

Ladakh organisations seek meeting with Home Minister

Shah to visit Union Territory from April 30; activist Wangchuk says Centre should withdraw cases filed against 83 persons during last year's protest for Statehood and inclusion in Sixth Schedule; L-G announces creation of five new districts

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

Ahead of Union Home Minister Amit Shah's visit to Ladakh, the Leh Apex Body (LAB), an amalgam of socio-political-religious organisations, on Monday advocated for a trust-building exercise and sought a meeting with Mr. Shah during his two-day tour of the Union Territory from April 30.

Top leaders of the LAB urged the government to convene a meeting of the high-powered committee, composed of members of it and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), set up under the chairmanship of Mr. Shah.

Activist Sonam Wangchuk, who has been seeking Statehood and Sixth Schedule status for Ladakh, has underlined the need to build trust for "meaningful and constructive dialogue".

"We demand the unconditional withdrawal of cases against 83 people who were arrested after the September 24 incidents (protests for Statehood last year), including the mem-



Vehicles torched by demonstrators demanding Statehood for Ladakh and its inclusion in the Sixth Schedule along a street near the BJP office in Leh on September 25, 2025. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

bers of religious organisations who had gone to stop the violence," Mr. Wangchuk said.

Seeks compensation

The LAB also demanded compensation to the families of four youth who were allegedly killed in security forces' firing in Leh in September. "Around 80 got crippled in indiscriminate police shootings, which were carried out without proper firing orders," the LAB said.

Mr. Shah is touring Ladakh for the first time since the Union Territory wit-

nessed major street protests last year. He is scheduled to pay his respects to the holy relics of Lord Buddha on the occasion of Buddha Purnima on May 1.

Talks to resume

Ladakh Lieutenant-Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Sunday announced the resumption of the Union Home Ministry-level talks with the civil society groups on May 22.

In a "confidence-building measure" ahead of Mr. Shah's visit, the Ladakh administration on Monday announced the creation of

five new districts in the Union Territory.

"A historic day for Ladakh. I have approved the notification for creation of five new districts, fulfilling the aspirations and long-pending demand of the people of Ladakh," Mr. Saxena said.

He said with the creation of the new districts – Nubra, Sham, Changthang, Zaskar and Drass – Ladakh will now have seven districts, from the existing two. "The development is aligned with Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's vision of a deve-

loped and prosperous Ladakh," he said.

The L-G said this "transformative decision", already approved by the Union Home Ministry in August 2024, under the leadership of Mr. Shah, "would strengthen grassroots governance, decentralise administration and ensures faster delivery of public services to the people of Ladakh, especially those in remote and far-flung areas".

"I reaffirm my commitment to ensuring that every citizen of Ladakh benefits from this historic decision, as we move together towards a brighter, stronger and more prosperous future," he said.

Ladakh was carved out as a Union Territory from Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. Besides Statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule [that allows autonomous administration in tribal areas] of the Constitution, Ladakh has also been demanding the establishment of a Public Service Commission for Ladakh and the allocation of two Lok Sabha seats [from one seat at present] for the region.

'People are disappointed... if Shah chairs meet, talks will be decisive'

AHEAD OF Union Home Minister Amit Shah's two-day visit to Ladakh starting April 30, and talks between the Centre and Ladakh next month, activist **Sonom Wangchuk** speaks to **Neeta Sharma** on what he hopes for the Union Territory, and why it would be just for the Centre to fulfill those demands.

Detailed for six months under the National Security Act (NSA), for allegedly instigating the violent protests in Ladakh in September 2025 which led to four deaths in police firing, Wangchuk was released last month. In a statement, the Union Home Minister said it was doing so as the government "remains committed to fostering an environment of peace, stability and mutual trust in Ladakh".

What is your immediate demand for the Centre?

Leaders of the Lehigh Apex Body urge the Centre to withdraw criminal cases against 83 people (arrested along with Wangchuk), who have been wrongfully charged under various Sections. Some of them are spiritual and religious workers and leaders. Some were passersby trying to stop the violence (during the September protests).

I was charged as the 'main conspirator', but the Centre withdrew the NSA against me. We hope such a gesture is



EXPRESS
interview

SONAM WANGCHUK
LADAKHI ACTIVIST

shown to these people too.

The stand of the Ladakh administration is that cases against these people are still on.

I know that as far as my case was concerned, the NSA was withdrawn just before the Supreme Court was to pronounce its judgment (on his detention under the NSA). But we believe it was withdrawn as a goodwill gesture, and so we urge the Centre to show a similar stance towards the 83.

