

# PM speaks with Iran President, pushes for secure shipping lanes

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday spoke with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on the occasion of Id and the Persian new year Nowruz and urged for “freedom of navigation”, indicating India’s concern over disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz.

Mr. Pezeshkian referred to the India presidency in the BRICS grouping and said it should play an “independent role” in bringing the attacks by the U.S. and Israel to a “halt”.

He said the “prerequisite” to bringing the war to an end is the “immediate cessation of aggressions by the U.S. and Israel”. Soon after this, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar spoke with his Iranian counterpart Seyed Abbas Araghchi and discussed the evolving conflict and the “implications for the larger region”.

“Spoke with President Pezeshkian... Condemned attacks on critical infras-



PM Narendra Modi on Saturday reiterated the importance of safeguarding freedom of navigation. ANI

structure in the region, which threaten regional stability and disrupt global supply chains. Reiterated the importance of safeguarding freedom of navigation and ensuring that shipping lanes remain open and secure,” said Mr. Modi in a X post.

The Embassy of Iran issued a press note about the phone call and said, President Pezeshkian “underscored that the prerequisite for ending the war and conflict in the region is the

## Did govt. take any major diplomatic initiatives: Cong.

NEW DELHI

The Congress on Saturday slammed the Centre for its failure to condemn the U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran. The party asked whether the the government had undertaken any significant diplomatic initiatives to de-escalate the situation or to push for a ceasefire. » PAGE 7

immediate cessation of aggressions by the U.S. and Israel, along with guarantees against their recurrence in the future.”

He also expressed his country’s “readiness to engage in both telephone and in-person dialogues with world leaders, including on the sidelines of the UN” for verification of the peaceful intent of Iran’s nuclear programme.

**CONTINUED ON**

» PAGE 7

# PM speaks with Iran President Pezeshkian

He also proposed the creation of a “regional security framework” which will be composed of countries of West Asia and will be free of “foreign interference”. President Pezeshkian referred to India’s current presidency of BRICS and urged for the group to “play an independent role in halting aggressions against Iran and in safeguarding regional and international peace and stability”.

Earlier, Prime Minister Modi had spoken to Mr. Pezeshkian on March 12 when he had pressed for giving space to diplomacy to resolve the crisis and had emphasised the need for safety and security of Indian nationals in the Arab states of the region, as well as in Iran.

India has so far evacuated around 882 Indian businessmen, students and pilgrims from Iran through neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan, said Official Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on March 20. However, the main escalating fallout of this conflict for India has been the issue of energy insecurity because of Iran’s tightening chokehold across the Strait of Hormuz, which is not allowing free movement of energy-carrying tankers to India, as well as growing concern for the safety of Indian sailors in dozens of Indian and global merchant navy ships that are stuck inside the Gulf.

India is also concerned about the fatalities among its nationals in tankers as well as cities in the Gulf states, where millions of Indians work as expat blue and white-collar workers. The latest fatality was recorded on March 18 in Saudi capital Riyadh where an Indian man was killed because of an Iranian missile strike that pushed up the number of Indians killed in this conflict so far to six, with one missing and presumed to be dead.

President Pezeshkian dismissed allegations of Iran as a “source of instability and tension in the region” and said, “it is Israel that carries out attacks and assassinations in Lebanon, Gaza, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, and elsewhere, justifying such actions under the pretext of maintaining security and peace, while in reality fueling unrest and conflict across the region.”

Mr. Jaishankar discussed the evolving scenario with his counterpart Mr. Araghchi. “Our conversation was on the latest developments regarding the conflict. And its implications for the larger region,” said Mr. Jaishankar after the call.

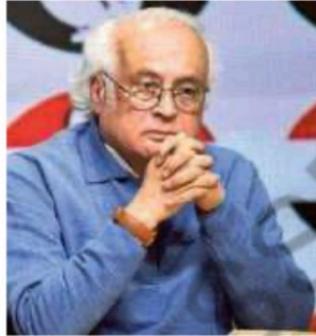
# Why is govt. hesitant to take a position on U.S.-Israel air strikes on Iran, asks Cong.

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

The Congress on Saturday condemned the Narendra Modi-led government for its failure to condemn the United States-Israel air strikes on Iran for the past three weeks, which have resulted in economic disruptions.

Congress communications chief Jairam Ramesh's long social media post on X comes days after the party's Lok Sabha member Shashi Tharoor, in an opinion piece, seemed to have taken a more nuanced stance on



Jairam Ramesh

the government position.

