

India, Canada ink uranium deal as Carney meets Modi

Suhasini Haidar

NEW DELHI

India and Canada on Monday agreed to a \$1.9 billion, 10-year uranium supply deal for Indian nuclear power reactors, and agreed to conclude the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) this year, as Prime

Minister Narendra Modi held talks with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in New Delhi in an effort to establish “strategic trust” and reset ties ruptured over the past few years.

However, issues over the killing of Canadian-Khalistani activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar persisted after new reports that Canadian investigative agencies believe two officials in the Indian Consulate in Vancouver were linked to the case, a charge that India rejected.

After the talks between the Prime Ministers, India



Fruitful talks: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Canadian counterpart Mark Carney in New Delhi on Monday. ANI

and Canada announced a number of agreements including a Strategic Energy Partnership in the fields of renewable energy, LPG and uranium supplies, and cooperation in critical and emerging technologies, as well as MoUs on education and culture.

They also issued the “Terms of Reference” for the CEPA or free trade negotiations, aiming to double bilateral trade by 2030.

Canada also decided to join the India-led multilateral International Solar Al-

liance (ISA) and Global Bio-fuel Alliance as a member.

The two leaders discussed the escalation of the conflict in West Asia, although they didn’t put out any joint understanding on the issue. Mr. Modi described the situation as one of “deep concern” and called for “diplomacy and dialogue” to resolve it. India had always called for peace and stability to be maintained, he said.

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India, Canada ink deal on uranium

On Friday, Mr. Carney, who spent the weekend in Mumbai, issued a statement supporting the U.S.'s strikes on Iran.

Mr. Carney is the first Canadian Prime Minister to make a bilateral visit to India since his predecessor Justin Trudeau visited India in 2018, and then in 2023 to attend the G-20 summit. Both visits were fraught with tensions, especially over New Delhi's concerns that the Canadian government is harbouring violent anti-India groups, including Khalistani leaders, and Ottawa's accusations that Indian government officials are involved in "transnational repression" of these groups.

In a joint statement issued on Monday, India and Canada agreed to strengthen security cooperation in a number of areas, including addressing "violent extremism, terrorism, organised crime".

On Monday, *The Globe and Mail*, a Canadian newspaper, quoted official sources saying that the Canadian Security Intelligence Services had "evidence" pointing to the involvement of two Indian officials at the Indian consulate in Vancouver in the Nijjar killing case, set to go to trial this year.

When asked about the reports, Ministry of External Affairs Secretary P. Kumaran said India continues to reject all such charges.

West Asia war escalates, spikes oil, strands flyers

Iran targets U.S. assets, Israel, Arab states; 3 jets fell in Kuwaiti 'friendly fire', says U.S., Tehran claims shooting down one; Qatar takes down 2 Iranian bombers; U.S. 'will no longer be safe' warns Iran

Associated Press

DUBAI

Iran and allied armed groups fired missiles at Israel, Arab states, and U.S. military targets around the region on Monday, while Israel and the U.S. pounded the West Asian country as the war expanded to several fronts and death toll grew on all sides.

Three American warplanes were downed in Kuwait, which the Pentagon said were hit by Kuwaiti "friendly fire", while Iran claimed it shot down a U.S. jet.

The conflict, in its third day, was already having far-reaching consequences, with previously safe havens in the Gulf seeing incoming fire, hundreds of thousands of airline pas-



Warning plume: Smoke rises from a warehouse in Sharjah City in the UAE following Iranian strikes. AP

sengers stranded around the globe, and oil prices shooting up by more than 8% to hover around the \$80 a barrel mark as of mid-day on Monday.

The Iranian Red Crescent Society said that the U.S.-Israeli strikes have killed at least 555 people. In Israel, where several locations were hit by Iranian

missiles, 11 people were killed. The Iranian-backed Hezbollah militant group also targeted Israel, which responded with strikes on Lebanon, killing more than two dozen people. Four U.S. troops have also been killed.

The chaos of the conflict became apparent when the U.S. said Kuwait had

"mistakenly shot down" three American F-15E Strike Eagles while Iranian attacks were under way. Iranian Armed Forces said they have shot down an advanced U.S. F-15 fighter jet near the border with Kuwait. Qatar's Air Force downed two Iranian bombers, its Defence Ministry said.

