

Vijay wins floor test with 144 votes; AIADMK divided

TVK-led government secures confidence vote in Tamil Nadu Assembly with 25 AIADMK MLAs voting in its favour; rift widens in AIADMK as Palaniswami removes 26 rebel functionaries

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay comfortably won the trust vote in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly on Wednesday with the support of the Congress, CPI, CPI(M), VCK, and IUML, as well as that of 25 rebel AIADMK MLAs and the lone AMMK MLA.

The confidence motion moved by Mr. Vijay was put to vote by Speaker J.C.D. Prabhakar after the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam legislators and the lone Desiya Murpokku Dravidar Kazhagam MLA, Premallatha Vijayakant, walked out.

The vote came despite AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami's opposition to allowing S.P. Velumani, rebel AIADMK leader and his confidant until a few days ago, from speaking on the party's behalf.

The rift in the AIADMK widened on Wednesday night with Mr. Palaniswami removing 26 rebel district secretaries, including 12 legislators, from their positions.

Among those who were sacked from their posts were Mr. Velumani and



Support check: Chief Minister Vijay delivering a speech in the Tamil Nadu Assembly on Wednesday. ANI

C.Ve. Shanmugam, both former Ministers.

Deepening fault lines

Earlier in the day, Mr. Velumani's camp pledged support to Mr. Vijay as the government secured 144 votes in the floor test.

While 22 MLAs from Mr. Palaniswami's camp opposed it, four Pattali Makkal Katchi MLAs and the lone Bharatiya Janata Party MLA 'abstained' from voting.

Reiterating that this was "the common people's rule," Mr. Vijay said the government was for the good of everyone and the

public would realise this as time goes by.

"This is not a government to show power or authority, or hatred. People and public welfare are important. It is the sole objective of this government," he said.

'People's faith'

Thanking everyone in the Assembly, Mr. Vijay said the people had reposed faith in the TVK-led government, just as they did in 1967 and 1977 to usher in "governments of the common people."

The "whistle revolution" had secured over

34.92% of votes to elect the TVK as the single-largest party in less than three years of its formation.

"The majority was missed by a thin margin. If anyone thinks that this is a minority government, we are happy. This is a minority government, which will truly safeguard the rights of the minorities," he said, adding that his government was for everyone which has been reflected in the confidence motion. The Chief Minister further promised a democratic, secular regime rooted in social justice.

Government doubles duty on imports of gold, silver

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

NEW DELHI

The Centre has doubled the effective tax paid on the import of gold and silver to a total of 18.4% from the previous 9.2%. The changes, which came into effect on Wednesday, were made through two separate notifications issued late on Tuesday night.

According to sources in the government, the decision was taken against the backdrop of the impact of the West Asia crisis on India's current account deficit (CAD). The CAD is the margin by which a country's total imports of goods, services, and transfers exceeds its exports.

However, industry players and experts, said this "retrograde" and "blunt" decision is not likely to impact Indians' demand for gold.

It will not only encourage a shift to smuggling, since the Indian appetite for gold is largely cultural, but will also have other negative effects on employment, they said.

The Ministry of Finance has not yet released an official statement on the duty hikes or its justifications.

Previously, the basic customs duty on gold and silver stood at 5%, with a 1% Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC), and a 3% Integrated Goods and Services

Bullion burden

The decision comes soon after Prime Minister Modi's austerity appeal to the public to reduce gold purchases

Tax	Earlier	Now
Basic customs duty	5%	10%
Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess	1%	5%
Integrated Goods and Services Tax*	3%	3%
Total	~9.2%	~18.4%



Note: IGST is applicable on the assessable value of the gold, which includes the Cost, Insurance, and Freight (CIF) value and the basic customs duty

Tax (IGST) rate on the total assessable value of the imports, which includes the cost, insurance, and freight price, and the applicable basic customs duties, taking the effective import tax to about 9.2%. Now, the customs duty has been hiked to 10%, and the AIDC has become 5%, taking the effective tax rate, including the IGST, to about 18.4%.

The decision comes soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's exhortations to the public to reduce gold purchases for at least a year, among other actions, to help protect India's foreign exchange reserves and the rupee exchange rate.

'Prudent management'

"The current geopolitical situation has created significant volatility in global crude oil markets and international shipping routes," a government source explained. "As a large importer of crude oil,

India remains vulnerable to elevated energy prices and supply-side disruptions, which can increase the import bill, exert pressure on inflation, and the CAD."

