

SPECIAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP ANNOUNCED

Trade, corridor, defence: Rome, Delhi upgrade ties

Modi, Meloni
discuss 'complex
scenarios', chart a
new roadmap

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, May 20

ELEVATING THEIR bilateral ties to a "special strategic partnership", India and Italy Wednesday set a trade target of 20 billion euros by 2029, agreed on a defence industrial roadmap, and concluded pacts on critical minerals, countering money laundering and terror financing.

These decisions were taken after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held talks with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Italian counterpart Giorgia Meloni in Rome, Wednesday. ANI; RELATED REPORT, [PAGE 5](#)

~~Opp: Economic storm at home, PM making reels abroad~~

~~Indecent remarks, says BJP chief~~

~~**Asad Rehman & Maulshree Sethi**
New Delhi, Lucknow, May 20~~

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Rome, Delhi upgrade ties

in Rome. Italy was the final stop on Modi's six-day tour of Europe which took him to Norway for the India-Nordic summit and on bilateral visits to Sweden and the Netherlands. From tech to innovation, defence to green energy, India is deepening ties with Europe amid turbulence in the global order.

The Prime Minister's visit to Italy reaffirms a strategic partnership in motion, coming as it does after intense leader-level engagement, anchored by the Joint Strategic Plan of Action 2025-29, the operational roadmap for the partnership.

Italy increasingly views India not just as a market, but as a major power and an indispensable partner for Europe. Its championing of IMEEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) as a founding member makes it the western anchor of the corridor. The proposed IMEEC will not just ensure stability of supply chains but will also boost India's energy security.

Discussing the geopolitical situation, Meloni said Italy and India will continue to play their part at every level, often working in tandem, to contribute to peace and help restore stability.

"Italy and India naturally share a common vision regarding many of the major challenges of our time: international stability, the upholding of the rule of law, economic security, the resilience of value chains, the promotion of peace, and inclusive development. We also discussed many of the complex scenarios confronting our era - specifically the situation in Ukraine and our shared commitment to achieving a just and

lasting peace -- as well as the crisis in Iran. We exchanged views with the shared hope that peace negotiations might move forward and reach a positive conclusion, even within a context that we clearly recognise as highly precarious," she said.

Modi said, "We have remained in constant contact regarding the situations in Ukraine, West Asia, and other areas of tension. India's stance is clear: all issues must be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy."

Referring to the near closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Meloni said, "Regarding freedom of navigation -- the restoration of which we are both actively working toward -- we are two nations that need no reminding of just how vital this principle is to our interests. We also addressed the Indo-Pacific region, where we naturally align with the Indian vision of an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive."

The bilateral piece in the relationship was marked by personal chemistry -- Meloni posted a photograph of the two leaders with a bag of Melody toffees, a pun on the social media hashtag #Melodi.

Modi said, "Over the past nearly three-and-a-half years, I have had the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Meloni several times. This reflects the close cooperation and harmony between India and Italy. Under her leadership, our relations have gained new momentum, new direction, and new self-confidence. I am pleased that we are announcing the Special Strategic Partnership as we upgrade our relations."

Meloni said, "I truly believe

it is a historic day... we are further strengthening our relation all the way up to the special strategic partnership, the highest ever reached in the relations between our two nations... It's safe to say that now Italy and India are closer than they have ever been."

Saying they want to increase trade from 14 billion euros to 20 billion euros, she added: "This is a very ambitious target, which can be achieved also by taking advantage of the potential stemming from the free trade agreement signed between the EU and India."

Modi said Italy is renowned worldwide for design and precision and India's identity is that of a powerhouse of scale, talent and affordable innovation. "We will move forward on the principle of Design and Develop in India and Italy and Deliver for the World," he said, adding that "from fashion to fintech, from leather to logistics, and from mobility to manufacturing -- in every sector -- we will combine our respective strengths to work for the welfare of all humanity".

The two sides agreed on a defence industrial roadmap which had long been an Italian request. In the wake of corruption allegations over the AgustaWestland deal, Italian defence companies had been barred from the Indian defence market. But that is witnessing a change now.