“Has the Modi Govt condemned or criticised or deplored the launch of the heavy aerial assault on Iran by the U.S. and Israel that has now led to severe economic dislocations eve-

rywhere including India? The answer is NO,” Mr. Ramesh said in a post on X.

He further claimed that New Delhi had remained silent on the targeted killings of senior Iranian leaders and attempts to bring about regime change in Iran.

The Congress leader also questioned whether the government had undertaken any significant diplomatic initiatives to de-escalate the situation or to push for a ceasefire, including engagement with the leadership of the U.S. and Israel.

“Has the PM used his

much-claimed friendship with the US President and the Israeli PM to bring about a cease-fire? The answer is NO. These 4 NOs reflect the moral cowardice and political betrayal of India's civilisational values,” Mr. Ramesh said.

His assertion was in contrast with Mr. Tharoor's article that said for “a government to recognise geopolitical realities and weigh consequences for India's economy and strategic position before taking a public stand is not moral surrender”.

“It is responsible statecraft,” Mr. Tharoor wrote.

# US is building a new tariff architecture: Why India plans to wait and watch

Ravi Dutta Mishra  
New Delhi, March 21

WITH THE US Supreme Court scrapping the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) tariffs last month, the Trump administration has imposed 10% global tariffs under Section 122 for five months. But the United States Trade Representative (USTR), amid the turmoil in West Asia, could be working on a new tariff structure that could serve as the legal basis for its trade agreement.

The new tariff structure could be built around the Section 301 investigations that the US launched last week. The tariffs resulting from these investigations could be the basis of the American trade agreements, including the India-US deal, which was agreed but not formally signed.

International trade experts said that US trade deals have lost their economic value after the IEEPA ruling as countries such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India had accepted tariffs of 15–20% and offered significant concessions on market access, procurement and regulations but after the court struck down the reciprocal tariff policy, Washington imposed a uniform 10% tariff on all trading partners.

## Comparative edge

A Commerce Ministry official explained Monday that any trade deal with the US that India

## • SHIFTING GEARS

**THE NEW** tariff structure could be built around the Section 301 investigations that the US launched last week

**THE SECTION** 301 investigations were started against India, along with several other countries, by the US. They cited structural excess capacity and overproduction, and the failure to prohibit imports of goods made using 'forced' labour

**THE TARIFFS** resulting from these investigations could be the basis of the American trade agreements, including the India-US deal, which has been agreed but not formally signed

signs would be focused on the upcoming tariff structure or comparative advantage that India gets in the US market, and that USTR is recreating a tariff structure.

This is because several US trade partners have begun to express doubts about their trade deals following the IEEPA ruling. While Malaysia has declared its trade deal with the US null and void, citing the collapse of the legal basis for the tariffs that supported it, the European Union had also put the EU-US trade deal on hold.

The US last week launched two Section 301 investigations on several countries, including India. While one cites structural excess capacity and overproduction in certain manufacturing sectors, the other cites fail-

ure to prohibit imports of goods produced using "forced" labour. But the purpose could be to create a reciprocal tariff-like structure.

"The Section 301 investigations signal that even countries that negotiated trade arrangements remain exposed to new US investigations and potential tariffs. For many governments, this combination raises a fundamental question: why maintain politically costly concessions if the same tariff treatment applies without a deal and trade pressure continues anyway," head of Delhi-based think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), Ajay Srivastava said.

The fast-track nature of the investigation means that USTR will have new legal powers to impose differential tariffs on countries by May.

Deborah Elms, Head of Trade Policy at Singapore-based Hinrich Foundation, in a social media post, said this is a "very fast" investigation with a short comment window and the ended hearing in early May.

"The reason for this unusually rapid inquiry is that the statutory authority for existing US tariffs currently set by the Trump administration at 10% globally under a different legal power, Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974, will expire on 27 July. The USTR's goal is to replace these Section 122 tariffs with new measures by July," Elms said.

## Stronger legal basis

Elms said that, unlike other tariff authorities, Section 301 is

unlikely to get overturned by the US Courts or involve Congress. "Any penalties that get applied are likely to be long-lasting, particularly since Section 301 empowers the executive branch to modify, adjust, or reopen cases at will in the future," Elms said.

While Indian government officials have said that the final trade deal will take care of the Section 301 tariffs, USTR, in its investigation, has said that India has "structural excess capacity and production".

