HORMUZ-NEW US TERRITORY?

By AZAD MIRZA

NEARLY six months into the US-Israel war on Iran, the Strait of Hormuz has become less a shipping lane than a rhetorical battlefield. This week that theatre reached a new pitch: Donald Trump posted an AI-generated map on Truth Social labelling the waterway "NEW US Territory," insisting the strait is "open and operating" and that "all water mines have been removed or detonated."

Tehran's response was blunt mockery - Iranian officials suggested that, by the same logic, they could just as well declare California Iranian territory, while parliament speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf told lawmakers the strait will stay shut until Washington lifts its naval blockade of Iranian ports, lifts oil sanctions, releases frozen Iranian assets and halts military operations on every front. The two statements cannot both be true, and that gap between claim and reality is now the central fact of the crisis. Trump's territorial framing is best read as psychological and political theatre rather than an operational claim - there is no serious suggestion the US intends to annex or physically administer the strait, and even his own officials speak instead of a naval blockade enforcing safe passage.

But the posturing matters strategically: by insisting the strait is already open under an American security umbrella, Trump denies Iran the leverage of being seen to control the closure, while simultaneously setting up any future disruption as an Iranian "provocation" against US-declared territory, rather than a continuation of a war Iran did not start.

Iran's position is comparatively coherent, if maximalist: Tehran has conditioned reopening on a reciprocal, verifiable rollback of American pressure - port blockade, sanctions, frozen assets and hostilities - not merely a diplomatic gesture. A senior Iranian official's disclosure that Tehran is shifting to a "fully offensive" posture, alongside a reported Iranian strike on a vessel in the strait this week, suggests Iran is not preparing to fold but to raise costs.

Meanwhile, Iran has been separately negotiating with Oman over a managed shipping corridor through the strait - a technical workaround that could restore some traffic without Iran conceding anything to Washington.

Trump's threat to "bomb the s*** out of" Oman if it "gets in the way" of that arrangement reveals the actual anxiety beneath the territorial bluster: Washington fears losing control of the narrative on reopening more than it fears the strait itself remaining shut.

Taken together, the two sides are not converging toward a deal; they are each trying to define reopening on their own terms, which makes an early, negotiated resumption of normal traffic unlikely in the near term.

The bravado abroad is unfolding against a grim political backdrop at home. A Reuters/Ipsos poll released this week put Trump's approval rating at 33%, the lowest of his current presidency and tied with the nadir of his first term. Sixty-four per cent disapprove, and roughly four in five Americans believe the Iran conflict will drag on rather than resolve soon.

The war that Trump promised would take "a few weeks" has instead pushed gasoline prices up sharply, and with November's midterms approaching, Republican strategists are visibly nervous about a conflict that has become a drag on both the economy and the party's congressional prospects. This is the context that makes the "new US territory" messaging legible: it is aimed less at Tehran than at an American audience anxious for a win, a way of declaring victory over a strait Washington cannot actually reopen through statements alone. A comprehensive reopening requires either a battlefield or economic shift dramatic enough to force one side to blink, or a face-saving formula that lets Trump claim credit for "reopening" a strait he insists was never really closed, while Iran claims its core sanctions-and-blockade demands were substantively met.

Until then, the direct cost is measured in oil markets: prices have already climbed to three-week highs on Iran's "offensive posture" signal, and the strait's roughly one-fifth to one-third share of global seaborne oil and LNG flows means every escalation ripples through global energy prices, shipping insurance premiums and inflation readings worldwide. At the disruption's peak, Hormuz-transiting cargo accounted for roughly 40–50% of India's crude imports and the bulk of its LNG and LPG supplies; New Delhi responded by diversifying sourcing to more than 40 countries, pushing non-Hormuz supply from about 55% to 70% of imports within weeks, deploying naval escorts under Operation Urja Suraksha, and briefly resuming Iranian crude purchases under sanctions relief windows.

A prolonged, unresolved Hormuz standoff keeps India locked into costlier, more circuitous sourcing, complicates its careful non-alignment between Washington and Tehran, and underscores why New Delhi has consistently pushed for de-escalation. (IPA)

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Fight For The Fighter's Over. What Next?

