

Heartiest Greetings  
on the festival of colours

Holi

March 4, 2026



# Defence ministry seals Rs 5,083-cr contracts for 6 choppers, missiles

**Amrita Nayak Dutta**  
*New Delhi, March 3*

THE MINISTRY of Defence on Tuesday signed contracts worth Rs 5,083 crore for the acquisition of six Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) Mk-II (Maritime Role) for the Indian Coast Guard and Surface-to-Air Vertical Launch - Shtil missiles from Russia for the Indian Navy.

Additionally, a contract for construction of 04 X 500T Self Propelled Fuel Barges for the Navy has been signed with Shoft Shipyard Private Ltd, Thane.

In a statement, the Defence Ministry said the contract for ALH Mk-III (MR), along with operational role equipment, an engineering support package, and performance-based logistics support, worth Rs 2,901 crore,

has been inked with the state-owned HAL.

“These twin-engine helicopters incorporate state-of-the-art features superior to the currently operated airborne platforms and are capable of undertaking a wide spectrum of maritime security missions from shore-based airfields as well as from ships at sea,” it said.

It said the contract for the procurement of Surface-to-Air Vertical Launch - Shtil missiles and associated missile holding frames, worth Rs 2,182 crore, has been signed with JSC Rosoboronexport, Russian Federation.

The acquisition is intended to substantially enhance the air defence capabilities of frontline warships against a wide spectrum of aerial threats, the statement noted.

# MGNREGS workers flag glitches in monitoring app

Workers' union reports widespread failures in National Mobile Monitoring System's facial recognition update; Centre says over 22 lakh workers successfully used the feature on Tuesday

**Sobhana K. Nair**

NEW DELHI

Several workers enrolled under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) have complained about glitches following the latest update to the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS), the mobile application used to record their attendance.

From March 1, the government has made facial recognition mandatory for marking attendance, but several workers say the new feature is not functioning properly, making it difficult for them to register their presence.

The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) shared videos on social media showing MGNREGS workers in parts of Rajasthan struggling to mark attendance. Women workers complained that they were unable to download the muster rolls, while in other locations, the facial recognition system allegedly failed to authenticate users. They also said attempts to reach district and State officials had yielded no response.



**Towards efficiency:** Facial recognition was introduced following the government's e-KYC drive for MGNREGA workers, aimed at eliminating ineligible beneficiaries. AFP

MKSS leader Nikhil Dey, one of the key authors of MGNREGA, questioned the efficacy of the monitoring system. "In the two years since it became operational, no review has been held to assess how effective this system has been in curbing corruption. Creating technological barriers for workers hardly helps advance the government's stated objective. Instead, the engineers who are supposed to supervise these sites should be held accountable for malpractices," he said.

Senior government offi-

cial, however, claimed that on Tuesday, over 22 lakh workers using the new facial recognition feature successfully recorded their attendance on NMMS. Facial recognition was introduced following the government's e-KYC drive for MGNREGA workers, aimed at eliminating ineligible beneficiaries.

Under the process, mates or supervisors take photographs of workers and upload them to the NMMS application, where they are matched against Aadhaar data. Officials said the additional verification

layer was necessitated after the discovery that the NMMS platform had been "misused".

"This new update was rolled out only after prior preparation. In October last year, we began a pilot in three districts, which was later expanded to one district per State," a senior official said, adding that exemptions are available in cases of technical difficulty.

There has been no extensive outage, the official asserted, and the government is handholding workers through the transition.

# Rahul says India's silence on Iran attack diminishes country's global standing

**The Hindu Bureau**

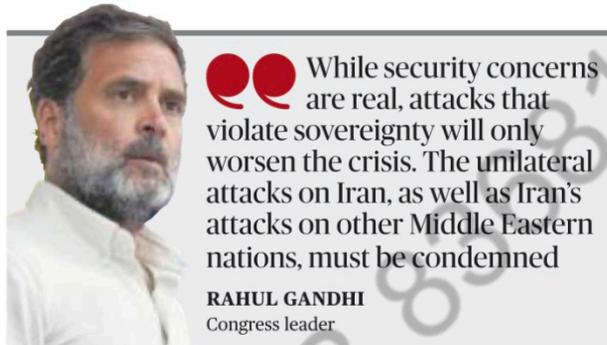
NEW DELHI

Condemning the unilateral attack on Iran as well as the retaliatory strikes by Iran in its neighbourhood, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday questioned India's silence on the developments.

In a post on social media platform X, Mr. Gandhi said Prime Minister Narendra Modi must speak up. "Does he support the assassination of a head of state as a way to define the world order? Silence now diminishes India's standing in the world," he said.

The Opposition leader said escalating hostilities between the United States-Israel alliance and Iran were "pushing a fragile region toward wider conflict".

"Crores of people, including nearly a crore Indians, face uncertainty. While security concerns are real, attacks that violate sovereignty will only



worsen the crisis. The unilateral attacks on Iran, as well as Iran's attacks on other Middle Eastern nations, must be condemned," Mr. Gandhi said.

## **Calls for dialogue**

He said violence begets violence, and dialogue and restraint remained the only path to peace.

"India must be morally clear. We should have the courage to speak plainly in defence of international law and human lives. Our foreign policy is rooted in sovereignty and the peaceful resolution of disputes and it must remain consistent," he said.

Echoing a similar position, senior Congress lead-

er Anand Sharma said India's silence and refusal to condemn the unprovoked attack on Iran's sovereignty is a "fundamental departure and an abdication of India's time-tested foreign policy to uphold international law, UN charter & national sovereignty".

## **'Govt. must answer'**

"It is ironic that as the current chairman of BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa], India has been isolated to a minority of one, with all other BRICS having condemned the attack. This is a national embarrassment on which the government must answer," Mr. Sharma said in a post on X.

## Social media handles of J&K news outlets taken down

**The Hindu Bureau**

SRINAGAR

Social media handles of several news outlets based in Jammu and Kashmir were taken down on Tuesday by Meta, which runs Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

The move came in the wake of widespread protests for the past three days over the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on February 28.

The affected outlets include prominent Srinagar-based organisations such as *Greater Kashmir*, *Rising Kashmir* and *Kashmir Life*.

In a statement, *Kashmir Life* said its verified Facebook and Instagram pages "became inaccessible in India on Monday afternoon after Meta restricted access at the request of law enforcement authorities".