"In such circumstances, prudent management of the country's external sector becomes essential," they added.

They further said that the government was prioritising India's foreign exchange resources towards essential imports such as crude oil, fertilizers, industrial raw materials, defence requirements, critical technologies, and capital goods. "In contrast, precious metals, while culturally and financially significant, are predominantly consumption and investment driven in nature," they said. "Such imports involve substantial outflow of foreign exchange."

CONTINUED ON

» PAGE 10

Govt. doubles import duty on gold, silver

Industry players, economists, and investment advisors have said that the decision is not likely to impact Indians' demand for gold, and would instead increase smuggling,

“Our consistent position is that hiking import duties rarely curbs gold imports – it merely inflates prices,” the Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council said in a statement. “Despite gold prices doubling recently, imports have not declined proportionally. Such measures often fuel smuggling and escalate export costs.”

This sentiment was echoed by Sachin Sawrikar, founder and managing partner at Artha Bharat Investment Managers, who termed the import duty hike as a “blunt instrument that history tells us rarely achieves its intended purpose.”

“India’s appetite for precious metals is structural, not cyclical; it is woven into savings culture, festive demand, and portfolio behaviour across hundreds of millions of households,” Mr. Sawrikar cautioned. “When the price of the legal channel rises this steeply, a well-established informal trade, call it grey-market or smuggled supply, simply fills the gap.”

Another fear among experts is the impact this decision would have on the domestic industry and all those it employs.

“Trying to micromanage consumer and industry behaviour via trade policy has substantial trade offs that we have to be careful about,” Rahul Ahluwalia, Founder-Director of Foundation for Economic Development, said. “In this case, it may negatively affect employment and exports in the jewellery sector and the ability of Indians to invest in one of the best performing asset classes at a time of global uncertainty.”

CBI arrests five, conducts raids across India in NEET leak case

Devesh K. Pandey
Snehal Mutha
NEW DELHI/MUMBAI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has arrested five persons and conducted searches at locations across the country in connection with alleged irregularities related to the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) paper leak. Three brothers – Mangilal Biwal, Vikas Biwal and Dinesh Biwal – were



A man arrested in the NEET-UG paper leak case being taken to a court in Jaipur. PTI

taken into custody from Jaipur, Yash Yadav was picked up from Gurugram, and Shubham Khairnar from Nashik in Maharash-

tra, it said. The Maharashtra Police detained two more suspects in the case and handed them over to the CBI.

The police nabbed Manisha Waghmare, a beauty salon owner, from Bibwe-wadi, and Dhananjay Lokhande, an ayurveda practitioner, from Rahuri in the early hours of Wednesday.

CONTINUED ON

» **PAGE 10**

RELATED REPORTS ON

» **PAGE 11**

CBI arrests 5, conducts raids in NEET leak case

Several other suspects are currently being examined, the CBI said. The agency is probing whether the brothers from Jaipur had procured the “guess paper”, in which about 120 questions matched the actual question paper, from the Gurugram-based ayurvedic medicine student Yash Yadav. It is suspected that the paper was passed on to a counselling agent in Sikar, Rajasthan, from where it was sold to a large number of people through encrypted messaging applications.

Earlier, the Rajasthan Special Operations Group (SOG) picked up 15 people for their suspected roles in the paper leak. On the SOG’s request, the Nashik Crime Branch had detained Shubham Khairnar, a 30-year-old Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery student from Nandagaon. He had allegedly bought the “guess paper” and sold it for profit.

The CBI registered the case on Tuesday following a written complaint from the Department of Higher Education, Education Ministry.

“Based on emerging leads, further searches and investigative actions are under way. During the searches and arrests, several incriminating materials and electronic devices, including mobile phones, have been seized. The agency is also coordinating with the Special Operations Group, Rajasthan, which had conducted a preliminary enquiry in the case,” said the agency, adding that the leads are being followed through “extensive technical and forensic analysis”.

In Maharashtra, a senior police officer from Ahilyanagar said the CBI had sought assistance to track Mr. Lokhande and take him into custody. “I have no idea about the link between the arrests in Pune and Nashik, or the detained person’s role. We are not part of investigation,” he said.

So far, three people have been arrested from Maharashtra. On Tuesday, the Nashik Crime Branch had detained Mr. Khairnar from Indiranaagar. He was later remanded in CBI custody for two days.