Also, there have been violations on the part of the administration, security forces too. Bullets were used against our own citizens... Trust building can happen if cases are withdrawn, and this gesture can pave the way towards a mean-

ingful dialogue.

This is Amit Shah's first visit to Ladakh since the protests. What do people of Ladakh expect from this visit?

More than expectations, we feel this is the right time to take the dialogue process forward. Shah had earlier too expressed his desire that talks can take place in Ladakh. As earlier, it was stated that leaders of both Lehigh and Kargil should participate in the meetings to be held with the Centre... and that Shah would personally chair the meeting. Now both are together.

This time the Union minister is coming for a pious occasion. Holy relics of Lord Buddha are being brought here... (But) Many leaders will be there, so

talks can happen here also.

Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena has said talks are scheduled to take place on May 22.

Those talks are at the sub-committee level, and no senior officer participates in them. After four months, these talks have been scheduled and these meetings do not lead to a meaningful, constructive dialogue. The Home Minister himself would be in Ladakh... if he can chair a meeting, it would lead talks towards a decisive mode... People are getting disappointed.

What is one non-negotiable demand as per the Lehigh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance?

I have not been a part of previous meetings at the Centre, but what I was told by the leaders was it's not about non-negotiability, rather flexibility... I would say mutual acceptability is the non-negotiable part of it. People are ready to negotiate, but to a mutually acceptable conclusion...

Two issues which have been constantly discussed are statehood, which means democracy restoration, and Sixth Schedule, which means autonomous councils for Scheduled Tribes. This was pledged by the current government... It is any citizen's right to seek... that the government fulfils those pledges.

Some in BJP claim that demanding special constitutional status or statehood can be counterproductive to national security.

It's a very strange argument because if you consider Arunachal Pradesh, when it became a state, the rationale for giving it statehood was it's a sensitive border region and therefore should be made a state. People of Arunachal were not struggling like people in Ladakh are, yet they were given statehood.

So if Arunachal has not become a disturbed place, then that rationale was not wrong. Therefore, it can be applied to Ladakh. And going by that, even Rajasthan is a border state, Gujarat is a border state...

How do you respond to being termed 'anti-national', after the NSA charges against you?

(Laughs) If for India, I'm an anti-national, then all others must be so national, so patriotic that I love to be an anti-national. If that's the benchmark, everybody in Delhi, in Mumbai are patriotic. But unfortunately I doubt that's the case... Somebody who has worked on the borders and on uplifting people, helping soldiers, if that person is called anti-national, then the nationals must be like heavenly, super nation lovers. And I can only congratulate them.

Home Secretary reviews security situation in Manipur amid unrest

Vijaita Singh

NEW DELHI

Amid fresh unrest and killings in Manipur, Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan on Monday reviewed the security situation in the northeastern State that has been affected by ethnic violence since May 2023.

The security vacuum created due to the withdrawal of around 8,500 Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) for deployment during the West Bengal election, frequent disruptions and blockade by women groups and new areas of conflict between Kuki and Naga communities were among the issues flagged at the meeting, a senior government official told *The Hindu*.

Around 36,000 security forces, including Assam Rifles, have been deployed in Manipur since 2023.

The official said over



Govind Mohan

3,300 social media posts that incited violence had been taken down so far.

The meeting was held through video conference and was attended by Director, Intelligence Bureau, Tapan Deka; Manipur Security Adviser Kuldiep Singh; Manipur Director General of Police Rajiv Singh; Director General, Assam Rifles, Lt. Gen. Vikas Lakhera; Director General, Military Operations, Lt. Gen. Abhijit S Pendharkar and other senior State

and Central government officials.

The official said nine additional columns of Assam Rifles had been inducted in the State since violence erupted in Naga-dominated Ukhrul district on February 7, three days after the President's Rule was revoked and a new Chief Minister Y. Khemchand Singh was installed in the State.

Since April 7, Manipur has witnessed 11 killings, including that of two children. The deaths and killings have been reported from Bishnupur district, a Meitei-dominated area, and Ukhrul, where a fresh conflict between Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis has emerged. On Sunday, Tangkhul women groups tried to block the movement of Central security forces. The same day Meitei groups led by women tried to march towards the Chief Minister's residence in Imphal to demand jus-

tice for the children, leading to clashes with security forces, which left several injured.

The relocation of camps of Kuki-Zo insurgent groups in suspension of operation pact (SoO) with the government was discussed.

The possession of a huge number of looted police weapons by the United National Liberation Front - Pambei faction was flagged.

