

AHEAD OF SEPTEMBER SUMMIT

China, Russia, Iran in Delhi next week for huddle of BRICS NSAs

Shubhajit Roy

New Delhi, June 18

CHINESE FOREIGN Minister Wang Yi, Russian NSA Sergei Shoigu and Iranian Supreme National Security Council Deputy Secretary Nezamipour will be in New Delhi for the meeting of the BRICS NSAs on June 22-23, which will set the stage for the summit of BRICS leaders in India in September.

India holds the rotating presidency of the BRICS bloc this year. Its members include Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.

Wang, who is also Beijing's Special Representative on the India-China boundary issue, is expected to hold bilateral talks



Doval and Wang are also India and China's representatives for boundary talks. PTI FILE

with NSA Ajit Doval during the visit. Doval will host the meeting of the NSAs.

Wang was unable to attend the meeting of BRICS Foreign Ministers last month because he had to be in Beijing for the visit of US President Donald Trump.

Sources said Wang's visit is

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

NSAs

also a signal that Chinese President Xi Jinping is likely to visit India for the summit of the BRICS leaders on September 12-13. Russia has already conveyed that President Vladimir Putin will be attending the meeting.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a media briefing Thursday that Wang will exchange views with other BRICS member states on the current international security situation and major international and regional issues.

The meeting will also discuss joint responses to traditional and non-traditional security challenges and make preparations for the BRICS summit in September, Lin said. "Amid a transforming and volatile world with many security challenges on the rise, BRICS countries standing at the forefront of the global south are committed to safeguarding world peace," Lin said.

Revised pact with U.K. could save \$500 million for Indians

The agreement on social security, effective July 15, will save Indian firms and workers there about \$500 million worth of social security payments they otherwise would have had to pay in the U.K.

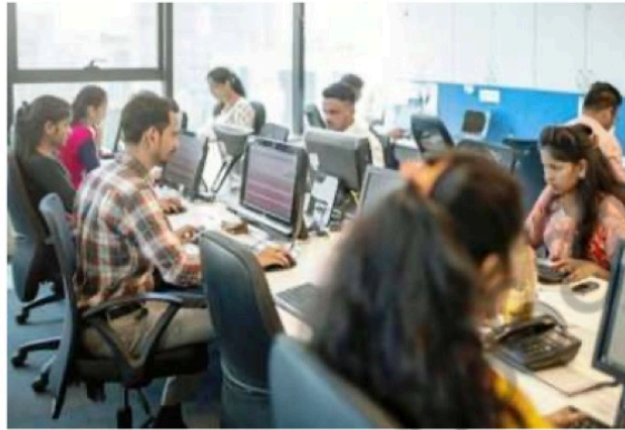
T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The agreement on social security that India and the U.K. have signed and that will come into force on July 15 will save Indian companies and workers there about \$500 million worth of social security payments that they otherwise would have had to pay in the U.K., according to sources in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The original Agreement on Social Security, also referred to as the Double Contribution Convention (DCC), was signed in July 2025. It exempted companies in the U.K. from paying social security for the temporary Indian workers they employed for a period of three years, as long as they paid social security in India during that period.

On Wednesday, both governments announced that the DCC would come into effect on July 15 along with the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between India and the U.K.

As per the revised agreement, the social security exemption limit has now been increased to five years, which will cover about 90-95% of the Indian workers in the U.K. and stands to significantly reduce costs for Indian companies operating in the U.K. "We have more than 75,000 workers from India



Shot in the arm: There are more than 900 Indian companies at present operational in the U.K., an official said. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

working in the U.K. and there are more than 900 Indian companies that are at present operational in the U.K.," a Commerce Ministry official explained on condition of anonymity since the matter is confidential until July 15.

"On the basis of their minimum salary levels, the savings to Indian companies in the U.K. employing temporary Indian workers will come to more than half a billion dollars," the official added.

Imbalances rectified

The issue that had arisen was that, in the absence of a DCC, companies employing Indian workers had to pay social security for these workers in India as well as in the U.K. Most of these workers were in the U.K. for up to a period of five years. However, the benefits from social security in the U.K. accrue only after 10 consecutive years

of contribution.

