

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

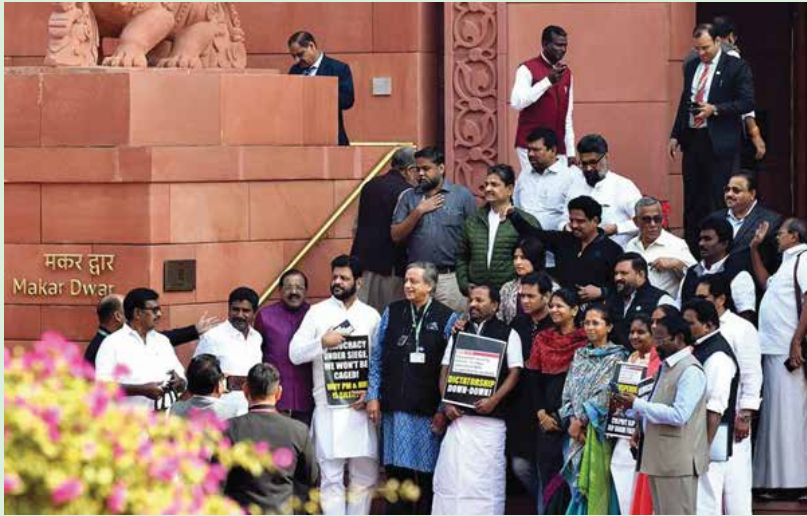
● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

PROTESTS ROCK PARLIAMENT OVER SECURITY BREACH ROW

CONTEXT: Both the Houses were adjourned till Monday, a day after 14 Opposition members were suspended for disrupting Parliament proceedings as protests continued over the issue of security breach.



Both the Houses did not take up the Question Hour, Zero Hour, and the private members' businesses on Friday over the issue of security breach in the Lok Sabha. The proceedings were chaired by BJP MP Rajender Agarwal. Almost immediately, Opposition members trooped into the well of the House, carrying placards and raising slogans against the government and demanded a statement from Home Minister Amit Shah over the security breach. The Chair adjourned the House till 2 p.m. in less than a minute and then it was adjourned for the day soon after it met in the post-lunch session.

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla rejected the notices by the Opposition members, who had moved notices to take up the matter as adjournment motions.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

BHAJANLAL SHARMA SWORN IN AS NEW CM OF RAJASTHAN

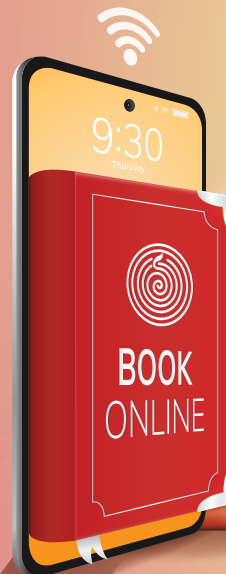


Bhajanlal Sharma

Sanganer MLA Bhajanlal Sharma was sworn in as the new Chief Minister of Rajasthan at a high-profile ceremony on Friday, attended by thousands of BJP workers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, several Union Ministers, and the CMs of BJP-ruled States were in attendance.

Governor Kalraj Mishra administered the oath of office and secrecy to Mr. Sharma and Deputy Chief Ministers Diya Kumari and Prem Chand Bairwa. The function was held in front of the Albert Hall in the Ram Niwas Garden.

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ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

ACCELERATION FORETOLD

CONTEXT: The RBI predicted a likely 'uptick' in headline retail inflation. The National Statistical Office's provisional reading of headline inflation shows the Consumer Price Index rose by 5.55 % year-on-year to a three-month high, from October's 4.87 %, food price gains measured by the Consumer Food Price Index accelerated by a steep 209 basis points to 8.7 % last month.