UNLF-P, the oldest armed Meitei insurgent group, for the first time signed a peace agreement with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Manipur government on November 29, 2023, months after ethnic violence between Kuki-Zo and Meitei people erupted in the State on May 3 the same year. The group operates from Myanmar and advocates for secession of Manipur from India.

A tightening of the fist in India's digital public square

Imagine this. You leave a sharp, satirical comment on social media or under a news article about rising fuel prices, and it gets a few likes. A few hours later, the comment disappears. The platform does not explain. Your account remains, but you notice that posts on similar topics no longer appear publicly. You have not been charged with any offence. No court has issued an order. Yet something has quietly shifted.

This is not a far-fetched scenario. It is a plausible outcome under the draft amendments to India's Information Technology Rules released by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on March 30, 2026. Presented as technical clarifications, the changes mark a deeper transformation in how speech is governed online and who gets to decide its limits.

Core area of concern

At the centre of concern is a proposed expansion of executive power that risks bypassing Parliament and the courts. One provision, Rule 3(4), would require platforms to comply with a wide array of government-issued instruments, including advisories, directions and standard operating procedures, as a condition for retaining "safe harbour" protection under Section 79 of the IT Act. In plain terms, platforms would be legally safer if they follow government instructions, even when those instructions do not arise from formal law.

This sits uneasily with the Supreme Court of India's landmark ruling in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2015), which held that platforms are only required to act on unlawful content when they receive a court order or a government notification grounded in law. By allowing informal directives to trigger compliance obligations, the draft rules appear to dilute that constitutional safeguard.

The likely result is not targeted moderation but broad over-censorship. Faced with uncertain and potentially unpublished directives, platforms will err on the side of removal. It is the predictable



Vikram Raj

Journalist associated with the Internet Freedom Foundation

The draft amendments to India's Information Technology Rules trigger fears of digital overreach and a departure from existing judicial rulings

logic of risk management. When liability is unclear, speech becomes expendable.

A second shift expands the scope of state oversight far beyond traditional publishers. Amendments to Rule 8 bring ordinary users who post or share news and current affairs content within the ambit of the government's oversight mechanism. This includes the Inter-Departmental Committee, a body empowered to review content and recommend blocking.

This is not merely an administrative adjustment. It reintroduces, through a different route, a regulatory framework that has already faced judicial scrutiny. In 2021, the Bombay High Court stayed key provisions of the IT Rules, citing concerns under Article 19(4) of the Constitution. The Madras High Court later observed that such oversight could undermine media independence. Those challenges remain pending. Yet, the new draft effectively reconstructs the same architecture while those questions are unresolved.

An undefined role

Equally troubling is the transformation of the Inter-Departmental Committee itself. Originally designed to address grievances, it is now empowered to examine any "matter" referred by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The term is left undefined. A procedure is currently in place under Rule 14 but compliance remains an issue. There is no clear threshold for intervention, and no guarantee that affected users will be heard before action is taken.

This shift from grievance redress to proactive scrutiny changes the character of the body. It becomes less a forum for dispute resolution and more an instrument of preemptive control.

The third major concern lies in expanded data retention obligations. The draft clarifies that platform duties to retain user data operate in addition to requirements under any other law. In practice, this could mean that personal data, browsing activity and communication records are stored for extended periods, potentially years,

depending on overlapping legal mandates.

The risks here are not abstract. Longer retention increases the surface area for misuse, whether through unauthorised access, data breaches or function creep. It also alters the relationship between citizens and digital spaces. When every interaction may be archived indefinitely, self-censorship follows naturally.

Taken together, these amendments signal a shift toward a model where executive discretion plays a dominant role in shaping online speech. The concern is not only about individual provisions but about their cumulative effect. Each change reinforces the other. Informal directives gain force through safe harbour rules. Oversight expands to include ordinary users. Data retention deepens the state's informational reach.

Upsetting the balance

Supporters of the policy may argue that governments require flexible tools to manage harmful content. That is true in principle. But constitutional systems impose limits on how that power is exercised. Delegated legislation must remain within the bounds of its parent statute, a principle affirmed in cases such as *Indian Express Newspapers vs Union of India* (1986). When rules begin to create new obligations that are not clearly grounded in law, the balance between regulation and overreach begins to tilt.

The short public consultation period, which ended on April 14, only heightens the concern. Changes of this magnitude deserve wider debate, legislative scrutiny and careful alignment with existing judicial rulings.

India's digital public sphere has grown precisely because it has allowed a diversity of voices, from professional journalists to ordinary citizens. That openness has always required some regulation. The question now is whether the new rules preserve that openness or narrow it through administrative control.