"Close cooperation in the fields of defence and security stands as a symbol of our deep mutual trust. Cooperation is growing not only between our armed forces but also between the defence industries of both countries. Our Defence Industrial Roadmap has paved the way for co-development and co-production," Modi said.

The joint statement ident-

fied the projects -- helicopters, naval platforms, marine armament and electronic warfare.

The two countries also signed a pact on maritime transport and ports to strengthen India's maritime infrastructure.

"Our goal is, naturally, to leverage the complementarities between our respective economic fabrics across many other sectors -- sectors we have discussed at length today, as well as during last night's events. From advanced manufacturing to infrastructure, from energy to the space economy, defence stands out as a key area of cooperation where we are currently investing significant and effective effort. Critical minerals, agri-business, maritime transport, tourism and culture -- for two great civilisations spanning millennia -- also represent opportunities for us to grow together," she said.

The two sides also signed pacts on mobility of Indian nurses to Italy, a roadmap on higher education and research, pacts on agriculture, export of Indian seafood to Italy, Ayurveda and research in climate change among others. They also decided to celebrate 2027 as the "year of culture".

Capping her statement on the broader ties, Meloni said, "There is an Indian word that captures this sentiment perfectly: *Parishram*. It signifies 'hard work', 'constant commitment', and 'diligent effort'. A word that I am told is widely used in India, and which, let's give it a try, often appears in an equally popular proverb: *Parishram safalta ki kunji hai*. This means: Hard work is the key to success. Well, that is precisely how we are accustomed to building our relationships -- through hard work that, ultimately, leads to success."

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Modi, Meloni discuss 'complex scenarios', chart a new roadmap

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Opp: Economic storm at home, PM making reels abroad

Indecent remarks, says BJP chief

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SOON AFTER Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni posted a video clip of Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifting her a bag of Melody toffees in Rome, Opposition parties Wednesday criticised Modi, saying he was busy "making reels" abroad

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Opp: PM making reels

when the country was reeling under an "economic storm".

Rahul Gandhi, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, in a post on X, said "An economic storm is raging over our heads, and our Prime Minister is busy handing out candies in Italy. Farmers, youth, women, labourers, and small traders are all in tears — the PM is laughing and making reels, while BJP folks are clapping along. This isn't leadership, it's a farce."

Speaking in Rae Bareilly, Gandhi said the PM asked people to use less petrol, not buy gold, spend less and avoid travelling abroad. "But just a day later, Narendra Modi boarded an aircraft worth Rs 3,000-4,000 crore and went to Italy carrying toffees in his pocket... Look at the kind of mockery being

made of the people of this country."

"Remember this, Narendra Modi will cry and again say it is not his fault, just as he did during demonetisation and Covid," he said, warning about an "economic storm".

At the Bahujan Swabhimani Sammelan in Amethi, Gandhi called the Prime Minister, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and the RSS "traitors".

"When you go home and RSS workers speak about Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, tell them openly that your Prime Minister is a traitor, your Home Minister is a traitor and your organisation is a traitor. You have sold India and attacked our Constitution," he said.

Gandhi's remarks drew a sharp response from BJP presi-

dent Nitin Nambin who said "such indecent language is completely unacceptable".

In a post on X, Nambin said, "Those who put a leash on terrorism. Those who eradicated Naxalism. Are they traitors? Or those who sheltered terrorism? Those who promoted Naxalism? Are they the traitors?"

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge, who is also the Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, attacked Modi over rising prices, unemployment, exam paper leaks, "dampening" investment and the "sinking" rupee. He said "every aspect of economy is suffering" but "Modi ji continues his PR, lecturing citizens to shoulder the burden of this grave economic storm".

"Modi ji wants the public to enjoy the 'melody' of speeches while surviving the 'misery' of his government's loot," Kharge said. The price of domestic

LPG, he said, "skyrocketed by 121%, exploding from Rs 414 in 2014 to Rs 915.5 in 2026." Commercial cylinder prices, he said, were "ruthlessly hiked by nearly 154%, from Rs 1,241 to Rs 3,152."