That India will manufacture 94 of the 114 Rafales to be inducted into IAF, is a boost for indigenous efforts to produce a fifth-generation military aircraft

Arjun Subramaniam

Retired Air Vice Marshal

The submission of the detailed technical and commercial proposal by France for the Govt-to-Govt (G2G) deal, for the purchase of 114 Rafale Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA), including the local production of 94 aircraft, offers closure to IAF's agonising wait for a complete overhaul of its fighter fleet. The vision for the procurement of a Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) began in 2000, when IAF first conveyed its intent to scout around for a fourth-generation + aircraft that would complement the Sukhoi-30 MKI as its sword arm over the next few decades.

After an excruciatingly long wait and tedious short-listing process, a Request for Proposal (RFP) was floated in Aug 2007 to six shortlisted companies that offered Rafale (Dassault), Eurofighter (European Consortium), F-16 (Lockheed Martin), F-18 (Boeing), JAS 39-Gripen (SAAB), and MiG-35 (MiG). The RFP was unique as it included, for the first time, the concept of life cycle costs, from design to disposal, the aim being to arrive at the overall ownership cost for govt at best value.

Following impeccable flight trials, two European contenders, Rafale and Eurofighter Typhoon, were shortlisted for further financial evaluation. But three major issues were responsible for the collapse of the deal once Rafale was declared as IAF's preferred choice in 2013:

● First, given the history of defence deals in India, with their looming overhang of corruption, and the gigantic size of the contract ($25-30bn), accusations and anonymous letters about various unsubstantiated irregularities flew thick and fast, rattling then defence minister AK Antony. This resulted in protracted contract negotiations behind closed doors, causing a near paralysis of decision-making.

● Second, the deal fell through with the electoral defeat of UPA govt in 2014, and the unwillingness of Modi govt to endorse a deal that was mired in so much controversy.

● Third, another aspect was the 'omnipresent Russian effect' of the futuristic Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) co-development programme, which was inked between India and Russia in 2007. Making it even more difficult to push the deal was the much-publicised trust deficit between the French and HAL, with the former refusing to assume guarantees for the 108 aircraft to be manufactured by HAL after the first 18 were delivered in fly-away condition.

HAL appeared to have thrown in its lot with the Russians to further the FGFA programme, despite having signed their willingness for co-production on the MMRCA contract. This move sealed MMRCA's fate. Ironically, India had to abort the FGFA deal in 2018, when IAF called out the complete lack of progress in the co-development mechanism between HAL and Sukhoi Development Bureau.

The following six issues seem to be the most obvious reasons for GOI to cement the current G2G deal with the French for a direct purchase of 20 Rafale F4 aircraft, and the production of 94 aircraft in India:

● Considering the ease and success of the India-US G2G deals for the C-130J and the C-17 aircraft, and the Apache and Chinook helicopters, an immediate operational requirement resulted in the G2G deal for 36 Rafale F3 aircraft in 2016. Notwithstanding attempts by vested political interests to scuttle the deal, govt stood firm and inducted the aircraft. With the forthcoming induction of 29 Rafale M for Indian navy, the operational, training, and technical ecosystem will be geared for the additional numbers.

● The current deal for 114 aircraft pegged at $38bn is fair value considering that a large complement of 94 aircraft will be manufactured in India, giving a major fillip to multiple stakeholders, including the private sector. A tertiary spin-off could see India emerging as a regional hub for the manufacturing of additional Rafales and its overhaul ecosystem.

● Having Rafales and SU-30 MKIs as the sword arm of IAF's offensive capability till the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) is inducted, will ensure consistency and continuity in the areas of doctrinal, operational, and tactical efficiency.

● The performance of the Rafale in Op Sindoor was outstanding, and the willingness of the French to offer the latest versions of the aircraft, the F4, and possibly the F5 towards the closing phase of the current deal, will ensure seamless upgrades of the entire fleet in the decades ahead. This will also ensure world-class longevity of the fleet, much like the Mirage-2000 did.

● Given the potential of the deal and the robustness of the India-France Strategic Partnership, the possibilities of integrating advanced Indian weapons such as BrahMos NG and Astra are high.

● The deal also raises hopes for the creation of a robust consortium of private companies and public sector players involved in the manufacturing of the Rafale, which augurs well for India's futuristic AMCA programme.

The erstwhile MMRCA deal was designed by IAF to pull India's defence industrial ecosystem out of mediocrity, and empower it to match the best in the world. Rather than lamenting over innocuous matters, and searching for skeletons in the cupboard, this time around, the Rafale deal with France must be considered a project of national importance, and not just an IAF project. Political will, bipartisan support, and a whole-of-govt approach is the need of the hour.