The answer will shape not only how platforms operate but also how freely citizens can speak, critique, and participate in public life.

Rajya Sabha Chairman accepts the merger of seven AAP MPs with BJP

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Rajya Sabha Secretariat on Monday updated the party-wise list of members in the House, counting Aam Aadmi Party MP Raghav Chadha and six others with the Bharatiya Janata Party, indicating that Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan has accepted their request to switch sides.

With the change, the BJP's strength in the Upper House has risen to 113 while the Congress, the largest Opposition party, remains a distant second with 29 members.

Welcoming the seven MPs in a post on X, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said: "For a long time, I have observed that these seven Hon'ble MPs have not resorted to abusive language and have never created indiscipline or indulged in unparliamentary conduct. Wel-



Joining hands: Rajya Sabha members Raghav Chadha and others meeting BJP president Nitin Nabin in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

come to nation building NDA under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister @narendramodi ji and goodbye to the Tukde-Tukde INDI Alliance."

On Friday, seven of the AAP's 10 Rajya Sabha members – Mr. Chadha, Ashok Mittal, Sandeep Pathak, Harbhajan Singh, Rajendra Gupta, Vikramjit Sahney and Swati Maliwal – quit the party and submitted a letter to the Rajya Sabha Chairman informing

him of their "merger" with the BJP.

The AAP reacted on Sunday with its Rajya Sabha leader Sanjay Singh filing a petition seeking their disqualification, calling the move a violation of the anti-defection law. "The Chairman has taken cognisance of the letter submitted by those seven MPs and, based on that, accepted their merger. The objections raised by us and the disqualification sought un-

der the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution have not even been considered," Mr. Singh said.

He added that the party hoped the Chairman would, after examining its submission, act "in favour of the Constitution and democracy" by disqualifying the seven members. "If that does not happen, we will approach the court. It is wrong to break a party in this manner," he had said.

Under the laid-down procedure, the Rajya Sabha Chairman is the final authority in deciding disqualification petitions.

Senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said the Chairman's decision to accept the "merger" of the seven AAP MPs with the BJP was "not at all surprising". "In fact, the only surprise is that it took so long and was not formally accepted over the weekend. Small mercies make up Indian democracy now," Mr. Ramesh wrote on X.

India, New Zealand sign 'historic' free trade deal

Deal to be implemented after New Zealand Parliament ratification later this year; Prime Minister calls the agreement a milestone, says it reflects 'convergence of values, trust, and shared ambition'

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India and New Zealand on Monday signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that Prime Ministers of both the countries hailed as a "historic" step towards deepening trade, investment, and people-to-people ties.

The FTA, signed by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and his New Zealand counterpart, Todd McClay, in New Delhi, will see New Zealand removing tariffs on all goods imported from India, while India will remove or reduce tariffs on 95% of current imports from New Zealand.

"Today marks a historic milestone in India's journey towards deeper global engagement and shared prosperity," a statement

Deal dynamics

The graphic lists select products on which India will be reducing or eliminating tariffs, as well as items excluded from the deal. New Zealand has removed tariffs on all items

Immediate elimination

- Wood | ■ Wool
- Leather-raw hides

Phased elimination

- Petroleum oil
- Vegetable oils
- Select electrical machinery

Tariff reductions

- Wine and pharma
- Polymers, aluminium, iron and steel articles

Products excluded by India

- Dairy products (milk, cream, whey, yoghurt, cheese etc.)
- Animal products (other than sheep meat)
- Agricultural products (onions, chana, peas, corn, almonds etc.)
- Sugar | ■ Artificial honey
- Copper and articles thereof (cathodes, cartridges, rods)
- Aluminium and articles thereof (ingots, billets etc.)



Sealing the deal: Union Minister of Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, with New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment, Todd McClay, during the signing ceremony of the FTA in New Delhi on Monday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

read out by Mr. Goyal quoted Prime Minister Narendra Modi as saying. "The signing of the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement reflects our strengthening economic partnership and a convergence of values, trust and shared

ambition between two vibrant democracies."

This FTA, discussions for which were announced in March 2025 and concluded in December 2025, is one of the fastest India has negotiated.

The deal still needs to be

ratified by New Zealand's Parliament, which Mr. McClay said would happen soon while adding that it would come into force within this year.

CONTINUED ON

» **PAGE 10**

India, New Zealand sign 'historic' free trade deal

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon – in a statement read out by Mr. McClay – said that during a time of global uncertainty, this FTA is a clear commitment by both sides to a stable, predictable and rules-based trade. “And the India-New Zealand story is about more than trade,” Mr. Luxon said. “New Zealand and India are building a relationship that is bigger, deeper and more exciting every year – across trade, investment, defence, sport, and innovation.”