"This meant that most of the Indian workers there were paying double social security, and also were not able to get any benefit from the U.K. social security system," the official added. "Now, with the exemption increased from three to five years, this covers about 90-95% of the temporary Indian workers in the U.K."

Companies will need to obtain a certificate from the Indian government confirming that social security was being paid here, which they can submit to the U.K. government in order to avail of the exemption.

The CETA was also signed in July last year and was supposed to be implemented by early May 2026.

However, a fresh U.K. regulation on steel import tariffs temporarily – which had not been part of the CETA negotiations –

brought the trade deal proceedings to a halt as both countries scrambled to find a solution without having to redo the CETA itself.

"If you look at this steel measure in detail, 85% of our steel exports to the U.K. was out of this," a second official explained. "Out of about \$890 million of steel export that we do to the U.K., only \$137 million was getting affected."

"We have arrived at a deal on this steel measure, which has taken care of our concerns," they added. "It was finalised only yesterday afternoon [hours before the deal was announced]. India will not lose any market access, and will have a decent market access in the affected portions. We are satisfied with the overall deal. We are happy that our concerns on steel have been addressed."

The two officials would not reveal details of what concessions India has obtained regarding the steel tariffs as the matter was still extremely sensitive for the U.K., which was still negotiating with other countries on the matter.

However, they said that the leeway granted to India would be in the form of a mix of country-specific quotas, residual quotas and access under authorised-use schemes.

The details will be available on July 1, when the U.K.'s tariffs come into effect.

‘Only 10% of 31,429 poll candidates since 2023 were women’

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Since the passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill in 2023, Assembly polls have been held in 20 States and Union Territories (UTs). Out of a total of 31,429 candidates who contested in these polls, only 3,273 (10.2%) were women.

The proportion of women candidates did not exceed 14% across these States and Union Territories, according to an analysis by the Association for Democratic Reforms.

The Women’s Reservation Bill mandates that 33% seats be reserved for women.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, held months after the passage of the Bill, out of 8,360 candidates analysed, only 800 (9.6%) were women and 152 (28%) in 543 constituencies had

zero women candidates, the report said.

Assemblies which had the highest number of women candidates were Odisha (2024) at 13.9%, Delhi (2025) at 13.7% and Puducherry (2026) at 13.6%. Arunachal Pradesh (2024) and Jammu and Kashmir (2024) recorded the lowest participation, with women constituting only 4.9% of the total candidates.

Benchmark not met

As far as the Lok Sabha polls were concerned, no political party met the one-third (33%) benchmark for women candidates in the 2024 general election.

While the Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian National Congress fielded women candidates in the range of 13%-16%, several State parties recorded substantially higher levels of female representation.

Telegram challenge once again puts spotlight on Section 69A of IT Act

NEWS ANALYSIS

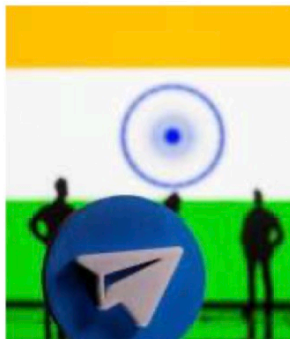
Rizmi Lia M.

CHENNAI

The Centre's move to block Telegram has once again drawn attention to Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, a provision that gives the government the power to direct intermediaries to block access to online information under specified circumstances.

The temporary ban on the platform, which was initially misused for the medical entrance examination paper leak and misinformation campaigns, was aimed at curbing another paper leak during the NEET-UG retest. Telegram has approached the Delhi High Court challenging the ban, which is set to last till June 22, and the judgment has been reserved.

Section 69A of the IT Act



Telegram has approached the Delhi HC challenging the ban, which is set to last till June 22.

authorises the Union government to block public access to any information via any computer resource, including applications and websites, if it is satisfied that such blocking is necessary “in the interest of India’s sovereignty and integrity, defence of India, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognizable offence”.

But the restriction may interfere with Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution, which protects freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, the orders under Section 69A must be issued with the procedural safeguards established by the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking Access to Information by the Public) Rules, 2009.

