

India to sign U.S. deal only after clarity on tariff rates

Any India-U.S. deal must be weighed against tariff structure and comparative advantage, says official; Commerce Secretary, however, maintains India remains engaged with U.S. on trade deal

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India will sign a trade deal with the U.S. only after the country settles its “tariff architecture” and clarifies country-wise tariff rate, sources in the government have said.

“Any deal that we finalise and sign has to be seen against the tariff structure or comparative advantage that India gets in the U.S. market,” a senior official in the Ministry of Commerce said. “The U.S. is working on trying to recreate a tariff architecture globally. If they are able to finalise that, at that juncture it would be right to sign the deal,” the official said.

This comes against the backdrop of two trade-related investigations the U.S. is carrying out that

Tariff travails

In 2025, U.S. imposed 25% reciprocal tariffs on India. An additional 25% linked to import of Russian oil was later imposed taking total tariffs to 50%. A timeline of events thereafter:

■ **Feb. 6, 2026:** India and the U.S. issue a statement on framework on interim pact

■ Additional 25% Russian oil-linked tariff removed (**Tariff on India: 25%**)

■ **Feb. 20:** U.S. SC strikes down reciprocal tariffs

■ **Feb. 24:** U.S. imposes

10% tariff on all countries for 150 days. **Tariff on India: 10%**

■ **Mar. 11-12:** USTR launches probe which could lead to additional tariffs

■ **Mar. 16:** Govt. sources say deal will only be signed after U.S. finalises tariffs on India and other countries

could potentially see additional tariffs being levied on a number of countries, including India.

Meanwhile, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said that India remains engaged with the U.S. on a trade deal.

“Pursuant to the U.S. Su-

preme Court judgment dated February 20, 2026 invalidating reciprocal tariffs, the reciprocal tariffs are no longer in force,” Mr. Agrawal told presspersons on Monday. “The U.S. government has issued Executive Orders imposing 10% tariffs pursuant to Section

India’s trade deficit stands at \$4 billion in Feb.

NEW DELHI

India’s trade balance stood at a deficit of about \$4 billion in February compared with a surplus of \$2.7 billion a year earlier due in large part to merchandise exports staying flat while imports of both merchandise and services grew significantly during the month. » [PAGE 13](#)

122 of the Trade Act, 1974 on certain products from all countries,” he added. “India remains engaged with the U.S. side for a mutually beneficial trade agreement,” he said.

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India to sign U.S. deal after clarity on tariffs

India and the U.S. announced a trade deal on February 2 and a joint statement on the finalisation of a framework for the deal was released on February 7. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal had said that the deal would be signed in March.

The U.S. Supreme Court on February 20 ruled against the validity of U.S. President Donald Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy reciprocal tariffs on America's trade partners. It is after this that the U.S. imposed the 10% tariffs on all its trade partners under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974. These tariffs are in force for a period of 150 days from February 24.

"The U.S. deal was to be signed in March. When we said this, at that time the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs had not come," the official explained. "Now with the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs, the tariffs per se don't exist." Under the framework announced by the two countries, the U.S. was to impose an 18% tariff on India. Now, the new rate will depend on the rates the U.S. imposes on India's competitors.

"Depending on how their tariff architecture settles, that will determine where India will land," the official said. "In case all others are at 19% and above then India will remain at 18%. But if others come down, then India will also come down."

On Russian oil

Mr. Agrawal also highlighted that the U.S.' removal of tariffs on India is linked to its import of Russian oil. "On February 7, 2026, the 25% additional ad valorem tariffs imposed by the U.S. on certain Indian exports citing India's imports of Russian oil were removed," Mr. Agrawal noted. "We can say that we are buying Russian oil and there has been an increased buying of Russian oil in the current month because of the challenges we are facing."

Protests held in Ladakh calling for Statehood

Peerzada Ashiq

SRINAGAR

Protest rallies were held in Ladakh on Monday, marking the first demonstration since violence erupted in September last year, on the call of the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) and the Leh Apex Body (LAB) to press for Statehood status and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule.

Hundreds of locals marched from Singay Namgyal Chowk up to Leh Polo Ground in Leh town. In Kargil, protesters held a rally. Protesters raised slogans that the current Union Territory status was unacceptable to the region.

“For the last six years, the people of Ladakh have been deprived of democratic representation and constitutional safeguards. The voices from the mountains are growing louder for justice. Although our activist Sonam Wangchuk has been released, our struggle for legitimate rights will continue. We also demand the release of Deldan Namgyal and Smanla Dorjey,” a member of KDA, Sajjad Kargili, said.

Opposition notice seeking CEC's removal cites his remarks against Rahul

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The notice seeking the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar cites concerns ranging from the selection process for the post to his public confrontation with Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, and reports of widespread deletion of voters in two constituencies in Karnataka, an Opposition leader said on Monday.

The Opposition is yet to make the contents of the 10-page notice against Mr. Kumar public. The notice signed by 193 Opposition MPs – 130 in the Lok Sabha and 63 in the Rajya Sabha – has listed seven charges against Mr. Kumar including “partisan and discriminatory conduct”, “obstruction of inquiries into electoral fraud” and “mass disenfranchisement”.

The Opposition alleges that the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise was

The notice signed by 193 Opposition MPs has listed seven charges against Gyanesh Kumar

used to benefit the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

The notices, filed on Friday, follow months of Opposition protests over the SIR of electoral rolls. MPs have alleged “manipulation” of voter lists and accused the Election Commission (EC) of overlooking complaints of disenfranchisement.

According to an Opposition leader, the notices draw heavily from Mr. Gandhi's February 2025 dissent note, submitted when Mr. Kumar was selected as CEC by the three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Home Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Gandhi had termed the government's late-night decision to appoint the

CEC “disrespectful and discourteous”, pointing out that the committee's composition and process were under challenge in the Supreme Court. The main point of contention has been the removal of Chief Justice of India from the selection committee, which now comprises the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and a Union Cabinet Minister, securing a majority for the government.

The notices also cite Mr. Kumar's public ultimatum to Mr. Gandhi at an August 2025 press conference, where the CEC demanded that he either apologise or file a signed affidavit backing his allegations of “vote theft”. The Opposition parties said that such remarks were partisan and compromised the neutrality of the office.