India's exports to New Zealand grew 32.1% in 2024-25 to \$711.1 million, the latest full financial year for which there is data. Imports from New Zealand grew 75.2% to \$587.1 million over the same period.

Gains beyond trade

“This FTA is far more than an agreement on tariffs and rules of origin,” Mr. Goyal said. “It is a comprehensive framework spanning market access, agricultural productivity, investment, and mobility, designed to benefit manufacturing, farmers, artisans, MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, students, and skilled professionals across both nations.”

Apart from the tariff concessions, the FTA also includes several provisions relating to the mobility of working professionals and students from India.

Mr. McClay expressed confidence that the deal would benefit New Zealander exporters substantially.

“This once-in-a-generation agreement delivers opportunities New Zealand exporters have never had in India,” he said. “It will deliver thousands of jobs and unleash huge potential for our world-class exporters. Not only will it enhance established business relationships, it will accelerate the development of new partnerships to significantly boost economic engagement and bring benefits to both of our countries.”

The FTA includes a provision wherein New Zealand has committed to facilitate \$20 billion in investments into India over the next 15 years.

“Our Make in India flagship initiative offers synergy to New Zealand's investment commitment of \$20 billion in India and delivers a vibrant partnership that goes beyond trade,” Mr. Modi said in his statement.

Industry bodies and exporters welcomed the deal, saying it would open up new opportunities for India's exports in several key sectors.

INCLUDE IN LEFT ON SCO

Rajnath in Bishkek for SCO meeting

Event brings together the Defence Ministers of SCO member states; Minister is expected to hold bilateral discussions with his counterparts

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Monday arrived in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, leading a high-level Indian delegation for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' Meeting on Tuesday.

On the sidelines of the meeting, Mr. Singh is expected to hold bilateral discussions with his counterparts from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and other participating nations, aimed at strengthening defence cooperation and expanding strategic ties.

Sources in the Defence Ministry said the meeting would bring together the Defence Ministers of SCO member states to deliberate on key regional and global security challenges, international peace, counter-terrorism efforts, and enhancing defence collaboration within the grouping.

The discussions are being held amid ongoing geopolitical tensions linked to the West Asia crisis, with member countries likely to



India connect: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with members of the Indian diaspora in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic on Monday. PTI

The Defence Minister will underscore Indian stance of zero tolerance towards terrorism, extremism

explore measures to mitigate the impact of the conflict on regional stability.

During the meeting, Mr. Singh is expected to reiterate India's commitment to global peace and stability, while underscoring its firm stance of zero tolerance towards terrorism and extremism in the face of evol-

ing security challenges.

Established on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, the SCO is one of the largest regional organisations focusing on political, economic, and security cooperation. Its members are India, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Belarus.

India became a full member of the SCO in 2017 and assumed the rotating chairmanship in 2023, further deepening its engagement with the grouping.

Discussing Chabahar port issue with Iran and U.S., says Centre

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Chabahar port issue is being discussed with both Iran and the United States, the External Affairs Ministry said on Monday, as India faces a crucial test of its strategic autonomy with the U.S. sanctions waiver having expired on Sunday.

New Delhi has two options of either exiting the 23-year-old project in the Iranian port city or facing U.S. sanctions.

“The issue is under discussion with both Iran and United States. Obviously, the current conflict is also a complicating factor,” Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. “We will keep you posted as the situation evolves.”

Washington granted New Delhi a six-month waiver last October to “wind down” Indian operations at the port and not



Randhir Jaiswal

face sanctions. Given the ongoing conflict and the U.S. seeking to tighten any economic avenue of Iran, Ministry officials said they were not hopeful of another extension.

As a result, the government has been exploring other options, which also includes transferring its stake in the Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar to an Iranian company. This will give India the leeway to take control of the project at a later time.

U.S. Pacific Air Forces chief pays week-long visit to India to strengthen defence ties

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

The Commander of the U.S. Pacific Air Forces, General Kevin Schneider, visited India from April 19 to 25, reaffirming the U.S.'s commitment to strengthening its strategic defence partnership with India, and advancing a shared vision for a secure and stable Indo-Pacific, a statement by the U.S Embassy in India said on Monday.

During the visit, Gen. Schneider held discussions with senior Indian defence leadership, including officials from the Indian Air Force, aimed at reinforcing long-standing military ties and exploring avenues for operational collaboration.

