

# Heavy polling in Bengal Phase 2

92.6% turnout recorded as 142 constituencies vote in last phase

Mamata accuses BJP of trying to 'rig' poll at her Bhabanipur seat

EC to retain 700 companies of Central forces in the State

**Shiv Sahay Singh**  
**Shrabana Chatterjee**  
KOLKATA

**T**here was a record turnout of 92.6% in the second and final phase of polling for the West Bengal Assembly election on Wednesday, amidst isolated incidents of unrest and violence. This is in tune with the record turnout in the first phase, where 93.19% of the electorate cast their votes in 152 seats on April 23.

The total turnout across the two phases stands at 92.9%, the highest polling in any West Bengal Assembly election since Independence, according to the State's Chief Electoral Officer.

In the second phase, polling was held in 142 Assembly seats spread across seven districts. The highest polling rates were recorded in the rural-dominated areas of Purba Bardhaman

## Strong mandate

Map shows constituency-wise turnout % (EC data as of 12.30 a.m. on Thursday)



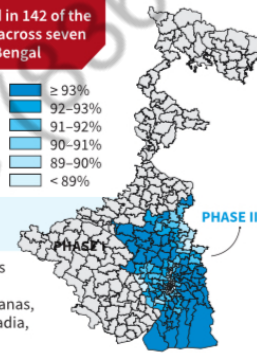
PHOTO: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Around 93% of voters in West Bengal exercised their franchise across the two phases after a 12.6% reduction in electorate due to the SIR

PHASE II  
VOTER  
TURNOUT **92.6%**

The highest turnout among districts was recorded in Purba Bardhaman (93.8%) followed by South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, and Nadia, all with more than 92%

Votes were polled in 142 of the 294 seats spread across seven districts of West Bengal



(93.83%), followed by South 24 Parganas (93.48%), North 24 Parganas (92.92%), Howrah (92.59), and Nadia (92.14%), districts.

The lowest turnout was in the Kolkata South administrative district, where 87.84% of voters exercised their franchise. The adjoining Kolkata North administrative district recorded an 89.36% turnout, while the

Hooghly (91.98%) saw a turnout of 92.35%. The polling rate is expected to rise as the final figures are yet to be released by the Election Commission at the time of publication.

The Election Commission has decided to retain 700 companies of the Central forces in the State even after the polling concluded on Wednesday evening.

The Bhabanipur consti-

tuency, which has been the epicentre of the electoral contest with Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee defending the seat against Bharatiya Janata Party leader Suvendu Adhikari, witnessed dramatic moments when Ms. Banerjee started visiting polling booths, accusing Central forces and observers of working on the instruc-

tions of the BJP. "People are supposed to cast their votes, not the police... Can voting take place like this?" Ms. Banerjee asked, alleging that there were attempts to rig the elections at the behest of the BJP. Tensions escalated when Mr. Adhikari arrived in the constituency. The BJP candidate was surrounded by Trinamool supporters, who raised "Joy Bangla" slogans. The commotion continued for several minutes as the BJP candidate, surrounded by a posse of security personnel, went from one booth to another. At one point, Mr. Adhikari was seen running on the streets of Bhabanipur. A similar situation erupted when the BJP leader visited the Kolkata Port Assembly seat as well.

**CONTINUED ON**  
» PAGE 10  
**MANY FIRSTS**  
» PAGE 11

# Merger of AAP MPs with BJP: Punjab CM Mann to meet President on May 5

On April 24, the Kejriwal-led party suffered a jolt when seven of its 10 Rajya Sabha MPs quit and merged with BJP, alleging that the party had 'strayed' from its principles, values and core morals

**Press Trust of India**  
CHANDIGARH

**P**unjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, who had sought an appointment with President Droupadi Murmu to demand the "recall" of the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) Rajya Sabha MPs who joined the BJP, said on Wednesday he will meet her on May 5.

"The President has given a time of 12 noon on May 5 and I will certainly meet her," Mr. Mann told reporters here.

On whether there was any provision for recalling a legislator in the law, he gave no clear answer. Mr. Mann also did not clarify whether party MLAs will accompany him when he meets the President.