They have also flagged alleged voter-roll manipulation in two Karnataka Assembly seats, Aland and Mahadevapura.

Centre responsible for the shortage of cooking gas: Kharge

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday held the Centre responsible for the ongoing LPG crisis, and accused it of failing to take preemptive measures despite knowing that the West Asia conflict could disrupt maritime routes and energy supplies.

Raising the issue during Zero Hour in the Upper House, Mr. Kharge said the government had not undertaken advance planning or arranged alternative import routes, even though India imports nearly 60% of its LPG needs, with 90% of these imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

The impact of the disruption was now visible across the country, from households to restaurants and MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises), of which many have scaled down or halted operations



Mallikarjun Kharge

due to non-availability of cylinders, Mr. Kharge said. Waiting time for refills had stretched to 25 days in urban centres, and up to 45 days in villages, triggering panic booking and fears of hoarding, he said.

Responding to Mr. Kharge, Union Health Minister and the Leader of the House J.P. Nadda accused the Congress of exploiting a national crisis for political gain instead of standing with the people. The LPG shortage, Mr. Nadda said, was an outcome of the West Asia conflict, in which India had “no contribution”.

In less than 24 hours, EC replaces Mamata top officers — CS to DGP

Bengal CM says reshuffle done at behest of BJP

Ravik Bhattacharya
& Sweety Kumari

Kolkata, March 16

IN LESS than 24 hours of announcing the dates for the Assembly elections in West Bengal, the Election Commission (EC) removed top adminis-



CM Mamata Banerjee at a rally in Kolkata, Monday. PARTHA PAUL

trative and police officers in the state, triggering a sharp reaction from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

The reshuffle began late Sunday night as the EC sent a letter to Chief Secretary Nandini Chakraborty, informing her that she and state Home Secretary Jagdish Prasad Meena have been substituted with Dushyant Nariala and Sanghamitra Ghosh, respectively.

In a letter sent to the chief secretary, the EC said “the

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

CS to DGP

officers transferred out” — Nandini Chakraborty and Jagdish Prasad Meena — “shall not be posted in any election-related position” till the polls are over.

“The directions of the Election Commission should be implemented with immediate effect, and a compliance report in respect of joining of Dushyant Nariala and Sanghamitra Ghosh be sent by 3 pm on March 16 (Monday),” the letter read.

By Monday morning, the EC also ordered the removal of Director General of Police Peeyush Pandey, Kolkata Police Commissioner Supratim Sarkar, and Additional Director General (Law and Order) Vineet Goyal.

Reacting to the removal of her top officials, Mamata Banerjee accused the EC of acting at the behest of the BJP.

Speaking at a protest rally in central Kolkata over the LPG shortage in the country, the TMC supremo said the BJP may use the EC to change as many officers as it wants, but will not be able to change the government. “It doesn't matter who you appoint as replacement officers... they will all work for Bengal,” Banerjee said.

“They chose the hour of midnight to remove Chief Secretary Nandini Chakraborty without consulting the state government. Nandini Chakraborty is a Bengali woman. It goes to show how anti-women they are,” Banerjee said.

Referring to the removal of Jagdish Prasad Meena, she

said, “Our home secretary is a non-Bengali. His removal reflects the deep disdain they have for efficient officers of Bengal.”

Nandini Chakraborty, a 1994-batch IAS officer, was appointed as the first woman chief secretary of West Bengal by Banerjee on December 31 last year. Her presence alongside the Chief Minister during the Enforcement Directorate's search at I-PAC's Kolkata office in January had sparked criticism from the state Opposition BJP and former bureaucrats — who called it a breach of administrative protocol.

Chakraborty, a voter in Kolkata, was also called for hearings by the EC during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.

The EC has replaced her with Dushyant Nariala, a 1993-batch IAS officer of the West Bengal cadre. He currently serves as the additional chief secretary (ACS) of the North Bengal Development Department.

He held additional charge as principal secretary of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) as well as additional chief secretary of the Correctional Administration Department.

Sanghamitra Ghosh, the new Home Secretary, is a 1997-batch IAS officer who served as principal secretary of the Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare.

The EC has also replaced DGP Peeyush Pandey with 1992-batch IPS officer Siddh Nath Gupta, and brought in Ajay Kumar Nand, a 1996-batch IPS officer, as the new Kolkata Police Commissioner, replacing Supratim Sarkar.

NIA arrests six Ukrainians, one from US for plotting terror activities in India

**Nirbhay Thakur
& Mahender Singh Manral**
New Delhi, March 16

THE NATIONAL Investigation Agency (NIA) has arrested seven foreign nationals — six Ukrainian nationals and one from the United States — on charges of conspiring to carry out terrorist activities against India.

The arrests, made in a coordinated operation by multiple NIA teams last week, were made under Section 18 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), along with other relevant sections.

An FIR in the case was registered on Friday evening. The US national was detained by the Bureau of Immigration at Kolkata airport, and three Ukrainians each were detained at airports in Lucknow and Delhi.

A source said that the accused had entered India on valid visas, but had proceeded to Mizoram without the mandatory Restricted Area Permit.

“From there, they crossed into Myanmar, where they reportedly met ethnic groups hostile to India. Investigations also uncovered that multiple consignments of drones from Europe were delivered by them in Mizoram,” the source said.

The suspects were brought to Delhi and produced before the duty Magistrate on Saturday, who remanded them in

7 held for terror plot

three days' custody. The suspects were remanded again on Monday until March 27, an extension of 11 days.

The NIA has alleged that the group was plotting terror strikes, and their movements had raised alarm over cross-border threats.

“The aspects of collection of evidence, unearthing criminal conspiracy, identification of co-accused persons and analysis of mobile data of accused persons, are such that police custody of accused persons is justified,” Additional Sessions Judge Prashant Sharma of Patiala House Court said in his order.

According to the NIA, the accused were involved in illegally “importing huge consignments of drones from Europe to Myanmar via India” for the use of “Ethnic armed groups”. These groups were allegedly also supporting some proscribed “Indian Insur-

gent Groups by way of supplying weapons and other terrorist hardware and training them”.

The NIA, which was represented by SPP Rahul Tyagi, PP Anil Dabas, and advocates Jatin and Amit Rohilla, sought the remand of the accused persons to “collect more evidence to unearth the overall conspiracy of the present case hatched by the accused persons and their accomplices”.