The visit underscored the growing scope, complexity and interoperability of U.S.-India defence



Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Anil Chauhan calls on U.S. Commander Gen. Kevin B. Schneider in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

cooperation across multiple domains, including air, land, sea, space and cyberspace, the statement said.

Both nations continue to deepen their defence partnership, with shared democratic values and mutual interests in maintaining regional stability, the statement said.

In recent years, India-U.S. cooperation has included joint exercises,

training engagements, and high-level exchanges, improving the ability of both forces to operate together in diverse scenarios, it said.

The visit reaffirms the strength of the U.S.-India major defence partnership and signals continued momentum in expanding defence collaboration to address evolving regional and global challenges, it said.

The evolving China-Pakistan space cooperation

The 'all-weather ties' between China and Pakistan are reflected in their space cooperation as well

Gunjan Singh

The Chinese space programme has undertaken major strides since it built and launched its first satellite in 1970. In last half a century Beijing has conducted satellite launches, built its own navigation system, carried out successful spacewalks, and built and operated its own space station.

China is also in the process of undertaking a manned moon mission by 2030. China has also consistently promoted its space technologies and pushed for cooperation under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This entails "a service network weaved by satellites and ground stations among the BRI partner countries has promoted the space industry to better benefit the local people". China has also used its launching platform, the Long March, to promote its soft power by launching satellite for a number of other countries.

The 'all-weather friendship' between China and Pakistan has been replicated in their space cooperation as well. The partnership began in 1990 with China launching Pakistan's Badr-1 satellite. Today, China has built and launched satellites for Pakistan and in 2026 announced that it will send one Pakistani astronaut to the Tiangong space station.

Lunar mission and satellite launches China has selected Muhammad Zeeshan Ali and Khurram Daud, two Pakistani candidates who will be trained in China for a visit to the Tiangong space station. However, only one of them will be visiting the space station as the payload specialist. This is being done under the 2025 agreement between the China Manned Space Engineering Office (CMSEO) and the Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission.

China had also launched the ICUBE-Q in 2024 on Chang'e 6 orbiter. This was

developed in a collaboration between the Pakistan's Institute of Space Technology (IST) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU). The ICUBE-Q, a lunar CubeSat weighing about 7kg was to explore the far side of the moon. It was successful in capturing images of the moon and the sun and transmitting them back to Earth.

China has been the only country which has launched a number of Pakistani satellites in the last two decades. This has helped Pakistan build a network of reconnaissance and communication satellite network. The latest mission in April 2026 saw Pakistan's indigenous electro-optical satellite, EO-3 being launched from China's Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center. In 2025 China had launched three Pakistani satellites, a remote-sensing satellite (PRSS-2) in October 2025, Pakistan Remote Sensing Satellite (PRSS-1) in July 2025 and PRSC-EO1 in January 2025. In 2024 China had launched the second communication

satellite for Pakistan, PakSat MMI. The first Pakistani communication satellite PAKSAT-IR was launched in 2011.

Navigation cooperation

BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) is China's indigenous navigation system. It is also seen as the plausible alternative to the United States' Global Positioning System (GPS). The BeiDou system is considered to be very precise with providing information with 2 centimetres precision and this can be improved to 5 millimetres after image processing. This can be very helpful in disaster relief, urban planning, traffic guidance as well as environmental management. In 2014 Pakistan became the first foreign country to use the BeiDou navigation system.

Under the China-Pakistan defence cooperation, the Pakistani military is all equipped to use the BeiDou system. In 2020 Chinese Satellite Navigation Office (CSNO) had announced that they will be establishing a Continuously Operating Radar Station (CORS) network in Pakistan which will be BeiDou enabled.

The developments highlight that the ties between China and Pakistan has moved to the space arena as well, giving Islamabad a strategic advantage. The dual nature of space technology also helps Pakistan gain access to better navigation, telecommunication and disaster relief. (Dr. Gunjan Singh is an Associate Professor at OP Jindal Global University.)

Iran offers to reopen Strait of Hormuz if U.S. lifts its blockade

Associated Press

CAIRO

Iran has offered to end its chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. lifts its blockade on the country and ends the war in a proposal that would postpone discussions on the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme, two regional officials said on Monday.

U.S. President Donald Trump seems unlikely to accept the offer, which was passed to the Americans by Pakistan and would leave unresolved the disagreements that led the U.S. and Israel to go to war on February 28. Mr. Trump has said one of the major reasons he went to war was to deny Iran the ability to develop nuclear weapons.