The top US trade body said that in 2025, India had a bilateral trade surplus with the US of \$58 billion, and that India's global goods trade surplus sectors include textiles, health and construction goods.

"For example, evidence suggests the solar module sector is plagued by excess capacity, including that India's current module manufacturing is nearly triple the annual domestic demand. India also has created significant excess capacity in petrochemicals, steel, and other industries," USTR said.

## Global response to shaky US deal

The European Commission is now seeking "full clarity on the steps the United States intends to take following the recent Supreme Court ruling" on the IEEPA and that "the current situation is not conducive to delivering fair, balanced, and mutually beneficial transatlantic trade and investment", as agreed to by both sides.

# Iran targets Israel's town housing nuclear facility after Natanz strike

Shrapnel wounds 20 in Dimona, home to Israel's nuclear facility; IAEA chief Grossi calls for 'military restraint' to avoid any risk of a nuclear accident; U.S. military used 5,000-pound bunker-buster bombs 'to destroy an underground Iranian facility'

**Agence France-Presse**

JERUSALEM/TEHRAN

Israeli medics late on Saturday said shrapnel wounded 20 people in the town of Dimona, home to a nuclear facility, after warnings of incoming missile fire from Iran.

Israeli police released pictures of officers in a building with a large hole blown in the wall.

Dimona in southern Israel hosts a facility widely believed to possess the West Asia's sole, if undeclared, nuclear arsenal.

Israel has maintained a policy of ambiguity about its nuclear programme, and the Dimona plant officially focuses on research.

According to Iran's



**Massive damage:** The rubble of a building that was destroyed by a strike in Tehran, Iran on Saturday. REUTERS

atomic energy organisation, the U.S. and Israel targeted a plant at Natanz in Isfahan province, which hosts underground centrifuges to enrich uranium for Iran's disputed nuclear programme and was alrea-

dy damaged in last year's June war. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, called for "military restraint to avoid any risk of a nuclear accident", but the UN watchdog con-

firmed that no increase in off-site radiation levels had been reported.

Asked about Natanz, the Israeli military said it was "not aware of a strike".

The Israeli military earlier in the day said its forces struck ballistic missile production facilities belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guards and a separate compound belonging to Iran's Defence Ministry in overnight attacks on Tehran.

"Facilities utilised for the production of critical components for the development of ballistic missiles belonging to the Iranian regime's security apparatus were targeted," the military said.

The U.S. military de-

clared on Saturday it had taken out an Iranian bunker housing weapons threatening oil and gas shipments in the Strait of Hormuz.

Admiral Brad Cooper, head of U.S. Central Command, said U.S. war planes had dropped 5,000-pound bombs on an underground facility on Iran's coast that was storing anti-ship cruise missiles, mobile launchers and other equipment.

"We not only took out the facility, but also destroyed intelligence support sites and missile radar relays that were used to monitor ship movements," Adm. Cooper said in a video statement, revealing details of a strike first announced on Tuesday.

# Iran's IRGC overhauls Hezbollah command to ready group for war

Reuters

Beirut, March 21

IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY Guards (IRGC) rebuilt Hezbollah's military command after it was mauled by Israel in 2024, plugging gaps with Iranian officers before restructuring the Lebanese group and laying plans for war it is waging in support of Tehran, two people familiar with IRGC activities said.

The overhaul was the first of its kind for Hezbollah, a Shi'ite Muslim group founded by the IRGC in 1982, pointing to a hands-on approach after the blows of the 2024 war, including the killing of its leader Hassan Nasrallah and other top commanders. Iran's investment paid off, getting Hezbollah back on its feet in time to enter the war in the Middle East on Tehran's side after it was attacked by the United States and Israel.

Reuters reported earlier in March that Hezbollah had seen another war as inevitable and spent months readying itself. This article sheds light on the IRGC's role in these preparations, based on accounts from six sources who spoke on condition of anonymity as well as an expert on Hezbollah.

The IRGC, deeply involved in Hezbollah since it was established, sent officers to retrain its fighters and oversee rearmament, the two sources familiar with IRGC activities said.