They also submitted before the court that they wanted to “unearth the route opted” by the accused persons. The custody was also sought to analyse the mobile data to ascertain the alleged source of funding.

The NIA also submitted that it wanted to “apprehend the close unknown associates still at large who are likely to surface after technical analysis of the social media accounts”.

As NavIC loses atomic clock, India's own GPS remains a challenge

Anonna Dutt

New Delhi, March 16

EVER SINCE its inception, India's regional navigation system has been plagued by problems affecting its positioning data. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) last week said that the atomic clock of one of five satellites that were still providing this data had stopped working.

"IRNSS-1F satellite launched in March 2016 has completed its design mission life of 10 years... On 13th March 2026, procured on-board Atomic clock stopped functioning," it said. The space agency added that the satellite will continue to provide one-way broadcast messaging services.

Atomic clocks are key for satellites being able to provide positioning data used for applications such as navigation of vehicles, mapping and surveying, and even planning large constructions with accuracy.

A GPS for India

The Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS), operationally called Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC),



NavIC was planned to provide positioning data over the Indian subcontinent. X/ISRO

was planned to be a seven-satellite system to provide positioning data over the Indian subcontinent and 1500 km around it: a regional system similar to the American GPS.

With all its satellites functioning and placed directly above the region, NavIC was designed to provide location accuracy of around 10 metres over the Indian landmass and surrounding countries. This ensures better availability of signals even in difficult

Mapping alternatives

- There are four satellite systems that provide global navigation data: the US's GPS, the Russian GLONASS, the European Galileo, and the Chinese Beidou.
- Japan has a four-satellite system called Quasi-Zenith Satellite System that can augment GPS signals over the country.

geographical locations compared with GPS, whose signals are received in India at an angle that makes it difficult to access in certain areas like valleys and forests.

However, NavIC has been running into troubles since its successful 2023 launch.

NavIC's track record

The constellation had five satellites that could provide positioning data: IRNSS-1B, 1C, 1F, 1I, and NVS-01. Atomic clocks on board some of the initial satellites started failing early on, with replacement satellites planned to keep the system running. Now, the atomic clock on board the IRNSS-1F has also been lost.

Besides the failing atomic clocks, some of the initial satellites are also aging out. IRNSS-1A was launched into orbit in 2013, and 1B and 1C followed in 2014. 1A is almost defunct, and the other two are also past their 10-year mission lives.

The last of the first-generation IRNSS satellites was 1I — a replacement for the failed 1H launch — which was launched in 2018. IRNSS-1H, launched in 2017 to replace 1A, failed to reach orbit due to operational issues.

NVS-02, the second of the new-generation satellites meant for NavIC (after NVS-01), was successfully placed in a highly elliptical transfer orbit in ISRO's 100th launch in January 2025. But it failed to move to its final orbit due to an electrical failure.

Another criticism ISRO faced over NavIC is the delay in developing the user segment. A 2018 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India pointed out delays in developing technology to that end.

Now, NavIC data is in use for aviation, shipping, and railways. Several new cell phones have chipsets that can use this data.

Advancements in new satellites

The most important change to the new-generation NavIC satellite was an indigenously developed atomic clock developed by ISRO. The newer generation satellites also have a longer mission life: 12 years.

Importantly, they send signals in a third frequency, L1, besides the two (L5 and S) in existing satellites. As GPS commonly uses L1, this improves interoperability with other positioning systems. L1 also helps in using NavIC data in wearable devices.

After violence, Meghalaya govt. extends tenure of Garo Hills Autonomous District Council

Press Trust of India

SHILLONG

Amid violence in the Garo Hills region over the participation of non-tribals in tribal council poll, the Meghalaya government on Monday extended the tenure of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) by six months, Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong said.

The decision was approved by the State Cabinet in a virtual meeting chaired by Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma. Addressing reporters, Mr. Tynsong said the Cabinet met with a single-agenda focus relating to the extension of the current GHADC House.

“After detailed deliberation and discussion, the Cabinet has decided to extend the term of the current House for a period of six months with effect from



CM Conrad Sangma

April 18 to October 18, 2026,” he said.

Violence erupted in Tura and adjoining areas last week after the district council issued a notification barring non-tribals from participating in the council election, triggering a protest by them.

Protesters clashed with security forces, several government and private properties were vandalised and vehicles were torched during the unrest. At least two persons were killed during the violence, while several others were injured.

Following the deterioration in the law and order situation, Mr. Sangma initially postponed the election, scheduled to be held on April 10, with counting on April 14.

However, Monday’s Cabinet decision to extend the council’s tenure came hours after Albinush R. Marak resigned as the chief executive member amid a no-confidence motion by 21 members of the council.

New chief elected

Later in the day, the GHADC House elected Dhormonath Ch. Sangma as the new CEM and constituted a fresh executive committee. Mr. Tynsong said the government will hold consultations with stakeholders over the next six months to resolve concerns surrounding candidate eligibility and related provisions governing the council elections.

Neighbourhood diplomacy and its West Asia challenge

With the sinking of the Iranian warship, *IRIS Dena*, in the Indian Ocean, by the United States on March 4, the war in West Asia came home to South Asia. With each passing day, the war that began on February 28 has reached South Asian homes in a number of ways – disrupting the availability of daily necessities, travel, trade, food and fuel for cooking and transport, fertilizers, and the safety of citizens in the West Asia region.

Approximately 25 million South Asians live and work in West Asia, including 10 million Indians, five million Pakistanis, between five to six million Bangladeshis, two million Nepalis, and significant numbers from Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Afghans – between five to eight million – are refugees in Iran. In addition, Indians make up about 15% of the population of seafarers, or crew aboard merchant ships worldwide, along with other South Asians, all of whom are at risk of harm, particularly those positioned around the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has weaponised access. As New Delhi formulates its next steps in the war, it is necessary to consider not only what it will mean for the whole region but also its own ties with each neighbour.

India's stance could raise eyebrows

It is important to recognise that New Delhi's posture at the start of the war – when U.S.-Israel strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and much of his immediate family – has been out of step with most of the region. Bangladesh and Pakistan issued statements condoling Khamenei's death almost immediately, the Maldives condemned the U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran and Iran's counter-attacks equally, and the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister offered his condolences. In contrast, it took South Block five days to send Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to the Iranian Embassy.