Mr. Lokhande, a native of Mahegaon Mahaduk in Rahuri, graduated in BAMS from Mangaluru and has been practising in Pune. The role of Ms. Waghmare is not yet clear. However, the Pune Police suspect she may have links with Mr. Lokhande. They have seized her phone and laptop.

Why did NTA's 'Zero Error' policy

Why has NEET landed in controversy again? How has NEET faced repeated paper leak allegations? Why are paper leak concerns persisting despite NT safeguards? What reforms were proposed after the 2024 row? Can NEET shift to a computer-based format?

EXPLAINER

Maitri Porecha
Srinidhi Madurai K.

The story so far:

Nine days after nearly 22 lakh medical aspirants wrote the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), which paves the way for admission to medical colleges, they were in for a rude shock. On May 12, the National Testing Agency (NTA) stated that the exam had been 'compromised,' and that there would be a re-test.

The decision has created a furore among students across the country, with the Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA) moving the Supreme Court with a plea to either replace NTA or conduct major restructuring reforms.

What controversies has NEET faced over the years?

The decision to conduct re-examination for nearly 22 lakh students is unprecedented in NEET's history, but concerns over paper leaks are not new. In 2024, the declaration of the NEET-UG results coincided with the announcement of national election results. For the first time, 67 out of the top 100 scorers received full marks. In comparison, only two students achieved full marks in 2023, while none did so in 2022. A high concentration of students achieving full marks led to massive rank inflation, with multiple aspirants who had scored high marks competing for a single seat in reputed medical colleges.

In 2024, 13 lakh students qualified and were competing for approximately 1.1 lakh MBBS seats across government and private medical colleges. Allegations of a paper leak later surfaced, with investigations revealing that 155 students had allegedly benefited from leaked question papers. Students had then demanded a re-examination, but their request fell on deaf ears.



Nearly 22 lakh medical aspirants wrote the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test. K.V.S. GIRI

Why has NTA's 'Zero Error' promise fallen short?

With repeated cases of paper leaks surfacing year after year, the NTA appears not to have learnt from its chequered past. The overhaul of NTA merely remained lip service. After the 2024 debacle, IAS officer Subodh Kumar Singh, then Director General of the NTA, was removed from the post and transferred to the Ministry of Steel as Additional Secretary. He is currently serving as Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh.

Following his transfer, the NTA remained without a full-time chief for over a year, with retired 1985-batch IAS officer Pradeep Singh Kharola holding 'additional interim charge'. In March this year, former IndiaAI Mission CEO Abhishek Singh took charge of NTA and declared that there would be a 'Zero Error, Zero Tolerance' policy.

After the NEET-UG 2026 examination was conducted on May 3, the NTA underscored on social media the "smooth manner" in which the exam had been held across 5,432 centres, with 22.79 lakh candidates appearing. It stated that more

than two lakh personnel were involved in conducting the examination.

The agency also claimed that there was end-to-end secure handling of confidential materials under sealed protocols, GPS-enabled vehicles with police escorts for the movement of examination material, CCTV surveillance at all examination centres (up to 1,50,000), with feeds linked to centralised control rooms, mandatory frisking through high-sensitivity metal detectors before entry, with strengthened manpower and equipment at every centre, Aadhaar-based biometric authentication to prevent impersonation and real-time monitoring through centralised control systems.

Mr. Abhishek Singh told *The Hindu* that the NTA had blocked 120 Telegram channels for circulating fake question papers and rumours, aimed at defrauding candidates.

Despite these measures, investigations by the Rajasthan Police revealed that a "guess paper" containing 120 out of 410 questions from the final examination had allegedly been circulating for nearly a month before the exam, a massive

oversight by the NTA.

What did the Radhakrishnan panel recommend?

Following the NEET-UG 2024 controversy, the Ministry of Education formed a high-level committee headed by former ISRO chairman K. Radhakrishnan. However, the committee's recommendations were not followed in letter and spirit by either the NTA or the Ministry.

The report, submitted in October 2024, highlighted the pen-and-paper testing (PPT) model as 'a major security risk'. It recommended a transition to Computer-Based Testing (CBT) format, similar to the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main, which is also conducted by NTA.

The committee also recommended Computer-assisted Secure PPT, where encrypted papers are delivered digitally to exam centres and printed locally just before the test. NTA has made no claim of implementing it. Instead, it relied on GPS vehicles and police escorts.