"We will not negotiate with the United States", Iran's top security official, Ali Larijani, said on Monday after several air strikes hit Tehran, even as Iran's Revolutionary Guards warned the U.S. that it will "no longer be safe".

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WAR FOR UNIPOLAR REGION

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West Asia war escalates, spikes oil, strands flyers

The intensity of the attacks, the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the lack of any apparent exit plan indicated the conflict would not end anytime soon even as U.S. allies pledged to help stop Iranian missiles and drones. Iran media reported that the wife of the slain Supreme Leader died on Monday after succumbing to wounds sustained during the attack. Mansoureh Khojasteh Bagherzadeh, 79, had been in a coma since strikes on Saturday killed Khamenei, the *Tasnim* news agency said.

The “big wave” is yet to come in the war with Iran, U.S. President Donald Trump told *CNN* on Monday. Iran has long threatened, if attacked, to drag the region into total war, targeting Israel, the Gulf Arab states, and the flow of crude oil crucial for global energy markets. All of these came under attack on Monday, even as Israel and the U.S. bombed Iranian missile sites and targeted its Navy, claiming to have destroyed its headquarters and multiple warships. Iran also accused Israel and the U.S. on Monday of having attacked its nuclear facility at Natanz, one of the main targets of the previous conflict between them last June.

Kuwait's Health Ministry said a strike killed one person. Bahrain's Interior Ministry said a post-strike fire killed an Asian worker. The UAE had reported deaths of three foreign nationals .

(With Inputs from AFP)

Khamenei killing: protests rock J&K for a second day

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

Security forces on Monday barricaded Srinagar's Lal Chowk, where hundreds held anti-U.S. and -Israel demonstrations on Sunday over the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Security was tightened after J&K Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha held a meeting with security officials on Sunday.

To prevent rallies, forces put tin sheets and laid concertina wires on roads. They parked vehicles at many places and other restrictions were imposed in parts of the Kashmir valley.

In spite of all this, protesters hit the streets in many areas and security forces lobbed teargas shells



Amid tight restrictions on protests across Kashmir, security personnel stand guard in Srinagar on Monday. IMRAN NISSAR

against them, locals said. The J&K Police has not issued any statement on restrictions or on use of force against protesters.

All educational institutes remained shut in Kashmir. Varsityes cancelled exams. Residents alleged Internet was slow in many areas. Most markets and private offices re-

mained closed following the shutdown call issued by the Muttahida Majlis-e-Ulama, an amalgam of Islamic bodies headed by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq.

Several parties, including the ruling National Conference, condemned the restrictions. "...grief is not unrest..." NC leader Tanvir Sadiq said.

Indian warships on standby for humanitarian operations

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

India is closely monitoring the evolving security situation in parts of West Asia following the recent escalation of tensions, with Indian Navy ships deployed in the region under Operation Sankalp placed on standby for possible humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.

A senior defence official on Monday confirmed that developments are being tracked closely and updates are being shared with the concerned departments for further direction.

"Under Operation Sankalp, two Indian Navy ships [a frigate and a des-



Ready to assist: *INS Surat*, as part of a regional maritime security engagement, is currently in Bahrain. @INDIANNAVY X

trooper] are already deployed in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Oman. They have been deployed for anti-piracy operations and the safety of merchant vessels since 2019. If required, these ships could be utilised for HADR operations. The Navy has prior experience in such missions," the official said.

The deployment under Operation Sankalp was initiated to safeguard Indian-flagged vessels and ensure maritime security in the region amid rising threats to commercial shipping.

The official also stated that *INS Surat* is currently in Bahrain as part of a regional maritime security engagement.

Putin offers help to restore peace; Kremlin calls US-Israeli strikes on Iran 'unprovoked'

Reuters

Moscow, March 2

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin spoke by phone to leaders of three Arab Gulf states on Monday, offering to use Moscow's ties to Iran to try to help restore calm to the Middle East following US and Israeli strikes, which he condemned.

In a series of calls with the leaders of the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar, Putin criticised the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, which the Kremlin described as "unprovoked aggression".

Earlier, the Kremlin said that Moscow remained in constant contact with the Iranian leadership.

Moscow sees its strategic partnership with Iran as central to maintaining its remaining clout in the Middle East, where its influence took a hit when their mutual ally Syrian President Bashar al-Assad



A plume of smoke rises after a strike in Tehran on Tuesday. AP

was toppled 15 months ago.