It took another week for the Ministry of External Affairs to express "grief" over the killing of more than 150 students and teachers at a school for girls abutting a naval base in Minab. Even in the wider region, a statement by Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) criticised U.S. and Israel for "initiating" attacks, and subsequent attacks by Iran.

This is less about optics and more about India's – and South Asia's – cultural values: the killing of Khamenei, an 86-year-old religious leader of a state, violated international norms, regardless of how his policies were viewed. That India's statements in the following days condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes without ever criticising U.S. or Israeli actions against Iran and Lebanon is an anomaly.

It is possible to explain the initial reactions in light of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to



Suhasini Haidar

Israel two days before the strikes, and his statement in the Knesset that India would stand with Israel "in the moment and beyond". But as the horror of the escalating war mounts and the Iranian regime demonstrates its resilience, there is a need to calibrate a more balanced response. India's traditional position, of building strong bilateral ties with every country in West Asia, without taking sides in regional fault lines has always kept it in a position of trust and goodwill; this was proven during Mr. Modi's outreach to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian for the passage of Indian ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition, the U.S.'s unabashed pride in bombing *IRIS Dena* near Sri Lanka without even attempting to help the surviving sailors has come as a shock to many in the region. It is admirable that the Indian Navy immediately assisted the Sri Lankan Navy in the rescue operations, and that both Delhi and Colombo offered safe harbour to other Iranian military ships in the area. Yet, the Indian Navy's failure to express its condolences for the deaths of the sailors who had recently been its guests at India's multinational naval exercise MILAN 2026 and the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam in February, is difficult to understand.

Economic, regional and maritime security

Going forward, India must reassure its neighbours – other than Pakistan, which it has no relationship with at present – that it remains cognisant of their concerns. As energy shortages deepened, New Delhi received requests for petrol and diesel from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives; landlocked Nepal and Bhutan may follow suit if the situation worsens. India must plan ahead to avoid a repeat of 2021, when it had to halt vaccine supplies to its neighbourhood for several critical weeks to deal with the crisis caused by the spread of the delta variant of SARS-CoV-2. Subsequently, India's "Vaccine Maitri" programme did much to ease those memories, and enforced the need for an "all of region" approach to such situations.

Since 2020, South Asia has been buffeted by several crises: COVID-19, supply chain blockages from India-China tensions along the Line of Actual Control, sanctions affecting grain, oil, and urea amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, fluctuations in remittances due to constant flare-ups in West Asia, the impact of the Trump administration's tariff policy on the region's labour-intensive apparel and fashion industry, and seafood exports, and the growing shadow of Artificial Intelligence on jobs in a region with a restless young population.

It is not a coincidence that many of India's neighbours have seen youth protests erupt, and new governments installed as a result – an example is Nepal's election on March 5 which brought its first Gen-Z-led government to power.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's poll losses in the general election in 2024, which resulted in Mr. Modi's first minority government within a coalition, are also attributed to the disaffection of unemployed and underemployed youth. The changes have impacted India's diplomacy, as the Modi government has had to amend its more muscular neighbourhood policy to engage leaders elected on these mandates and who are less beholden to India.

India must also recognise that its position as "net security provider" in the region has been challenged by the U.S.'s sinking of the *IRIS Dena*, which cuts more deeply given their joint membership of the Quad (the strategic forum comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia).

At their last meeting in July 2025, the Quad Foreign Ministers issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to "peace and stability" in the Indo-Pacific region and declaring that they "strongly oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion", a reference to China. With the U.S. behaving unilaterally, India must move to strengthen its own coalitions in the maritime region, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, and the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) so that it is not caught unawares in the future. South Asia requires more regional trade, connectivity and energy sharing platforms, along with more conversations on regional security, as each country in the subcontinent is a stakeholder.

On the global stage, India's position as Chair of the Quad requires it to host a summit this year – when U.S. President Donald Trump is to visit India. But India's immediate priority should be to convene a Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting to ensure better communication and chart a more stable course for the maritime region in view of the West Asia war.

New Delhi must restore the balance

On the other side of the global North-South divide, India is also due to convene the BRICS Summit in 2026 – while bringing current rivals and BRICS members Iran and the United Arab Emirates to the table may be difficult given current tensions, New Delhi's diplomatic skills must be exerted in forging consensus for a BRICS statement that also highlights South Asia's economic and security concerns. Having momentarily abandoned its balancing act between the U.S.-Israel and Iran, it is time for India to restore the balance in its West Asia policy. New Delhi's traditional position on the tightrope may be tense, but it gives a more beneficial vantage point from which to steer the future of its people and those across the wider neighbourhood.

The conflict will test India's regional influence and strategic balance

Naval warships escort Indian vessels from the Gulf of Oman

Three warships escort *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi*, *Jag Laadki*; warships operating under Operation Sankalp, a mission aimed at safeguarding merchant shipping, protecting India's maritime interests

Saurabh Trivedi
Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy has deployed warships to escort Indian-flagged merchant vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf region, according to official sources.

Three Indian Navy ships have escorted the Indian-flagged merchant ships *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi*, and *Jag Laadki* from the Gulf of Oman after they crossed the Strait of Hormuz. The warships ensured the safe transit of vessels through vulnerable waters.

Though the conflict has been intense in the Persian Gulf west of Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, east of the strait, has also seen attacks. *Jag Laadki*, carrying more than 80,000 tonnes of crude oil, left Fujairah terminal in the UAE on Sunday. The vessel had a narrow escape when the terminal was attacked while it was loading.

Sources said that naval ship escort to Indian merchant ships will continue to be provided. Some 22 Indian-flagged ships are still stranded west of the strait.



Safe arrival: LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached the Mundra Port on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While officials declined to disclose the names of the naval ships involved, a senior official confirmed that the warships were operating in the region under Operation Sankalp, a mission aimed at safeguarding merchant shipping and protecting India's maritime interests in the region.

Launched in June 2019, Operation Sankalp ensures the safe passage of Indian-flagged vessels through critical sea lanes, and saw action, including during the Houthi attacks.