Quoting Meta's response, the news portal said the handles "were restricted under Section 79(3) (b) of the Information Technology Act, 2000".

PDP president Mehbooba Mufti decried the move.

MARCH 4 IS WORLD OBESITY DAY

# India ranks 2nd globally for overweight, obese children

The number will go up to 56 mn by 2040, predicts World Obesity Atlas 2026

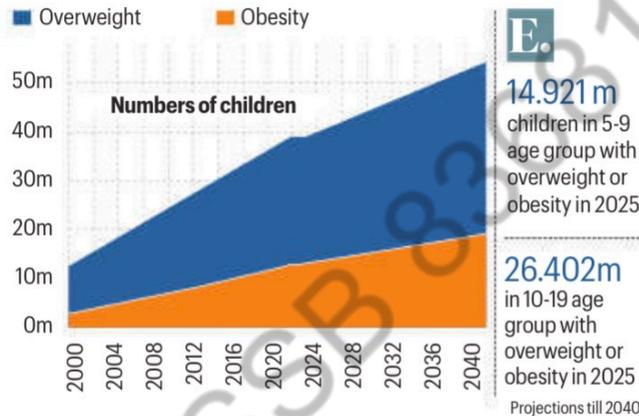
Anuradha Mascarenhas  
Pune, March 3

INDIA NOW ranks second after China for children who are overweight and living with obesity, beating the US and other Western nations, according to the World Obesity Atlas 2026.

In India, altogether 14.9 million children in the 5-9 age group, and more than 26 million children in 10-19 age bracket were overweight or obese in 2025. Worldwide, the atlas found that more than one in five (20.7%) among 5-19 age group were living with obesity or were overweight, an increase of 14.6% since 2010.

Of eight countries projected to have more than 10 million children with high BMI by end of 2025, China, India and the US each had over 10 million children living with obesity. China leads both categories, with 62 million children with high BMI and 33 million with only obesity, followed by India (41 million high BMI; 14 million obese-

## ● Overweight & obese Indians (5-19 yrs)



ity) and the US (27 million high BMI; 13 million obesity).

The Atlas presents a series of childhood obesity prevalence projections for the period 2025 to 2040. Estimates suggest that by 2040, 20 million children in India will be living with obesity and 56 million will be overweight and living with obesity. In the same period, children aged 5-19 years are projected to develop risk factors associated with high BMI.

This includes hypertension, increasing from 2.99 million to 4.21 million, hyperglycaemia from 1.39 million to 1.91 million and high triglycerides from 4.39 million to 6.07 million. "Most alarming is pace of change. India is among the fastest rising countries in the world

for children who are overweight and living with obesity, with annual increases, on average, of almost 5%. These trends are not inevitable — they are linked in large part to an environment that fails to provide access to healthy foods and activities," said Johanna Ralsom, CEO of World Obesity Federation.

Explaining India's ranking, Ralsom said it is because of the country's population size. India now ranks first within the WHO South-East Asia Region with more than 45 million young people (0-19 years) overweight or living with obesity.

Childhood obesity exposes the young to similar risks of chronic illnesses as adults, including hypertension and cardiovas-

cular disease. It is estimated that by 2040, over 57 million children will show early signs of cardiovascular diseases (high triglycerides), while over 43 million will show signs of hypertension. World Obesity Federation predicts by 2040, 507 million children will be living with obesity or be overweight.

As per the report, 74% of those aged 11 to 17 years fail to meet recommended physical activity levels. Only 35.5% of school-age children (primary and secondary) receive school meals. Children aged 6-10 years consume an average of 0-50 ml of sugary drinks/day. Around 32.6% of infants up to five months are breast-fed sub-optimally. About 13.4% of women aged 15-49 years are exposed to high BMI. About 4.2% of women aged 15-49 years live with Type 2 diabetes.

The World Obesity Atlas shows that urgent, coordinated action is needed to protect India's next generation. Stronger prevention policies, including healthier school food environments, protection from marketing of unhealthy foods, and fiscal measures such as taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. Early screening and care in primary health systems can also change this trajectory. "India has opportunity to lead the region in reversing these trends, but action cannot wait," Ralsom said.

# On India's fighter jet acquisitions

The procurement of the Rafale jets is not just fleet expansion. It is a structural shift in how India positions itself within global defence hierarchies. Securing access to mission software and autonomy to integrate weapons in fighter aircraft is central to advancing India's efforts to indigenise defence development.

## FULL CONTEXT

Deepanshu Mohan

India's Defence Acquisition Council recently cleared the procurement of 114 Rafale fighter jets from Dassault Aviation. The deal is valued at approximately Rs 3.25 lakh crore.

What followed was a recent visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to India for the A.I. Summit where he committed to 'technology transfer' which can significantly elevate the defence capabilities of New Delhi.

Though, this comes with a caveat, reports suggest that France has firmly denied the sharing of the critical source codes which will greatly hamper India's autonomy in customising the software systems and integrating sensors and radar systems.

This will limit New Delhi's attempt in indigenising the operations of the Indian Air Force squadron 'Golden Arrows'. This might also not be the only hiccup India faces in re-positioning itself in the defence hierarchy.

### Limited technology transfer

The Indian Air Force operates 29 fighter squadrons against an authorised strength of 42. The MiG-21 fighter jets retired in September 2025 after 62 years. Pakistan maintains around 25 squadrons. China fields around 65, Operation Sindoore in May 2025 exposed this vulnerability through the largest beyond-visual-range engagement in the region's history.

That reality underpins the Rafale procurement. Of the 114 aircraft, 18 will arrive in fly-away condition. The remaining 96 will be manufactured in India, with indigenous content targeted at 30% initially and 60% eventually.

Tata Advanced Systems has signed agreements with Dassault to manufacture four fuselage sections in Hyderabad, delivering up to 24 fuselages annually from the fiscal year 2028.

The question is whether assembly translates to autonomy. In defence aerospace, geo-economic leverage is measurable.

It lies in the proportion of domestic value-add, control over mission software, freedom to integrate third-party weapons, and autonomy over lifecycle upgrades all of which now seems to be in jeopardy. Assembly depth without design authority alters production geography but not bargaining power.