Although Russia stands to benefit from higher oil prices and may welcome Washington's focus shifting away from Ukraine, the US-Israeli air war also runs counter to Moscow's desire for a multilateral world order in which the US is not dominant.

Arab states in the Gulf, all

close US allies, have come under Iranian drone and missile attack since the United States and Israel launched their air strikes on Saturday.

According to the Kremlin readout of Putin's call with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Russian leader offered to act as a conduit by conveying the

UAE's complaints about being attacked to Tehran.

During the call, "both sides emphasised the need for an immediate ceasefire and a return to the political and diplomatic process," the Kremlin added.

In Putin's call with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Kremlin said both leaders had spoken of their concern about the conflict widening and the risk of third countries becoming involved. And Putin told Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa that Russia was ready to do all it could to stabilise the situation in the region.

Putin on Sunday condemned the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a "cynical" murder. The Russian Foreign Ministry has accused the U.S. and Israel of plunging the Middle East "into an abyss of uncontrolled escalation".

China urges Gulf states to join hands against external interference; Wang dials Araghchi

Reuters

Beijing, March 2

CHINA'S FOREIGN minister urged Gulf countries to unite to oppose external interference on Monday, after U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran triggered a widening conflict in the region.

China hoped that the Gulf states would strengthen unity and develop neighbourly friendship to "keep their future

and destiny in their own hands", Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in a phone call with his Omani counterpart, according to a statement released by the ministry. In a phone call with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on the same day, Wang said he believed that Iran could maintain national and social stability as well as attach importance to the legitimate

concerns of its neighbours, a separate statement showed. Attacks by the United States and Israel from Saturday killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and prompted retaliatory Iranian strikes on Israel and other Gulf countries hosting US military bases.

Wang voiced support for Gulf countries in safeguarding their sovereignty and national security, as well as for Iran in

safeguarding its own legitimate rights and interests. In a phone call with France's foreign minister on Monday, Wang called on Paris to work with China to promote the easing of tensions, according to another ministry statement. Wang on Sunday called the US and Israeli attacks and the killing of Khamenei "unacceptable", and called for an immediate ceasefire and the resumption of talks.

Tea exports to West Asia take a hit as conflict shows signs of escalation

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

With shipping corridors to West Asian countries affected due to the war, tea shipments are either stranded with exporters, at Indian ports, or, at destination ports, say exporters.

The escalating conflict poses significant risks for India's tea export sector, given that about 45-50% of India's total tea exports are shipped to countries in the West Asian region, said Ajoy Thipaiah, president, the United Planters Association of South India.

In 2024, India recorded strong export volumes to



Losing flavour: Tea exports to the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been on a rise in recent years. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Iraq (52.59 million kg), UAE (52.71 million kg), Iran (11.25 million kg) and Saudi Arabia (7.94 million kg). The closure of Strait of Hormuz will have a direct bearing on the exports to

these regions

Expensive freight

Increased freight charges, rising insurance premiums and extended transit times will significantly raise trans-

saction costs. Trade route instability – particularly through key maritime corridors – may further delay shipments and strain supply chains, he said.

While trade tensions eased with the reduction of U.S. tariffs, they now face a new challenge of a full-blown war in West Asia. Tea exports to the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been on a rise in recent years as they transit to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Iraq and other countries from there. The extent of business losses is hard to assess now, said Dipak Shah of South India Tea Exporters Association.

Modi speaks to Saudi Crown Prince, Jordan, Bahrain Kings

He thanks them for looking after well-being of the Indian community in these countries; calls for earliest restoration of regional peace and stability; condemns attack on Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Against the backdrop of the widening conflict in West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday spoke to the King of Bahrain, Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman.

The Prime Minister also spoke to King Abdullah II of Jordan and conveyed deep concern at the evolving situation in the region.

“India condemns the recent attacks on Saudi Arabia in violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We agreed that earliest restoration of regional peace and stability is of utmost importance,” Mr. Modi said after his conversation with the Crown Prince.

“I thanked him for looking after the well-being of the Indian community in these difficult times,” Mr. Modi said.

In another post, the Prime Minister said he had a “productive telephone conversation with the King



Smoke billows from Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery after a reported Iranian drone strike. REUTERS

of Bahrain”. Mr. Modi thanked him for the “steadfast support extended to the Indian community in Bahrain”.