Meanwhile, LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached the Mundra Port on Monday evening, the government con-

firmed. Earlier in the day, Rajesh Kumar Sinha, Special Secretary at the Shipping Ministry, told reporters in an inter-ministerial briefing that priority berthing and documentation had been arranged to ensure there was no delay in discharging the cargo.

Nanda Devi, another LPG carrier, is expected to reach Kandla port on Tuesday. Individually, the vessels are holding 46,000 tonnes of cargo, cumulatively, 92,172 tonnes. "Seafarers on board are all safe and would be reaching tomorrow at Mundra port," Mr. Sinha said. *Jag Laadki* will

be arriving at the Mundra Port on Tuesday.

He said there was "no congestion reported at any of the major ports" with export-bound containers at the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority having reduced to about 3,900 from 5,600.

Addressing reporters at the same briefing, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary at the Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry, said that cooking gas continued to be an "issue of concern" though supply of LPG to domestic consumers continued uninterrupted. No dry out had been reported among distributors, she added.

Separately, in response to a query, the senior official informed that domestic LPG production had increased 36% since the supply maintenance order.

Responding to queries about U.S. President Donald Trump seeking countries send warships to guard passage of vessels from the Strait of Hormuz, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson at the External Affairs Ministry, said the issue had not been taken up in any bilateral setting.

Iran survives, Bibi gains, India's dilemma: 5 takeaways after two weeks of war



SHUBHAJIT ROY

THE WAR in West Asia has entered its third week, and it doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon. Over the weekend, the US hit Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export terminal in the Persian Gulf, and is sending more marines and warships to West Asia.

US President Donald Trump has announced that NATO and countries like China should send their ships to the Strait of Hormuz amid its effective closure.

Unlike the 12-day conflict of June 2025, this war has had severe consequences, with a spike in oil prices and fears of a global energy shortage.

It is also becoming apparent that the US

significantly underestimated Iran's resilience and ability to expand the war.

1. Not World War III, but...

The geographical spread and intensity of the war are much greater than last summer.

The US and Israel's airstrikes swiftly wiped out Iran's top leadership, including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Rather than folding, Iran launched ballistic missiles and Shahed drones that hit countries including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Western military bases and energy and civilian infrastructure have been targeted.

About 20 countries (including European powers) are now said to be directly or indirectly involved in the war, supplying arms, ammunition and intelligence.

For this to be World War III, however, China would need to step in directly. That is unlikely, considering the tone of its official statements. Still, this regional war has had global consequences — something the Trump administration did not foresee.

2. Iran is not collapsing

The war is now a test of staying power, both militarily and psychologically.

US officials have privately admitted to being surprised at Iran's staying power despite the damage inflicted on it. Khamenei may be dead, but the structures of the state are far too entrenched to simply vanish.

Iran had also been preparing for such an eventuality, especially since US B-2 bombers struck its nuclear facilities in June 2025. Khamenei had asked every top official to name up to four successors.

The entire military apparatus has been decentralised into a "mosaic defence doctrine": 31 units are protecting Tehran and the 30 other provinces. They have independent command-and-control structures.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the clergy have banded together for survival, even going against Khamenei's own diktat against hereditary rule in appointing his son, Mojtaba, as the new Supreme Leader. The continuity signals the regime's defiance.

3. Bibi, the beneficiary

With the Supreme Leader gone after ruling for 37 years and Iran's capabilities being steadily degraded, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has found himself as one of the biggest beneficiaries of this war — certainly more so than Trump.

This is a far cry from the situation he had found himself in after the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas that killed 1,195 Israelis. Netanyahu responded to the criticism over the security failure with a brutal siege of the Gaza Strip that killed over 73,000 people, and caused widespread starvation among its 2.3 million residents.

His government has also taken out major hostile figures backed by Iran — Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah. With a few months left for legislative elections, Netanyahu can claim some major wins.

4. India's strategic dilemma

India has been in a precarious position since the US and Israel began the war. PM

Narendra Modi's visit to Israel, barely 40 hours before the attacks, sparked criticism from domestic political quarters. India also has not condemned the US-Israeli attacks, but did so for Iran's retaliation.

The Gulf countries are India's key strategic and trade partners, but Iran has also been a historical partner. India has not expressed condolences over the Supreme Leader's death at the highest levels, but Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri signed the condolence book at the Iranian embassy.

The war reached India's doorstep, as the Iranian warship IRIS Dena was torpedoed in international waters near Sri Lanka by the US Navy. PM Modi spoke to eight countries in the region at the highest level, and in a belated course correction, he also spoke to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

This is similar to India's initial response after October 7, where the PM had expressed support for Israel and then later spoke to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. With the LPG panic, India has another reason to want the war to end soon.

5. Is there an off-ramp?

Trump has said over the last few days that there is "nothing left" to target, implying that the US might call off the war soon. Simultaneously, the US has deployed more warships and troops.

His goalposts have also shifted — from regime change, to destroying the nuclear programme, and dismantling missile and defence capabilities. Ultimately, his decision may be shaped by the impact on markets, the global economy and energy prices.

The US's carpet-bombing has so far not touched Iranian enriched uranium, the fissile material needed to make nuclear weapons. Trump threatened Kharg Island's oil infrastructure on Saturday, essentially to put pressure on Iran. He can also easily point to having achieved other objectives, including killing the Supreme Leader.

Iran, which has lost the battle of the air, can say that it has won the battle of the sea — the Strait of Hormuz. Each side can claim victory if it calls off the war. The question is, will they?

USCIRF is creating a distorted picture of India, says Centre

Kallol Bhattacharjee

NEW DELHI

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in its latest report, has presented a “distorted and selective picture of India”, the External Affairs Ministry said on Monday.

“For several years now, the USCIRF has persisted in presenting a distorted and selective picture of India, relying on questionable sources and ideological narratives rather than objective facts. Such repeated misrepresentations only undermine the credibility of the Commission itself,” Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said after the USCIRF in its latest report called for “targeted sanctions” against India’s external intelligence agency, the Research & Analysis Wing, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), “for their responsibility and tolerance of several violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ and entities assets and barring their entry into the United States”.

The report further said that bilateral trade policies with India should be linked to “improvements in religious freedoms”.



Randhir Jaiswal

“Instead of persisting with selective criticism of India, USCIRF would do well to reflect on the disturbing incidents of vandalism and attacks on Hindu temples in the United States,” Mr. Jaiswal said.