On April 24, AAP suffered a jolt when seven of its 10 Rajya Sabha MPs - Raghav Chadha, Ashok Mittal, Sandeep Pathak, Harbhajan Singh, Rajendra Gupta, Vikramjit Sahney, and Swati Maliwal - quit and merged with the BJP,



Those who break trust are called *gaddars*, said CM Bhagwant Mann referring to party MPs who defected to the BJP. FILE PHOTO

alleging that the party had 'strayed' from its principles, values and core morals. Six of the seven MPs who quit AAP were from Punjab.

## Merger accepted

Rajya Sabha Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan on Monday officially accepted the merger of the lawmakers with the BJP, reducing the strength of the Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP in the Upper House to three.

On speculation that the government will bring a

confidence motion during the special session of the Assembly on May 1, Mr. Mann said, "There are already 94 MLAs [of the party]. What could be the bigger confidence of the people of Punjab than this? When a budget passes, it also shows confidence. If a budget fails, then a government can fall. All our Bills were passed almost unanimously. If somebody claims that so many [MLAs] are in contact [with other parties] and their [AAP] government will fall,

then we will bring the confidence [motion]," he said.

Referring to the seven MPs who defected to the BJP, the Chief Minister said, "Those who break trust are called *gaddars* (traitors)."

## 'BJP most fake party'

Meanwhile, senior AAP leader and former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Wednesday termed the BJP the "most fake party" that is always trying to "break" other parties and misusing the Central probe agencies.

Mr. Sisodia, party in-charge of Punjab, was speaking to reporters after chairing a meeting of party MLAs, block observers, and members in Jalandhar.

Asked if some of the AAP legislators in the State were in touch with leaders of the Opposition party, he said, "The BJP is the most fake party. It is full of *gaddars* from other parties. It only knows how to break other outfits and the country, and misuse the ED and the CBI."

# Kargil leaders oppose 'skewed restructuring' of districts in Ladakh

**Peerzada Ashiq**

SRINAGAR

Ladakh Lieutenant-Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Wednesday formally inaugurated the five new districts that were carved out in the Union Territory.

However, just a day ahead of Union Home Minister Amit Shah's two-day visit to Leh, several leaders in Kargil expressed reservations over the creation of the new districts.

Sajjad Kargili, a member of the Kargil Democratic Alliance, said the move has resulted in the formation of five Buddhist-majority districts and only two Muslim-majority districts.

"This disproportionate distribution reflects a deeply skewed and discriminatory approach, undermining the spirit of fairness and inclusivity," he said.

The process has "clearly ignored" regional sensitivities, demographic realities,

and principles of equitable representation, he said. "We strongly oppose this arbitrary and insensitive restructuring," he added.

## 'Can't be overlooked'

Mohammad Jaffer Akhoon, chairman and chief executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council-Kargil, said the exclusion of Sankoo and Shakar Chiktan Shargole subdivisions, both Muslim-majority areas, "cannot be overlooked".

Mr. Akhoon said he is hopeful Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr. Shah, and Mr. Saxena will ensure that a separate notification is issued declaring Sankoo and Shakar Chiktan Shargole as new districts.

Mustafa Haji, the Leh Apex Body's legal adviser, said the manner in which the districts were created reflects "huge discrimination towards the Muslim population of Kargil".

# Compounding gains

## The New Zealand Free Trade

### Agreement builds on seven recent FTAs

The India-New Zealand Free Trade agreement (FTA) signed on Monday might look underwhelming when viewed in isolation, but is nevertheless significant when looking at what has been happening over the last five to six years. This impression is because New Zealand's economy is one-sixteenth the size of India's, and makes up less than 1% of India's total trade. Yet, this view ignores the fact that the FTA comes soon after the signing of, or closure of negotiations on, seven other trade agreements in the past three and a half years or so. It also ignores the larger policy goals that India is trying to achieve through such deals. The COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. tariff frictions have shown India that it needs to diversify supply chains on the import and export sides. Weaning off imports from China is a tough task. Yet, any chipping away of the 16% of India's imports that China accounts for would be welcome. Importantly, the strategic need to diversify export destinations, especially while the mercurial Donald Trump is in charge of India's largest export market, is clear and urgent. The trade deals with Mauritius, the UAE, Australia, the EFTA nations, the U.K., the EU, Oman, and now New Zealand all provide Indian exporters opportunities that they should take advantage of. Finally, dismissing this FTA on the basis of its size would be unfair to India's negotiators who have done well to use India's comparative advantage to push through key victories.

