

CABINET SECRETARIAT SENDS 'SCORECARDS' FOR SEPT-NOV 2025

From file disposal to output, Union Secretaries now get a report card each

Includes negative marks for 'excessive' spend on foreign visits or events, delayed payments to MSMEs

Harikishan Sharma
New Delhi, February 8

IN A first, the Cabinet Secretariat has sent "administrative score-cards" to Secretaries in the Central government, showing the percentage of marks obtained by them, based on their individual performance as well as that of their departments,

The Indian Express has learnt.

The scorecards assess the Secretaries and their departments on about a dozen parameters, with a total of 100 marks, and include "negative marks" and "discretionary marks".

It is learnt that Cabinet Secretary Dr TV Somanathan sent the first set of these

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• Parameters used in assessment

PARAMETER	MAX MARKS
File disposal	20
Public grievance redressal	5
Cabinet/CCEA notes	5
Litigation	5
Output/Activities annexure A of the monthly DO	15
Expenditure on schemes and capital expenditure	15
Timely completion of PMG projects	10
Financial Advisor/IFD	6
Disposal of bills by PAO/CCA	4
Output/Activities in Annexure C of the monthly D.O.	10
Discretionary marks by Cabinet Secretary	5
Total	100
NEGATIVE MARKS	-12

File disposal to output

“administrative scorecards”, for the months of September, October and November 2025, to the Secretaries in the first week of January this year.

Among the parameters, file disposal carries the maximum marks of 20, followed by output/ activities, and expenditure on schemes and capital expenditure, both with 15 marks each. The other parameters include public grievance redressal, Cabinet notes, timely completion of projects being monitored by the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), timely disposal of bills by Pay and Accounts Office (PAO) and Chief Controller of Accounts (CCA).

The scorecards also carry 12 negative marks, which, it is learnt, would be imposed for “excessive expenditure” on foreign visits or events, abnormal pendency of files at the level of Secretary and above, and delayed payments to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

Besides, the scorecards also have a provision for 5 “discretionary marks”, which will be awarded by the Cabinet Secretary for exceptional work or contributions made by a Secretary or department.

The concept of scorecards is learnt to have been introduced after Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on several occasions, highlighted the need to eliminate delays at various levels in the government.

The purpose, it is learnt, is to assess administrative performance and efficiency of Secretaries and their departments, in absolute and relative terms,

based on an objective and a fair methodology.

These “administrative scorecards” will be used to compare a department's performance — with itself as well as other departments.

Explaining the need to issue scorecards, the Cabinet Secretary, in a communication to Secretaries, is learnt to have conveyed that “the fact that something cannot be measured with perfect accuracy does not mean that it should not be measured at all”.

In this context, he is learnt to have pointed out that the Civil Services Examination has a provision for comparing a History student's marks with a Physics student's marks.

He is learnt to have underlined that “the public and the government expect results, not excuses”. The Cabinet Secretary has also sought feedback and suggestions from the Secretaries.

In 2024, the Cabinet Secretariat had introduced changes in the practice of “monthly demi-official letters” written by Secretaries to the Cabinet Secretary, by adding ministry-specific quantitative performance indicators.

Earlier, the Modi government had also launched PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) — a flagship platform for fast-tracking projects, schemes, and grievance redressal through direct, real-time review by the Prime Minister, in partnership with States and Union Ministries.

Citing rules, PMO tells LS Sectt: No questions on PM CARES, relief and defence funds

Asad Rehman

New Delhi, February 8



EXPLAINED

THE PRIME Minister's Office (PMO) has told the Lok Sabha Secretariat that Parliament questions and matters related to PM CARES Fund, the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) and the National Defence Fund (NDF) are not admissible under rules related to the conduct of business in Lok Sabha, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

It is learnt that on January 30, the PMO told the Lok Sabha Secretariat that questions and matters related to the three

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Funds in question

PM CARES is a public charitable trust set up to raise funds for national emergencies such as Covid. PMNRF provides immediate relief to people affected by natural calamities, major accidents, riots, etc. The NDF is meant specifically for the welfare of members of the armed and paramilitary forces and support to their families.

PM CARES fund

funds are not permissible under Rule 41(2) (viii) and 41(2)(xvii) of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha.

Under the stipulated conditions that govern the right to ask questions in the Lok Sabha, Rule 41(2) (viii) states that “it shall not relate to a matter which is not primarily the concern of the Government of India”. Rule 41(2) (xvii) states “it shall not raise matters that are under the control of bodies or persons not primarily responsible to the Government of India”.

The reasoning for questions and matters not being admissible in Lok Sabha given by the PMO, it is learnt, was that the corpus of these funds is constituted entirely with voluntary public contribution and not from any allocation out of the Consolidated Fund of India.