First visit by a US diplomat to Ladakh since Galwan clash

▶Continued from P 1

Officials also said they had no idea whether US envoy Sergio Gor was meeting the Dalai Lama Friday morning. The 91-year-old Tibetan spiritual leader has been recuperating in Ladakh since June 28 following a medical procedure on his left knee in New Delhi.

This is the first visit by a top US diplomat to Ladakh since it was carved out as a UT from the former state of J&K in Aug 2019, and the Galwan clash between Indian and Chinese troops in June 2020 that led to a prolonged military standoff between the two countries in the region. Gor is also US

Gor is President Trump's special envoy for South and Central Asia, and his visit to the 2 UTs bordering China & Pakistan is being seen as a message to the two nations

President Donald Trump's special envoy for South and Central Asia, and his visit to the two UTs bordering China and Pakistan is being seen as a message to the two countries.

In Srinagar, Gor's remark describing Kashmir as an important part of India drew a sharp reaction from Pakistan, which summoned the US embassy's charge d'affaires in Islamabad and lodged a "strong demarche" over what it termed a "factually incorrect statement". He also talked of US considering reviewing its security advisory for Jammu & Kashmir

Asked about Pakistan's reaction to Gor's remarks, J&K CM Thursday said: "This is a matter between Pakistan and America. Neither you nor I can do anything about it."

UGC equity regulations '26 under reconsideration: Centre to SC

NEW DELHI, Aug 20 (PTI)

THE Centre on Thursday told the Supreme Court that the 2026 University Grants Commission equity regulations on preventing caste-based discrimination on campuses is under reconsideration.

On January 29, the apex court had directed that the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, be kept in abeyance.

The matter came up for hearing on Thursday before a bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana.

"This is the UGC regulation matter. It is under reconsideration," Solicitor General Tushar Mehta told the bench.

The bench asked the UGC to file a comprehensive counter affidavit within four weeks.

It said petitioners may file rejoinder, if any, within two weeks thereafter.

The apex court was hearing a batch of pleas challenging the validity of the 2026 regulations.

On January 29, the top court had stayed the 2026 UGC equity regulations, saying the framework was "prima facie vague", can have "very sweeping consequences" and may end up dividing society with a "dangerous impact".

> The SC deemed the 2026 regulations "prima facie vague" and ordered the UGC to file a comprehensive counter-affidavit within four weeks.

The apex court had also sought responses of the Centre and the UGC on three pleas against the 2026 regulations.

"In exercise of our powers under Article 142 of the Constitution, we further direct that the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2012, will continue to operate and remain in force till further orders," it had said.

The 2026 regulations triggered protests at various places, with student groups and organisations demanding its immediate rollback.

The top court had flagged concerns with the 2026 regulations and questioned the need for a separate definition of "caste-based discrimination" under regulation 3(1)(c), when regulation 3(1)(e) already provides a broad definition of "discrimination". It had also questioned why ragging had been left out of the scope of the regulations, despite being a common form of harassment within educational institutions.

The apex court had said the language of the regulations appeared to be "prima facie vague" and "capable of misuse".

Advocate Vishnu Shankar Jain, appearing for one of the petitioners, had assailed Regulation 3(1)(c), which defines caste-based discrimination as discrimination "only on the basis of caste or tribe" against members of SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes.

Cross-border trade in local currencies reduces transaction costs, says RBI Deputy Governor

MUMBAI, Aug 20 (PTI)

LOCAL currencies will play an ever-increasing role in cross-border trade and payments as they lower transaction costs, reduce currency mismatches, and improve settlement efficiency, RBI Deputy Governor Rohit Jain has said.

Speaking at the Annual Day of the Foreign Exchange Dealers' Association of India (FEDAI) last week on 'India's Foreign Exchange Markets: Getting ready for the next Decade', Jain said that by their very nature, markets are continuously evolving and parameters of their readiness are being regularly renewed according to the needs of the time.

"Our market would be ready for the next decade if it can help facilitate India's ever-increasing engagement with other countries, absorb shocks in a non-disruptive manner, serve the smallest user as efficiently as the biggest, and embrace new technology without vitiating the trust it has earned," he said. The Deputy Governor said India's foreign exchange reserves have risen from about USD 38 billion in 2000 to USD 691 billion in 2026. The average daily turnover in the domestic forex market, spot and derivatives combined, has doubled from USD 41 billion in FY22 to about USD 80 billion at present.

