

Gyanesh Kumar appointed as CEC

NEW DELHI, Feb 17 (PTI)

ELECTION Commissioner

Gyanesh Kumar was appointed as the next Chief Election Commissioner on Monday, the Law Ministry said.

Kumar is the first CEC to be appointed under the new law on the

Similarly, he will oversee the Assembly polls in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, which are also due in 2026.

Kumar, who played a key role in implementing decisions following the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution in Jammu and Kashmir during his stint in the Union Home

Vivek Joshi is new Election Commissioner



Gyanesh Kumar

appointment of the members of the Election Commission (EC). His term will run till January 26, 2029, days before the EC is expected to announce the schedule of the next Lok Sabha election.

Vivek Joshi, a 1989-batch Haryana-cadre Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, has been appointed as an Election Commissioner.

During his tenure as the 26th CEC, Kumar will oversee the Bihar Assembly polls later this year, and the Kerala and Puducherry Assembly polls in 2026.



Vivek Joshi

Ministry, took charge as an Election Commissioner on March 15, 2024.

His appointment came hours after the Congress asked the Government to defer its decision on the new CEC till the Supreme Court concludes its hearing on a petition challenging the composition of the selection panel.

The Congress's demand was put forth by Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi during a meeting of the selection panel chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sources said.

Goods exports fall for 3rd month, trade deficit widens

Electronics Pip Oil Products, Emerge 2nd Biggest Export Item

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

SERVICES OVERTAKE GOODS IN JAN



New Delhi: India's goods exports fell for the third straight month due to lower oil prices, pushing up the trade deficit in Jan as imports grew at the fastest pace since April.

Latest data released by the commerce department on Monday estimated that exports fell 2.4% in Jan to \$36.4 billion, although non-oil exports shot up 14.5% to \$32.9 billion. In contrast, exports of petrol and diesel crashed 58% to \$3.5 billion — making electronics (79% jump to \$4.1 billion) the second largest item in India's export basket after engineering. During Jan, imports were up 10.2% to \$59.4 billion, resulting in a trade deficit of \$23 billion compared with \$16.6 billion in Jan 2024.

The provisional estimates of services exports indicated that it has once again topped goods. Services ex-

ports are estimated to have gone up by over 24% to \$38.8 billion in Jan, while imports were pegged at \$18.2 billion.

With export of goods and services cumulatively adding up to \$683 billion, commerce secretary Sunil Barthwal said India was on course to topping exports of \$800 billion this year.

Asked about the impact of tariff actions by the US on several countries, including China, Canada and Mexico,

Barthwal said Indian exporters could gain, and added that the govt was planning to soon hold stakeholder consultations.

"Despite conflicts and tariff retaliation around the world, we are doing well," he told reporters, while drawing comfort from non-oil exports.

The secretary said India's strongholds, such as engineering, electronics, pharma and readymade gar-

ments, had been growing consistently over last year's high base. "The major drivers of non-oil import growth are electronics, drugs and pharma (21.5%) and rice (44.6%). We are seeing some green shoots in gems and jewellery," said Barthwal.

In Jan, gold imports soared 40% to \$2.7 billion, although it was significantly lower than Dec 2024, when it was estimated at \$4.7 billion.

Fieo president Ashwani Kumar called for strategic measures to bolster exports and rationalise imports. In a statement, he demanded a focused approach to export diversification, targeting new markets and products, and for the continuation of trade facilitation measures and export incentives.

"A careful review of import policies is also essential to identify areas where domestic production can be encouraged to reduce dependency on imports," he said.

F-35 for India: Will it be a game changer, or costly trap?

At a time when China is showcasing its stealth prowess and Pakistan is eyeing next-gen jets, India faces a dilemma — stick to its long-standing defence ties or embrace the world's most advanced fighter? Here's what India's choices are

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On Feb 14, US President Donald Trump made the surprise announcement: "We're paving the way to ultimately provide India with the F-35 stealth fighters." If the deal goes through it could catapult India's airpower into the league of stealth-enabled nations like the US, UK, Japan, and Israel. The Indian Air Force (IAF) currently has no stealth fighters, while China has already deployed its J-20s and is working on the sixth-generation J-36.

But this is not just a military deal. Accepting the F-35s comes with serious geopolitical and financial considerations. Would this pull India deeper into the US sphere of influence and strain its decades-old ties with Russia? Would this impact India's indigenous AMCA stealth jet program, delaying its defence self-sufficiency? And most crucially, at \$80-100 million per jet, can India afford this deal?

Why F-35 is A Big Deal

The F-35 Lightning Strike is considered "the most advanced fighter jet" in the world. It's the second most expensive combat jet after the F-22 Raptor; another US-made stealth fighter that is not for sale.

Manufactured by US defence giant Lockheed Martin, F-35 is a single-seat, single-engine, supersonic, all-weather stealth fighter. It comes in three variants — F-35A (conventional take-off and landing, meant for the air force), F-35B (short take-off and vertical landing, used by marines) and the carrier-borne F-35C (for navy).