‘Needs attention’

“Growing intolerance and intimidation of members of the Indian diaspora in the United States merit serious attention,” Mr. Jaiswal added.

There have been several incidents of violence against individuals belonging to the Indian community in the U.S. as well as members of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. in recent years.

There have also been several incidents of vandalism at Hindu temples and properties that India has urged the U.S. to address.

Jaishankar discusses West Asia situation with EU counterparts

The Hindu Bureau

LONDON

On the second day of his Brussels visit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and had discussions, including about the situation in West Asia and Ukraine. Mr. Jaishankar was invited to interact with Foreign Ministers from the 27-member bloc, during the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday, as per a statement from the External Affairs Ministry.

“We also discussed developments in the Middle East and in Ukraine. De-escalation, stability and energy security are our shared objectives,” Ms. Von der Leyen said in a post on X, about her meeting with Mr. Jaishankar. The EU and India were focused on implementing the trade deal signed in January in New



S. Jaishankar meeting Foreign Ministers from the EU at the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting in Brussels on Monday. ANI

Delhi, “as soon as possible”, she said.

Thanking the EU’s top diplomat Kaja Kallas for inviting him to the Foreign Affairs Council, Mr. Jaishankar said, “Our conversation today therefore covered trade, investment, technology, mobility and defence in particular.”

“The stronger convergence between India and the EU in a multipolar world is also expressed in

closer consultations,” he added, saying West Asia, Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific were discussed at the meeting. On Sunday, Mr. Jaishankar publicly thanked Armenia for the safe evacuation of 550 Indian nationals from Iran.

Ahead of the meeting, Ms. Kallas had outlined various options the EU was considering to open the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial body of water through

which a quarter of the world’s oil passes.

Mr. Jaishankar had said that India would be happy to share what New Delhi was doing with Tehran, with European countries, although he acknowledged that every country had a different relationship with Iran. He had also said there was no *quid pro quo* involved with Iran permitting the passage of two Indian-flagged tankers carrying LPG crossing the Strait on Saturday, saying this was based on a “history of dealing” with each other.

Calling the conflict “most unfortunate”, he called for other countries to engage with Tehran. The Minister had also emphasised that India did not have a “blanket arrangement” with Tehran for safe passage of ships, but it was being arranged on a case-by-case basis and discussions were ongoing.

'EU, UN discussing initiative for Hormuz Strait'

U.S. President Donald Trump had called on NATO allies and other countries to assist in forcibly opening the Strait; Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the U.K. 'will not be drawn into a wider war'; a German government spokesperson said, 'This war has nothing to do with NATO; it's not NATO's war'; Italy's government says it is not at war with anyone

Sriram Lakshman
LONDON

The EU is in discussion with the UN on a Black Sea Grain initiative type arrangement to open up the Strait of Hormuz, according to its top diplomat Kaja Kallas.

The Strait, a waterway for a fifth of the world's oil supply, has been virtually closed by Iran following a conflict in the region which began after Israel and the U.S. struck Iran on February 28, sending oil prices soaring to above \$100 per barrel.

Speaking ahead of an EU foreign affairs meeting in Brussels on Monday morning, Ms. Kallas said that she had discussed adopting a Black Sea initiative type arrangement for

the Strait with UN Secretary General António Guterres. The Black Sea initiative, facilitated by the UN and Turkey, sought to ensure the safe export of grain and fertilizer from Ukraine's ports after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

Ms. Kallas pointed out that 85% of the oil that goes through the Strait of Hormuz is destined for Asia, and that the blocking of the Strait was also impacting fertilizer production and warned of food shortages next year if the Strait isn't opened up.

Ms. Kallas also suggested one option was to expand Aspides, the EU's security mission to protect vessels in the Red Sea from attacks by Houthi militants in Yemen. German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl



European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas speaks during a press conference. AFP

had said he was "very sceptical" of using Aspides to secure the passage.

"...We will discuss with Member States whether it is possible to really change the mandate of this mission. The point is that whether the Member States are willing to actual-

ly use this mission," she said, adding that a third option was to form a "Coalition of the Willing" to open the Strait.

U.S. President Donald Trump had called on NATO allies and other countries to assist in forcibly opening the Strait, telling the *Finan-*

cial Times on Sunday that it would be "very bad" for the future of NATO if allies did not help the U.S. in opening the passage.

The easing of U.S. sanctions on Russia was a "dangerous precedent", Ms. Kallas said, adding that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz was to Russia's benefit, helping it to fund its war with Ukraine. New Delhi has also been in talks with Teheran regarding the safety of Indian vessels passing through the Strait.

European leaders resisted pressure from Mr. Trump to join Washington and Israel's war with Iran. "We will not be drawn into a wider war," British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Monday as he announced millions of pounds in assistance for

households facing rising energy costs.

Referring to the British opposition parties, Mr. Starmer said: "They would have rushed the U.K. headlong into this war, without the full picture of what they were sending our forces into and without a plan to get us out."

Mr. Starmer said a diplomatic solution was needed once the armed conflict ended, "to constrain the threat posed by Iran", which he suggested lay with Teheran's ability to rebuild a nuclear programme, pose a ballistic missile threat and to arm proxy militias.

"This war has nothing to do with NATO. It's not NATO's war," German government spokesperson Stefan Kornelius said on Monday.

The U.S. and Israel did not consult Europe before the war, Mr. Kornelius said.

"Italy is not at war with anyone and sending military ships in a war zone would mean entering the war," Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said, as per news agency Reuters.

France, like the U.K., has emphasised that it is focused on defence in the region not offensive strikes. French President Emmanuel Macron said on Sunday he had spoken to Iranian President Massoud Pezeshkian, and conveyed that France was only taking "strictly defensive" actions to protect its assets in the region and its regional partners and that it was "unacceptable" for France to be targeted.

Iran defiant as strikes hit Gulf transport, energy hubs

Agence France-Presse
TEHRAN

Iran said it was ready to take the West Asia war "as far as necessary" as it launched strikes across the region on Monday.

"By now they have... understood what kind of nation they are dealing with, one that does not hesitate to defend itself and is ready to continue the war wherever it may lead, and take it as far as necessary," Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told presspersons in Tehran.