France has positioned 'Make in India' as central to the partnership. But technology transfer faces a critical constraint. While Dassault will co-produce the airframe and Safran M88 engines, access to source codes for electronic warfare and radar systems remains restricted. This limits India's ability to independently integrate indigenous weapons.

Software defines modern warfare. Every modification without source code access requires bilateral clearance and outlays to foreign contractors.

India's experience with Mirage 2000 upgrades illustrates this, where French vendor dependency added over \$1 billion in integration costs across 50 aircraft since 2011. Turkey's TFX KAAAN programme illustrates the risks of partial transfer. Ankara secured airframe production rights but remains engine-dependent on foreign suppliers.

Russia has reportedly offered unprecedented access to the Su-57 fighter aircraft's source code in consultations for



Indian Air Force's (IAF) Rafale aircrafts perform a flypast during the 77th Republic Day Parade, in New Delhi. pn

co-production.

The United Aircraft Corporation has signalled willingness to provide greater source code access than Western partners typically offer, potentially enabling deeper avionics customisation. This represents a strategic hedge against Western technological gatekeeping, leveraging existing infrastructure from licensed Su-30MKI production.

However, a hedge is credible only if the supplier possesses the technological and industrial depth to honour it. Russia's aerospace industry operates under sanctions-induced supply constraints, and the Su-57's engine programme remains in transition from AL-41F1 to Izdeliye 30.

Whether "full source code access" extends to mission system architecture or only limited avionics layers remains unclear. A hedge that substitutes one dependency for another does not deepen autonomy.

India is nearing a deal to export Su-30MKI fighters to Armenia valued at \$3 billion. The Armenian variant will feature the indigenous Uttam AESA radar and Astra missiles. This marks India's shift from licensee to modifier-exporter, signalling a new level of absorption maturity.

### Diversification as leverage

India's diversification across France, Russia, Israel, and the United States prevents supplier monopoly and strengthens negotiating leverage.

Operation Sindoore validated India's punitive airpower doctrine but exposed coordination complexities across Rafale, Su-30MKI, and Mirage 2000 platforms. The episode reinforced the primacy of software integration.

This has accelerated emphasis on Integrated Air Command and Control Systems and Threat Commands.

Union Budget 2026-27 allocated a record ₹7.85 lakh crore to the Ministry of Defence, an increase of over 15%. Capital outlay surged by over 20% to ₹2.19 lakh crore. Approximately 75% of the capital budget, ₹1.39 lakh crore, is earmarked for boosting procurement under the Domestic Indigenous Defence Manufacturing category.

This fiscal expansion is industrial policy by design. The mandate forces global original equipment manufacturers to establish not just assembly lines but Tier 2 and Tier 3 supplier networks within

India. Defence production reached Rs 1.51 lakh crore in the fiscal year 2024-25. The private sector's share rose to 23%.

Yet context matters. China's defence spending is estimated at approximately \$249 billion. India's \$93 billion budget necessitates an asymmetric strategy and qualitative superiority rather than numerical parity.

The resurgence of Donald Trump adds transactional volatility. Delays in engine deliveries underscore how American industrial bottlenecks directly impact Indian sovereign capabilities. Diversification of technology partners across France, Israel, and Russia is, thus, a geo-economic necessity.

### The path to strategic autonomy

The Indian Air Force achieved a TruVal Rating of 69.4 in the World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft 2026 rankings, placing it sixth globally. This surpasses China's rating of 63.8. This ranking reflects combat power and operational readiness. It does not measure industrial power or technological sovereignty.

As SIPRI notes, India is the world's fifth largest military spender at \$86.1 billion in 2024 and remains a top arms importer, pursuing import reduction policies.

The decisive metric is absorption capacity. Defence research and development received ₹29,100 crore in fiscal year 2026-27. Without doubling research intensity, co-development claims remain partial.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers face capital constraints. In advanced aerospace ecosystems such as the United States and France, domestic value capture in fighter aircraft programmes exceeds 60%.

In India, indigenous value-add in major licensed production platforms has historically ranged between 25-35%, concentrated in structural manufacturing rather than mission systems. Without deepening subsystem ownership, domestic content targets risk remaining assembly heavy.

Micro, small, and medium enterprises lack the depth of certification and access to advanced materials. Aerospace manufacturing requires long cycle capital and quality compliance infrastructure. India risks becoming a Tier 0 assembler without deep-tier ecosystem capacity.

Talent scarcity compounds infrastructure deficits. Demand for aerospace engineers is rising faster than

the supply pipeline can keep up. Advanced manufacturing requires proficiency in artificial intelligence driven design and simulation capabilities. Industrial sovereignty ultimately depends on human capital sovereignty.

The true geo-economic asset is not airframes. It is a proprietary design architecture. Software defined warfare means source codes determine autonomy.

Rafale integration dependency limits weapon customisation. Su-57 negotiations potentially bypass Western gatekeeping. Indigenous platforms like Tejas Mk2 and the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft accumulate intellectual property over decades.

India's fighter jet moment is less about air dominance and more about industrial positioning. In an era of transactional geopolitics shaped by Trump's return, strategic autonomy will not be measured by aircraft on the tarmac. It will be measured by who owns the code inside them.

The I14 Rafale programme, Su-57 consultations, Armenia exports, and Tejas development signal structural ambition. Transformation depends on four conditions. First, doubling research and development intensity to match global norms.

Second, building deep-tier aerospace supply chains with capital access and certification capability. Third, securing source code access through strategic negotiations or indigenous development. Fourth, scaling high-end technical human capital through formalised training programmes.

As far as the source code of Rafales is concerned, if New Delhi remains dissatisfied with the API model offered by France, then it might be time to re-enact the GaN model again, reinforcing 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', which could be the first statement if not the first step, in attaining defence autonomy.

The laboratory, not the runway, will determine whether India ascends the defence hierarchy or remains its most sophisticated customer in the medium to long term.

Deepanshu Mohan is professor and dean, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a visiting professor at LSE and a visiting academic fellow at University of Oxford. Saksham Raj and Nagappan Arun contributed to this column.

## THE GIST

India's Defence Acquisition Council recently cleared the procurement of 114 Rafale fighter jets from Dassault Aviation. The deal is valued at approximately Rs 3.25 lakh crore.

France has positioned 'Make in India' as central to the partnership. But technology transfer faces a critical constraint since access to source codes for electronic warfare and radar systems remains restricted.