They said IRGC officers also reshaped Hezbollah command structures that had been



Israeli soldiers patrol the Israeli side of the border with Lebanon, in northern Israel on Saturday. AP

Bases in Cyprus not for offensive missions, says UK



RAF Akrotiri, a British sovereign base in Cyprus. REUTERS

Reuters

Nicosia, March 21

## • From Rigid Command to Decentralised Force

- Iran's Revolutionary Guards rebuilt Hezbollah after heavy losses in the 2024 war.
- About 100 IRGC officers were sent to retrain fighters and supervise rearmament.
- The Guards replaced Hezbollah's rigid hierarchy with small, decentralized units.
- Units were structured to know little about each other, boosting operational secrecy.
- IRGC helped reorganize Hezbollah's command and military planning after the ceasefire.
- Coordinated missile attack plans from Iran and Lebanon were drawn up and used March 11.
- Hezbollah fighters are now more resilient, able to continue fighting after major losses.
- Analysts say the group now mirrors Iran's "mosaic defence" model for flexible warfighting.

breached by Israeli intelligence - a factor that had helped Israel kill many Hezbollah leaders.

An Israeli military spokesperson said on March 12 that Hezbollah remains a relevant and dangerous force despite the damage Israel has inflicted on it over the last three years. Hezbollah has fired hundreds of missiles at Is-

E.

rael since it entered the regional war on March 2, prompting an Israeli offensive that has killed more than 1,000 people in Lebanon. Hezbollah fighters are battling Israeli soldiers who have seized ground in the south. It has yet to be seen how Hezbollah would fare in the event of a full-scale Israeli invasion.

BRITAIN WILL not be using its bases in Cyprus for any offensive action in the Iran crisis, the Cypriot government spokesperson said on Saturday, citing a phone call between British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides.

"The British Prime Minister reiterated... that the security of the Republic of Cyprus is fundamental to the United Kingdom and, to that end, a decision has been taken to enhance the means contributing to the preventive measures already in place," the spokesperson said in a written statement.

"Finally, the Prime Minister reiterated that the British Bases in Cyprus will not be used for any offensive military operations."

An Iranian-type Shahed drone caused damage when it hit facilities at Britain's Akrotiri airbase in Cyprus on March 2, with two others later intercepted.

# Sri Lanka eyes Trincomalee project to ease energy woes

**Meera Srinivasan**

COLOMBO

Redeveloping the Second World War-era oil tank farms in Sri Lanka's eastern Trincomalee district is the "permanent solution" to the energy crisis, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath said, adding that the government was taking steps to expedite the project backed by India and the United Arab Emirates.

"Temporary solutions are not sustainable, we need a long-term strategy to deal with oil storage and distribution given the global energy situation," Mr. Herath told *The Hindu* on Saturday, reiterating his recent Parliament address. "That is why at the very beginning, our government

signed the MoU with India and the UAE.," he said, referring to the Memorandum of Agreement signed by the three parties in April 2025, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the island nation, to develop Trincomalee as an energy hub.

The move drew attention as one of the first major MoUs on strategic projects, signed by the Anura Kumara Dissanayake administration after its big win in the November 2025 general elections. The move is widely perceived as a big shift, since the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the main constituent of the ruling National People's Power, had long opposed Indian involvement in the project.



**Severe shortage:** A sign reading 'Closed' is displayed at a Lanka IOC fuel station in Kotahena on the outskirts of Colombo. AFP

After the signing of the MoU nearly a year ago, the three parties have met once, and Sri Lanka has put forward a concept note for the other two partners to respond to, sources familiar with the discussions said. "There are some tech-

nical aspects being addressed by the Energy Ministry. Once that is done, a tender process will be initiated to bring in investors," Mr. Herath said, adding that the government was working to "expedite the process".

For over four decades now, since the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, New Delhi has been negotiating the redevelopment of the strategically located oil tank farms with various governments in Colombo. However, the project has seen little progress beyond initial agreements. However, the current energy crisis, which threatens to severely disrupt global supply chains and economies, has put the once-contested project back in the spotlight.

Although Sri Lanka does not import fuel through the Strait of Hormuz – its sources are India, Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore – the closure of the strait impacted global supply, Minister Herath told

**Parliament last week.**

"When a situation like this erupts...the entire country must face the ramifications. We are facing that same situation today," he said, while speaking on Sri Lanka's response to the crisis in West Asia, including Colombo's refusal to entertain requests from both the United States – ground access to its war planes – and Iran, which sought port calls for its vessels.

Amid escalation in the war in West Asia, following the United States and Israel's attack on Iran, and its retaliation, Sri Lanka switched to a digital QR code-based system to ration fuel sales last week, in what authorities called a "precautionary measure".