The first key strength of the FTA for India, and unprecedented, is that New Zealand will remove all goods tariffs immediately on execution of the agreement. The second strength is that India managed to avoid providing any concessions on any of its sensitive sectors. Key among these exclusions is dairy, something New Zealand had been especially keen to include. The third positive is New Zealand's commitment to facilitate investments in India worth \$20 billion over 15 years. This is similar to the provisions in the EFTA trade pact, wherein the four EFTA countries committed to facilitate \$100 billion of investments in India over 15 years. To be sure, these are commitments to facilitate and not commitments to invest, but getting them included in the text of the deal is nevertheless significant. To help this along, India will create a dedicated desk to address any issues New Zealander investors might face. Such a targeted approach to foreign investment is necessary if India wants to achieve the multiple goals of weaning off China, increasing and diversifying exports, creating jobs, bolstering the capital account, and generally increasing incomes. The other long-standing need of helping domestic manufacturers scale up remains a sticky problem.

# Why has the creamy layer debate returned to court?

Is the current push based on a misreading of the judgment? Can income be used as a proxy?

## LETTER & SPIRIT

Prannv Dhawan  
Vignesh Karthik K.R.

Fresh petitions before the Supreme Court are seeking to extend the creamy layer principle to SC/ST reservations, based on a misreading of the 2024 Davinder Singh judgment. The move revives a decades-old debate about whether income can serve as a proxy for caste-based disadvantage, and whether social justice can be trapped inside an economic test.

### The renewed push

On March 10, the Supreme Court issued notice to the Centre and all States on a public interest litigation filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay seeking the exclusion of a “creamy layer” from SC/ST

reservations. A separate plea, filed in February, sought an income-based prioritisation mechanism within these quotas. Both petitions claim constitutional sanction from the same source: the seven-judge bench decision in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024).

That judgment permitted States to sub-classify Scheduled Caste communities to direct reservation benefits toward the most marginalised within them. Four of seven judges made passing observations that creamy layer logic might apply to SC/ST groups.

### A doctrine born in ambiguity

The creamy layer principle entered Indian constitutional law through the judgment in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), where the Supreme Court upheld OBC reservations but held that more advanced sections, the “creamy layer,” should be excluded from benefits.

The 1993 Office Memorandum that

followed identified creamy layer exclusion primarily through status, not income. Holding a Class I or Class II post in government was the proxy, a recognition that institutional power compounds across generations.

This architecture was progressively diluted. A 2004 clarificatory letter from the Department of Personnel and Training began treating PSU salaries as a standalone disqualifying criterion. On March 11, the Supreme Court in *Union of India v. Rohith Nathan* struck down that letter, holding that parental salary alone cannot determine creamy layer status. The 1993 OM’s status-based logic was restored, but the deeper premise of the doctrine, that economic attainment adequately measures the erasure of social disadvantage, remained intact and unexamined.

### The Ambedkar objection

In his 1932 note to the Lothian

Committee, B.R. Ambedkar warned that excluding wealthy or educated individuals from the category of untouchables was “a totally erroneous view.”

At the Mahar Conference of 1936, Ambedkar put it concretely: the educated, propertied Mahar still cannot open a shop without customers leaving when his caste is known; he still cannot apply for a job without his identity becoming a disqualification. Economic progress and social emancipation travel on different tracks, and the creamy layer doctrine collapses the two.

Data presented in *Jaishri Patil v. Union of India* (2021) showed that even Group D government employees were rendered ineligible for post-matric scholarships due to income-testing. The court noted that a family earning ₹6 lakh a year cannot be equated with one earning ₹24 lakh simply because both exceed a common ceiling. Statistical research published by Nishith Prakash showed that elite capture of quota benefits was a myth. Contrary to the popular notion, the positive impact of quota policy is concentrated among “the less-educated SC members in rural areas.” The doctrine’s bluntness produces what may be called a creamy layer trap: the bar is set low enough to exclude the barely stable, yet the social burdens that reservation addresses persist regardless of salary bracket.