In India, indigenous value-add in major licensed production platforms has historically ranged between 25-35%, concentrated in structural manufacturing rather than mission systems. Without deepening subsystem ownership, domestic content targets risk remaining assembly heavy.

# Pakistan's arms sales drive calls for India's attention

**A**lthough largely ignored by India, a couple of historic benchmarks were created in Rawalpindi on February 2. Pakistani Chief of Defence Forces Asim Muneer met with Eastern Libyan State President Khalifa Haftar - believed to be the first meeting between two self-styled Field Marshals. They reportedly finalised a deal to supply Pakistani arms worth \$4.6 billion - the largest such deal ever by Islamabad - to the Benghazi-based Libyan National Army (LNA) headed by the 82-year-old warlord.

Since the overthrow of leader Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, the LNA has been in a sputtering but inconclusive civil war with the Tripoli-based internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU).

## An arms push

Haftar regarded his first-visit to Pakistan as important enough to send his Prime Minister two days ahead, and bring along Saddam, his son and putative heir. The deal reportedly comprises 16 fully loaded JF-17 fighter jets (built in Pakistan with Chinese assistance, a Russian engine and some Turkish missiles) and 12 Super Mushak trainer aircraft over the next 30 months. As neither the LNA nor the GNU currently has a worthwhile air component, Haftar hopes that the Pakistani game-changing supplies will enable him to win the civil war. Some reports indicate that the deal is being funded by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has long supported Haftar.

Pakistan has also been chasing a similar opportunity in Sudan, another Arab country afflicted by civil war for the past three years. It is negotiating to sell \$1.5 billion worth of defence equipment to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), currently waging a bloody war against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). While the initial deal reportedly involves 10 Karakorum-8 light attack aircraft, more than 200 drones, and advanced air defence systems, it may eventually include JF-17 fighter jets, raising the price tag to \$4 billion. There are hints that Saudi Arabia may finance this transfer through the waiver of loans owed to it by Islamabad.

Leveraging recent developments, such as the claimed successes in the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, U.S. President Donald Trump's White House welcome for Asim Muneer, the signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia, and the UAE President's visit to Islamabad, Pakistan has turbocharged its defence exports. It claims to have already supplied JF-17s to Azerbaijan, Myanmar and Nigeria, and has offered them to Bangladesh. If Pakistan's claimed and potential deals are cumulated, they reach \$13 billion.

But then, several constraining factors could intervene to dampen the optimism. First, Pakistan's capacity to produce the JF-17 is limited



**Mahesh Sachdev**

is a former Indian Ambassador specialising in oil and West Asia

to about 25 units a year to be shared between domestic requirements and exports. Lacking an industrial base of its own, it largely assembles these fighters from foreign-sourced components, creating dependencies. Second, these transactions are often made to recipients dependent on third-party financing, a pinch point. Third, the deals often pose tricky legal and geopolitical issues - both Libya and Sudan are currently under United Nations arms embargoes, and the two megadeals are buffeted by the Saudi-UAE rivalry, making them an awkward balancing act for Rawalpindi. The possibility of Haftar supplying Pakistani arms to RSF (supported by the UAE) cannot be ruled out, which would put its weapons with both the Sudanese belligerents. Moreover, the hype about the combat-proven success against India may eventually wear out, revealing shoddy, incompetent products, and result in a reversal. Finally, Muneer's bromance with Mr. Trump may be a mixed blessing: While Mr. Trump may bless the transactional activities of his favourite Field Marshal, he may disfavour Muneer acting as a conduit for the Chinese military hardware to a region that Washington regards as its fiefdom.

In the past, Washington has often found it convenient to subcontract the Gulf security to Pakistan. The current episode seemed different, with the Gulf monarchies using the same subcontractor to fortify their respective regional proxies. In this game, the GHQ Rawalpindi is all trumps: it gets hard cash, earns brownie points from the cash-rich Gulf monarchies and expands its outreach to regional hotspots for future security aggregation. Unlike in the past, Pakistanis are only supplying hardware and training, without putting boots on the ground.

## A growing role

Pakistan's growing role as a net security provider to the Gulf and beyond should concern New Delhi. India has a much stronger economic engagement with the Gulf than Pakistan, which has, hitherto, been seeking handouts. However, Pakistan's success in forging a regional security and defence role would be a force multiplier, enabling it to reclaim parity with India in that region. It may make the country a hub of the military-industrial complex, creating a strategic challenge for India.

The Gulf's growing security dependence on Pakistan also helps Islamabad to wash away the taint of terrorism, dodgy financial practices and drug running, earning it plaudits from Beijing and Washington. All these developments may embolden GHQ Rawalpindi to revive terrorism in India, notwithstanding New Delhi's threat of retaliation, which, if it happens, may afford Pakistan a chance to conflate a fresh false narrative about a military success.

The recent Pakistani defence salesmanship

scoops should prompt us to ask how this neighbour can upstage us in our backyard? While the Pakistani economy and manufacturing are a tenth and a thirteenth of India's, respectively, thanks to extensive joint ventures with China and Türkiye, its annual defence production has reached \$7 billion, compared to India's \$18 billion. Its sales pitch has been sophisticated and multi-pronged - leveraging Islamic solidarity, military-to-military links, and aggressive pricing.

Unlike India, Pakistan's defence exports and military establishment do not work in silos. Last December, Muneer personally visited Benghazi to consummate the deal with Saddam Haftar. Similarly, the PAF chief led the negotiations with Saudi Arabia and SAF. Earlier, Islamabad supplied around \$400 million of ammunition to Ukraine. While some may regard these deals as morally and legally questionable, GHQ Rawalpindi has single-mindedly pursued them regardless. Pakistan's gains may not be India's loss in material terms, but these, nevertheless, tilt the geopolitics in its favour.

## Steps for India

While India's defence exports have grown rapidly to stand at \$2.8 billion in 2024-25, Pakistan has shown that an asymptotic surge is achievable with greater endeavour and passion. As a more responsible and self-respecting country adhering to international law, India cannot replicate Pakistani tactics. Yet, India can leverage its indigenous defence industry more effectively for exports. India should prioritise defence exports for their financial and political spin-offs, focusing particularly on its friends in the neighbourhood and the Global South. As the world's third-largest crude importer, India can leverage its buying power to persuade its oil suppliers to redress the huge trade imbalance by procuring Indian weapon systems.

