

# Europe, Canada eyeing alternatives to American-made fighter jets

BERLIN, Mar 19 (AP)

QUESTIONS are mounting in Canada and in Europe over whether big-ticket purchases of high-end US weaponry, such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, are still a wise strategic choice for Western countries worried about their investment in US defence technology.

In less than two months, US President Donald Trump has upended decades of US foreign policy. He has left NATO members questioning whether the US will honour the alliance's commitment to defend each other if other European countries are attacked by Russia. He's also made repeat overtures to Russia and suspended most US foreign aid. And Pete Hegseth, Trump's



Defence Secretary, last month told a gathering of European defence ministers "that stark strategic realities" prevent the US from being primarily focused on the security of Europe.

That could impact foreign sales of the Lockheed Martin-produced F-35 and other advanced US jets like the F-16. As the war in Ukraine continues into its fourth year, it's become clear that Eastern European NATO members still have vast stores of Soviet-era weapons in their stockpiles that were not interoperable with Western weaponry. A long-term plan to get all of NATO on similar platforms - by replacing old Soviet-era jets with Western ones, particularly the F-16 and in some cases, the F-35 - has gained momentum.

Some of the NATO countries are now re-thinking tying their defence to US-made systems and potentially considering European jets like the Saab Gripen, Eurofighter Typhoon and Dassault Rafale instead.



# India's agricultural exports record double digit surge as farm sector bounces back

NEW DELHI, Mar 19 (IANS)

INDIA'S exports of agricultural and processed food products have recorded a robust 13 per cent increase to \$22.67 billion during April-February in the current financial year compared with the same period of the previous year, reflecting the strong performance of the farm sector.

According to data compiled by the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, rice exports, including basmati and non-basmati varieties, jumped by 21 per cent during the 11-month period to over \$11 billion from \$9.32 billion in the same period last year.

The Government started easing restrictions on rice exports in September 2024 on prospects of



bumper crops, around a year after they were imposed to check food inflation in the domestic market fuelled by local shortages in a poor monsoon year.

These restrictions have been removed. This had led to a decline in exports during 2023-24. Rice exports increased by 13.21 per cent to \$1.19 billion in February this year from \$1.05 billion in February last

year, the latest figures show. Meanwhile, India's tea exports touched a 10-year high at 255 million kg in 2024 despite the uncertainties in the global market triggered by geopolitical tensions, data compiled by the Tea Board of India shows. The country's exports shot up by a robust 10 per cent during the year from the corresponding figure of 231.69 million kgs record-

ed in 2023, according to the figures.

The average price of Indian tea in the export market also went up by 10 per cent, bringing welcome relief to the tea industry which had been hit by inclement weather in 2023.

There was a sharp increase in shipments to Iraq, accounting for 20 per cent of tea exports, and merchants are expecting to send 40-50 million kg to the West Asian country this fiscal, he said.

Indian exporters, who entered several markets of West Asia when the Sri Lankan crop was low, managed to retain the shipment volumes there, he said.

India exports tea to more than 25 countries with UAE, Iraq, Iran, Russia, the US and the UK as the major markets.

# Like it or not, they are a reality: EAM Jaishankar on use of tariffs, sanctions

NEW DELHI, Mar 19 (ANI)

EXTERNAL Affairs Minister S Jaishankar highlighted the reality of there being increased use of tariffs and sanctions by various countries to protect one's economic interests, and that developing International relations has "eroded" the lines which divide the different domains across countries.

"Tariffs, sanctions, I think, whether we would like it or not they are a reality, countries use them. In fact, if one looks at the last decade, I would say we have seen a much greater weaponization of pretty much any kind of capability or any kind of economic activity. It could be financial flows, it could be energy supplies, it could be technology," EAM Jaishankar said, as he was asked on India's refusing to use tariffs and sanctions on other countries.