“India condemns the attacks on Bahrain and stands in solidarity with its people in this difficult hour,” Mr. Modi said.

About his telephonic conversation with the King of Jordan, Mr. Modi said in a post on X: “We reaffirm our support for peace, security and the well-being of the people of Jordan. I thanked him for taking care of the Indian community in Jordan in this difficult hour.”

The conversations came

even as the first Indian casualty of the U.S.-Israel versus Iran conflict was confirmed by the Indian Embassy in Oman. The embassy announced that an Indian sailor aboard oil tanker *MKD Vyom* had died.

“The Embassy is in close coordination with the local authorities in Oman to facilitate the safe and early repatriation of our nationals on board the vessel. We remain committed to extending all possible assistance in this matter,” said the Indian Embassy.

Omani officials had announced on Monday afternoon that *MKD Vyom* had

been hit by an explosive-laden boat.

CCS meeting

Late on Sunday evening, Mr. Modi chaired a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the country's highest decision-making body on security and strategic affairs.

The meeting reviewed the conflict in West Asia and its implications for India.

The meeting was attended by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Home Minister Amit Shah, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

Trump lists war objectives, says Iran operation to last four to five weeks

U.S. President refuses to rule out sending ground troops to Tehran, a sentiment also echoed by Defense Secretary Hegseth; Pentagon chief says the war is not a democracy-building exercise; Trump says 'substantially ahead' of given time projections

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday said he is not ruling out sending U.S. troops into Iran, while threatening a new, "big wave" of attacks.

While so far the assault has focused entirely on aerial attacks by missiles and bombs, Mr. Trump refused to rule out sending ground troops.

"I do not have the yips with respect to boots on the ground," Mr. Trump said, using a golf term for anxiety. "Every President says, 'There will be no boots on the ground.' I don't say it."



A plume of smoke rises after a strike in Tehran on Monday. AP

"I say 'probably don't need them,' (or) 'if they were necessary,'" he told the *New York Post*.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also signalled on Monday that deploying troops inside Iran had not been ruled out. Asked if

there were already boots on the ground, Mr. Hegseth told a news conference: "No, but we're not going to go into the exercise of what we will or will not do."

Mr. Trump also, for the first time, clearly laid out

what he said were four objectives regarding Iran.

They include destroying the West Asian country's missile capabilities and "annihilating the navy." "We've knocked out already 10 ships. They're at the bottom of the sea," he said.

The U.S. President said that the other goals were stopping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and "ensuring the Iranian regime can't continue to arm, fund and direct terrorist armies outside of their borders."

Mr. Trump said that the United States could sustain the assault beyond the month-long time frame he has publicly spoken about.

"We're already substan-

tially ahead of our time projections," Mr. Trump said. "From the beginning we projected four to five weeks, but we have capability to go far longer than that. We'll do it."

Meanwhile, Mr. Hegseth sought to differentiate the Iran operation from past long-running U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying the war is not an effort to build democracy in Iran.

"No stupid rules of engagement, no nation building quagmire, no democracy-building exercise. No politically correct wars. We fight to win and we don't waste time or lives," the Pentagon chief said. "This is not Iraq. This is not endless," Mr. Hegseth said.

HAD A SUBSTANTIAL FOLLOWING IN THE SUBCONTINENT SINCE 1979

Najaf to Qom: Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran, and Shia politics in India

Asad Rehman

New Delhi, March 2

AS NEWS of Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei's killing emerged on Sunday, protests broke out in cities and towns across the country with a Shia Muslim presence — from Kashmir Valley and Ladakh to Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka.

For Shias, including those in India, Khamenei was not just a political leader who was the "Supreme Leader" of Iran, but also a religious leader. Shia clerics said Khamenei's importance for the community could be compared to what the Christians have for the Pope. While a sizable number of South Asian Shia Muslims follow Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, the dean of the Hawza in Najaf, Iraq — the oldest Shia seminary in the world — Khamenei also had a substantial following in the Indian subcontinent.

When the centre of Shia Islam was Najaf, political interventions from the Shia leadership were negligible.