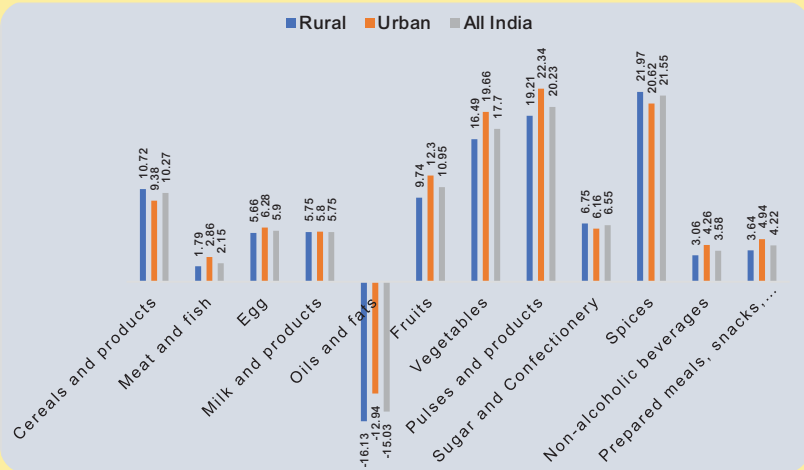


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the retail inflation

Cereals and vegetables, constituents of the 'food and beverages' subgroup, that logged 10.3 % and 17.7 % inflation, respectively propel the upsurge in food prices. Cereals, that account for almost one-tenth of the CPI and logged double-digit inflation for a 15th straight month, also saw a month-on-month acceleration in inflation with rice, wheat, and the coarse cereal of jowar, a rural hinterland staple, all registering palpable sequential price gains. Vegetable prices were back on a boil with the year-on-year inflation rate surging by almost 15 percentage points from October's 2.8%. While price gains in the perishable tomato swung from two straight months of sizeable deflation to a more than 11% year-on-year rate of inflation last month, the extent of increase could be truly gauged from the fact that prices surged a steep 41% from the preceding month's levels, as per data aggregated on the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's website. And the key masala essentials of ginger and garlic registered more than 100% rates of inflation for the seventh and third months, respectively.

From the TOP or tomato, onion and potato triumvirate of India's most widely consumed vegetables, onion prices remained the biggest source of concern as year-on-year inflation ballooned to 86%, from October's 42 % pace, and the sequential pace swelled to 48%. With reports that inclement weather and depleting groundwater are likely to cause a near 25% shortfall in onion output during the key rabi season, the outlook for prices of the nutrient-dense bulb moderating in the near future appears bleak, the government's move to impose a ban on its exports notwithstanding. Only potato prices, which continued to remain in deflationary territory, offered some respite. Pulses and sugar are other areas of concern, with the first witnessing more than 20 % inflation and the

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

EXPORTS SHRINK AGAIN, TRADE DEFICIT NARROWS AS IMPORTS FALL FASTER

CONTEXT: India's goods exports slipped back into contraction, dropping 2.83 % in November to \$ 33.9 billion, while imports fell by a sharper 4.33 % to \$ 54.48 billion.

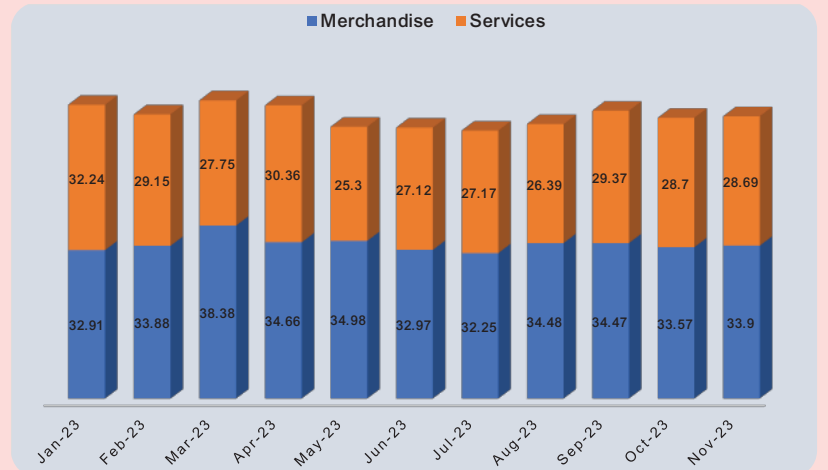


FIGURE: Column chart representation of monthly value of merchandise and services exports

Exports had recorded only their second uptick this year in October, and though the value of outbound shipments was up 1.1 % on a month-on-month basis, they still marked the second-weakest level since November 2022. The trade deficit for November narrowed sharply beyond expectations to \$ 20.58 billion, from the all-time high of \$ 29.91 billion recorded in October. November's trade deficit was 6.7 % narrower on a year-on-year basis, and 31.2% less than October's tally. The originally estimated deficit of \$ 31.5 billion for October was revised downward thanks to a \$ 1.6 billion correction from the initially released import estimate of \$ 65.03 billion.