The PMO told the Lok Sabha Secretariat that in case a situation arises to determine the admissibility of a question or notice of zero hour or special mention seeking information on the three funds arises, the conditions in the provisions may be exercised, it is learnt.

The PMO did not respond to an emailed query from *The Indian Express* on its communication with the Lok Sabha Secretariat in this regard. Mukesh Kumar Sharma, Joint Secretary, Lok Sabha Secretariat (Media & Public Relations Branch), did not respond to requests for comment from *The Indian Express*.

The PM CARES fund was set up on March 27, 2020, following the Covid outbreak. The fund was registered as a Public Charitable Trust and its trust deed has been registered under the Registration Act, 1908, at New Delhi on March 27, 2020.

As per the PM CARES Fund receipts and payment account report for 2022-23, which is the last published on its official website, the total balance at the end of March 2023 stood at Rs 6,283.7 crore.

In January 2023, the Centre had informed the Delhi HC that PM CARES Fund has been set up as a public charitable trust and is not created under the Constitution or any law made by the Parliament or the state. The Centre had made the submission during the hearing of a plea seeking to declare the fund a “state” under Article 12 of the Constitution to ensure transparency in its functioning.

The Centre in its affidavit had said that the trust is “neither intended to be or in fact owned or controlled” by any government or any instrumentality of the government and the composition of the board of trustees consisting of holders of public office is merely for administrative convenience.

The affidavit also stated that since it is not constituted under law or the Constitution, PM CARES does not constitute a public authority under the provisions of the RTI Act.

On August 18, 2020, the Supreme Court had “refused” to order transfer of funds from the PM CARES Fund to the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF), saying they “are two entirely different funds with different object and purpose” and “there is no occasion” for such a direction.

The apex court had also said guidelines specifically provide for audit of the NDRF by the Comptroller & Auditor General of India, but PM CARES Fund is a public charitable trust due to which “there is no occasion” for such an audit.

Dismissing a writ petition filed by the NGO, Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL), the court had said: “The funds collected in the PM CARES Fund are entirely different funds which are funds of a public charitable trust and there is no occasion for issuing any direction to transfer the said funds to the NDRF”.

Security info channel opens with Canada post Doval visit

Divya A

New Delhi, February 8

IN A first, India and Canada have agreed to appoint security liaison officers to enable information-sharing on drug-trafficking and transnational organised criminal networks. This comes after the two-day visit of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval to Ottawa on February 6-7, where he met Nathalie Drouin, National Security and Intelligence Advisor to Canadian PM Mark Carney.

In a statement released after the visit, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Sunday that the two sides acknowledged the progress on initiatives aimed at supporting the safety and security of their countries and citizens.

“They agreed to a shared work plan to guide bilateral cooperation on national security and law enforcement issues and to enable practical collaboration on respective priorities,” the MEA said, adding that the visit was part of regular bilateral security dialogue between the two sides.



File photo of NSA Ajit Doval with his Canadian counterpart Nathalie Drouin. Doval met Drouin during his visit to Ottawa on February 6-7.

New Delhi and Ottawa are undergoing a significant diplomatic reset over the last one year, since the beginning of Carney's term as PM – shifting from a major chill over the Hardeep Singh Nijjar assassination in 2023 to a pragmatic partnership. Key initiatives include a potential \$2-plus billion uranium deal, revived trade negotiations (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) and renewed cooperation in critical minerals, security and counter-terrorism.

Prime Minister Carney is expected to visit India some time this year to cement ties, although there has been no official announcement by either side on the dates of the visit. This follows a “positive” meeting between Modi and Carney on the sidelines of the G7 Summit in Kananaskis in June last year.

Ever since, India and Canada have taken calibrated and constructive steps to restore stability in the relationship, starting with the “early return

of High Commissioners to each other's capitals”.

In the recent meeting between Doval and his Canadian counterpart, MEA said, “It was agreed that each country would establish security and law-enforcement liaison officers and that their respective agencies would build on working relationships.”

“This important step will help streamline bilateral communications and enable timely information-sharing on issues of mutual concern to Canada and India, such as the illegal flow of drugs, particularly fentanyl precursors, and transnational organized criminal networks,” said the statement.

Besides, as per MEA, the two countries are also committed to formalising cooperation on cybersecurity policy and information-sharing on cybersecurity issues, as well as continuing discussions on cooperation related to fraud and immigration enforcement. During his visit, Doval also had a meeting with Gary Anandasangaree, Minister for Public Safety of Canada, on Friday.