# Bangladesh rushes to secure \$2 bn loan amid energy crisis

Agence France-Presse

DHAKA

Bangladesh is pushing to secure loans of around \$2 billion from multilateral agencies for tackling energy security concerns amid soaring global fuel prices driven by the West Asia war.

The government has already taken several measures to curb fuel consumption, including halting production at most fertilizer factories.

The government has now adopted a three-pronged approach to ensure sustainable energy supply, the Prime Minister's finance and planning adviser Rashed Al Titumir said on Saturday.

"Part of that is securing loans," Mr. Titumir said.

## Early disbursement

"The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has committed \$1.3 billion, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has pledged \$500 million as Budget support," he said, adding the government was pursuing the loans for early disbursement.

The government may also approach the World



Rashed Al Titumir

Bank. "As we want to keep foreign currency reserves intact, we have limited options other than seeking loans," Mr. Titumir added.

Bangladesh – which imports 95% of its oil and gas needs – has not raised electricity and fuel prices despite the global surge.

Most crude fuel is sourced from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, while around 35% of gas supply also comes from the West Asia.

Since the outbreak of the war, authorities have taken several measures to curb fuel consumption.

These include setting limits on fuel purchases, halting production at most fertilizer factories, deploying police to patrol filling stations, and using the navy to escort LNG shipments.

# Trump mulls ending war; U.S. eases curbs on Iran oil

U.S. President says securing the Strait of Hormuz is the responsibility of other nations; he adds U.S. is very close to meeting its objectives; however, Tehran claims to have attacked 2 American bases

**Stanly Johnny**

**U**.S. President Donald Trump said on Saturday that he is considering “winding down” the war on Iran, adding that securing the Strait of Hormuz – now under Iran’s control – is the responsibility of other nations, even as Washington temporarily eased sanctions on Iranian oil shipments in a bid to alleviate the global supply crisis.

“We are getting very close to meeting our objectives,” the U.S. President wrote in a post on a social media platform.

Mr. Trump also said that the U.S. has “degraded” Iran’s missile capability, “destroyed” its defence industrial base, and “eliminated” its Navy and Air Force, including anti-aircraft weaponry. The U.S.



**Big hit:** Members of a Red Crescent rescue team working at a building that was damaged by a strike in Tehran. REUTERS

President vowed to protect America’s allies in the region, “including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and others”, adding that the U.S. had taken out Iran’s nuclear capability, and would never allow Tehran to rebuild it.

The U.S. Treasury Department on Friday said it was temporarily lifting sanctions on Iranian oil already loaded onto vessels, to tackle supply disruptions and rising prices.

Meanwhile, on Saturday evening, Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the Islamic

## Centre increases commercial LPG allocation to 50%

**NEW DELHI**

Offering respite to commercial establishments, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas has permitted to allocate an additional 20% of commercial LPG to States. This will take the overall allocation of the commercial cooking gas allocated to States, from two previous and the latest directives, to 50%. » [PAGE 7](#)

Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy said the Guards had attacked two American bases in the Persian Gulf.

**CONTINUED ON**

» [PAGE 7](#)

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# Trump mulls ending war, eases curbs on oil

“IRGC pounded the facilities of the two Al-Minhad [UAE] and Ali Al-Salem [Kuwait] air bases, the hangars, and the fuel depots of American-Zionist aircraft with a massive volume of ballistic missiles and suicide drones. These bases were the origin of the aggression against #IranianIslands,” Mr. Tangsiri said in a post on Saturday.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in a statement, “By temporarily unlocking this existing supply for the world, the U.S. will quickly bring approximately 140 million barrels of oil to global markets, expanding the amount of worldwide energy and helping to relieve the temporary pressures on supply caused by Iran.” “This temporary, short-term authorization is strictly limited to oil that is already in transit and does not allow new purchases or production.”

The U.S. and Israel have carried out thousands of air strikes in Iran since they started the war on February 28. At least 1,400 people have been killed, including Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and its Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani. Mr. Trump has repeatedly claimed that the U.S.-Israeli strikes have destroyed Iran’s military capabilities.

## Iran’s continuing attacks

Despite such claims, Iran has consistently carried out missile and drone attacks against Israel and America’s Persian Gulf Arab allies, besides taking control of the Strait of Hormuz through which one-fifth of the world’s traded oil passed before the war. The attacks on oil facilities in the Gulf and the closure of the Strait have driven up oil, gas, and fertilizer prices. Brent crude closed at \$106 a barrel on Friday, up from \$72 on February 28, the first day of the war.