### The SC/ST distinction

The case for creamy layer exclusion was

always weaker for SC/ST communities than for OBCs. Sub-classification, what Davinder Singh actually authorised, is a different instrument entirely. It asks which sub-communities within the SC list are least represented and directs preference toward them.

Extending creamy layer logic to SC/ST would mean removing individuals from reservation eligibility based on parental income, precisely what Ambedkar argued was constitutionally and sociologically indefensible. Justice B.R. Gavai, who endorsed the broader principle in *Davinder Singh*, himself acknowledged that the criteria for SC/ST cannot be identical to those for OBCs.

### Parliament’s moment

The *Rohith Nathan* judgment creates a narrow but real opportunity for legislative recalibration, one that measures social backwardness by the subordination they continue to face. Parliament has both the constitutional authority and the democratic obligation to clarify that sub-classification and creamy layer exclusion are distinct instruments, and that the latter has no application to communities whose inclusion in the Presidential list was never conditioned on poverty.

(Prannv Dhawan is an LLM Candidate at Yale Law School. Vignesh Karthik KR is a postdoctoral research affiliate at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden)

# South Asian power balance shifts toward Pakistan

In recent weeks, an intense debate has emerged in India regarding Pakistan's rising diplomatic stature, following its role as mediator and venue for negotiations between the United States and Iran. Iranian and American officials – including U.S. President Donald Trump – have publicly acknowledged Pakistan's leadership, specifically Field Marshal Asim Munir and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, for their role in precipitating and sustaining the ceasefire, and maintaining channels of communication.

While Pakistan is now seen as central to diplomacy around the Iran war, India's response has been marked by silence – variously interpreted as caution toward Mr. Trump or as strategic restraint. India has not criticised Israel or the U.S. for their actions, and this contrast with Pakistan's rising role has fuelled debate within India's strategic community about the shifting balance between the two countries.

## Gains from enhanced diplomatic visibility

Pakistan's diplomatic visibility has increased not only due to its mediation role but also because of its expanding engagement with Washington and its growing influence in Gulf security. Its relationship with the U.S. – particularly under Mr. Trump – has elevated Pakistan's profile. At the same time, its defence partnership with Saudi Arabia, and possibly a similar security partnership with Qatar, have further reinforced its strategic relevance in the region.

This enhanced diplomatic position has translated into economic and political gains. Saudi Arabia's pledge of billions of dollars highlights the financial dividends of Pakistan's rising influence. Since the end of Operation Sindoor, Pakistan has also secured several diplomatic wins denying India's efforts to portray it as a state sponsor of terrorism and diplomatically isolate it. India's efforts have been undermined by Pakistan's growing alignment with the U.S. as a counterterrorism partner against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as its role in Qaza-related discussions and the Iran crisis. Together, these developments suggest that Pakistan's recent diplomatic momentum has blunted India's strategy, raising broader questions



**Muqtedar Khan**

Professor of International Relations at the University of Delaware, a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Middle East Policy Council, and host of the YouTube channel, 'Khanversations', on global affairs

Pakistan's recent diplomatic momentum appears to have blunted India's strategy, raising broader questions about the regional balance of power in South Asia

about whether the regional balance of power in South Asia is beginning to shift.

## Pyramid of power

According to scholars of international relations, states are often understood within a hierarchy of power based on their capacity to project influence and shape outcomes beyond their borders. At the apex are superpowers such as the U.S. and China – states with the ability to project power globally and to shape, the international order itself; their influence spans military, economic and institutional domains on a worldwide scale. The next tier consists of global powers, which, while not able to unilaterally shape the global order, possess sufficient capabilities to project power across multiple regions, as illustrated by Russia. Below them are middle powers, which lack comprehensive global reach and do not dominate multiple regions, yet exert meaningful influence through partnerships and economic and military capacity; countries such as Türkiye, South Korea, Indonesia and Brazil are often cited as examples. Next are regional powers, which dominate a specific geographic area but have limited ability to project influence beyond it, such as Saudi Arabia in the Gulf. Finally, there are minor powers, comprising most states whose influence remains largely confined within their own borders and whose role in shaping regional or global outcomes is limited.