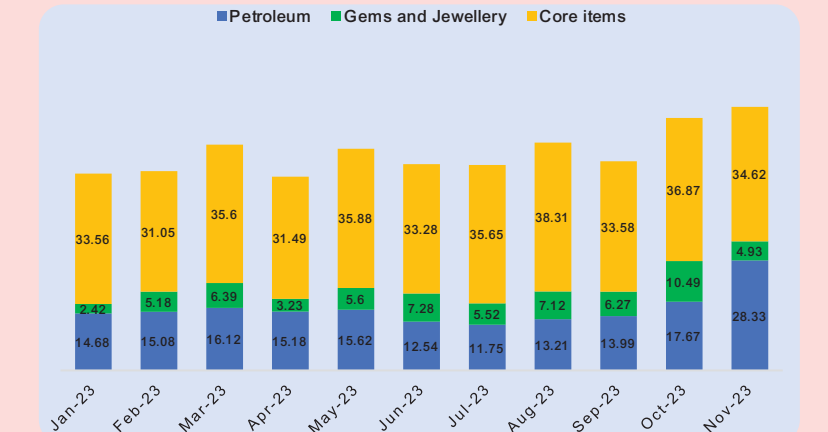


FIGURE: Bar chart representation of the import profile of Indian imports. Gems & Jewellery*: Gold, Silver & Pearls, precious & Semi-precious stones.

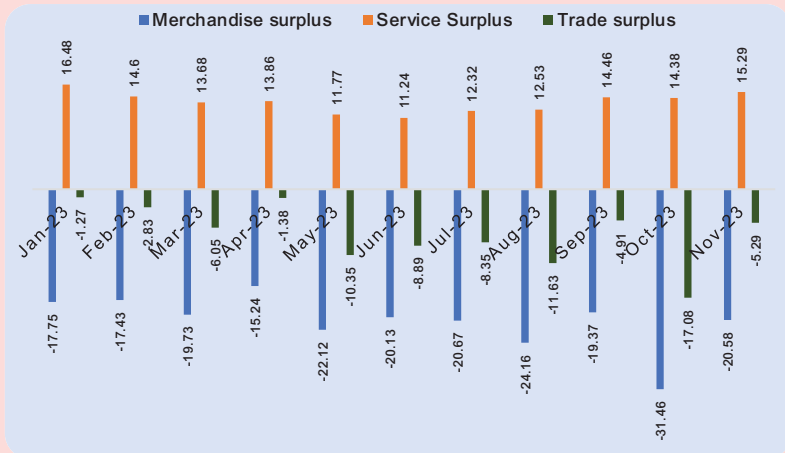


FIGURE: Column chart representation of trade surplus.

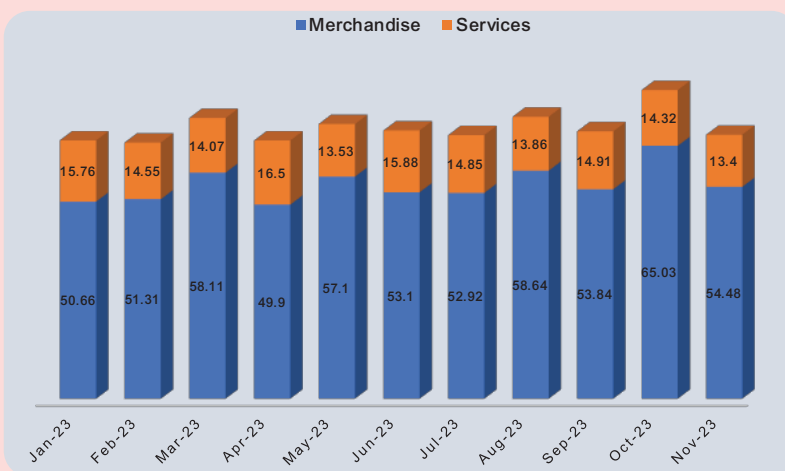


FIGURE: Column chart representation of monthly value of merchandise and services imports