The offer emerged as Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Russia and met President Vladimir Putin, who, according



Russian President Vladimir Putin with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in St. Petersburg on Monday. AFP

to state news agency Tass, praised Iranian people as "bravely and heroically fighting for their sovereignty". Russia would do everything possible to bring peace to West Asia, Tass reported Mr. Putin as saying. It is unclear what, if any, assistance Moscow, which has long been a key backer of Tehran, might offer now.

CONTINUED ON

» **PAGE 10**

HEZBOLLAH REJECTS TALKS

» **PAGE 14**

+ Iran offers to open strait if U.S. lifts its blockade

Iran's ability to choke off traffic in the Strait of Hormuz has proved one of its biggest strategic advantages in the war.

The Iranian Foreign Minister, in a video interview posted by Iran's state-run IRNA news agency before his meeting with the Russian President, said that it was "a good opportunity for us to consult with our Russian friends about the developments that have occurred in relation to the war during this period and what is happening now."

Over the weekend, Mr. Araghchi made two stops in Pakistan and a visit to Oman, which shares the strait with Iran. He also spoke by phone with counterparts in Qatar and Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

Iran wants to persuade Oman to support a mechanism to collect tolls from vessels passing through the strait, according to a regional official. The official, who is involved in mediation efforts, also said Iran insisted on ending the U.S. blockade before new talks and that Pakistan-led mediators are trying to bridge significant gaps between the countries.

Mr. Trump told journalists Saturday that after he called off a trip by his envoys to Pakistan, Iran sent a "much better" proposal.

TALKS BETWEEN PUTIN AND ARAGHCHI 'USEFUL' AND 'CONSTRUCTIVE' SAYS LAVROV

Putin meets Araghchi, says Russia ready to do its best to bring peace in West Asia

Russia is ready to mediate if all sides agree: Kremlin spokesperson

Press Trust of India
Moscow, April 27

IRAN'S FOREIGN Minister Abbas Araghchi on Monday met Russian President Vladimir Putin, who hailed the Iranian people for fighting bravely and heroically for their sovereignty and said Moscow is ready to do its best to help bring peace to West Asia as soon as possible.

Araghchi, who held talks with Omani and Pakistani leadership before arriving in Russia, met Putin in St Petersburg and thanked him for supporting Iran, state-owned TASS news agency reported.

"Russia is ready to do everything in its power to ensure that peace in West Asia is achieved as soon as possible," Putin said during his meeting with Araghchi, which was attended by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Revealing that he received a message from Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei last week, Putin asked Araghchi to convey his "gratitude for this message and best wishes for his health and well-being." He praised the Iranian people for fighting "bravely and heroically" for their sovereignty, Iran's state-



Russian President Vladimir Putin with Iran Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi during their meeting at the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, in St Petersburg, Russia, on Monday. AP

run PRESS TV reported.

"We really hope that, based on the courage and desire for independence, the Iranian people, under the guidance of the new leader, will weather this difficult period of trials and peace will come," Putin said.

He also stressed that Russia "intends to maintain" its strategic relations with Iran.

Araghchi said that the world witnessed Iran's strength in countering the US during the recent war, and that the Islamic Republic is a "stable and powerful establishment." "With their courage, the Iranian people

succeeded in resisting the US aggression and will be able to endure it," he said.

He said that it became clear that Iran has "great friends and allies" like Russia, and conveyed "warmest greetings" from Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei and President Masoud Pezeshkian to the Russian leader.

Araghchi said relations between Moscow and Tehran represent a "strategic partnership at the highest level" and will continue to develop "regardless of circumstances." "We are grateful to you for the solid and strong positions in support of the Is-

lamic Republic of Iran," he said.

Foreign Minister Lavrov said that the talks between President Putin and the Iranian Foreign Minister were "useful and constructive."

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov later said that Russia is "ready to provide any good offices, any mediation services that are acceptable to the parties. We will be ready to do everything so that ultimately peace ensues, guaranteed peace, and that there is no return to hostilities," Peskov was quoted as saying by TASS. He was asked how Moscow can assist in future.

Despite new proposal from Iran, truce talks with US are in a flux

Associated Press
Dubai, April 27

IRAN'S FOREIGN minister continued his shuttle diplomacy, landing in St. Petersburg for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday after a weekend in Pakistan and Oman. Tehran also pitched a new proposal to end the war with the US and Israel.

But the US delegation canceled its trip to Pakistan, raising fears a deal to end the war and open the crucial Strait of Hormuz remains elusive.

Iran's latest proposal would put off negotiations on its nuclear program to a future date.