Similarly, India has sizable aid programmes and credit lines with several countries, which could be utilised to lubricate such arms deals. It could create a dedicated, nimble defence export promotion organisation embedded with the stakeholders concerned, such as the public and private defence producers, relevant experts, including those from IT and Artificial Intelligence, pertinent Ministries and funding institutions.

Such an organisation should aggressively market its defence products at various international exhibitions and bilateral events and should be empowered to negotiate and conclude deals autonomously with minimum bureaucratic controls. Only then would India have a fighting chance to tilt the current highly skewed balance of defence trade. India is currently the world's second-largest arms importer and ranks low among the top 25 defence exporters. The difference between the two ranks needs to be bridged.

Rawalpindi's recent arms deal surge tilts the geopolitics in Pakistan's favour

# Amid West Asian conflict, 4 lakh tn basmati stuck at ports, in transit: Exporters

Ravi Dutta Mishra  
New Delhi, March 3

INDIAN RICE exporters on Tuesday said nearly 4 lakh metric tonnes (mt) of basmati rice is stuck at Indian ports and in transit amid widening conflict in the Gulf region, giving rise to payment-related uncertainty and concerns about losses in the low-margin product.

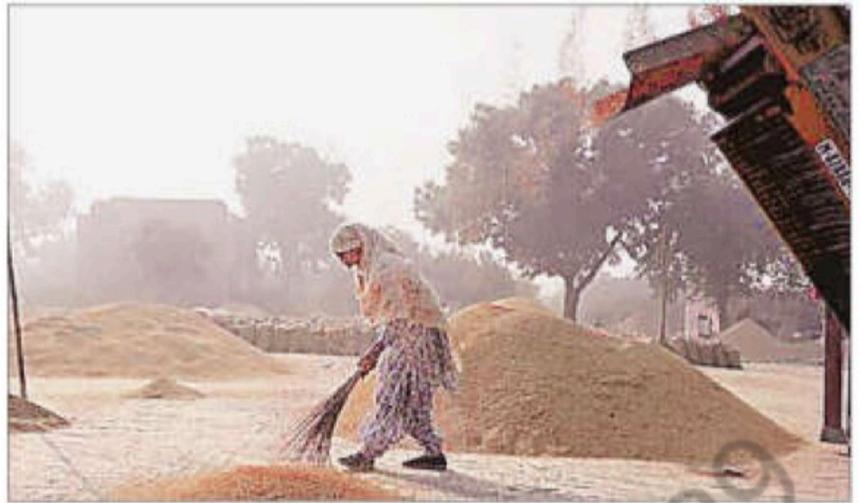
“About 2 lakh tonnes of basmati is stuck at our ports, and a similar quantity is in transit. No one can predict when the situation will be normal. We have met commerce ministry officials this week, and they are in touch with shipping lines to assess the situation,” Satish Goel, president of the All India Rice Exporters’ Association (AIREA) said.

Goel said India exports nearly 60 lakh tonnes of basmati, out of which nearly 40 lakh tonnes go to the Gulf region. “The crisis is big, but the Commerce Ministry has reassured all support. Some of our shipments are stuck at our port, some are in transit, and some are near the destination port,” he told *The Indian Express*.

Meanwhile, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said a consultation meeting was held with all stakeholder ministries on Tuesday with key logistics and trade facilitation partners to review the emerging geopolitical situation and its potential impact on India’s exports and imports.

“In this context, the ‘Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG) for Supply Chain Resilience’ has been created, comprising members from Department of Financial Services, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Shipping, Ports & Waterways, Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas and Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs, to facilitate effective coordination, monitoring and follow-up,” Goyal as per a statement.

Indian Rice Exporters’ Federation (IREF) said heightened volatility in basmati prices is expected in the coming days, as basmati wholesale prices were up 10-15% over the past month, and Iran is a key market for Indian rice. IREF said it has issued



India’s rice trade with Africa and the Middle East together accounts for roughly half of the national rice exports. REUTERS FILE

## E. EXPLAINED

### Impact rate from bunker fuel prices

Developments in Iran and the UAE can have an immediate impact on bunker (ship fuel) prices and, if oil prices rise, it may also disrupt container and bulk vessel availability, according to the Indian Rice Exporters’ Federation. This could spike container and bulk freight prices, exposing exporters to losses

an advisory to its members in view of the deteriorating situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and parts of the Gulf.

“Members are advised not to undertake new CIF (cost, insurance and freight) commitments for these destinations and, wherever feasible, to conclude sales on FOB (free on board) terms so that freight & insurance and related risks remain with the international buyer,” the IREF said in a statement.

Developments in Iran and the UAE can have an immediate impact on bunker (ship fuel) prices and, if oil prices rise, it may also disrupt container and bulk vessel availability, the federation said, adding that in such circumstances, container and bulk freight could increase sharply at short notice, exposing exporters to losses on fixed delivered-price contracts.

“The situation may also lead to a steep increase in insurance premiums. Exporters are also

advised to exercise restraint while concluding new orders and to avoid open-ended, unhedged positions. India’s rice trade with Africa and the Middle East together accounts for roughly half of the national rice exports. During April-December 2025, exports to the Middle East totalled 3.90 million metric tonnes (mmt) and to Africa 7.16 mmt, as detailed below,” IREF said.

The five leading basmati destinations are in West Asia — Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, UAE and Yemen — and are, therefore, among the most directly affected and account for about 50% of all basmati rice exports from India.

Indicating further escalation in tensions, US President Donald Trump said Tuesday that Tehran wanted to talk, but it was too late, as the US continued its military operation against Iran.

“Their air defence, Air Force, Navy, and Leadership is gone. They want to talk. I said, ‘Too Late!’” Trump said in a Truth Social post commenting on an opinion piece.

The West Asian conflict has entered the fourth day of large-scale combat operations. Following the confirmed death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Israeli and US forces have intensified “Operation Epic Fury”, striking over 1,250 targets across Iran, including ballistic missile hubs and naval assets. As Tehran vows “scorched earth” retaliation in the Strait of Hormuz, the global economy is reeling with gold prices surging past \$5,200 and critical energy corridors under threat.