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Mihail Popsoi during a meeting, in New Delhi. (PTI)

Jaishankar made the remarks during the panel discussion "Commissars and Capitalists: Politics, Business and New World Order," during the Raisina dialogue held in New Delhi today. His remarks come amidst the United States announcing various tariffs on the import of goods from various countries, including from India.

"This is a reality of the world. You fight for your business, because you are fighting for your employment, you are fighting for your comprehensive national power, of which business makes a very important contribution," Jaishankar said.

Underlining the developing international relations across the globe, he added, "I think today, the lines dividing different domains have eroded. If you see in international relations, I think it's a less restrained culture today than it was a decade ago."



# India-France bilateral Naval exercise 'Varuna' commences

NEW DELHI, Mar 19 (ANI)

THE 23rd edition of the India-France bilateral Naval exercise, 'Varuna' commenced on Wednesday, and will conclude on March 22, showcasing the two nations' commitment to enhancing naval interoperability and operational synergy.

Two aircraft carriers, 'Charles De Gaulle' from France and India's 'Vikrant' along with destroyers, frigates, Indian scorpene class submarines and a maritime patrol aircraft will be participating in the exercise, according to a post by the Indian Navy. "This year's edition promises an exhilarating array of mar-



Twenty third edition of India - France Bilateral Naval Exercise 'Varuna' commences.

(ANI)

itime exercises and complex manoeuvres across the sub-surface, surface, and air domains," read the Ministry of Defence's statement. Varuna 2025 will feature advanced air defence drills and fighter exercises, including mock air-to-air combat between the French Rafale-M and Indian MiG-29K, designed to refine tactical and operational capabilities. "Anti-submarine warfare exercises will provide rigorous training in underwater domain awareness, while surface warfare operations will demonstrate synchronised manoeuvres and engagements by the Indian and French fleets," read the statement.



# Facing Dragon's fire, Manila turns to Delhi

## Philippines Wants India To Join Strategic Alliance 'Squad'

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**New Delhi:** Bearing the brunt of China's aggressive expansionist tactics in the South China Sea, the Philippines now wants India to join the relatively new 'Squad' strategic alliance it has forged with the US, Australia and Japan to counter such threats in the crucial Indo-Pacific region.

Pointing to China's "illegal, coercive and disruptive Grey Zone" tactics to claim territory and build militarised artificial islands in the South China Sea region, Philippines chief of staff of the armed forces General Romeo S Brawner said countries like India and South Korea should also be 'included' in the Squad.

China was clearly the big dragon in the room when top military officers of the 'Quad' (India, US, Australia and Japan) and the Philippines got together to discuss maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific during the Raisina Dialogue here on Wednesday. "The three artificial islands created by China give it effective control over the South China Sea. They



**TURBULENCE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA:** Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr with armed forces chief Gen Romeo Brawner Jr

have built a 2.7-km runway, with air defence and other missile systems, on Mischief Reef...Moving forward, it is our belief that they will take full control of the South China Sea," Gen Brawner said.

China has been strengthening its neighbours in the South and East China Seas as well as the Taiwan Strait to push its territorial claims, flouting all international norms. Japan, on its part, is doubling its defence spending to improve its current war-fighting capabilities and prepare for the future, said Japanese chief of joint staff Gen Yoshihide Yoshida.

US Indo-Pacific Command chief Admiral Samuel Paparo, who also dwelt upon the prospect of China forcibly intervening in Taiwan, in turn, said all countries that believe matters should not be "settled by force" should build and maintain a strong deterrence posture.

China, with the world's

largest Navy of 370 warships and submarines, now of course also deploys seven to eight naval vessels on a permanent basis in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including dual-purpose research or spy ships to map oceanographic and other data useful for navigation and submarine operations.

Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi said India believed it was its responsibility to ensure IOR remains peaceful and stable, with unhindered passage of trade. "A Navy that does not deploy does not deter. So, we have been deploying far and wide...We are quite capable of maintaining MDA (maritime domain awareness) in the IOR. We are aware of who is doing what, where and how," he said.