A drone sparked a fuel tank fire near Dubai airport, disrupting travel, while a missile killed a civilian in their car in Abu Dhabi, and another drone sparked a blaze in in the emirate of Fujairah.

GERMANY, SPAIN, ITALY OPT OUT; IRAN SAYS 200 CHILDREN KILLED IN CONFLICT

Trump: Some countries not eager to help unblock Strait

Bo Erickson
& Humeyra Pamuk
Washington, March 16

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump on Monday repeated his call to nations to help unblock the Strait of Hormuz, and complained that some were not very enthusiastic about providing help to Washington.

Trump wants nations to help police the strait after Iran responded to US-Israeli attacks by using drones, missiles and mines to effectively close the channel for tankers that usually transport a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas.

"Some are very enthusiastic about it, and some aren't. Some are countries that we've helped for many, many years. We've protected them from horrible outside sources, and they weren't that enthusiastic. And the level of enthusiasm matters to me," Trump said at an event at the White House.

Several US allies said on Monday they had no immediate plans to send ships to unblock the Strait of Hormuz.

Germany, Spain and Italy ruled out participating in any mission in the Gulf, at least for now. Chancellor Friedrich Merz said on Monday that Germany would not participate in the US-Israeli war against Iran. "We



Emergency workers at a damaged residential building in Tehran on Monday. REUTERS

lack the mandate from the United Nations, the European Union or NATO required under the Basic Law. It was therefore clear from the outset that this war is not a matter for NATO," Merz said at a news conference in Berlin. Britain and Denmark said they would consider ways they might help, but emphasizing a need to de-escalate and avoid getting dragged into the war. France has said it will probably help.

Earlier on Monday, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said the US was "fine" with some Iranian, Indian and Chinese ships going

through the Strait of Hormuz for now.

At the White House event on Monday, Trump said that he believes Iran wants to make a deal to end the US-Israeli conflict with Tehran but it is unclear who is actually leading Iran. "We don't know who their leader is. We have people wanting to negotiate. We have no idea who they are," Trump said. The US-Israeli war on Iran is now entering its third week, with no clear end in sight.

In a post on X, Foreign Minister of Iran Seyed Abbas Araghchi said, "Hundreds of Iranian

civilians have been killed in Israel-US bombings, including over 200 children. Reports claim that some neighbouring states which host US forces and permit attacks on Iran are also actively encouraging this slaughter. Stances should be promptly clarified."

In a briefing on Monday, Israeli military spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nadav Shoshani told reporters that there are detailed operational plans for the war with Iran in place for the next three weeks, along with additional plans extending further ahead.

Trump says 'we're talking' to Iran but it is not 'ready' for deal

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Sunday that the United States was in discussions with Iran as the war enters its third week but that Tehran was not ready for a deal to end it. "Yes, we're talking to them," Mr. Trump told presspersons aboard Air Force One, without detailing the nature of such talks, when asked if there was any diplomacy under way to end a conflict that has spread across the West Asia and roiled global markets.

"But I don't think they're ready. But they are getting pretty close," Mr. Trump said.

Iran's foreign minister had denied earlier that any talks with the United States



Donald Trump

were taking place.

Mr. Trump also said that NATO faces a "very bad" future if U.S. allies fail to help open the Strait of Hormuz.

In a brief interview with *The Financial Times*, Mr. Trump said that as the United States has aided Ukraine in the war with Russia, he expects Europe to help on the Strait of Hormuz, whose closure has sent energy prices soaring.

Israel begins 'ground operations' in Lebanon

Agence France-Presse

JERUSALEM

The Israeli military said on Monday it had begun what it described as "limited ground operations" against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, with Defence Minister Israel Katz warning that those displaced would not return home until northern Israel was secure.

"In recent days, IDF troops from the 91st division have begun limited and targeted ground operations against key Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon, aimed at enhancing the forward defence area," the military said in a statement.

"Prior to the troops' entry, the IDF conducted strikes using both artillery and the Israeli Air Force."

Sixer: One Battle After Another' triumphs; 'Sinners' score a four

Reuters

Los Angeles, March 16

THE DARKLY comic thriller "One Battle After Another" won best picture at the Academy Awards, leading a haul of six trophies on a Sunday night when Hollywood handed its top movie honors to unconventional stories.

The offbeat tale of political resistance traded wins with the vampire story "Sinners," setting up a fight to the end at the Dolby Theatre. "Let's have a martini! This is pretty amazing," director Paul Thomas Anderson said on stage after his "One Battle" was announced the recipient of the top award.

"Sinners" had entered the ceremony with 16 nominations, more than any other film in the nearly 100-year-old history of the Oscars. The movie finished with four awards including a best actor trophy for Michael B Jordan, who played the dual roles of twin brothers Smoke and Stack. Set in the

Segregation-era US South, the movie was a celebration of blues and Black culture told with a supernatural twist.

Irish actor Jessie Buckley landed the best actress accolade for playing William Shakespeare's wife, Agnes Hathaway, in "Hamnet." The movie explores how the couple navigates the death of their 11-year-old son "Hamnet."

"KPop Demon Hunters," a Netflix movie that became a global phenomenon, was named best animated feature. Its catchy song, "Golden," won the award for best original song.

Amid the celebration, the Oscars took on a serious tone to honor two major losses in the film world - the deaths of directors Robert Redford and Rob Reiner. Billy Crystal, star of "When Harry Met Sally," said Reiner's films including "A Few Good Men" and "This Is Spinal Tap" would "last for lifetimes." He was joined on stage by Demi Moore, Meg Ryan and other cast members from Reiner classics.

• THE NEWSMAKERS

ALEXANDRE SINGH, Franco-Indian director has won the Academy Award for co-directing 'Two People Exchanging Saliva', in the Best Live-Action Short Film category.

AUTUMN DURALD ARKAPAW became the first woman to win the best cinematography Oscar Sunday. She was recognised for her work on Ryan Coogler's "Sinners."

MICHAEL B JORDAN has the best actor Oscar as his reward in what proved to be a hugely popular win. Jordan got one trophy for playing identical twins Smoke and Stack in the blues-seeped supernatural horror film set in 1930s Mississippi.