In *Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India*, the Supreme Court examined the validity of the indefinite blanket ban on internet services in the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir, and the court held that freedom of speech and expression, as well as freedom to practice any profession or carry on any trade, business, or occupation over the internet, are protected by Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g). The court also concluded that orders restricting internet access must

meet the proportionality test: they must be required, use the least restrictive measures available, and be open to judicial review.

Article 19(1)(g) provides the right to practice any profession or to engage in any occupation, trade, or business. A ban on a platform that has about 150 million users in India will disrupt many creators, educators, and entrepreneurs running broadcast groups, and prevent them from maintaining communication with their subscribers. It thus limits one's ability to earn a living.

Section 79 of the IT Act also establishes intermediary safe harbour provision, which means platforms are not liable for third-party content if they exercise due diligence, follow the Information Technology Rules, 2021, and act quickly upon receiving knowledge of illegal content.

Telegram evolved into 'new dark web', govt. tells Delhi HC

Govt. says the app is used by cybercriminals, exam paper leak operators; court questions the platform-wide ban as it hears Telegram's challenge

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

The Union government on Thursday submitted before the Delhi High Court that the messaging platform Telegram had evolved into the "new dark web", arguing that its architecture and privacy features had made it a preferred tool for cybercriminals, fraud networks, extremist and terror groups, and operators involved in examination paper leaks.

The government's submissions relied heavily on an Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) assessment that the platform was a growing hub for illicit online activity. The government has restricted access to the platform

Telegram on trial

The messaging platform contests restrictions imposed under Section 69A of the IT Act



Govt.'s stand

- Used by cybercriminals, fraud networks, extremist groups, and exam leak operators
- Fails to act against illegal and suspicious channels despite repeated requests
- Features can be misused to falsely portray exam papers as leaked and trigger law-and-order concerns

Telegram's stand

- Centre fails to justify emergency powers or a platform-wide ban
- Specific content can be blocked instead of restricting the entire platform

ahead of the June 21 NEET re-examination.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre during the hearing on Telegram's petition challenging the temporary ban imposed till June 22 under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, told the court

that the enterprise behind the messaging app had been repeatedly asked to proactively monitor and curb illegal and suspicious channels on the platform.

CONTINUED ON

» **PAGE 10**

ON SECTION 69A

» **PAGE 10**

Telegram evolved into 'new dark web': govt.

However, the company failed to take any meaningful action, Mr. Mehta said.

Senior advocate Dhruv Mehta, appearing for Telegram, said the government had failed to justify the use of emergency powers and had not demonstrated why specific content could not be blocked, instead of disabling access to the entire platform. "The order says it is in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India. An examination like NEET will affect the sovereignty and integrity of India?" he asked.

A Bench of Justice Tejas Kataria scrutinised the government's justification for a platform-wide restriction, even as it acknowledged concerns about exam malpractice and cybercrime. "How can we stop the rights of 150 million people just because one set of citizens are appearing in examinations?" he said while hearing submissions from both sides.

The judgment has been reserved for Friday.

The Centre's affidavit also details how Telegram is allegedly used by cyber threat actors to coordinate attacks, distribute malware, and facilitate financial crime. It is alleged that Telegram channels host marketplaces for rented and mule bank accounts used in money laundering and cyber fraud. Such channels enable criminals to exchange information on bank accounts, UPI handles, and cryptocurrency conversion mechanisms while, due to the interface, it remains difficult for the police to track them because new channels emerge continuously.

"The entire population of a channel, around a lakh, can be moved to another channel in seconds. This is unique to Telegram and poses a serious risk," the Solicitor General said.

To support its claims, the Centre pointed to a sharp rise in cybercrime complaints linked to Telegram. Data placed before the court show that complaints on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal involving Telegram increased from 75,688 in 2023 to 2.75 lakh in 2025, with reported fraud amounts crossing ₹3,000 crore in 2025. In 2026, by May, over 88,000 such complaints had already been recorded.

"In Telegram, one account can create 40 bots. In WhatsApp it's one bot per user," Mr. Mehta said.