TMC Deputy Leader in RS Sagarika Ghose said the optics of the gift and the video were "unfortunate". "The head of state indulging in such acts is inappropriate. While the rupee's value is going down, the PM is doing all this. It shows a lack of empathy..." she said.

CPI Rajya Sabha MP P Sandosh Kumar said, "Perhaps this is the new model of diplomacy: Hand over the country to billionaires at home, distribute chocolates overseas while getting unfair deals, and expect cameras to do the rest... While unemployment, inflation and inequality keep rising, government seems more invested in meme diplomacy than people's lives..."

Govt pitch to US nuclear mission: Scale up capacity, small modular reactors key

Anil Sasi

New Delhi, May 20

ALONGSIDE A stepped-up role for the private sector in nuclear plant operations, India is doubling down on its domestic civil nuclear programme based on its mainstay, pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs), and remains open to collaborating with external players to scale up projects built on this technology.

Less than six months after the landmark legislation opened up India's nuclear sector, a visiting high-powered American nuclear delegation has been informed, in meetings with top government functionaries, of New Delhi's two clear

E. EXPLAINED

America's mission

The US nuclear 'executive mission' has a twin-pronged brief: take stock of India's nuclear energy landscape after a landmark legislation opened up this sector; communicate the US industry's interest, as well as coordinate US government messaging, on emerging opportunities.

objectives following the legal changes: scale up nuclear power to step up base-load capacity, and progressively enter

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Govt pitch to n-mission

the manufacturing value chain of small modular reactors (SMRs).

Based on heavy water and natural uranium, PHWRs are a technology India's nuclear establishment has mastered — but one that is increasingly out of sync with the light water reactors (LWRs), or pressurised water reactors, that are now the most dominant type worldwide.

The problem with LWRs, from an Indian perspective, is high project costs, which translate into a high per-unit cost of power. As a result, there is a sense in policy circles PHWRs will remain the main focus. Any foreign collaboration could

largely be limited to SMRs for now, given cost concerns linked to LWRs, an executive who is part of the US delegation told *The Indian Express* after the first leg of visits concluded in Delhi.

The executive said the Indian side communicated a general openness to private participation, alongside the need for funding from foreign sources. India's dominant nuclear technology — PHWRs spanning 220 MWe (megawatt electric) reactors up to newer 700 MWe reactors — has a largely unblemished operational record but has suffered from scalability issues.

India's external outreach for nuclear collaborations is driven

more by the need for capital than technology, a top government official had indicated at the time of the nuclear Amendments' passage.

The import of LWRs at higher cost raises two concerns: such projects should not end up stunting the growth of indigenous reactor design and production capacities; and higher capital expenditure results in higher tariffs, which must be absorbed under Indian market conditions. The setting up of nuclear reactors at Jaitapur site in Maharashtra, for instance, has been in limbo because of high tariff concerns, alongside liability concerns flagged earlier by French atomic power major Areva, which also faced its own financial troubles. The liability concerns have been addressed in

new nuclear amendments.

Organised by the Washington DC-based Nuclear Energy Institute — a lobby group of America's commercial nuclear energy industry — and the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, the industry delegation held meetings with Union Power Minister Manohar Lal and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, as well as top representatives from states such as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The delegation is in Mumbai for two days, with meetings scheduled with India's private sector energy players, including Reliance Industries, Adani Group, Tata Power Company, JSW Energy, Vedanta, Larsen & Toubro, Tata Consulting Engineers and Hindalco Industries.

Nothing wrong in caste count: SC; rejects plea against move

Not within the court's domain to decide if it should necessarily be part of Census 2027, says CJI; until the 2011 Census, the exercise included the systematic enumeration of only the SCs and STs

Krishnadas Rajagopal

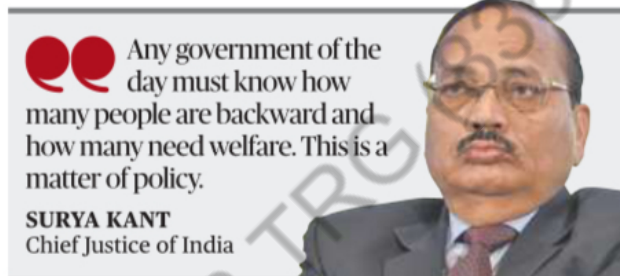
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday said there was nothing wrong in the government of the day ascertaining caste as part of the ongoing nationwide Census exercise.