Talking about drivers that will shape India's forex markets in the coming decade, Jain said local currencies will play an ever-increasing role in cross-border trade and payments. The Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) framework for invoicing, payment and settlement of international trade in rupees has been implemented keeping in view the evolving dynamics of our international trade.

Its success, he said, will depend on commercial viability, emphasis on trade settlement in local currencies, offering market-determined rates, and strengthening confidence in the settlement ecosystem.

"The settlement of cross-border transactions in local currencies results in lower transaction costs, fewer currency mismatches, better settlement efficiency, and the ability to trade where correspondent banking is costly or constrained," the Deputy Governor said.

BNP's Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir elected Bangladesh's new president

Dhaka: Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, a longtime secretary general of the ruling BNP and a close ally of former PM Khaleda Zia, was Thursday elected as the country's new president in the first contested poll for the post in 35 years.

Alamgir won the first contested poll for the post in 35 years

The 78-year-old BNP stalwart defeated his lone rival, Colonel (retd) Oli Ahmed, the 84-year-old Liberal Democratic Party chairman and the nominee of the Jamaat-e-Islami-led 11-party opposition alliance, chief election commissioner and also election returning officer AMM Nasir Uddin announced after the counting of votes. PM Tarique Rahman congratulated Alamgir on his victory.

Of the total 349 registered voters, 343 voted in the election. Six lawmakers didn't vote, he said. Alamgir secured 255 votes while Oli Ahmad bagged 88 votes. He will take the oath as Bangladesh's 23rd president Friday.

It is the first contested presidential election in Bangladesh since 1991, as the office had largely been filled through consensus and uncontested polls in recent decades.

The president is a ceremonial head of state under Bangladesh's parliamentary system, with key constitutional powers, including appointing the PM and the chief justice.

An economist by training, Alamgir made his political debut as a left-leaning student activist when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan. After joining the BNP in the early 90s, Alamgir served as state minister for agriculture and civil aviation. When the BNP returned to power this year, Alamgir was made the local govt minister. PTI

For 1st time in a decade, India to import 10 lakh tonnes of sugar

Faces Possible 20% Decline In Opening Stock Of Sweetener

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Govt Thursday allowed the import of 10 lakh tonnes of raw sugar, the first such move in a decade, as it stared at a possible decline of at least 20% in the opening stock of the sweetener.

The move came soon after the food ministry ordered that no bulk consumer such as confectioners, soft drink manufacturers, food processing industries, sweetmeat sellers and other institutional buyers using more than 10 tonnes of sugar a month can hold inventories for more than 15 days. This means if an entity uses 12 tonnes a month, at any given point, it can hold a stock of six tonnes. The order will be applicable between Sept and Nov.

The low opening stock — projected at 35-40 lakh tonnes, against 50 lakh tonnes at the start of Oct 2025 — was on account of a sharp fall in production to 296 lakh tonnes, the lowest since the 2019-20 sugar season that runs from Oct to Sept. During the next crop year, the industry has estimated production at 324 lakh tonnes.

The sugar industry has maintained that there is no shortage in the country as stocks with mills are adequate to meet the domestic demand till Nov-Dec, when fresh sweetener reaches the market.

Officials said India's annual sugar consumption is around 280 lakh tonnes. According to the third advance estimate of sugar production for the 2025-26 season in Feb, the industry projected net production at 290 lakh tonnes, excluding 31 lakh tonnes diverted for ethanol. The final sugar production figure for the current season is likely to be released next month.

Govt's twin moves come amid rising retail prices. The average sugar retail price was Rs 52.3 a kg Tuesday, 13% higher than a year ago, according to data available with the consumer affairs department. In July, retail prices rose over 9%. To check hoarding and speculative trading, govt imposed stock holding limits on sugar dealers from Aug to Nov and has made it mandatory for dealers to declare their stocks and update them weekly.

Indian Sugar & Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association said govt's move to import sugar sends a clear signal to the market that speculative and unwarranted price increases will not be allowed to persist. It said the import permission was a precautionary measure that added further comfort during the peak festival months, and not a response to any supply gap.

NO SHORTAGE, SAYS INDUSTRY

Sugar Production (lakh tonnes)

Year (Oct-Sep)	Production	Opening stock
2021-22	358	63-65 (Oct 2022)
2022-23	328	56 (Oct 2023)
2023-24	320	85 (Oct 2024)
2024-25	296	50 (Oct 2025)
2025-26	324*	30-40 (Oct 2026)

*Third Advance Estimate, including allocation for ethanol

Source: ISMA

UNSC membership must not be used as tool to 'legitimise' terrorists: India

By Yoshita Singh
UNITED NATIONS, Aug 20 (PTI)

MEMBERSHIP of the UN Security Council must not be used as a tool to "legitimise" terrorists by seeking their removal from the sanctions regime or to blacklist entities solely on "political considerations", India has said, asserting that the powerful 15-nation body must not become a platform for pursuing narrow interests.

