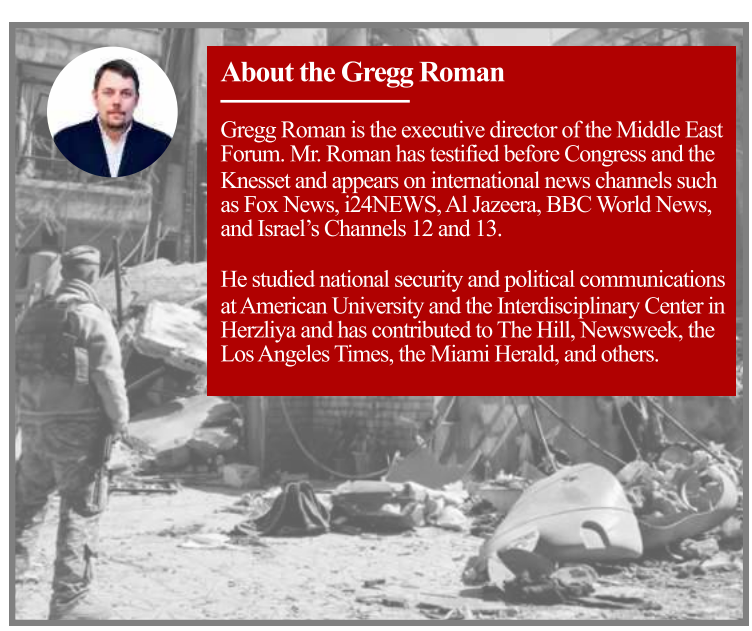
## 5 | Deterrence Versus Ceasefire

***"Ceasefires do not fail because they are enforced. They fail when one side rearms and nobody stops it."***

In 2006 the job of keeping Hezbollah's military out of southern Lebanon went to UN peacekeepers, and Hezbollah rebuilt. The November 2024 ceasefire handed the dismantling of Hezbollah's southern infrastructure to the Lebanese army, and March 2 of this year saw Hezbollah enter the war on Iran's side anyway. In Gaza, Hamas's rebuilt ranks number 30,000 to 40,000 a year into the truce, by Haaretz's reporting.

Ceasefires do not fail because they are enforced. They fail when one side rearms and nobody stops it. So deterrence and a durable ceasefire can coexist, and the second does not last without the first. Trust in a negotiation comes from verified terms, not from one side holding back while the other rearms.

Critics have a point on one thing: force without a political end state only buys time, and Israel has been better at the military half than the political half. The answer is verified disarmament in Lebanon and Gaza. When that is done, the strikes stop.




**About the Gregg Roman**

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