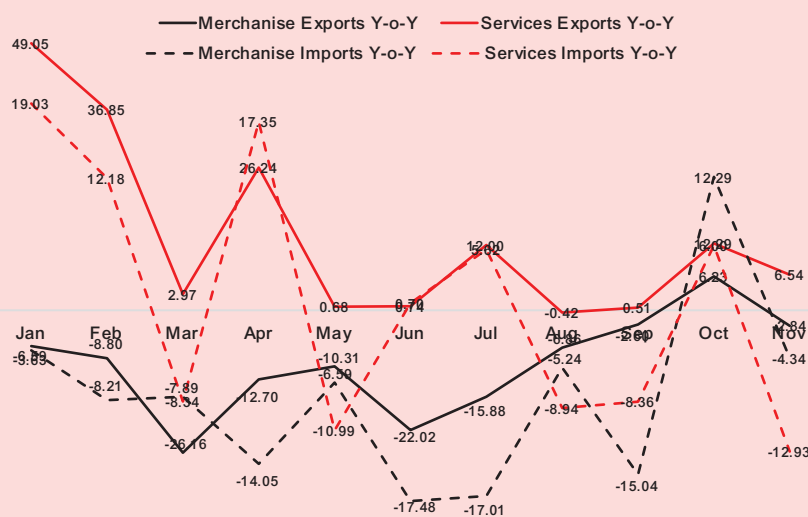


FIGURE: Column chart representation of Year on Year (Y-o-Y) merchandise and services export and import growth.

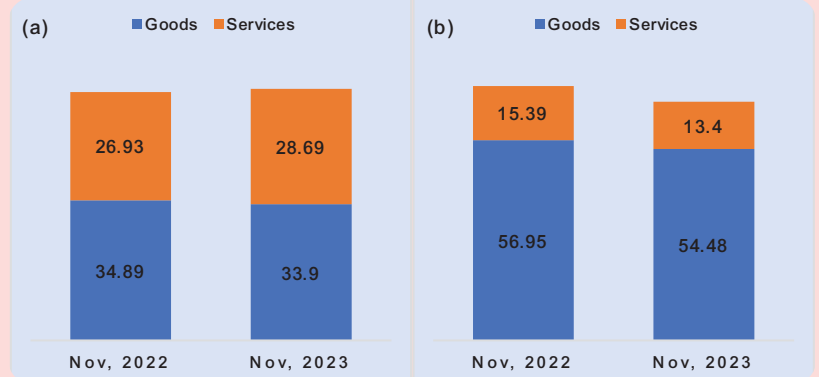


FIGURE: (L) Column chart representation of monthly value of exports of goods and services. (R) Column chart representation of monthly value of imports of goods and services.

‘Narrower deficit’

India’s merchandise trade deficit unexpectedly shrunk in November, with a better-than-expected performance of exports resulting in a narrower deficit than our projection of \$23.5 billion. The monthly trade deficit is estimated to hover in the range of \$20 billion to 25 billion through the rest of 2023-24.

Between April and November, merchandise exports are now 6.5% lower at \$278.8 billion, while imports have dropped 8.7 % to \$ 445.15 billion. At \$ 166.35 billion, the trade deficit so far this fiscal is 12.1 % narrower than in the same period last year when several commodity prices had shot up after the conflict in Ukraine.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

‘AMBITIOUS COAL TRANSPORT PLANS MAY TEST RAILWAYS’

CONTEXT: Indian Railways’ plan to raise the quantum of coal to be transported by rail by at least 400 million tonne (mt) in the next eight years face congestion and logistical challenges, the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) said in a report.



Freight corridor impact

Coal stocks at many northern power plants slid considerably until mid-October, despite commissioning the

entire Sonnagar to Dadri section of the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC) in June, which is expected to move coal at up to 35 km per hour (kmph), compared with 15 kmph earlier.

The Traffic, Transportation and Business Research (TT&BR) unit of the Railways estimate the Railways' annual coal transportation capacity to double to 1,200 mt by 2030 from 660 mt currently, to meet the growing energy demand. Coal India Ltd. is likely to be the largest contributor to new coal production and is planning to move an additional 400 mt by rail in just four years. CIL reports six lakh truck movements each month. While Indian Railways devotes planning and engineering resources to coal evacuation projects, on major routes, track-renewal activities take a hit.