India is "keeping a close watch" on dual-purpose and other naval vessels operating in the IOR, Admiral Tripathi added.



# Sunita, Butch back to Earth after 9-mth space odyssey

## Astronauts Look Very Healthy: Nasa

Kenneth Chang & Thomas Fuller

They set off to spend eight days at the space station. The trip lasted nine months instead. On Tuesday, two Nasa astronauts who had been in orbit since June, Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore, splashed down in calm, azure waters off the co-

► **EDIT PAGE: What Suni & Others Endure Up There**

ast of the Florida Panhandle, concluding a saga that had captivated the world for several months.

It was a SpaceX capsule, the Crew Dragon, that brought them back from space Tuesday. The spacecraft detached from the space station just after 1 am Eastern time and then travelled



NASA astronaut Sunita Williams exults as she safely returns to Earth after an unexpected 286-day mission aboard ISS, in Florida on Wednesday

back to Earth, slowing from more than 17,000 mph before deploying four large parachutes that gently plopped the spacecraft into the water just before 6 pm. Once the capsule had been hoisted onto a ship, the door was opened and the beaming astronauts were extracted from the spacecraft.

After months of weightlessness, their bodies still adjusting to the pull of gravity, they were lifted onto gurneys.

"They all looked very healthy," Steve Stich, manager of Nasa's commercial crew program, told media. **NVT**

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## Welcome back Sunita, Earth missed you: PM

President Droupadi Murmu and PM Modi joined celebrities, politicians, scientists and others on Wednesday to celebrate the return of Nasa astronaut Sunita Williams to earth after nine months. "India's daughter and her fellow astronauts have inspired everyone with their perseverance, dedication and never-say-diespirit," Murmu said on X.

"Welcome back, #Crew9! Earth missed you," PM Modi said while pointing out that it was a test of grit, courage and the boundless human spirit of the astronauts.

"Their unwavering determination in the face of the vast unknown will forever inspire millions..." Modi said. **P18**



# Israel launches new ground op in Gaza, toll 38

**Cairo/Jerusalem:** The Israeli military said on Wednesday its forces have resumed ground operations in the central and southern Gaza Strip, as a second day of airstrikes killed at least 38 Palestinians, according to local health workers.

The renewed ground operations come a day after more than 400 Palestinians were killed in airstrikes in one of the deadliest episodes since the beginning of the conflict in Oct 2023, shattering a ceasefire that has largely held since Jan.

The Israeli military said its operations have extended Israel's control over the Netzarim Corridor, which bisects Gaza, and were a "focused" manoeuvre



Israelis in Jerusalem rally for an end to the war in Gaza on Tuesday

aimed at creating a partial buffer zone between north and south of the enclave.

**UN said an Israeli air strike had killed a foreign staffer and wounded five workers at the site of a UN headquarters in central Gaza City on Wednesday.** But Israel denied this, saying it had hit a Hamas site, where it had detected preparations for

firing into Israeli territory. In Sofia, the foreign ministry said a Bulgarian working for the UN died on Wednesday in Gaza. It was not immediately clear if the Bulgarian was the foreign UN staffer killed in Gaza.

Israel said its latest onslaught was "just the beginning". Israel and Hamas accuse each other of breaching the truce, which had offered a respite for Gaza's 2.3 million residents after 17 months of war that has reduced the enclave to rubble and forced most of its population to evacuate multiple times. The Israeli campaign has killed more than 49,000 people in Gaza, Palestinian authorities say. REUTERS

## Trump issues fresh threats to Houthis

**U**S President Donald Trump threatened Yemen's Houthi rebels on Wednesday that they'll be "completely annihilated" as American air strikes pounded locations under their control, while further pressuring the group's main benefactor Iran. Strikes hit Sanaa, Yemen's rebel-held capital, as well as their stronghold of Saada in the country's northwest Wednesday night, said Houthi's al-Maisrah news channel reported. Meanwhile, Trump again warned Iran not to arm the Houthis. REUTERS