India, Malaysia ink pacts to expand strategic ties

The countries sign agreements in key areas, including security and semiconductors; during talks in Kuala Lumpur, Modi and Malaysian PM highlight efforts to promote trade in local currencies

Press Trust of India

KUALA LUMPUR

India and Malaysia on Sunday vowed to expand their ties in the high-priority sectors of trade and investment, defence, energy, advanced manufacturing and semiconductors with Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserting that both sides are committed to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Following his wide-ranging talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Mr. Modi reiterated India's position on combating terrorism as he said:

"Our message on terrorism is clear; no double standard, no compromise." The two sides inked a total of 11 agreements and documents to expand cooperation in a range of key areas, including a framework pact for deeper engagement in the semiconductor sector.

Mr. Modi, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday, and Mr. Ibrahim appreciated efforts to promote the usage of local currencies – the Indian rupee and Malaysian ringgit – for trade settlement.

"We will pave the way



Bidding adieu: Prime Minister Narendra Modi waving to the gathering before his departure from Malaysia on Sunday. PTI/PMO

for economic transformation through strategic trust," Mr. Modi said, describing the India-Malaysia relationship as "special".

During the visit, Mr. Modi also met Malaysia's Indian-origin Ministers, MPs and Senators and interacted with four leading industry leaders of Malaysia.

"We are maritime neighbours. For centuries, our peoples have had deep and cordial ties," he said in his media statement. Mr. Modi also announced India's decision to establish an Indian Consulate General in Malaysia.

In his remarks, Mr. Ibrahim noted India's econom-

ic growth and said his country would benefit immensely if it could secure more ways and opportunities to collaborate with New Delhi.

'Spectacular rise'

"It (India's economic growth) is one spectacular rise in the international eco and trade scene," he said, describing the decision to use local currencies for bilateral trade as "remarkable".

In the talks, Malaysia extended its support for India's permanent membership in a reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Elaborating on engagement in the security domain, Mr. Modi said cooperation in counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and maritime security will be strengthened, adding that both sides will further expand defence ties.

"Along with AI and digital technologies, we will advance partnerships in semiconductors, health, and food security," he said, noting that the discussions at the CEO Forum opened new opportunities for trade and investment.

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India, Malaysia ink pacts to expand strategic ties

The Prime Minister touched upon India's position on Indo-Pacific and its steadfast views on the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations's (ASEAN) centrality in the region.

"The Indo-Pacific region is emerging as the world's growth engine. We, along with ASEAN, are committed to development, peace, and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific region," he said.

"With the support of friendly countries like Malaysia, India will further expand its relations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). We agree that the review of the ASEAN-India Trade Agreement, ITIGA, should be completed expeditiously," he added.

Mr. Modi said he and Mr. Ibrahim also had a "meaningful discussion" on regional and global issues.

"In this environment of global instability, the growing friendship between India and Malaysia is of vital importance to both countries." "We share the view that reform of global institutions is essential to address today's challenges. We will continue to support all efforts for peace. And our message on terrorism is clear: No double standards; no compromise," he added.

"We appreciate your commitment to India-Malaysia relations. Let us together realise your dream of a prosperous Malaysia and our resolve for a developed India," he said.

The two Prime Ministers also "unequivocally and strongly condemned" terrorism in all its forms, including cross-border terrorism and called for "zero tolerance" of terrorism, according to a joint statement.

The two leaders also called for concerted global efforts to combat terrorism in a comprehensive and sustained manner and agreed to work towards countering radicalisation and violent extremism.

India-Greece defence ties in focus as Ministers meet in New Delhi today

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

With a focus on enhancing defence cooperation, Greek Defence Minister Nikos Dendias and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will hold a bilateral meeting on Monday at the Manekshaw Centre in New Delhi.

The discussions are expected to focus on enhancing cooperation in the defence sector, a senior

official said.

Speaking at the India-EU Forum 2026 on Saturday, Mr. Dendias described India as an indispensable partner for Europe, highlighting New Delhi's growing strategic and economic importance for the European Union and Greece in particular.

Mr. Dendias noted that European perceptions of India have evolved significantly over time, adding that India is now viewed as

a "necessary-to-have" partner.

Defence ties between India and Greece have seen steady momentum in recent months. In January this year, the two countries held the inaugural India-Greece Joint Services Staff Talks in New Delhi, marking a step towards institutionalising defence cooperation.

Earlier, in September 2025, the Indian Navy and the Hellenic Navy conduct-

ed their maiden bilateral maritime exercise in the Mediterranean Sea. The exercise, which concluded on September 18, 2025, was carried out in two phases – a harbour phase at Salamis Naval Base from September 13 to 17, followed by a sea phase on September 17 and 18.

The upcoming talks are expected to further consolidate the growing defence partnership between the two countries.