"The F-35 is a powerful force multiplier with advanced sensors and communications suites operating close to the battlefield and from an elevated position, significantly enhancing the capabilities of networked airborne, maritime, space, surface and ground-based platforms," according to the manufacturer. More than 1,000 F-35s are currently operational around the globe with 20 buyers worldwide having chosen the machine. The jets can carry an array of precision-guided missiles as well as bunker-buster bombs.

Where IAF Stands Now

IAF currently operates only 31 squadrons (each with 18 aircraft) — far below the sanctioned strength of 42. The shortfall is largely due to IAF's inability to replace an ageing and mainly Soviet-era fleet, especially the accident-prone MiG-21s, while the homegrown Tejas fighter jet is caught in production delays.

IAF chief AP Singh has repeatedly vented his frustration over the sluggish pace of indigenous defence projects, saying recently that "R&D [research and development] loses its relevance in case it is not able to meet timelines. Technology delayed is technology denied".

JETS THAT CAN DODGE RADAR

- Stealth fighters are mostly fifth-generation jets designed to avoid detection by radar and other electronic means. They use a variety of technologies to reduce their radar signature, infrared, visible light, radio frequency, and audio emissions
- Stealth aircraft avoid sharp curves, right angles, and large surfaces. Instead, they use curved surfaces with large radii and many small, flat planes
- They are made of special radar-absorbent materials
- They use inertial guidance or other non-emitting navigational systems
- They do not have large, heat-producing afterburner engines

THE STEALTH CLUB

Russia | Sukhoi SU-57 (\$35mn-\$54mn)

China | J-20 Mighty Dragon (\$110mn) and J-35 (\$70mn)

US | F-35 Lightning Strike (\$80mn-\$100mn per unit) and F-22 Raptor (\$350mn)

WHEN WILL INDIA GET ITS STEALTH AMCA?

- India plans to have the first prototype of its indigenous 5.5 generation fighter jet ready by 2028
- AMCA will be a stealth aircraft capable of carrying a significant weapons load
- Mass production of the AMCA is expected to start by 2035

counterpart] SU-57 and is definitely much better," said Air Vice Marshal Pranay Sinha (retd), a former fighter pilot with a long experience of flying IAF's Sukhois.

According to Sinha, IAF should have stealth fighters for strategic use. "For instance, this [stealth] capability will be required if we want to go into an enemy territory, hit them hard and come back without getting detected by their air defence system," he explains.

Years ago, Colonel Ajai Shukla (retired), a leading commentator on military issues, also made a strong case for the F-35, writing in a blog post that when it comes to the "ability to deliver high explosives accurately without sustaining unacceptable casualties to our strike force... the F-35 will be the granddaddy of any living fighter, including our Sukhois".

When Will Deal Get Done?

India has sounded cautious about buying the expensive F-35s. "There is a process by which platforms are acquired," Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri told reporters in Washington, adding that negotiations have not started yet.

If India indeed pursues the F-35 offer, it will also have to factor in several things like the off-the-shelf price, the technologies being given, life-cycle costs, maintenance and the like, apart from the strategic benefits it can reap.

Besides, utmost care will have to be taken that India's own 5th-Gen fighter project, the AMCA, is not adversely impacted. "Whenever we go for any foreign acquisitions, our own projects [like AMCA] get affected. If the US allows technology transfer, then buying F-35s would make sense. This could help us in the development of our AMCA as well," Sinha says.

GOVT
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FOR THE
PROJECT IN
MARCH
2024

IAF, which until two years ago was very much dependent on its workhorse Sukhoi SU-30MKI, has tried to plug the gap with the French-made Rafale jets. But if Pakistan is ramping up its air power with the

TOI Explains

planned acquisition of 40 J-35 stealth fighters from China, China's recent debut of what it claims is its sixth-generation J-36 fighter jets has raised eyebrows globally. Neither the US nor Russia have unveiled any such project so far. China has also deployed its J-20 stealth jets at its airfields facing India. Defence analysts have repeatedly highlighted India's strategic vulnerability in the face of a two-front war threat and stressed the need for speedy acquisition of advanced aircraft.

What Advantage Does F-35 Bring?

"The F-35 will undoubtedly be a game changer [for India]. It's a proven bird and it's battle-hardened, although it's very costly. The F-35 is smaller than [its Russian

The Russia Angle

Any move to acquire F-35s could face serious obstacles given India's close defence ties with Russia. The US has been hesitant to sell its stealth fighters to countries where its technology might be stolen by adversaries.

In 2018, India decided to buy Russia's S-400 missile defence system, which is said to be capable of detecting and destroying all types of aerial objects, including stealth fighters. India has deployed two-three squadrons of the S-400s at its western and northern borders. The US had previously scrapped F-35 co-production with Turkey after Ankara decided to buy the S-400 over fears Russia would learn too much about the plane's technology. "The F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities," a July 2019 White House statement said.