Mr. Abhishek Singh said that the NTA has the capacity to conduct CBT tests for only about 1.5 lakh students in a day. He added that shifting NEET to CBT mode is a 'high-level ministry call' involving both the Ministries of Health and Education.

In 2024, the NTA floated a tender to increase its capacity of computer labs, but the process could not be finalised. In 2026, the NTA has around 552 CBT centres, which are primarily used for JEE and CUET examinations. Since the Radhakrishnan Committee report came out in 2024, the NTA has not been able to augment its infrastructure to add more centres.

Multiple proposals to administer NEET-UG exams online were sent to the Ministry of Education, but in vain, officials at the NTA told *The Hindu*. "Talks for administering the NEET-UG in CBT mode have been ongoing for at least five years now. The recent paper leak fiasco should serve as an eye-opener to change the format of the exams," an official said.

'Learn from Sri Lanka's experience on impact of fertilizer supply chains'

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

As the West Asia crisis impacts fertilizer supply globally, India should shift its long-term focus to gradually move away from the older model of fertilizer-dependent agricultural practices while not forgetting lessons learnt from the Sri Lankan experience, according to Sudha Meiyappan, Member, Economic Affairs Committee, Southern India Chamber of Commerce And Industry (SICCI).

Participating in a panel discussion on the topic 'Impact of West Asia Crisis on Economic Disruptions and Sustainability: Implications for India' here on Wednesday, she said that in the long run, India should seek to make agriculture sustainable by adopting natural farming, agro-forestry, and various other forms of sustainable movements that are taking place in the sector. She, however, put forth a caveat that India should take care to pick up lessons from the Sri Lankan experience.

The island country had made a sudden shift to organic farming with a ban on fertilizer imports leading to a drop in production of food grains causing eco-



The session on 'Impact of West Asia crisis on Economic Disruptions & Sustainability: Implications for India' moderated by Kunal Shankar, Deputy Business Editor, *The Hindu*. J. JOHAN SATHYADAS

nomc disruption and social unrest.

The panel discussion was part of the Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues 2026 jointly organised by the Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technological Sciences (SIMATS) and *The Hindu*.

Ms. Meiyappan said that in the short term, India should continue to follow the current policies while focussing on a transition to sustainable practices in the long term. "In the short term, you continue doing what you are doing today. You don't change to organic today, but over the long term, you slowly, gradually veer away...not organic per se, but something that's more climate resilient, more sustainable in nature. You can't get rid of

fertilizers but [determine] how much you are using and for what crop you are using and where the crop is being grown," she said, responding to a question from the moderator Kunal Shankar, Deputy Business Editor, *The Hindu*.

She also warned that India was looking at curtailment of personal consumption by virtue of general price rise due to the increase in fuel prices, even without the announcement from the Prime Minister. Gold prices, for example, went beyond the threshold of being a safe haven even before the war. After the announcement, the artisans and the local shops selling gold will be impacted heavily, Ms. Meiyappan added.

Col. Rajeev Agarwal

(ret'd), Senior Research Consultant, Chintan Research Foundation, said that the Iran war has given clear dimensions to projects like India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) while it has exposed the vulnerability of the existing trade routes and connectivity. Choke points and conflict zones, he said, would always make trade connectivity and supply lines vulnerable. An alternative is required that bypasses both these chokepoints and conflict zones. Projects like IMEC, with certain modifications given the geopolitical changes, could provide such a framework.

S. Pandiaraj, professor of International Law and Trade, Saveetha School of Law, said that India's stand in foreign affairs should be pragmatic but also operate in a way that would not forsake the values and principles that it always stood for, whether it was the 1955 Bandung Conference or the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

"The transactional approach, the give and take approach would only take us up to a point and not beyond. So, India should be careful in terms of treading various passages," Dr. Pandiaraj observed.

Tehran will welcome diplomatic initiative from India: Iran Dy FM

Shubhajit Roy

New Delhi, May 13

FOR THE first time since Pakistan emerged as a mediator between the US and Iran amid the war in West Asia, Tehran has conveyed to New Delhi that if India comes up with a "diplomatic initiative", the Iranian government will "welcome and work on it". Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi said on Wednesday that he has conveyed the same to MEA Secretary (West) Siby George at their bilateral meeting.