Addressing a Security Council open debate on working methods on Wednesday, Charge d'Affaires at India's Permanent Mission to the UN Ambassador Yojna Patel flagged the need for greater transparency and objectivity in the listing and de-listing of terrorists and terror entities under the Council's sanctions regimes.

Yojna Patel

"Security Council membership brings significant responsibilities. This must not become a platform to pursue narrow political interests," she said.

"Listing and de-listing are a case in point. There must be more transparency and objectivity on this front. Presence in the Security Council must not be instrumentalised to legitimise terrorists by attempting to de-list them or to list other entities as terrorist organisations based solely on political considerations, without any objective criteria or supporting documentation," Patel said.

India has consistently called out the opaque manner in which decisions are made under the UNSC sanctions committees on proposals to designate terrorists and terror organisations.

New Delhi has also called for greater transparency in the working of the Council's subsidiary bodies, pointing out that while decisions on listings are made public, details relating to the rejection of proposals or their placement under technical hold remain the "exclusive preserve" of a select few.

India has in the past described such practices as a "disguised veto" and raised concerns over the functioning of the 1267 Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in particular.

New Delhi has said evidence-based proposals to designate internationally sanctioned terrorists should not be blocked without adequate explanation, arguing that such practices undermine the Council's stated commitment to combating terrorism. India has previously faced such hurdles in its attempts to designate Pakistan-based terrorists, with China, a permanent member of the Security Council, having placed holds or blocked some of the proposals. India also voiced concern over the delay in finalising chairs of the Security Council's subsidiary bodies, including the 1267 Al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctions committees.

Eight months into 2026, the Council is yet to finalise the chairs and vice-chairs of its subsidiary bodies, prompting India to call for urgent action.

Singapore PM meets Indian Ministers

Discusses ways to deepen bilateral ties

SINGAPORE, Aug 20 (PTI)

SINGAPORE and India on Thursday discussed cooperation in advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, connectivity, digital, fintech and clean energy domains at the fourth India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR) here.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, and Minister of State for Electronics and IT Jitin Prasada attended the ministerial meeting. Singapore's delegation was led by Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong, who is also Minister for Trade and Industry (Trade). Coordinating Minister for National Security and Home Minister K Shanmugam, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan,

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, and MoS for Electronics and IT and Commerce and Industry Jitin Prasada during the fourth India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR), in Singapore. (PTI)

Digital Development and Information Minister Josephine Teo and Transport Minister Jeffrey Siow were part of the team.

"Our discussions explored deeper ties in advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, connectivity, digital, fintech, skilling, green economy and clean energy domains," Jaishankar posted on X after the meeting.

Speaking at the Shangri-La Singapore hotel after the meeting during which the two countries inked deals on ways to expand collaboration in areas such as agri-food trade and maritime heritage, Gan hailed talks with Indian ministers as useful and productive, Channel News Asia reported. He said both sides were "candid and open to each other", which has facilitated progress in bilateral collaboration.

With a vow to keep Indo-Pacific free and open, India, Japan seal maritime pact

■ **Delhi Bureau and Agencies**
NEW DELHI, Aug 20

INDIA and Japan on Thursday sealed a pact to bolster their maritime security ties and vowed to synergise military cooperation to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific, an assertion that came amid China's increasing military muscle-flexing in the region.

In their talks, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Japanese counterpart Shinjiro Koizumi expressed their strong opposition to any unilateral actions that impede freedom and safety of navigation and overflight, as well as attempts to change the status-quo by force or coercion.

The remarks are seen as directed against China as both India and Japan are concerned over Beijing's offensive military posturing in South and East China seas. A joint statement on Singh-Koizumi said they affirmed their commitment, to further deepen defence cooperation to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with his Japanese counterpart Shinjiro Koizumi during the India-Japan Defence Ministers' meeting, in New Delhi. (PTI)

"The two Ministers concurred on the importance of sharing assessments of the regional and international security environment between the two countries at a time of heightened global tensions," it said. "They expressed their strong opposition to any unilateral actions that impede freedom and safety of navigation and overflight, as well as to

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