Thailand revives \$30bn coast-to-coast corridor

Ranong: Chaiyaporn Arunrasamee hunched over his fishing nets, overlooking the waters of the Andaman Sea, where Thailand's government is proposing an ambitious "Land Bridge" that will ferry goods between ports on opposite sides of the peninsula.

"Personally, I don't want it to happen at all," Chaiyaporn said of the project, which Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has resuscitated after the war in Iran and the closure of the Hormuz Strait highlighted countries' reliance on strategic maritime chokepoints.

Plans envision a 1 trillion baht (\$30.45 billion) logistics corridor to offer an alternative route to the

congested Strait of Malacca by connecting two new deep-sea ports: Chumphon, on the Gulf of Thailand to the east, and Ranong, along the western Andaman coast, where Chaiyaporn, 50, has fished for his entire life.

"This thing will be located in the area where we make our living," he said last month in the small fishing hamlet of Baan Hat Sai Dam on an island ringed by mangrove forests.

Analysts say the project currently appears economically ambitious and is unlikely to compete with Malacca as a global transit route, but it could prove viable as a smaller-scale strategic corridor for Thailand.

Uzbekistan courts global investors with AI tax breaks, duty-free zones

Harikishan Sharma

Tashkent, June 18

THE PRESIDENT of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Wednesday, while announcing the launch of tax free zones for artificial intelligence projects and data centres, said that the doors of 'New Uzbekistan' will always remain open to foreign investors who come to "our country with trust and ideas."

Addressing the Opening ceremony of the Fifth Tashkent International Investment Forum, Mirziyoyev also announced that his country will create an open digital geological database of all minerals including rare minerals and in-

crease by four times the number of deposits put up for auction and will "extensively" attract foreign investment into the 'Metals of the Future' technoparks, which are being established in Tashkent and Samarkand regions.

Welcoming the heads of state and government, representatives of international financial institutions, major companies and investment funds and business leaders, Mirziyoyev said, "We are always open to investors interested in cooperation with Uzbekistan and ready to build equal and mutually beneficial partnership. The participation of nearly 4,000 foreign guests from more than 100 countries in this



Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev addressing at the Fifth Tashkent International Investment Forum.

EXPRESS PHOTO

year's forum is a clear indication of the growing international recognition and prestige of the Tashkent International Investment Forum." Promising more

reforms to attract foreign investors, Mirziyoyev announced tax free zones for the investors.

"We have created a special zone for AI projects and data

centres in Karakalpakstan. In this territory, until 2040, investors will be exempt from all types of taxes and duties; road, electricity, and water infrastructure will be financed by the state; a preferential electricity tariff of 5 cents per kilowatt-hour will be applied," he said.

He also announced that his country will attract foreign investment in rare mineral mining through its new initiative — 'Metals of the Future' technoparks. "As you are well aware, Uzbekistan is rich in natural resources, including gold, copper, uranium, tungsten, natural gas, and other rare minerals. The total value of our subsoil wealth, strategic raw materials,

is estimated at \$3 trillion," Mirziyoyev said.

"In order to provide opportunities in this sector to foreign investors we will create an open digital database of geological data and increase by four times the number of deposits put up for auction. To implement projects from "mining to finished products," we will extensively attract foreign investment into the 'Metals of the Future' technoparks, which are being established in Tashkent and Samarkand regions," he said.

FULL REPORT ON

WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

The writer is in Tashkent at the invitation of the government of Uzbekistan.

Iran deal sparks anger among Republican hawks

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump's deal with Iran has opened a rare breach with Republican hawks, who warn that the agreement falls far short of the sweeping victory he promised and could leave Tehran richer, stronger and still able to threaten the region.

The memorandum of understanding, signed by Mr. Trump in France, is aimed at ending months of conflict, reopening the vital Strait of Hormuz and stabilising energy markets after a war that drove up oil prices and raised fears of a wider West Asia crisis.

But the terms have alarmed some of the same Republicans who spent

years denouncing Democratic former President Barack Obama's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran as dangerously weak.