## ● WAR IN WEST ASIA

# 'Strait of Hormuz is too vital to remain closed for very long'



## EXPERT EXPLAINS

AJAY SINGH

AN ENERGY AND SHIPPING INDUSTRY  
EXECUTIVE BASED IN TOKYO

THE CONFLICT in West Asia has resulted in the drying up of oil and gas flows through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital chokepoint for global energy supply. **Ajay Singh**, a Tokyo-based management advisor, speaks to **Anil Sasi** about the likely impact to India's energy supplies due to the conflict. Singh has also been a former Shell and Japan Petroleum Corporation executive with considerable experience of the Middle East.

### How are the military operations in the Persian Gulf likely to affect India's energy supplies?

The Persian Gulf is the most important source of oil and gas for India. Around 90% of India's LPG, 40% of its LNG and 35% of its crude oil came from the Persian Gulf in 2025. This year, with oil imports from Russia potentially reducing, imports from the

Gulf could be expected to be even higher. At the moment, the Iranian military has announced that ships should stay clear of the Strait of Hormuz. Consequently, shipping through the strait has more or less stopped.

That said, India and other importing countries would have stockpiles of these commodities to last several weeks, precisely to cater for such exigencies. As long as the blockade is not prolonged, there should not be any immediate problem for consumers.

Given all of these factors, there will be an impact in terms of pricing even if there is no physical scarcity.

### What are the odds of the blockade being short lived?

We are probably still in the early days of the conflict and the range of scenarios that could come to pass is still too wide for any meaningful prediction to be possible. From an energy security perspective, what will be most important is the restoration of confidence in the safety of navigation in the Persian Gulf, especially in the Strait of Hormuz.

Ideally, that could come via some kind of unambiguous signal such as a ceasefire announced by all warring parties.

More than anything else, at this time the possibility of that happening hinges on what political developments will next occur in Iran regarding its future leadership. If, unfortunately, the fighting continues for a long time, or there is internal strife within Iran,

### Bridging the gulf

● Around 90% of India's LPG, 40% of its LNG and 35% of its crude came from the Persian Gulf in 2025.

● This year, with oil imports from Russia potentially reducing, imports from the Gulf could be expected to be even higher.

● India and other importing countries would have stockpiles of these commodities to last several weeks.

or some sort of guerilla warfare erupts then we are looking at a worse scenario.

All of this notwithstanding, the Strait of Hormuz is simply too vital an artery for the global economy — close to a quarter of the world's supply of oil and gas passes through it — for its closure to be tolerated for too long. Restoring marine traffic will be among the topmost priorities for most parties concerned at this time.

### Could a situation like the "Tanker War" of the 1980s develop, where over 400 ships were attacked for years?

The Tanker War of 1984-88 had quite a different context in many ways but it does offer an important pointer. It was a subset of the war between Iran and Iraq, countries more or less on a par with each other in terms of military capability, both employing roughly similar means of disruption. I am not qualified to go into the military aspects, but there seems to be a wide disparity in capabilities as well as staying power between the current adversaries.

And although I suppose technological developments offer more varied and stealthy means of offence, they also enable more effective surveillance and defence than were available four decades ago.

The main conclusion I draw from the Tanker War is that, after an initial reduction in flow of oil and gas through the strait, there was surprisingly little disruption in the flow

of oil and gas. There was a tragic loss of life among the tanker crews and other personnel, but the militaries of various countries ensured that the strait was kept open.

### Are there any alternatives?

Unfortunately, not immediately. In the case of crude oil, the main exporter from the Gulf — Saudi Arabia — does have the means to physically divert a substantial quantity of oil from its main export point of Ras Tanura on the Persian Gulf to Yanbu on the Red Sea, via an on-land pipeline.

However, Saudi exports from Yanbu to Asia are unlikely. They almost stopped during 2024-25 due to the Houthi threat. In case of LPG and LNG even such diversion possibilities are non-existent due to the cryogenic nature of these commodities and the consequent lack of alternative pipeline routes.

### Iran has attacked Gulf countries in response to the US and Israeli strikes. Do you see these affecting oil and gas supply in the long run?

So far, damage to production facilities in other Gulf countries seems negligible. To cause a major economic disruption, Iran will have to destroy a great deal of capacity. Ample extra capacity of 3-4 million barrels per day exists in the world, so I do not see this as a major risk at present. Similarly, in case of LNG, new supply projects will start in the near future in the US and elsewhere.

# Battered Iran attacks oil infra targets in West Asia

Tehran strikes U.S. embassies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait as war enters fourth day; energy facilities in the region come under attack; Israel bombards Iran, goes deeper into Lebanon, targets Hezbollah

Agence France-Presse

DUBAI

Iran stepped up its attacks on economic targets and U.S. missions across West Asia on Tuesday as U.S. President Donald Trump said the U.S.-Israel strikes have inflicted wide damages on the Islamic Republic while warning it was “too late” for it to seek talks to escape the war.

As drones and missiles crashed into oil facilities and U.S. embassies in the region, Washington's ally Israel bombarded targets in Iran and pushed troops deeper into Lebanon to battle the Tehran-backed militia Hezbollah.

Loud explosions were heard in Iraq's Erbil and across cities of Doha, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi in the



**Grey horizon:** A tall plume of black smoke ascends following an explosion in the UAE's Fujairah industrial zone on Tuesday. AFP

UAE on Tuesday night, which Dubai authorities said were caused by “interception operations” by air defence forces.

Tuesday's attacks came after Iran widened its targets in the war in its fourth day to include infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar – where

the state-run energy firm suspended LNG production, sending European energy prices skyrocketing.

An attack from two drones on the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh caused a “limited fire”, according to Saudi Arabia's Defence Ministry, and the embassy

## 'India has 25 days of crude oil stock'

NEW DELHI

India has 'sufficient stocks' of crude oil and energy products, including petrol and diesel for the next 25 days each, sources in the government said on Tuesday. The crude reserve does not include that from the emergency-earmarked Special Petroleum Reserve, the source said. » **PAGE 13**

urged Americans to avoid the compound. It followed an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait, that announced it had been closed until further notice.