SEAN PENN has added another Oscar to the list. Penn, 65, did not attend the Oscars. Mykola Serha, founder and leader of the Cultural Forces told AP that Penn is in Ukraine. He did not elaborate on the actor's plans during his visit.

CASSANDRA KULUKUNDIS' claimed the first-ever Oscar recognising casting. This is the newest category since the best animated feature film prize, which was established in 2001.

• AND THE OSCAR GOES TO...



Cast members celebrate as they accept the Oscar for Best Picture for 'One Battle After Another'. REUTERS

Russian Urals crude delivered price for India at record high

Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, March 16

WITH THE US issuing a universal sanctions waiver on Russian oil purchases amid the oil supply constraints due to the West Asia conflict, the price of Russia's flagship crude grade Urals hit a record high for deliveries at India's west coast.

The discount on this oil relative to international benchmark Brent crude has contracted to the lowest in four months.

According to oil price assessment data by global service provider Argus Media, the delivered-at-port price for Urals crude on India's west coast was \$98.93 a barrel on Friday, the highest since India stepped up imports of Moscow's crude in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This price is for month-ahead deliveries, and includes shipping costs.

The discount to dated Brent was down at just \$4.8 per barrel, the lowest since November 12. Discounts on Russian oil had widened significantly from November following US sanctions on Russian oil majors Rosneft and Lukoil, which had reduced the appetite for their oil.

Till a few days back, millions of barrels of Russian crude were languishing on the high seas with few willing buyers.



A crude oil tanker sails in Nakhodka Bay near the port city of Nakhodka, Russia. REUTERS FILE

Now, they are in high demand with the disruption in vessel movement through the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow waterway that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman — and accounts for one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. Around 2.5–2.7 million bpd of India's crude imports — accounting for around half of the country's total oil imports — have transited the Strait of Hormuz in recent months; the longer-term average is around 40%. This oil is mainly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait.

According to trade sources, Indian refiners are estimated to have bought over 40 million barrels of Russian crude — predominantly Urals — so far this month, leading to a jump in

prices.

Washington had earlier granted a one-month waiver exclusively to India for buying US-sanctioned Russian crude already in tankers on sea.

The initial allowed Indian refiners to buy Russian crude loaded on tankers before March 5, for deliveries up to April 4, without risking attracting secondary sanctions. The universal waiver issued last week allowed for deliveries up to April 12.

In the first 11 days of the month, India imported 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of Russian oil, up around 50% from February levels, as per ship tracking data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler. These volumes are expected to rise further as the

regular West Asian oil volumes through the Strait remain highly constrained.

Around 130 million barrels of Russian crude was estimated to be on ships on water as of early March. Some of those volumes would have already been gobbled up by India and China, the biggest buyers of seaborne Russian crude. Additional volumes are likely to have come on water over the past couple of weeks as well. With the US now keen on getting the global supply gap bridged partly by Russian oil, the offtake of Moscow's crude is expected to accelerate further.

Along with higher sales in volume terms, the spurt in global oil prices — particularly Russia's own crude grades—is also helping Russia boost its oil

revenue, making Moscow a direct beneficiary of the war in West Asia. According to a recent *Financial Times* report, Moscow is estimated to have earned around \$150 million a day in extra oil revenue since the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

All this means that Russia could rake in billions of dollars more due to the West Asia conflict. And the longer the West Asian oil flows remain heavily constricted, the better it would be for Moscow, whose Budget deficit has been expanding due to high expenditure on the Ukraine war even as the Russian economy is slowing down.

India had, in recent months, cut down significantly on its oil imports from its largest oil supplier Russia amid trade negotiations with the US, as Washington made it a pre-requisite for scrapping its 25% additional penal tariff on New Delhi. In February, India had imported just over 1 million bpd of Russian crude, almost half of the 2025 peak of over 2 million bpd. Loadings of Russian crude for Indian ports, which averaged 1.7 million bpd last year, was just 0.7 million bpd in February. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its oil requirement.

Goods export flat in Feb.; official sees dip in March on conflict

Commerce Secretary Agrawal noted March may be challenging on account of logistical issues on West Asia crisis, while releasing Feb. data

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

NEW DELHI

India's trade balance stood at a deficit of about \$4 billion in February compared with a surplus of \$2.7 billion a year earlier due in large part to merchandise exports staying flat while imports of both merchandise and services grew significantly during the month.

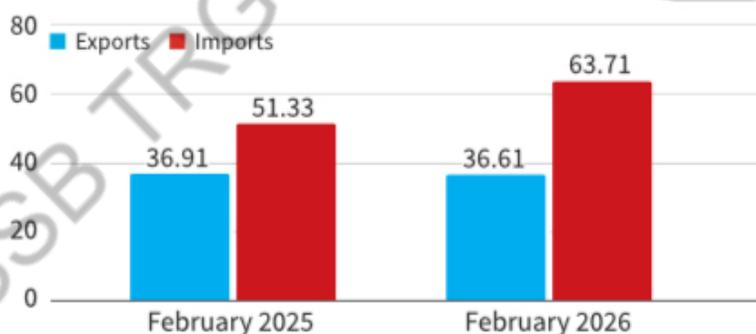
Releasing the data, Commerce Secretary Rakesh Agrawal said exports in March are likely to be impacted by the ongoing conflict in West Asia.

As per the Ministry of Commerce and Industry data, total exports, including merchandise and services, grew 11% to \$76.1 billion, while total imports rose 21.7% to \$80.1 billion.

Within this, merchandise imports widened gap over exports. Merchandise exports were largely flat at

Widening deficit

Chart shows India's merchandise trade performance in Feb. 2025 and Feb. 2026. Figures in \$ bn.



\$36.6 billion in February compared with \$36.9 billion a year earlier. Merchandise imports, however, climbed 24.2% to \$63.7 billion over this period.

'Likely to worsen'

Mr. Agrawal said the situation may worsen in March on West Asia crisis.

"Despite all of the challenges, our merchandise exports have been doing well," Mr. Agrawal told the press. "The month of

March will be a challenging one as well, because of too many logistics challenges, and when one part of the geography gets constrained, then too much of exports will not happen. Exports will likely see a downward trend this month because of the logistical challenges."

In February, services exports climbed almost 25% to \$39.5 billion while imports grew almost 13% to \$16.4 billion.