The Lowy Institute operationalises comprehensive national power by combining hard and soft capabilities into a single analytical framework. It assigns roughly 55% weight to material power – economic size, military capability, and resources – and 45% to softer dimensions such as diplomacy, economic networks, and institutional influence.

Before Operation Sindoor, using the Lowy Institute metric, I would place India in the second tier from the top as a global power given both its hard power and soft power capabilities, while Pakistan would fall into the second tier from the bottom as a regional power. However, developments over the past few months suggest movement in opposite directions. India's

performance during Operation Sindoor has not been widely seen as commensurate with its perceived stature or the expectations surrounding its rise, whereas Pakistan has been viewed by many as performing above its capacity. At the same time, India's continued silence or restraint – particularly in relation to Mr. Trump and major geopolitical developments – has contributed to its marginalisation from key global events. This perception has been reinforced by economic and geopolitical shifts, including a decline in India's ranking from the fourth to the sixth largest economy and the waning visibility of groupings that once elevated its profile, such as I2U2, BRICS, and the Quadrilateral Dialogue.

In contrast, Pakistan, without any change in material capabilities, has significantly enhanced its diplomatic profile and relevance. The result is a perceptible shift: India appears to be moving from a global power toward the characteristics of a middle power, while Pakistan is emerging as a more consequential regional power with aspirations toward middle-power status. This evolving dynamic – India trending downward and Pakistan upward in relative standing – may help explain the intensity of current debates within India's strategic community, as well as the more confident and optimistic mood within Pakistan's strategic discourse.

## In context

My final observation for Indian policymakers is that whatever constraints India faces with regard to the U.S. and Israel – whether driven by ideological alignment or dependence on defence technology – the choices it is making will inevitably affect the softer dimensions of its power. While these softer elements can enhance or diminish a country's influence in global affairs, they are not a substitute for hard power: military capability, a robust economy, demographic scale, and cutting-edge technological capacity. In these foundational areas, there has been no significant relative change between India and Pakistan.

While India remains firm in the elements of hard power, Pakistan while gaining in soft power is still nursing a fragile economy. And that matters.

# India and China discuss LAC stability, regional security

The two sides exchange views on regional security and the situation in West Asia; Defence Minister also holds talks with his counterparts from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

**D**efence Minister Rajnath Singh met his Chinese counterpart, Dong Jun, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' Meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic on Tuesday.

## Peace along LAC

The two sides discussed maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and exchanged views on broader regional security issues, including the West Asia situation, the spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in India posted on social media platform X.

On Tuesday, while addressing the SCO gathering, Mr. Singh described terrorism as the most serious threat to global peace and the emerging world order. Emphasising a policy of zero tolerance, the Minister called for a unified and consistent approach



**Strategic dialogue:** Defence Minister Rajnath Singh interacts with his Chinese counterpart Admiral Dong Jun, during the SCO Defence Ministers' Meeting in Bishkek on Tuesday. ANI

among member states to eliminate terrorism, extremism and radicalism in all forms.

## Expanding defence ties

On the sidelines of the meeting, Mr. Singh held discussions with his counterparts from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic, focusing on

strengthening defence cooperation and expanding strategic ties with partner countries.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, established in 2001 in Shanghai, is one of the largest regional organisations promoting political, economic and security cooperation. Its member states include

India, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Belarus.

India became a full member of the grouping in 2017, and assumed its rotating presidency in 2022-23, underlining its growing role in regional security and multilateral cooperation.

## Minister to flag off Vande Bharat from Jammu Tawi

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

Union Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw will flag off the extended Srinagar-Katra Vande Bharat Express service from the Jammu Tawi railway station on April 30.

The train, which previously operated from Srinagar to Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra, will now run all the way to Jammu Tawi.

Mr. Vaishnaw will also inspect the Anji Bridge and the Chenab Bridge on the Udampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link, a 272-km route on which the Vande Bharat train operates.