**CONTINUED ON**

» **PAGE 10**

**MORE REPORTS ON**

» **PAGES 7, 11, & 14**

# Fuelling conflict

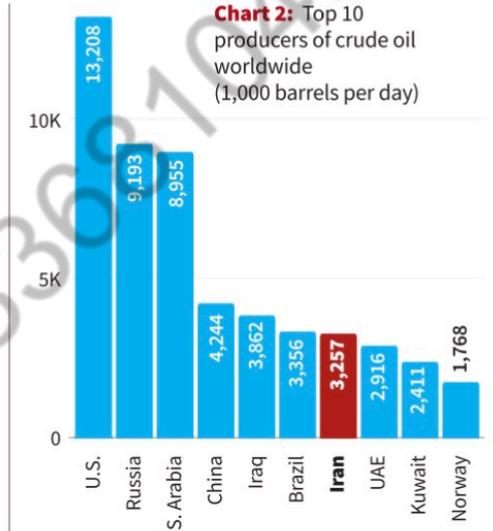
The data for the charts were sourced from the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and the U.S. Energy Information Administration



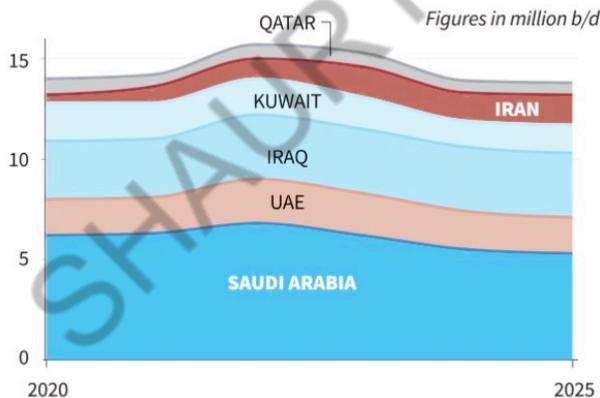
**Chart 1:** Daily Brent crude oil prices in the last year. Figures in \$ per barrel. Oil prices soared to \$78.31 on Monday, almost 12% higher than a week ago



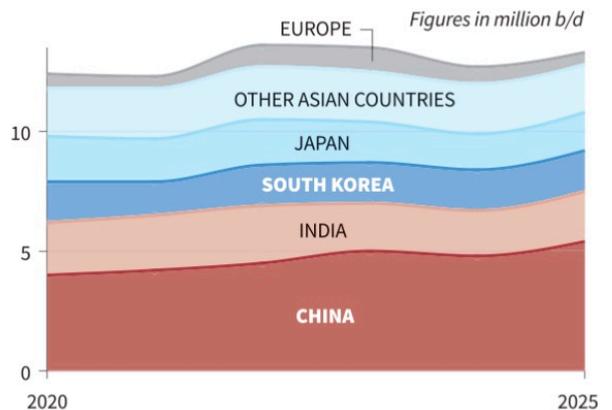
**Chart 2:** Top 10 producers of crude oil worldwide (1,000 barrels per day)



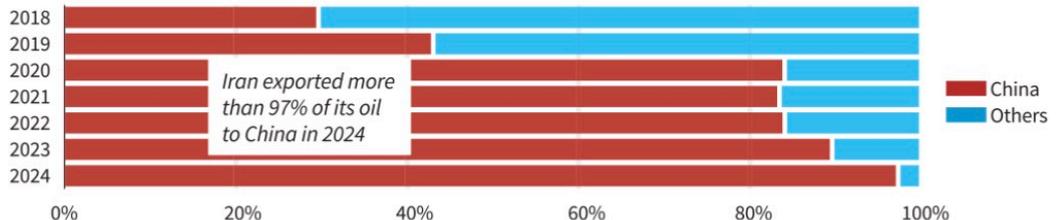
**Chart 3:** Volume of crude oil and petroleum transported through the Strait of Hormuz by select countries of origin



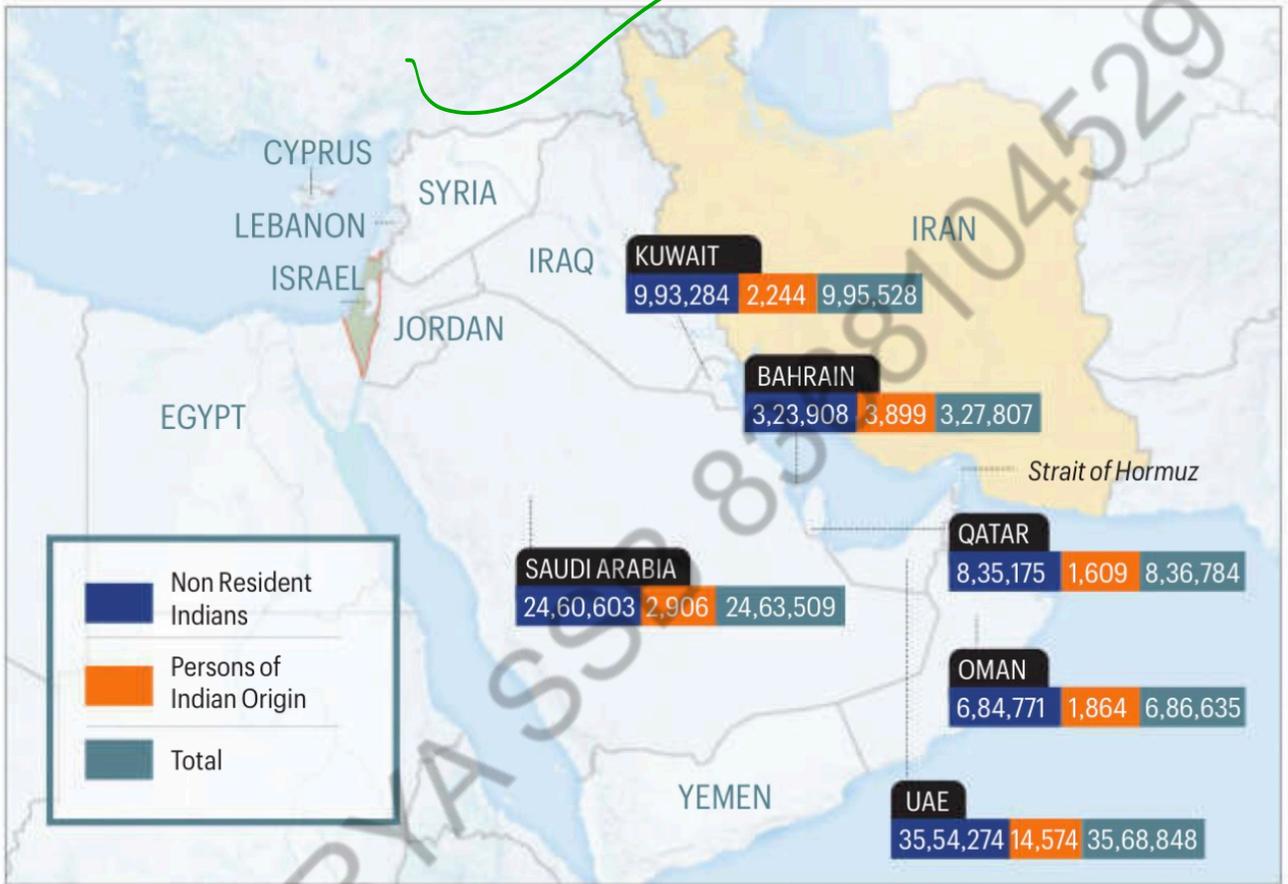
**Chart 4:** Volume of crude oil transported through the Strait of Hormuz by destination