Giving a context to Pakistan's role, he said that Egypt, Qatar, Oman, and now Pakistan have been mediators, and that they are open to India as well. Gharibabadi, who is a member of the Iranian negotiating team and was part of the Islamabad talks, said, "We always welcome any diplomatic initiative. Egypt had diplomatic initiative, when we did not have even full political or diplomatic relations with Egypt, but we welcomed the initiative of Egypt. So, the nature of the initiatives are important. We went to Cairo. We had the Cairo declaration solving a problem between Iran and the agency (IAEA) regarding verification activities. We had Qatar, Oman, and now we have Pakistan. What is the role of a mediator? Mediator is only facilitating, not engaging substantively, because you are not a part of differences or dispute or even negotiations... negotiations are taking place only between two sides."

"This morning, I said to my counterpart in the (Indian) foreign ministry here... I requested India to come up with an initiative. India is a big, important country. If India comes up with an initiative, we will work on that. So this is the nature of accepting different initiatives." When asked about India's response, he said, "India has always supported peace in the re-



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi being received by officials ahead of BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting in Delhi, Wednesday. PTI

gion. That's very important... So, if there is any initiative, we absolutely would welcome such an initiative... whatever role India plays, would be important."

In March, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said India can't act as a "dalal nation" (broker) in global geopolitics, specifically regarding West Asia mediation. This remark, made at an all-party meeting, differentiated India's foreign policy from Pakistan's role as a mediator between the US and Iran. Gharibabadi, who is accompanying Iranian Foreign minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi for the two-day BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting starting Thursday, appreciated India for the "balanced view", and said, "India, as the chair, is showing impartiality, and that's important." He said Iran is in favour of a final declaration. "We want to have a successful meeting. It's not good to signal this message to the world that BRICS has been divided... we're in favour of having a declaration. But..., there is one neighboring country of Iran that is insisting to condemn Iran into final declaration. Iran has been aggressed. We have been attacked by the US and Israel, and now one neighbouring country of Iran is insisting to condemn Iran."

The Iranian minister is referring to the fact that the 11-member BRICS grouping, which the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iran are part of, has not been able to agree on a common language on the conflict. Iranians claim that UAE is insisting on condemning Iran. With consensus eluding the grouping, New Delhi had issued a Chair's summary on April 24 stating that "members expressed deep concern on the recent conflict in the Middle East (West Asia) and offered views and assessments on the matter".

In early March, *The Indian Express* reported that Tehran had reached out to New Delhi to take the lead in issuing a statement on behalf of the BRICS, currently chaired by India, condemning the US and Israeli strikes against Iran in the previous two weeks. This put Delhi in a diplomatic pickle given that it had not taken sides in the ongoing conflict. About the closure of Strait of Hormuz, Gharibabadi said, "We are working now on protocol and arrangements to see what services Iran and Oman are providing in the Strait of Hormuz... We are evaluating... It hasn't been finalised... Yes, we have a temporary arrangement now..." However, he said India is a "friendly nation" and 11 vessels have been allowed to transit.

Trump to begin talks with Xi on Iran war, trade, U.S. arms sales

Associated Press

BEIJING

U.S. President Donald Trump arrived in Beijing on Wednesday for his hotly anticipated talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the Iran war, trade and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

The meat of the summit doesn't start until Thursday, when the leaders hold bilateral talks, and take part in a formal banquet.

The President was greeted by Chinese Vice President Han Zheng; Xie Feng, China's ambassador to Washington; Ma Zhaoxu, executive vice minister of foreign affairs; and the U.S. envoy to Beijing, David Perdue.

"We're the two superpowers," Mr. Trump told presspersons as he departed the White House. "We're the strongest na-



Donald Trump

tion on Earth in terms of military. China's considered second."

The visit occurs at a delicate moment for his presidency as his popularity at home has been weighed down by the U.S. and Israel's war with Iran and rising inflation.

The Trump administration hopes to begin establishing a Board of Trade with China to address differences between the countries.



The Xi-Trump summit — shadow boxing on Iran

An American President stuck in an unwinnable and unpopular war, undertakes a risky trip to Beijing to seek Chinese intervention for a desperately needed off-ramp. The hosts feign sympathy and help, albeit in a layered, unhurried manner. They are subtle and discreet in proposing a hefty quid pro quo. Over the next few months, things are sorted out: the White House disengages from a sticky mess, quietly letting the “vanquished” opponent prevail. Long sceptical and often hostile, Washington becomes a reluctant believer in China’s “peaceful rise”.