(With inputs from Rajat Pandit & agencies)

In rare honour, PM receives Amir of Qatar at airport

On Agenda For Today's Meet: Trade, Gaza

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: In a rare honour for a visiting head of state, PM Narendra Modi received the Qatar Amir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, at the airport. This is the first visit by the Amir to India in nine years.

Al-Thani joined a select group of people, which includes former US President Barak Obama, Donald Trump during his first presidency, former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe and UAE President Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who have been given that honour by Modi.

In a major reprieve for India last year, Al-Thani had pardoned eight Indian Navy veterans who had been arrested by Qatari authorities for military espionage. While seven have come back to India, one is yet to return.

Commander Purnendu



Jaishankar with the Amir of the state of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, in New Delhi

Tiwari (ret'd) is still in Qatar apparently because of a travel ban. The eight men had been sentenced to death but later had it commuted to imprisonment. After their release, Modi had travelled to Doha for a bilateral visit during which he thanked Al-Thani for the pardon.

“Went to the airport to welcome my brother, Amir of Qatar HH Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani. Wishing him a fruitful stay in India and looking forward to our

meeting tomorrow,” Modi posted on X, shortly after he greeted Al-Thani with a hug at the airport.

The two countries are expected to discuss ways to enhance cooperation in trade, investment, technology, culture, energy and people-to-people contacts.

Modi and Al-Thani will also discuss regional and global issues, including the Gaza situation where Qatar is making efforts to salvage the ceasefire.

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HC orders CBI probe into ₹5,832cr beach mining scam in TN

Chennai: Madras HC Monday ordered a CBI probe into the alleged Rs 5,832 crore illegal beach mineral mining along the coasts in Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, and Kanyakumari districts. **Sureshkumar K.**

Bangladesh seeks India's backing to revive SAARC

DHAKA, Feb 17 (PTI)

BANGLADESH'S interim Government's Foreign Affairs Advisor Touhid Hossain has sought India's backing to revive the SAARC at a meeting with External Affairs S. Jaishankar at the sidelines of a multi-lateral conference in Muscat.

"Hossain sought to initiate discussions for the renewal of the Ganges Water Treaty signed in 1996 and emphasised the need for convening the SAARC Standing Committee meeting and requested New Delhi's support on the matter," a Bangladesh Foreign Ministry statement said after the two leaders met during the 8th Indian Ocean Conference

(IOC) in Muscat, Oman, on Sunday. Bangladesh's new Interim Government led by Muhammad Yunus has been insisting on the revival of the South Asian regional grouping SAARC which has been suspended for a long time due to the India-Pakistan conflict.

Jaishankar in a post on X after the meeting did not mention SAARC. "Met Foreign Affairs Advisor Md Touhid Hossain of the Interim Government of Bangladesh. The conversation was focused on our bilateral relationship, as also on BIMSTEC," Jaishankar posted on X.

Bangladesh will replace Thailand as chairman after the 6th BIMSTEC summit in April.

India, US to draw up broad contours of trade deal shortly

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Govt on Monday said it will draw up the broad contours of the proposed bilateral trade agreement with the US over the next few weeks, even as it keeps tabs on how the Trump administration's move to impose reciprocal tariffs unfolds.

"Give us a couple of weeks to decide what is the level of ambition in the first tranche (of the agreement that is proposed to be finalised by Fall) that we are looking at and what is the nature of the agreement that we will be arriving at. The two sides will need to sit together and try to finalise the broad contours," said Rajesh Agrawal, additional secretary in the com-

merce department.

Last week, PM Narendra Modi and US president Donald Trump set a target of more than doubling bilateral trade to \$500 billion by

"We have agreed to a road map for a fair and mutually beneficial bilateral agreement... It is not akin to an FTA," said an official

2030, while agreeing to negotiate a bilateral trade agreement. "We have agreed to a roadmap for a fair and mutually beneficial bilateral agreement... It is not akin to a free trade agreement," another official said.

As part of FTAs, countries typically announce a reduction or

elimination of import duty on 90%-95% of goods, if not more, in addition to offering concessions for services and investment. The initial agreement may be limited to import duty on goods, which has been Trump's main focus as he is seeking to reduce trade deficit with countries and get companies to invest in the US to create jobs.

While a mini trade deal was on the table during Trump's first term, the move did not go through. Officials have indicated that India is open to importing more oil, gas and defence goods from the US, while seeking to push its labour-intensive products, such as textiles and leather. Besides, farm products will be part of the trade agreement.

Officials said

the negotiations can formally commence once Howard Lutnick is confirmed as commerce secretary.

The announcement of a trade agreement came hours after Trump announced reciprocal tariffs, a move aimed at raising import duty on products from a country where American goods are subject to higher levies.

Officials said a bill to provide legal backing was introduced in the US Congress and is currently being examined by a select committee. "We will see when it comes," an official said when asked if the Indian govt was planning any action at the WTO since the proposed move violates global trade rules.