The Katra-Srinagar Vande Bharat Express was flagged off on June 6 last year.

# India and Sri Lanka reaffirm maritime ties through bilateral diving exercise in Colombo

**Saurabh Trivedi**  
NEW DELHI

India and Sri Lanka reaffirmed their growing maritime partnership by conducting the fourth edition of the bilateral diving exercise, IN-SLN DIVEX 2026, in Colombo from April 21 to 28.

The Indian Navy said that it deployed its diving support and submarine rescue vessel *INS Nireekshak*, while the Sri Lankan Navy fielded its diving teams, jointly enhancing operational coordination and professional synergy.

Focused on complex underwater operations, the exercise was aimed at strengthening interoperability through advanced deep-sea diving evolutions, including mixed gas



Indian Navy personnel during the bilateral India-Sri Lanka diving exercise, with *INS Nireekshak* in the background, in Colombo. PTI

diving drills. Divers from both Navies carried out extensive harbour and open-sea dives, demonstrating high levels of operational expertise.

A key highlight of the exercise was the conduct of mixed gas dives off Colombo over the World War-era

wrecks *SS Worcester* and *SS Perseus*.

Marking a significant milestone, the divers successfully executed deep-sea dives beyond 55 metres, boosting joint capabilities in underwater search, rescue and salvage operations in the Indian

Ocean Region (IOR), it added.

During the exercise, Rear Admiral S.J. Kumara, Flag Officer Commanding, Western Naval Area of the Sri Lanka Navy, visited *INS Nireekshak* and commended the Indian Navy's continued support in enhancing the training of Sri Lankan divers. He emphasised the importance of sustained exchange of best practices and professional expertise.

In a solemn gesture, the Commanding Officer of *INS Nireekshak* paid homage at the Indian Peace Keeping Force Memorial in Colombo, laying a wreath in honour of Indian soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice during the IPKF operations in Sri Lanka.

Further, extending hu-

manitarian cooperation, two BHISM (Bharat Health Initiative for Sahyog, Hita and Maitri) cubes (portable hospital units) were handed over under India's Aarogya Maitri initiative, enhancing disaster response and medical preparedness.

The exercise concluded with a ceremonial send-off for *INS Nireekshak*, symbolising the strong camaraderie and enduring maritime partnership between the two Navies.

IN-SLN DIVEX 2026 stands as a testament to sustained bilateral collaboration, aligned with the MAHASAGAR vision (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), and a shared commitment to peace, stability and security in the IOR.

# Jaishankar speaks with Araghchi days after BRICS logjam

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**

NEW DELHI

Days after an India-led meeting among BRICS envoys failed to reach a consensus on the conflict in West Asia, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Iranian counterpart, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, spoke over phone on Wednesday.

Following the conversation that is part of the preparatory steps ahead of BRICS ministerial meeting that will be held here next month, the Iranian embassy here said that the two Ministers discussed the current Iran-U.S. ceasefire as well as “bilateral, regional and international issues”.

“Had a detailed conversation about various aspects of the current situation. We agreed to remain in close touch,” said Mr. Jaishankar after receiving the call from Mr. Araghchi.

The Iranian Minister had visited Pakistan, Oman and Russia in the past five days to find a “workable framework” to resolve the conflict that erupted on February 28.

The Embassy of Iran said the two Ministers “discussed and exchanged views on the latest developments related to the ceasefire, bilateral relations, as well as regional and international issues”.

The conversation indicates continuity in high-level contacts despite the fact that a meeting of Deputy Foreign Ministers and Special Envoys from BRICS and MENA (Middle East North Africa) held here last week failed to reach a consensus on the crisis as



S. Jaishankar

member countries had differing positions on matters such as Israel’s involvement in the conflict.

*The Hindu* had reported that the envoys could not reach a consensus because of differences between Iran and the UAE, as well as India’s desire to dilute the language about the Israel-Palestine conflict. The BRICS dialogue is part of the preparatory exchanges that are taking place ahead of the Ministerial meeting that will take place here next month.