The 1972 summit

Is this a likely pre-script for Donald Trump’s visit to Beijing that begins today? It may turn out to be. But it does sum up the first United States-China bilateral Summit in February 1972, when a Vietnam-mauled President Richard Nixon met Chairman Mao. As the post-visit Shanghai Communiqué panned out, the U.S. recognised the long-reviled Communist People’s Republic as the sole China, gave it a P5 status, and threw Taiwan under the bus. Subsequent western capital and technology surge propelled China’s phenomenal economic and geostrategic take-off.

In return, China abandoned Hanoi, enabling the U.S. to extricate itself from a haemorrhaging war. Vietnam, too, emerged as a victorious and unified nation. So, while other stakeholders benefited, China hit a jackpot.

Half a century later, history may be tantalisingly close to repeating itself in Beijing on the first such visit by an American President since 2017 for a summit. It would have a comprehensive agenda, from bilateral (trade/tariff, economic, tech-transfer, and Taiwan) to various global issues.

The U.S.-Iran war is likely to figure prominently in Beijing because an early face-saving exit from the West Asian imbroglio is currently Mr. Trump’s top priority. The Iran war



Mahesh Sachdev

Retired Indian Ambassador with an interest in West Asia and oil matters

Beijing summit tests diplomacy over Iran and global geopolitical order

has had huge economic and geostrategic costs, including to his legacy.

Waging a clever asymmetric strategy, Iran has converted a military debacle into a strategic win with a chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz, staunching crude supplies and causing economic pain globally. Its refusal to capitulate to Mr. Trump’s conditions has denied him an off-ramp, denting his approval at home as he faces an uphill battle in the upcoming Congressional midterm election.

China as Iran’s anchor

China is Iran’s largest economic partner, buying over 80% of its oil exports, estimated at up to \$45 billion in 2025. The additional non-oil bilateral trade is estimated to be over \$9 billion and is suspected to include many of the crucially needed Chinese war materials. Pakistan, an “ironclad” friend, keeps China informed about the U.S.-Iran negotiations. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, visited Beijing on May 6 for bilateral discussions, without the traditional joint communiqué. These factors make China the most prominent foreign determinant for Iran, with Beijing the go-to destination with a key to the Iranian imbroglio. Thus, despite Mr. Trump’s assertion to the contrary, he may need Chinese President Xi Jinping’s help to cobble a modus vivendi with Iran.

Against this backdrop, observers discern several competing tendencies during the last week: the Trump team was keen to finalise the negotiation road map with Iran before the Beijing Summit to keep China out.

However, Iran delivered an uncompromising response after 10 days, which was rejected by Mr. Trump. The U.S. “Operation Freedom” to jump-start the Strait of Hormuz navigation was a non-starter. The Trump administration has officially “terminated” the Iran war to avoid running afoul of the War Powers Act. Suspended negotiations, problematic military option,

escalating oil prices, and the incoming Hajj have created a perfect maelstrom for Mr. Trump’s Beijing foray. Two tendencies afford an insight into the ever-inscrutable and minimalist Chinese mindset on this issue.

Following Mr. Araghchi’s visit to China, Tehran’s position has hardened perceptibly on contentious issues such as Hormuz, nuclear enrichment, missiles and the proxies. Apart from highlighting its mistrust of Mr. Trump, Tehran has also upped its demands on reparations, security guarantees, defreezing assets, closing the American military bases in the region and a ceasefire in Lebanon and Yemen. Simultaneously, China and Russia have raised the ante by threatening to veto even the toned-down U.S.-backed draft UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution on the Hormuz blockade.

A possible strategy

While the Summit scenario is still evolving, Beijing’s nod-and-wink to Iranian defiance indicates a hardball strategy for the Trump-Xi summit. China seems to perceive that prolonged or deepened Gulf tensions would enable it to extract more American concessions on bilateral issues in return for sorting out Iranian obduracy. It may ask Mr. Trump to yield on tariffs and sanctions, technology denial and Taiwan. Citing the Iranian trust deficit, Beijing may cynically carve a role for itself either as a mediator-guarantor or through a UNSC Resolution. The proposed unwinding could be phased over the next few months.

It remains to be seen if Mr. Trump, a self-styled consummate transactional dealmaker, has a counterstrategy of his own for a potential grand bargain: Chinese help for an Iranian off-ramp in return for minimal concessions. Otherwise, he may sell out like Henry Kissinger, who sheepishly admitted later, “I think if we drink enough mao tai [a potent Chinese liquor], we can solve anything.”