They have voiced concerns that Mr. Trump is offering Iran sanctions relief, access to oil markets and the prospect of a \$300 billion reconstruction fund while failing to secure firm commitments on uranium enrichment, ballistic missiles or Tehran's support for armed proxies.

Republican Senator Bill Cassidy wrote on X that former President and Republican icon Ronald Reagan would be "rolling over in his grave," calling the agreement "the worst foreign policy blunder in decades".

"Before the war, the



Signs protesting the Iran war and its impact on fuel prices during a protest outside of the U.S. Capitol in Washington DC. AFP

strait was open, Iran was being crushed by sanctions, and 13 service members were still alive," he said.

"Now, 13 Americans are dead, families have paid billions at the pump, sanctions will be lifted, and the bombing has stopped."

States could resume strikes if negotiations fail.

"It's a memorandum of understanding, and if I don't like it, we'll go back to shooting at them, dropping bombs on their head," Mr. Trump told presspersons on Wednesday at a Group of Seven summit in Evian, in eastern France.

Republican Senator Ted Cruz warned urged Trump not to "suddenly come in with massive buckets of cash to let them rebuild and become a threat to America again".

Senator Lindsey Graham said the deal opened the Strait of Hormuz, suspended hostilities and created space to test whether diplomacy could curb Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Mr. Trump has defended the deal as a practical way to reopen one of the world's most important energy chokepoints, through which about a fifth of global crude normally passes. He said the agreement was not final and warned that the United

Hegseth blasts NATO allies, says U.S. will review forces in Europe

Agence France-Presse

BRUSSELS

U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth told NATO on Thursday the Pentagon will review its force presence in Europe within six months, as he lashed out at allies over defence spending and their response to the Iran war.

“This will be a real review. It will be designed to ensure that NATO is moving fast and irreversibly toward Europe leading, stepping up to take primary responsibility for the defence of Europe,” Mr. Hegseth told a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in



Pete Hegseth

Brussels. “It’s a review that some countries will fail, and others will pass with flying colours.”

The Pentagon chief said the move was also aimed at ensuring U.S. “access, basing and overflight are clearly delineated and assured”

after some European nations imposed restrictions on U.S. forces during the Iran war.

“It was shameful. These allies, they put America’s sons and daughters, our sons and daughters, at risk,” he said. “There’s no excuse for that.”

Mr. Hegseth said going forward that Washington paying its dues to cover NATO organisational running costs – roughly some \$790 million in 2026 – would be “contingent” on allies reaching spending targets. “Where other allies do not spend with urgency, our dues contributions will go down,” he said.

Trump defends Iran deal from critics he calls ‘fools’

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump lashed out at critics of his agreement with Iran on Thursday, calling those who accused him of offering concessions to end the war “fools”, ahead of negotiations in Switzerland on implementing the deal.

Oil prices tumbled after Mr. Trump and his Iranian counterpart separately signed their accord to end the West Asia war, with the Strait of Hormuz to reopen but two months of negotiations lying ahead.

In a sudden development after uncertainty over when the deal agreed earlier this week would be formally signed, Mr. Trump put his name to it in thick black ink at a candlelit dinner with French President Emmanuel Macron at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris on Wednesday.

Mr. Macron – for whom the signing at the palace,



Donald Trump during the signing of a deal with Iran to end the West Asia war, inside Chateau de Versailles, on Wednesday. AFP

which hosted the signing of the treaty that ended the First World War, was an immense coup following his hosting of the G7 summit – shouted “bravo” as Mr. Trump signed.

“These fools, who think I haven’t been tough enough on Iran, when the Stock Market Just Hit A RECORD HIGH, and Oil prices are ‘tumbling’ down, are either jealous, bad people, or stupid,” Mr. Trump posted on social media hours after signing the deal.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian also signed the agreement, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baqaei said, adding that “now it is time to test the implementation of the agreement”.

The deal should bring an end to the current U.S.-Israeli conflict with the Islamic republic, which saw five weeks of all-out war until a ceasefire early April and led to shipping being greatly restricted in the Strait of Hormuz, causing a spike in energy prices.