"Any government of the day must know how many people are backward and how many need welfare. This is a matter of policy," Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, said.

The top court was responding to a plea filed by petitioner-in-person Sudhakar Gummula that caste enumeration should not be made part of Census 2027.

"There are endless possibilities of politicians and corporate entities misus-



ing the caste data. There is no justification for gathering such a large tract of data on caste," Mr. Gummula submitted.

The Chief Justice said it was not within the top court's domain to decide whether a caste enumeration should necessarily be a part of Census 2027 or not.

"This issue exclusively comes within the policy domain," the CJI said before the court dismissed the petition.

The Cabinet Committee

on Political Affairs had decided to include caste enumeration in Census 2027 at a meeting held in April 2025.

Since then, caste enumeration has emerged as a major feature of the Census.

Until the 2011 Census, the exercise had included the systematic enumeration of only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The government had said on the floor of Parliament about the incorpora-

tion of the caste enumeration in the second phase of Census 2027.

Two phases

The first phase involved the collection of the House Listing Operation (HLO) information regarding housing conditions, assets, amenities and so on of each household.

The second phase, Population Enumeration, would involve the collection of demographic, socio-economic, cultural and other details.

Former Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar had said that "thoughtfully collected caste data would be an instrument of integration, like an MRI of the body".

The last comprehensive nationwide caste Census was conducted in colonial India in 1931.

Naga body in Manipur petitions PM, seeking release of six Naga captives

The Hindu Bureau

GUWAHATI

An apex body of Naga women in Manipur petitioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, seeking the Centre's intervention for the release of six Naga men allegedly held hostage by Kuki groups. They also demanded the abrogation of agreements signed with several Kuki extremist groups.

The appeal of the Naga Women's Union (NWU) followed a memorandum from the Kuki-Zo Council, an apex body of Kuki-Zo communities in the State, to the Prime Minister on May 18. The Kuki body had sought the safe release of 14 Kuki men, including three minor students, allegedly held hostage by Naga groups.

The latest hostage crisis



Women protest demanding the release of six missing Naga civilians, at Kanglatongbi village, in Imphal West district of Manipur. PTI

hit Manipur after unidentified gunmen ambushed and killed three Thadou church leaders on May 13. A section of Thadous claims it is a tribe independent of the Kuki tag.

Six hostages remain

On Wednesday, hundreds of NWU members staged protests in the Naga-majority hill districts – Chandel,

Kamjong, Noney, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul – to demand the release of the six Naga captives and the abrogation of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements.

In the memorandum to the Prime Minister, the NWU said Kuki extremists had abducted 20 Naga civilians, 14 of whom were released in exchange for an

equal number of Kuki hostages on May 15. The union identified the remaining abductees as church leaders.

The NWU also demanded that the Centre arrest and prosecute all those involved in the abductions, deliver justice to Wilson Thanga, a Naga villager killed in Noney district on May 13, and ensure the welfare, rehabilitation, and protection of the women who had been released.

Officials said the security forces were continuing their search-and-rescue operations.

A Tangkhum Naga delegation from Ukhrul met CM Yumnam Khemchand Singh, highlighting that repeated attacks on the vulnerable village of Sina-keithe have created fear, insecurity, and distress among residents.

Marco Rubio to begin India visit on May 23; discuss trade, energy

Meeting comes amid U.S.-Iran war that has hurt India's energy security; trade and defence cooperation also on the agenda of his first India trip

Kallol Bhattacharjee

Shiv Sahay Singh

NEW DELHI/KOLKATA

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio will pay his first visit to India between May 23 and 26, the U.S. State Department said on Friday.

The visit will be closely watched as it comes against the backdrop of the U.S.'s continued engagement in hostilities in the Persian Gulf region, which have had consequences for India's energy security.