After START, need for new stabilising mechanisms

THE TRUMP Administration's decision to let the last remaining nuclear arms-control treaty with Russia lapse marks a historic inflection point in the management of dangerous weapons. Since the 1950s, the US viewed legally binding, treaty-based ceilings and intrusive verification as the core instruments for achieving global stability and mutual security among the great powers. Trump's approach breaks sharply from that tradition. It emphasises unconstrained deterrence, unilateral technological advantage, and flexible force postures as better suited to American interests. This shift aligns with Washington's broader reorientation under Trump on global economic and political institutions. In Trump's view, classical arms control locked the US into outdated constraints while ignoring the real drivers of future instability: China's rapid nuclear expansion, the proliferation of new delivery systems, and the rising prominence of tactical and theatre-level nuclear weapons.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) had capped US and Russian arsenals at 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed delivery systems, underpinned by rigorous data exchanges and inspections. With its demise, those limits and verification mechanisms have disappeared. For Russia, such treaties symbolised great-power parity with Washington; yet, the underlying asymmetry is stark. The US economy is nearly 12 times larger and enjoys a vast technological lead. The Trump Administration does seek stable relations with Moscow, but not through the late-20th-century template of codified equivalence. Analysts warn that the post-START environment will fuel hedging and worst-case planning, accelerating a renewed arms race. The risks are amplified by the rise of novel systems — hypersonic vehicles, dual-capable missiles, and exotic delivery platforms — that lay outside the treaty's scope.

The collapse of formal arms control will create ripples well beyond US-Russia relations. States feeling vulnerable may sense fewer constraints on pursuing nuclear options. Efforts to bring China into future frameworks will not get far, because Beijing has no interest in freezing its arsenal at a position of inferiority. Europe, already unsettled by Russian aggression and uncertainty about US commitments, may drift towards strengthening a "Euro-deterrent," alongside rising pressures on Japan and South Korea to consider their own nuclear capabilities. India, too, must confront the reality of emerging nuclear multipolarity. Rather than remain a bystander, Delhi must engage major powers in shaping new norms and stabilising mechanisms for a world with many nuclear actors.

EU, US deals connect India to world's largest markets, open new trade vistas

BILATERAL TRADE deals have been characterised by long negotiations and reasonable concessions on either side to iron out workable agreements. In this respect, India's two bilateral FTAs — one with the EU and the most recent one with the US — stand out as significant developments connecting the world's largest economies.

Both FTAs have different histories, commonalities and differences. India's position is based on, one, not budging from its stated position of protecting the vulnerable areas of agriculture, dairy and SMEs, ensuring the interests of the small farmers are not compromised, and two, the emergence of a mature, market-driven economy in India, driven by wider reforms across governance, regulation, and market infrastructure.

The differences include some key points, notably the issue of CBAM in the EU negotiations and its absence in the US-ETA negotiations. Views on labour mobility also differ across the two FTAs.

Looking at the EU FTA, India has secured unprecedented market access for more than 99 per cent of Indian exports, by trade value, to the EU, which also bolsters the "Make in India" initiative. Beyond goods, it unlocks high-value commitments in services, supported by a comprehensive mobility framework enabling the seamless movement of skilled Indian professionals.

In contrast, the US interim agreement was a direct by-product of emerging geopolitical realities. The fact that the deal with the US was given the go-ahead only after putting in place historic deals with the EU and the UK stands testimony to India's di-

plomatic acumen. The deal with the US should thus be viewed as part of a series of formal negotiations spanning the Middle East, the UK, and New Zealand, all of which indicate the emergence of a new trade order in South Asia.

Before we discuss the impact of the US trade deal, a couple of points are in order on the misguided rhetoric around the deal. First, even after the 18 per cent tariff has come into force, the gap between the MFN simple average tariff and the new tariff is among the lowest for India relative to most countries, including its neighbours.

Second, India's exports post-deal could still see an upside, as exports of goods and services — even with a 50 per cent tariff regime — have almost matched a hypothetical no-tariff scenario in the first nine months of FY26 by registering growth of 4.3 per cent.

Third, hypothetically, the complete substitution of Russian crude with Venezuelan crude (Meruy 16) has clear benefits for the domestic economy, as heavy crude discounts in the range of \$10–12 per barrel can ensure commercial viability. In fact, India could save up to \$3 billion on its import bill. This suggests that the trade deal will not significantly affect domestic inflation, even after sacrificing the Russian discount (end of hostilities in Ukraine may even reduce the discount from Russia).

Now, the benefits. The US trade deal opens up a massive \$118 billion global market for textiles and apparel. Further, the 25 per cent penalty on Russian oil imports will cease to exist, provided necessary adjustments to the oil



Soumya
KANTI GHOSH

The fact that the deal with the US was given the go-ahead only after putting in place historic deals with the EU and the UK stands testimony to India's diplomatic acumen

import basket are made. The US has also indicated that this interim framework is a stepping stone toward a full Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). Further tariff reductions on Indian goods will be considered during BTA negotiations.