However, all that changed with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ascendance to power. Khomeini popularised this concept of "Vilayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist)", the Shia political doctrine that holds that top religious scholars should rule in the absence of the 12th Imam, whom the Twelver Shias believe will reappear at the end of time. Popularised by Khomeini, the concept forms the basis of Iran's Constitution, placing supreme political and military power in the hands of a cleric.

"Since 1979, the project that the Iranian government embarked on through its embassies was almost missionary and very proactive... Ruhollah Khomeini (the 'Supreme Leader' of Iran till 1989) and his successor Khamenei have been looked at as an integral part of the Shia faith. It has almost always been religious and not political. But there also continue to be Shias in India who prioritise Najaf, not Qom (one



A poster of Ayatollah Khamenei near the Chhota Imambara in UP's Lucknow. EXPRESS

of Iran's theological centres)," said West Asia expert Bashir Ali Abbas, who is Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research.

Iran's project to make itself more significant among Shia Muslims yielded dividends and now many among Indian Shias look at Iran as an authority on religion. Iran taking on the combination of Israel and the US over Palestine has also led to it being viewed as a "lone crusader" against western imperial powers, increasing its influence on Muslims across the world sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Shia Muslims, specifically in parts of Kashmir, Kargil, and Lucknow, hold Khamenei in great reverence. The Rizvi Syeds of Lucknow and the Awadh region in UP trace their lineage to Iran. During the 18th Century, the nawabs of Awadh, including Asaf-ud-Daula, were Shia Muslims. Even today, Lucknow has a sizable Shia population and most of them are comparatively wealthier than Sunni Muslims, giving them more

political power.

Shias have traditionally not been very vocal on issues seen as important to the Muslim majority. During the decades-long Ram Janmabhoomi dispute in Ayodhya, the UP Shia Central Waqf Board claimed ownership of the Babri Masjid, arguing it was a Shia Waqf built by Shia noble Mir Baqi during Babur's reign. The Board also opposed the Sunni Waqf Board's claim over the mosque.

It favoured a peaceful, mediated settlement, and even proposed building a mosque at a different location to allow the Ram temple to come up at the site. The Shia-Sunni divide is a global phenomenon and is visible in India too, with several incidents of clashes between the communities having been recorded. In 2005, the All India Shia Personal Law Board (AISPLB) was created as Shias felt the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, dominated by Sunnis, ignored their concerns.

AISPLB general secretary Maulana Yasooob Abbas told *The Indian Express*, "Ayatollah

Ali Khamenei has been martyred. We held protests in Lucknow last night. Through the protests, we are sending a message to countries such as Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and others. These are the countries that have harmed Iran and helped America and Israel in the killing of Khamenei. We will continue to support the Iranian people and the state."

The Shia community, which constitutes around 15% of the Muslim population in the country, has traditionally had good ties with the establishment, especially the BJP. The community, which is concentrated in Lucknow and some other cities such as Hyderabad, Budgam (Kashmir), and Kargil in Ladakh, enjoyed good relations with former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was BJP MP from Lucknow, and current Lucknow parliamentarian Rajnath Singh.

BJP leaders in Lucknow said while Adityanath had almost ended the distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the state, a section of the BJP leadership still favours having "cordial" relations with the Shia community.

In Srinagar, protesters clash with cops

Bashaarat Masood & Arun Sharma

Srinagar, Jammu, March 2

PEOPLE PROTESTING the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in strikes by the US and Israel clashed with police in Srinagar on Monday. The J&K Police had imposed curbs on civilian movement amid concerns over protests that started on Sunday.

Several people were injured as protesters engaged in stone-throwing, and police fired tear-gas shells and at some places, resorted to lathi-charge. A large contingent of the J&K Police and paramilitary forces was deployed in Srinagar and other parts of the Valley, and curbs on civilian movement were imposed. While Lal Chowk was sealed with tin sheets and spools of concertina wires, the roads leading to the city were blocked.

However, a large number of men and women from the Bemina neighbourhood of the city on Monday morning tried to move towards Lal Chowk. Police and paramilitary forces tried to stop the procession near Bata-maloo, resulting in clashes. As the protesters threw stones at the paramilitary forces, police fired teargas shells to disperse them.

People from different parts of north Kashmir tried to move towards Lal Chowk, holding placards with images of Khamenei and chanting anti-Israel and anti-US slogans. They were stopped near the Shalteng crossing, where the protesters clashed with police, who resorted to lathi-charge and teargas to disperse the protesters.