**Chart 5:** The share of crude oil and condensates exported from Iran to China and other countries



# INDIANS BY COUNTRY



SOURCE: POPULATION OF OVERSEAS INDIANS, MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

## MONEY FLOW

**\$118.7 billion**

Remittances from Gulf to India in 2023-24, as per RBI March 2025

Bulletin. This is a nearly a 4-time rise from \$30 billion in 2012

**38%**

The total remittances to India in FY24 from Gulf Cooperation Council countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain

**19.2%**

The share of the UAE alone in India's remittances in FY24, making it the second-largest contributor for India

# Putin and Orban discuss Hungarian POWs captured fighting for Ukraine

**Agence France-Presse**  
MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Tuesday discussed the issue of Hungarians captured while fighting for Kyiv, the Kremlin said.

Ukraine is home to a large Hungarian minority, mostly living in the western Zakarpattia region.

Mr. Orban is one of the few European leaders to maintain close ties with Russia amid the war in Ukraine, and has publicly criticised Kyiv for drafting ethnic Hungarians into its army.

“Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban,” the Kremlin said in a statement.

“Issues concerning Hungarian citizens mobilised



Vladimir Putin, right, with Viktor Orban during their meeting at the Senate Palace of the Kremlin in Moscow in November 2025. AP

into the Ukrainian armed forces and taken prisoner by Russia were also touched on,” it added.

The Russian Defence Ministry published a video last week purporting to show a dual Hungarian-Ukrainian citizen captured as prisoner of war, alleging he had been forced to enlist in the Ukrainian army.

Last July, Hungary sum-

**Orban is one of the few European leaders to maintain close ties with Russia**

moned Ukraine’s envoy over allegations an ethnic Hungarian man died weeks after military recruiters allegedly assaulted him in Ukraine.

Kyiv says the man was legally mobilised and denied he was beaten.

Mr. Orban and Mr. Putin’s call also comes amid a stand-off between Budapest and Kyiv over supplies of Russian oil to Hungary through Ukraine.

Ukraine says the Soviet-era Druzhba pipeline that delivered large amounts of Russian oil to Hungary and Slovakia was damaged in Russian air strikes on January 27.

Slovakia and Hungary, Moscow’s closest partners in the European Union, have accused Kyiv of deliberately stalling the pipeline’s reopening to put pressure on them. Kyiv rejects this allegation.

The Kremlin said Mr. Orban and Mr. Putin also discussed the war in the West Asia, in particular its implications for the global energy market.

# U.S.-U.K. relation 'not like it used to be': Trump over Britain's support

Starmer refused initial U.S. access to U.K. bases for strikes, allowing it later for 'agreed defensive purposes'; Britain does not 'believe in regime change from the skies', he adds; Trump says U.S. has 'strong relationships with other European countries'

**Sriram Lakshman**

LONDON

U.S. President Donald Trump criticised U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer for the U.K.'s refusal to support the initial United States-Israel offensive strikes on Iran, saying the U.S.-U.K. relationship was "not like it used to be".

Mr. Starmer had initially refused U.S. access to U.K. bases, later allowing it only for "agreed defensive purposes".

The relationship was the "most solid relationship of all", Mr. Trump told *The Sun* newspaper, adding, "And now we have very



**Strained ties:** Donald Trump says Keir Starmer 'has not been helpful', adding he 'never thought' he 'would see that from U.K.' AP

strong relationships with other countries in Europe". The relationship between London and Washington is often referred to as a "special rela-

tionship" by both governments. "He [Mr. Starmer] has not been helpful...I never thought I'd see that from the U.K. We love the U.K.," Mr. Trump said, ac-

cording to reports.

Addressing the House of Commons on Monday evening, Mr. Starmer had said there was a "deliberate" decision not to get involved in the initial U.S.-Israel strike on Iran, which began on Saturday morning, and that the U.K. preferred to pursue a negotiated settlement.

"President Trump has expressed his disagreement with our decision not to get involved in the initial strikes," the Prime Minister said, adding that he was, however, acting in Britain's interest.

"We all remember the mistakes of Iraq, and we have learned those les-

sons," Mr. Starmer said. The Prime Minister repeatedly said that his government had sought legal advice before undertaking operations in the region and that it did not "believe in regime change from the skies".

The Conservative Party backed the United States' actions, party leader Kemi Badenoch said, as she criticised Mr. Starmer for taking time to permit allies to use U.K. bases. She stopped short of suggesting that Britain should have joined the U.S.-Israel strikes.

The far right Reform UK also criticised Mr. Starmer for not joining the strikes.

## BRUSSELS

### NATO 'welcomes' talks with France as Macron pledges nuclear buildup



AFP

▲ NATO on Tuesday said it welcomed “the opportunity to expand consultation on nuclear issues” with Paris after President Emmanuel Macron vowed to bolster France’s nuclear arsenal. Mr. Macron said on Monday France would expand its atomic arsenal and could deploy nuclear-armed aircraft to allied countries. AFP

## ISLAMABAD

### Zionists orchestrated Iran war to expand Israel’s influence, says Asif



REUTERS

▲ Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Asif claimed that the Zionists orchestrated the Iran war to expand Israel’s influence on the border of Pakistan. “From the establishment of Israel on Palestinian land until today, every catastrophe that has befallen the Islamic world will show the hand of Zionist ideology,” Mr. Asif wrote on X. PTI