Russia has indicated that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will attend the BRICS Ministerial meeting in New Delhi. “On the 14th and 15th of May, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Lavrov will participate in a full-fledged session or council, of the foreign ministries of BRICS countries in New Delhi. This session under the Indian presidency will become a good opportunity for detailed and profound discussion of relevant issues of international agenda,” said Maria Zacharova, spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday.

Mr. Araghchi’s participation is yet to be confirmed.

# Trump warns Iran better 'get smart soon', accept nuclear deal

Reports suggest U.S. President has decided to reject Tehran's latest proposed deal to reopen Strait of Hormuz; Iranian army spokesperson says 'no trust in America', adds they do not consider the war to be over and have many cards not yet used

Agence France-Presse

TEHRAN

President Donald Trump warned Tehran on Wednesday that it should "get smart soon" and capitulate to Washington's demands for tight controls on its nuclear programme, as a U.S. naval blockade turned the screws on Iran's economy.

The U.S. could extend its naval blockade of Iran for months more, oil executives were told in a meeting with Trump, an official said, after press reports that he had rejected Iran's latest proposed deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

"Iran can't get their act together... They better get smart soon," Mr. Trump posted on his social media platform, above a mocked-up picture of himself toting



**In solidarity:** People at a rally in support of new Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Mojtahab Khamenei in Tehran on Wednesday. AFP

a rifle in front of explosions wrecking a desert fortress and the slogan: "No more Mr. Nice Guy!"

The news that peace talks were still stalled sent oil prices higher once again. At around 1335 GMT, a barrel of Brent crude for June delivery was up 5.16% at \$117, its highest level

since the fragile ceasefire between the U.S. and Iran came into effect on April 8.

The UN Development Programme, meanwhile, warned that the war, which has sent the price of energy and fertiliser soaring, could plunge more than 30 million people into poverty in 160 countries.

Iran has blockaded the strait since the U.S. and Israel launched the war two months ago, sending shockwaves through the global economy. But its own economy is also suffering. On Wednesday, the Iranian rial fell to historic lows against the dollar.

## 'No trust in America'

But an Iranian army spokesman told state TV on Tuesday that "we do not consider the war to be over", saying Tehran had "no trust in America".

"We have many cards that we have not yet used... new tools and methods of fighting based on the experiences of the past two wars, which will definitely allow us to respond to the enemy more decisively" should the fighting resume, Amir Akraminia said

in an interview. The latest Iranian proposal laid out red lines including on nuclear issues and Hormuz, according to Iran's Fars news agency.

The plan would reportedly see Tehran ease its chokehold on the strait and Washington lift its retaliatory blockade while broader negotiations continue, including over the nuclear programme.

Iranian defence ministry spokesman Reza Talei-Nik said Washington "must abandon its illegal and irrational demands".

## Cost of war

The war against Iran has cost the U.S. military \$25 billion since it was launched in late February, acting Pentagon comptroller Jules Hurst told lawmakers on Wednesday.

# Russian forces must withdraw from Mali: Tuareg spokesman

**Agence France-Presse**

PARIS

Tuareg rebels want Russian forces to withdraw from “all of Mali”, a spokesman for the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) coalition told AFP on Wednesday, after Islamist insurgents and separatists launched attacks destabilising the country.

At the weekend, jihadists and Tuareg separatists, who have joined forces against the ruling junta and its Russian paramilitary backers, launched a

wave of attacks on strategic junta positions, including areas around the capital, Bamako.

The rebels captured the key town of Kidal in the mostly desert north, and Defence Minister Sadio Camara, seen as the mastermind behind the junta's pivot to Russia, was killed in two days of fierce fighting.

“Our objective is for Russia to withdraw permanently from Azawad and beyond, from all of Mali,” the spokesman for the FLA coalition, Mohamed El-

maouloud Ramadane, told AFP in Paris.

“It supported people who committed serious crimes and massacres,” he said.

Russia's defence ministry confirmed this week that paramilitary fighters from the Africa Corps, controlled by the government in Moscow and sent to back up the Malian junta, had been forced to withdraw from Kidal in the north.

Mr. Ramadane said the Russians asked for a secure corridor to withdraw.