A protester said, "A large number of people came from different areas of Pattan and Mirgund, and we joined them at Lawaypora. It was a peaceful protest." He was hit by pellets in the arm and face. "As we reached near the (Shalteng) crossing, police indiscriminately fired tear smoke shells and pellets."

Senior police officers were personally monitoring the situation at Shalteng. This is for the first time since the abrogation of J&K's special status in 2019 that the Valley has witnessed a stone-throwing protest and police fired teargas shells. Police decided Sunday evening to impose restrictions in the Valley and not allow any more protests.

Starmer allows U.S. to utilise U.K. bases for strikes on Iran

Agence France-Presse

LONDON/AKROTIRI

Britain evacuated one of its sovereign bases in Cyprus on Monday while the Cypriot government evacuated its second biggest airport, after it said two drones heading for Akrotiri had been “dealt with”.

The incident comes a day after British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Sunday he had agreed to let the United States use U.K. bases to fire “defensive” strikes aimed at destroying Iranian missiles and their launchers.

But in a video address posted to social media, he added: “We were not involved in the initial strikes on Iran and we will not join offensive action now.”

On Monday, an Iranian Shahed drone crashed into the Akrotiri base, causing



Keir Starmer

minor damage, according to Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides.

Shortly after, Cypriot government spokesman Konstantinos Letymbiotis posted on X that “Two unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) heading toward the British Bases in Akrotiri were dealt with in a timely manner”.

The Interior Ministry then announced the evacuation of the area around

Akrotiri as well as Paphos airport, one of two international airports in government-controlled Cyprus which hosts a military base used by the United States.

In his statement on Sunday, Mr. Starmer added “the only way to stop the threat” from Iran was “to destroy the missiles at source.

“The United States has requested permission to use British bases for that specific and limited defensive purpose,” he added, without specifying locations.

France, Germany ready
Earlier on Sunday, France, Germany and the U.K. said in a joint statement they were ready to defend their interests and those of its allies in the Gulf if necessary by taking “defensive action” against Iran.

Russian oil imports at 44-month low in January as share of Gulf countries rises

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

NEW DELHI

India continued its strategy of reducing Russian oil imports and sourcing more from the Gulf countries and the U.S. in January 2026 as well, the latest official data shows, with Russia's share in India's oil imports falling to less than 20% for the first time since May 2022.

An analysis of the latest preliminary data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry shows that India imported \$1.98 billion worth of crude oil from Russia in January 2026, the month before India and the U.S. issued a joint statement about an interim trade agreement between the two countries. This was also the lowest in 44 months. With this, Russia's share in Indian oil imports fell to 19.3% in January 2026, the lowest since December 2022.

For context, Russia's share was 27.5% two months earlier, and 33% in May 2025.

While the India has maintained that it decides on its energy sourcing based on independent strategic and energy security considerations, the U.S. has repeatedly linked the lowering of tariffs on Indian imports and the potential trade deal with India's cutting down of oil imports from Russia.

Even as it lowered oil

supplies from Russia, India either retained supply levels from the Gulf countries or has increased them.

About 16.6% of India's oil imports in January 2026 came from Iraq, about the same level as a year earlier. The UAE accounted for another 10.4% of India's oil imports in January 2026.

Saudi Arabia saw its share of Indian oil imports jump to 17.5% in January 2026, the highest it has been since April 2023. Kuwait's share grew to 6.1%, the highest since February 2023.

However, with Iran having closed the crucial Strait of Hormuz following the conflict in West Asia, supplies of oil from all of these countries are at risk.

Multiple events over the last week could render the move to reduce Russian supplies costly for India. The trade deal with the U.S. is in limbo following the U.S. Supreme Court's February 20 decision striking down that country's reciprocal tariffs. Further, oil supplies from the Gulf and the U.S. are currently at risk following the conflict with Iran.

Notably, on February 6, U.S. President Donald Trump lowered tariffs on Indian imports from 50% to 25% by removing the 25% penal tariffs he had imposed in August 2025 linked to India's purchase of Russian oil.

UGC reform debate, faultlines in politics of social justice

Recent debates over proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have triggered wider political discussions on caste privileges, social discrimination and the idea of social justice in institutions of higher academics. A section of upper caste elites has opposed the UGC's regulations even as the higher judiciary quickly put the policy reform in abeyance. Media and social networks pushed for its annulment, calling the regulations discriminatory toward the social elites.