The two deals share some similarities, notably shielding the imports of agri and dairy products to India. Under the US deal, India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products, including dried distillers' grains (DDGs), red sorghum for animal feed, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soyabean oil, wine, and spirits, while protecting the broader domestic market. In fact, India is already the largest importer of soyabean oil globally (but USA accounted for only 3 per cent in India's overall soyabean oil import of \$4.3 bn in Apr-Nov, FY25). Hence this decision clearly benefits India. Similarly, almonds, walnuts, pistachios and cranberry import from USA will now attract significantly lower duties and benefit India consumers. India produces these fruits in very limited quantities and these are in high demand given their nutritional contents.

Notably, regarding non-tariff barriers and digital trade, both the US and the EU have indicated flexibility and a willingness for dialogue.

In terms of benefits, \$75 billion of Indian exports to the EU are poised for take-off, with \$33 billion in labour-intensive sectors set to gain significantly from preferential access under the EU FTA.

The benefits from the US deal could be even greater. Among the top five US imports, India has a re-

vealed comparative advantage in chemicals, where China and Singapore currently hold higher shares. With higher tariffs on China, India can increase its share of chemical and pharmaceutical exports to the US. India may also capture part of Singapore's share. Capturing a 2 per cent share from these countries could add 0.2 per cent to GDP, and an additional 1 per cent from Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea — which face tariffs equal to or lower than India's — could add another 0.1 per cent to GDP.

India can also capture a larger share of apparel exports from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Currently, India's share of apparel exports in US imports is 6 per cent, and if it captures an additional 5 per cent from these countries, it could add another 0.1 per cent to its GDP.

India also intends to purchase \$500 billion of US energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next five years. This will diversify our capital goods imports from China.

The EU FTA and the interim BTA with the US open a new chapter in India's trade history. Today, consumers are the real kings, conscious of the choices they make across backward and forward integration. This changed reality must be recognised, and adjustments made. India has effectively established a reverse Byzantine equation, engaging in dialogue with all key stakeholders on its own terms and pace, building a springboard for a win-win proposition.

The author is member 16th FC, member, PMEAC and group chief economic advisor, State Bank of India. Views are personal

Cancel ASEAN trade pacts if against national interest, Cong. dares Goyal

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Congress leader Anand Sharma on Sunday dared Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal to cancel trade pacts with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore if they were against the national interest.

Mr. Sharma, Commerce Minister in the erstwhile UPA government, was reacting to Mr. Goyal's press conference on Saturday in which he had questioned UPA-era deals and policy decisions such as the import of palm oil.

"It's ironic that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Malaysia for an ASEAN outreach tour and the Commerce Minister made these statements," Mr. Sharma told *The Hindu*. "What's stopping their government from cancelling these deals if they are against the nation?"



The Commerce Minister has done a disservice to the nation by terming ASEAN the B-team of China. He should apologise. I would urge him to also answer our questions on the India-U.S. trade deal

ANAND SHARMA
Congress leader



Mr. Sharma justified the decision to import edible oils such as palm oil, citing data to argue that imports were required to meet domestic demand. "India remains an importer of edible oils. Annual indigenous production is 10.5-10.6 million tonnes, while imports are 16 million tonnes per year. Nearly \$18.3 billion was spent in 2024-25," he said.

He said that palm oil was imported even during the NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and

had continued during the 12 years of Narendra Modi's government.

'Answer our questions'

"The Commerce Minister has done a disservice to the nation by terming ASEAN the B-team of China. He should apologise for his statements. I would urge him to also answer our questions on the India-U.S. trade deal, which remains shrouded in mystery," Mr. Sharma said.

Mr. Sharma said U.S. President Donald Trump's

"tall claims" about the agreement raised "fundamental questions beyond trade, which concern national sovereignty, India's global commitments, the multilateral rule-based trade regime and the WTO."

Pointing out that the average U.S. MFN (most-favoured nation) tariff on India was around 3% before the 25% reciprocal tariffs of April 2025, he asked, "What is there to celebrate?"

He sought answers on whether India had agreed to open up its agriculture and dairy sectors, offer "zero-duty access" to U.S. products, commit to buying \$500 billion worth of American goods, and restrict purchases of Russian oil. "The government must answer all these questions by our people. They can't be silent on the details and seek to blame previous governments," he said.