Instead, the deal would only see Tehran end its chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for Washington lifting its blockade on Iranian ports and a long-term or permanent truce, according to two regional officials with knowledge of the proposal who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door negotiations.

That offer will likely be rejected by US President Donald Trump. For one, it doesn't address the core issue he cited

when he began bombing on February 28: finding a way to ensure that Iran cannot build an atomic weapon. It also appears to be silent on other questions, like Iran's missile program and its support of proxies in region.

This weekend, Trump held back sending envoys to Pakistan, which has been playing a crucial mediating role. By saying the Iranians could call Wash-

ington with any proposal, Trump appears to be signaling he's trying to continue to squeeze Iran via a blockade.

The current truce began April 8 after multiple deadlines posed by Trump that threatened Iran's very "civilization" at one point. A separate ceasefire between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group in Lebanon also has taken effect. Trump has now extended the ceasefire with Iran indefinitely after whipsawing between various timelines for the conflict.

But negotiations for ending the war have stalled.

US Vice President JD Vance took part in an earlier round of talks days after the truce began between America and Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

E.

Hezbollah rejects Israel-Lebanon direct talks; Aoun pledges to end war

The Lebanese group's chief calls direct talks a 'grave sin' that will destabilise the country; President says those dragging Lebanon into war were committing 'treason'; Israeli attacks killed over 2,500 people, according to Lebanese authorities

Agence France-Presse
BEIRUT

Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem on Monday rejected Lebanon's planned direct negotiations with Israel, calling them a "grave sin" that will destabilise Lebanon.

Shortly after, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun took a jab at the Iran-backed group, saying those who dragged the country to war were committing "treason".

Lebanon and Israel's U.S. Ambassadors met twice in Washington over the past weeks, the first meetings of their kind in decades, for talks that



Under occupation: Israeli soldiers walking along a road between destroyed houses in southern Lebanon on Monday. AFP

were rejected by the Hezbollah.

After the first round of talks, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a 10-day ceasefire that came into effect on April 17, later announcing a three-week

extension after the second round of talks.

"We categorically reject direct negotiations with Israel, and those in power should know that their actions will not benefit Lebanon or themselves," Mr.

Qassem said. He called on authorities to "back down from their grave sin that is putting Lebanon in a spiral of instability".

President hits back

Lebanon's President said that direct negotiations with Israel were aimed at ending the war with Israel.

"My goal is to reach an end to the state of war with Israel, similar to the armistice agreement" of 1949, President Aoun said. The two countries have officially been at war since 1948.

"Was the armistice agreement a humiliation? I assure you that I will not accept reaching a humiliating agreement."

Mr. Aoun said: "What

we are doing is not treason. Rather, treason is committed by those who take their country to war to achieve foreign interests".

Lebanese authorities have stated that the goal of the U.S.-led negotiations is to stop the war and secure Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

"These direct negotiations and their outcomes are as if they do not exist for us, and they do not concern us in the slightest," Mr. Qassem said. "We will continue our defensive resistance for Lebanon and its people," he added.

Israeli attacks killed over 2,500 people since the start of war on March 2, according to authorities.

China blocks Meta acquisition of AI start-up Manus amid U.S. tech rivalry

Associated Press

HONG KONG

China on Monday blocked U.S. tech giant Meta's acquisition of the artificial intelligence startup Manus, in an unexpected move to reverse a deal that apparently aroused Beijing's concerns about the transfer of advanced technology.

In a one-line statement, China's National Development and Reform Commission, the country's top planning agency, said it was prohibiting a foreign acquisition of Manus and had required all the parties to withdraw from the deal.

The decision by the commission's Office of the Working Mechanism for Security Review of Foreign



Artificial apprehensions: The decision reflects Beijing's concerns about transfer of advanced technology. REUTERS

Investment came after Chinese authorities said they were looking into the deal earlier this year.

The commission did not elaborate on the reasons for the ban.

The announcement came less than a month be-

fore U.S. President Donald Trump's planned visit to Beijing to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping in May, in a sign that China's communist leaders are tightening scrutiny of the AI industry amid intensifying geopolitical rivalry with the United

States over the technology. Meta announced in December that it was acquiring Manus, which has Chinese roots but is based in Singapore, in a rare case of a major U.S. tech group buying an AI company with strong links to China. Its deal with Manus, whose "general-purpose" AI agent can perform multistep complex work autonomously, was expected to help expand AI offerings across Meta's platforms.

Meta said on Monday that the Manus transaction "complied fully with applicable law."

"We anticipate an appropriate resolution to the inquiry," the California-based company said in a statement.