Though initiated by the Union government, the Bharatiya Janata Party has also hesitated to defend the UGC rules. This is only logical for the right-wing party to avoid upsetting its core political supporters, mainly the social elite. Yet, such distancing risks alienating Bahujan groups as they have joined the Hindutva bandwagon hoping to expand their representation in power and gain substantive social and class mobility. In the current debate, though Bahujan groups have remained fragmented and leaderless in promoting their interests, they have the potential to harm the electoral prospects of the right-wing party.

Inclusive subaltern Hindutva

The rise of Narendra Modi as the dominant leader in national politics has led to the social character of the BJP changing considerably. It was suggested that the BJP shift from its visible Brahmanical focus to bringing Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) groups into the party structure. The BJP's electoral success as a new 'Subaltern Hindutva' party is overly dependent upon the support of the DBA groups, while the social elites have remained its committed support base. The party's new social engineering also checkmates the 'official' parties of the Dalit-Bahujan castes, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. A sizable faction within the vulnerable castes (especially the lower Other Backward Classes, or OBCs) have trusted



Harish S. Wankhede

is senior faculty at the Centre for Political Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The BJP's 'inclusive Hindutva' faces challenges as the proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission spark debate

the BJP more for their welfare, hoping that an inclusive Hindutva platform would offer them social dignity and equitable participation in the power structures.

The shift of certain DBA sections has made the BJP a formidable force. However, in return for their support these groups have only received some tokenistic presence in the power structures. Their class conditions remain precarious, and they often face discrimination and violence from dominant social groups. The lower OBC groups (mainly the artisanal castes, landless labourers and lower middle-class sections of the urban population) have negligible presence in modern state institutions and the urban market economy. Further, limited access to quality higher education keeps their presence in IT-related and other elite professions minimal.

The OBC question

After the release of the Bihar Caste Survey in 2023, a similar factsheet showed that almost 40% of the State's population is considered Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a majority of whom are landless or dependent on the rural economy and an education status that is similar to Dalits and Adivasis. It was expected that the ruling establishments, at the State and Centre, would take cognisance of the grave situation and formulate policy for their welfare. However, there was no such initiative.

It appears that the new UGC regulations were drafted to address the growing problems faced by OBC candidates in academic institutions. The Education Ministry faces constant criticism by the Opposition for failing to meet Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) and OBC quotas in central universities and premier institutes such as the IIMs, IITs, and AIIMS. The parliamentary report on the recruitment of professors in central universities has shown that OBCs constitute less than 3% of central university faculty. Importantly, they also face overt discrimination in the recruitment process (by using the 'not found suitable' rubric). Unlike SC/STs, OBC members

have limited institutional support to protect them from caste-based discrimination on campuses.

In the new UGC regulations, the addition of OBCs and other vulnerable groups (like the EWS) alongside SC/STs is an acknowledgment that a vast section in university campuses survive as vulnerable social groups under the dominant presence of the social elites and, therefore, in need of legal safeguards. The new regulations appeared to be crucial corrective measures in making academic institutions more democratic, inclusive and responsible towards the agenda of social justice. However, the reforms have stalled following backlash, leaving the vulnerabilities that DBA groups face unaddressed.

The BJP's dilemma

The BJP's inclusive Hindutva has captivated sections among the DBA and has presented the party as a promising representative of Hindu unity. The UGC debate has challenged this celebrated idea, revealing that caste-based divisions occupy social space. The counter against the new UGC reforms has shown that the social elites have little concern for the inclusive welfare of marginalised social groups. As social justice policies reveal and disturb the control and hegemony of the traditional ruling elites, such attempts are targeted as anti-national, harmful to meritocracy or as an appeasement of identity politics.

The BJP has failed to convince social elite opponents about the political necessity of such a policy framework that would also ameliorate the deplorable conditions of DBA groups.

The uproar by a section of the social elites has become effective because of the BJP's tacit silence and hesitation to defend the policies of social justice. Such a nexus between the right-wing party and conservative social elites may have relegated the agenda of social justice to the periphery. But it also ignites a new consciousness among vulnerable social groups about their expendability within Hindutva politics, resulting in their exit from the right-wing party.