Himanta targets Gaurav Gogoi, wife on 'Pak. links'

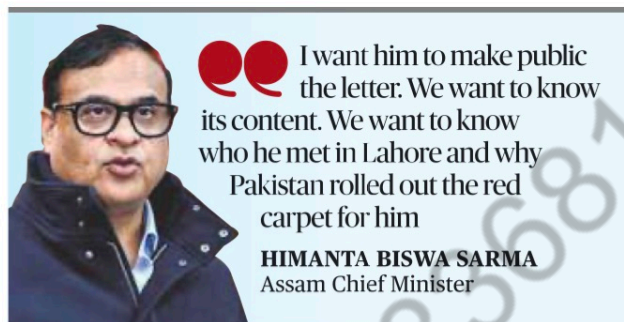
Assam CM questions State Congress chief's 2013 Pakistan visit, says a probe into the visit has been handed over to Centre; Gogoi dismisses claims, asks how CM's family acquired 'vast tracts of land'

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday questioned Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi's "suspicious" 10-day visit to Pakistan in December 2013 and his British wife Elizabeth Colburn Gogoi's professional stint with a climate organisation in the neighbouring country.

Addressing presspersons, Mr. Sarma asked Mr. Gogoi, the State Congress president and son of former Chief Minister late Tarun Gogoi, to disclose details of his visit to Pakistan months before he was elected to the Lok Sabha, during which he "uncharacteristically" maintained "digital silence". He asked the Congress leader to make public a letter allegedly issued by Pakistan's Interior Ministry, leading to the modification of the itinerary in his visa.

Mr. Sarma said Mr. Gogoi entered Pakistan through the Attari-Wagah border for his visit from December 14 to 24, 2013. "Pakistan is not a tourist destination. Asked by the media about the purpose of his visit, he claimed that he had gone to meet his



I want him to make public the letter. We want to know its content. We want to know who he met in Lahore and why Pakistan rolled out the red carpet for him

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA
Assam Chief Minister

wife, who had shifted to India 21 months earlier," Mr. Sarma said, adding that the Special Branch of the Assam Police was not informed about the visit, although Mr. Gogoi's father was the Chief Minister then.

Serious allegations

Assam's Special Investigation Team (SIT), probing the MP's alleged Pakistan links, learnt about the modification in his itinerary by confiscating his passport, Mr. Sarma said.

"I want him to make public the letter. We want to know its content. We want to know who he met in Lahore and why Pakistan rolled out the red carpet for him," he said.

"We suspect he may have undergone some form of training during those 10 days," the Chief Minister said.

Citing the seriousness of the allegations, Mr. Sarma said the Assam Cabinet decided on Saturday to hand the case over to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and seek a national-level investigation. He added that while the SIT had not interrogated Mr. Gogoi out of respect for his position, it would do so if directed by the Centre.

Mr. Sarma said some kind of "indoctrination" was evident from the questions related to national security raised by Mr. Gogoi in Parliament in 2014. These questions were related to uranium reserves, border security, Chinese infrastructure, defence procurements, climate change, and national water mission strategies.

Mr. Sarma described Mr. Gogoi as a "national threat" and alleged he could be vulnerable to

blackmail. "Who facilitated his visits to Islamabad and Karachi? If he does not answer, every question he raised in Parliament will be viewed with suspicion" the Chief Minister said.

Mr. Sarma alleged that Ms. Gogoi, who had joined U.K.-based climate organisation LEAD Pakistan as a consultant on March 18, 2011, was effectively "managed by Pakistan".

However, Mr. Gogoi said the Chief Minister embarrassed himself before the media and claimed that the journalists remained unconvinced after the lengthy press conference. He dismissed the allegations and instead asked how Mr. Sarma's family acquired vast tracts of land across Assam, promising redistribution if Congress came to power.

"I pity the journalists from Delhi and Assam who had to suffer the most flop press conference of the century. This was worse than a C-grade cinema. Most mindless and bogus points," he said in a post on X. "This #SuperFlop is in contrast to our #XomoyParivartanYatra which has been a hit in uncovering the 12,000 bighas of land occupied by the Chief Minister and his family."

Myanmar's military-scripted polls, India's strategic bind

Five years after the February 1, 2021 coup, Myanmar's military sought to manufacture political normalcy through elections held in three phases between late December 2025 and January 2026. Predictably, the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won. The outcome was barely a surprise since voting was permitted in only 265 of the country's 330 townships, with a controlled political participation.

Polling was largely confined to urban wards, as most rural areas remain under resistance influence. The junta claimed an overall voter turnout of around 55% – roughly 13.14 million of 24 million eligible voters. This sharp decline, from the roughly 70% turnout recorded in 2015 and 2020, reflects not voter apathy, but widespread rejection of a military-scripted political exercise.

The credibility deficit was compounded by the junta-appointed Union Election Commission dissolving several opposition parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), the Arakan National Party, and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, with senior leaders jailed. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing fielded dozens of serving and retired military figures under the USDP banner, which has now claimed sweeping victories. The new Parliament is slated to be formed within two months.

Elections amidst war; India's response

Since the coup, at least 7,738 people, including activists, journalists, and civilians, have been killed, while over 30,000 have been arrested. Of these, 22,767 remain in detention, including NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and former president U Win Myint, and 11,497 have been sentenced, often on politically motivated charges. More than 1,13,000 houses and structures have been destroyed, particularly in Sagaing and Magway.