Mr. Rubio's visit is part of a tightly packed Indian diplomatic calendar for this summer and monsoon season, with New Delhi expected to host meetings of BRICS, the Quad, the India-Africa Forum Summit, and other platforms.

"As America gets ready to celebrate our 250th birthday, we look forward to doing it with our partners in India. India is the



U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, right, with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Washington. FILE PHOTO

world's largest democracy and we are the world's oldest. So, we look forward to celebrating it together," Mr. Rubio said, in a video message that was shared on X by the U.S. Embassy in India. He will visit Kolkata, Agra, Jaipur, and New Delhi.

"The Secretary will discuss energy security, trade, and defense cooperation during meetings with senior Indian officials,"

U.S. State Department spokesperson Thomas Pigott said.

The visit is connected to unfolding regional and global diplomatic dialogues, coming days after India hosted the BRICS Foreign Ministers meeting.

The State Department's announcement did not mention the Quad Foreign Ministers meeting that is also expected to be held in the near future.

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Putin, Xi hail 'resilient' relations in talks days after Trump's China visit

Beijing and Moscow have 'continuously deepened our political mutual trust and strategic coordination' with a resilience that remains unyielding, says Chinese President; the leaders have signed a slew of agreements on trade, media and energy

Agence France-Presse
BEIJING

President Xi Jinping hailed China and Russia's "unyielding" ties in talks with Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, as the pair met to underscore their alliance days after Donald Trump's own visit to Beijing.

The two countries' ties have deepened since Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as Russia has become increasingly dependent on China.

Mr. Putin was received by Mr. Xi outside Beijing's opulent Great Hall of the People in much the same fashion as Mr. Trump last week, complete with



Xi Jinping with Vladimir Putin during a welcoming ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, on Wednesday. REUTERS

chanting children and military fanfare.

But the language was much warmer, with Mr. Xi telling the Russian leader Beijing and Moscow have "continuously deepened

our political mutual trust and strategic coordination with a resilience that remains unyielding", according to Chinese state media.

Opening talks, both were quick to laud their

countries' special ties as they extended their treaty of "friendly cooperation".

Mr. Putin, quoting a Chinese phrase, told Mr. Xi: "A day apart feels like three autumns," adding that relations had reached an "unprecedentedly high level" despite "unfavourable external factors".

In an apparent swipe at the U.S., Mr. Xi warned of "unilateral and hegemonic countercurrents running rampant" in the world.

In contrast to Mr. Trump's visit last week, which yielded little in the way of immediate concrete announcements, Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi signed a slew of agreements on Wednesday on trade, media and ener-

gy. The two leaders will have tea later, at which "the most important issues" such as Ukraine, Iran and relations with the U.S. will be discussed, Kremlin foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov said.

"Russia and China are actively cooperating in the energy sector... We are ready to continue reliably supplying all these types of fuel to the rapidly growing Chinese market," Mr. Putin said on Wednesday.

Mr. Xi told Mr. Putin on Wednesday that "a comprehensive ceasefire [in Iran] is of utmost urgency, resuming hostilities is even more inadvisable and maintaining negotiations is particularly important".

War would spread beyond West Asia, say Iran Guards

Agence France-Presse

TEHRAN

Iran warned on Wednesday that the West Asia war would spread far beyond the region if the United States and Israel resumed their attacks, after U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to strike again unless a deal is reached.

A ceasefire on April 8 brought a halt to the conflict, which has roiled the global economy, but with Washington and Tehran seemingly reluctant to resume the fighting a war of words has taken its place.

U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened Tehran with renewed military action, while Iranian officials have



A Basij force member demonstrates how to handle an assault rifle during a weapons training class in Tehran on Tuesday. AP

hit back with their own warnings of devastating action.

On Tuesday, U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance told presspersons that “a lot of good progress is being made” and “we’re just going to keep working at it”, even as he told Iran the

U.S. military was “locked and loaded”.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards issued their own threat on Wednesday, saying, “if the aggression against Iran is repeated, the promised regional war will this time spread far beyond the region”.