The regime's brutality has fuelled the growth of resistance groups, notably the People's Defence Forces, which now operate alongside long-established ethnic armed organisations and control large swathes of territory, including 91 towns.

Despite the elections, these groups exert significant influence, constraining the USDP and



Harsh V. Pant

is Vice-President, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi



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is Associate Fellow, Neighbourhood Studies, Observer Research Foundation

India will have to manage its ties with the regime, balancing principles with pragmatism

suggesting that the conflict is likely to intensify.

For India, Myanmar is both a strategic neighbour and a gateway to Southeast Asia, crucial for its Act East Policy. The elections, therefore, continue to pose a long-standing dilemma for New Delhi's security and connectivity interests, without legitimising a deeply contested political mechanism.

In repeated statements in December 2025 and January 2026, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal has reiterated that India supports Myanmar's democratic transition and that any electoral process must be free, fair and inclusive, with the participation of all political stakeholders. This carefully calibrated language reflects India's attempt to uphold democratic principles while avoiding a complete diplomatic rupture with Naypyitaw. During the same period, New Delhi also clarified that any Indians who had visited Myanmar during the election process had done so in their personal capacity, signalling a distance and absence from the political exercise.

High-level engagement has continued alongside this calibrated rhetoric. On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in August 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to review bilateral ties and explore avenues for cooperation. While reiterating India's readiness to support Myanmar's developmental needs, the Prime Minister also emphasised the importance of conducting free, fair, and inclusive elections involving all stakeholders. The message was clear: engagement would continue, but without explicit political endorsement.

Amidst this, India has continued to play its humanitarian role by sending relief teams, humanitarian and medical assistance, and the establishment of a temporary field hospital under Operation Brahma during the March 2025 earthquake, which allowed New Delhi to remain engaged while avoiding legitimisation of the regime.

Implications for India

Myanmar shares a 1,643-kilometre border with four of India's northeastern States, making instability across the frontier inseparable from

India's internal security. Violence and state collapse have already triggered refugee inflows into the nation. India currently hosts 90,100 displaced Myanmar nationals in Mizoram and Manipur. The absence of a coherent national refugee policy places disproportionate burdens on State governments, thus exposing faultlines in this respect. Continued post-election instability is likely to sustain such movements.

Indian-backed projects, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, have faced repeated delays due to insecurity in conflict-affected regions. The junta's claims of post-election normalisation will be difficult to translate into improved implementation conditions, forcing New Delhi to reassess timelines, risk exposure and engagement strategies.

Moreover, transnational security threats – for instance, the proliferation of narcotics and human trafficking networks – have accelerated amid weakened border controls and fragmented authority. Of particular concern is the rapid expansion of cyber scam centres and cyber slavery networks operating in border conflict zones in Myanmar, from where 2,165 Indians have been rescued since 2022, but more still remain within the shackles. These developments present emerging non-traditional security challenges, underscoring the need for coordinated and clearer domestic and regional policy responses.

The path for New Delhi

As western and regional blocs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) refuse to recognise the election outcomes for now, it becomes essential for India to maintain its balanced approach. New Delhi is likely to sustain limited engagement with the regime in power to protect core interests, while simultaneously maintaining contacts with local actors, which it has already been doing in recent times.

Myanmar's elections have, therefore, not marked a turning point. For India, they underline a hard truth: managing relations with a fractured neighbour will require balancing principles with pragmatism – at a time when neither offers an easy exit.

From Mexico to South Africa: Why Indian automakers are facing rising tariff walls

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, February 8

INDIAN AUTOMOBILE makers face a new reality as key export markets slam the door on their ambitions with steep tariff barriers. South Africa is considering significant duty hikes on imported vehicles from countries like India and China, while Mexico has already implemented a 50% tariff on cars from countries without free trade agreements — including India.

For Maruti Suzuki and Hyundai Motor India, the challenges in Mexico and South Africa are particularly concerning. They are seen as key markets in India's automotive export strategy. Mexico, as a gateway to Latin America, and South Africa, as a hub for the African continent.

Rahul Bharti, senior executive officer-corporate affairs at Maruti Suzuki, told analysts during an earnings call in January that the company will assess what is on the South African government's agenda. "The best thing is to be broad-based across a wide portfolio of countries, and we have 100-plus of them. So, we'll try to de-risk to the maximum extent possible,



Vehicles parked at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar facility. The carmaker aims to keep a broad-based approach across countries in the face of global trade- and tariff-related risks, said an official. **EXPRESS FILE**

but still, we are exposed to all kinds of global trade- and tariff-related issues," he said.

Mexico's 50% tariff aims to protect its domestic automotive industry and promote local manufacturing. It applies to vehicles from nations without preferential trade agreements, leaving Indian manufacturers at a disadvantage compared with US, Canadian, European, and even some Asian rivals who benefit from Mexico's FTA network.

South Africa's automotive sector, which directly employs over 110,000 people and supports hundreds of thousands more, has struggled with excess capacity and mounting competition from imported vehicles.

Officials in Pretoria argue that protecting local manufac-

turing is essential for preserving industrial capabilities in an economy battling high unemployment rates.

These moves also reflect a broader global trend toward economic nationalism and industrial policy. Countries are increasingly prioritising domestic manufacturing and job creation over the free trade consensus that dominated the previous three decades. What does this mean for Indian automakers?

The implications are consequential. According to a Lightstone report, Indian cars accounted for close to 50% of all vehicle imports into South Africa in 2025. Mexico represented an even more promising market due to its proximity to the US and its role in regional supply chains.

FULL REPORT ON

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Japan's first woman leader on course for landslide win in general election

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party-led coalition on track to secure over 350 of the 465 seats, exit polls show; the snap election was called to capitalise on her strong approval ratings; her rule has strained Tokyo's ties with Beijing

Reuters

TOKYO

Prim Minister Sanae Takaichi's ruling coalition is set for a landslide victory in Sunday's election for Japan's Lower House, exit polls showed, a move that may rattle financial markets and accelerate a defence build-up aimed at countering China.

Ms. Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party, known as Ishin, could secure as many as 366 of the 465 seats in the chamber, a supermajority that would ease her legislative agenda, according to public broadcaster NHK.

The LDP alone is projected to win as many as



LDP chief Sanae Takaichi places a red paper rose on the name of an elected candidate at the party headquarters in Tokyo. REUTERS

328 seats, which would be its best result since 1996, when the current electoral system was adopted.

Japan's first female Prime Minister, 64, called the rare winter snap election to capitalise on her buoyant personal approval ratings since she was elevated to lead the ruling

LDP late last year.

Rare snap polls

Voters have been drawn to her straight-talking, hard-working image, but her nationalistic leanings and emphasis on security have strained ties with powerful neighbour China, while her promises of tax cuts

have rattled financial markets.

Residents trudged through snow to cast their ballots with record snowfall in parts of the country snarling traffic and requiring some polling stations to close early.

It is only the third post-war election held in February, with elections typically called during milder months.

Ms. Takaichi's election promise to suspend the 8% sales tax on food to help households cope with rising prices has spooked investors concerned about how the nation with the heaviest debt burden among advanced economies will fund the plan.

"Her plans for the cut in the consumption tax leave open big question marks

about funding and how she's going to go about making the arithmetic add up," said Chris Scicluna, head of research at Daiwa Capital Markets Europe in London.

Younger voters are among the most supportive of Ms. Takaichi, with one recent poll finding more than 90% of those under 30 favoured her.

On Thursday, Ms. Takaichi received the "total endorsement" of U.S. President Donald Trump.

China will also be keeping a close eye on the results.

Weeks after taking office, Ms. Takaichi touched off the biggest dispute with China in over a decade by publicly outlining how Tokyo might respond to a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Iran defies U.S. threats, says it has right to enrich uranium

Agence France-Presse

PARIS

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Sunday ruled out Tehran ever giving up uranium enrichment in its negotiations with Washington, insisting it will not be intimidated by the threat of war with the United States.

Mr. Araghchi told a forum in the Iranian capital that Tehran had little trust in Washington and even doubted that the U.S. side was taking renewed negotiations seriously.

“Why do we insist so much on enrichment and refuse to give it up, even if a war is imposed on us? Because no one has the right to dictate our behaviour,” Mr. Araghchi said. “Their military deployment in the region does not scare us,” he said, referring to the arrival of an aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln, in the Arabian Sea.



Abbas Araghchi

The United States and Iran reopened negotiations on Friday in Oman for the first time since Israel's 12-day war with the Islamic republic in June of last year.

Iran is seeking to have U.S. economic sanctions on the country lifted, in exchange for what Mr. Araghchi said at the forum could be “a series of confidence-building measures concerning the nuclear programme.”

Western countries and Israel, thought to be West

Asia's only country with nuclear weapons, say Iran is seeking to acquire a nuclear bomb, which the Islamic republic denies.

Questions commitment

“They fear our atomic bomb, while we are not looking for one. Our atomic bomb is the power to say ‘no’ to the great powers,” Mr. Araghchi said.

Mr. Araghchi's comments came after U.S. negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner visited the aircraft carrier on Saturday, signalling the persistent threat of U.S. military action against Iran.

Mr. Araghchi called into question the United States' commitment to negotiations.

“The continuation of certain sanctions and military actions raise doubts about the seriousness and readiness of the other side to conduct genuine negotiations,” he said.