Freight vs. passenger

The coal supply crisis in May 2022 when up to 1,900 passenger trains were cancelled to prioritise coal movement. The National Rail Plan forecast a 46% rise in the number of non-suburban passengers carried daily, from 13 million in 2021 to 19 million in 2031. This could pose a substantial double burden on the railway network of expanding freight and passenger capacities. Coal transport from mine to power plant will remain the weakest link in the coal chain in the immediate future.

Even as stocks in plants declined, at the end of August, CIL and Singareni Collieries Company Ltd. (SCCL) reported having 48.92 mt of vendible stock on hand, far more than required to maintain power plant stocks had the Indian Railways been able to transport it.

Focus on speed

Non-suburban trains are at their slowest speeds since 2015, signifying the return of rail network congestion, a chronic problem that will only be exacerbated if coal freight is more than doubled. While average speed of passenger trains had approached 60 km/hr in 2020, when the pandemic led to the cancellation of most passenger services, by September 2023, the average speed dropped to 38.6 km/hr — the lowest monthly average reported by the Indian Railways since at least June 2015.

National Rail Plan's preferred scenario assumes freight speeds will increase from 25 km/hr to 50 km/hr by 2051, with a 30 km/hr goal by 2026. Keeping these plans on track require rapid reversal of current trend. Renewable energy projects should be prioritised and incentivised in regions where thermal power plants are far away from India's coal mines.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S., ISRAEL DISCUSS TIMETABLE TO SCALE BACK WAR IN GAZA

CONTEXT: The U.S. and Israel have discussed a timetable for scaling back intense combat operations in the war against Hamas, amid growing American unease about the mounting death toll in Gaza. U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the besieged enclave's post-war future.



Israeli discussions

Mr. Sullivan discussed a timetable for winding down the intense combat phase of the war in meetings with Israeli leaders on Thursday and Friday. American NSA Jake Sullivan discussed a timeline with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's War Cabinet, and that such conversations would continue during an upcoming visit by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The offensive, triggered by the unprecedented October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis.

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OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO REDISCOVER CHENNAI'S HYDROLOGY

CONTEXT: Unusually heavy rainfall years have been becoming more frequent in recent decades in India. Chennai suffered the serious impacts of floods in 2005, 2015 and, again, in 2023. The flood in 2023 is considered the worst in the past 47 years.

As a result, people are also experiencing more frequent occurrences of floods in several parts of the country

including Chennai. These are considered climate change-induced floods/disasters.

The coastal city of Chennai has also got to deal with coastal floods and climate change and the consequent impact of seawater rise. The key issue is to highlight the necessity to decode Chennai's urban and peri-urban hydrology, its ecosystem in its totality, and make meaningful

and scientific interventions not only towards flood mitigation but also towards handling droughts and in building climate-resilient strategies for Chennai and Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA).

Upstream and downstream watersheds

There are 3,588 irrigation tanks, including very large tanks in Kancheepuram, Chengalpattu and Tiruvallur districts, respectively. These man-made but magnificent watersheds created through a series of earthen embankments were constructed in such a way that surplus from an upstream tank served as a feeder to a downstream tank. Unfortunately, these tanks are neglected, silted up with broken bunds and control structures. In addition, catchment areas, flood plains, feeder and supply channels and even the water spread area in many of these tanks are heavily silted and encroached. Water storage in these tanks is very little and run-off is very high (over 80 %) which caused heavy damage to the city of Chennai.

These water bodies need to be restored to their original capacity or, where possible, even double the capacity so that excess water can be saved in these water bodies which will contribute

MAP: THE WASTEWATER MAZE

The city's sewage is first pumped in a relay through its pumping station to nine STPs located in its periphery. The treated sewage is then dumped into its rivers, which flow from west to east and finally, into the Bay of Bengal. But before the sewage reaches the sea, 400-700 outfalls add untreated sewage into the waterways. By the time the rivers meet the sea, they get highly polluted, thereby defeating the purpose of operating a centralised sewerage system



Source: Anon 2011, 71-City Water-Excreta Survey, 2005-06, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi

[Enlarge View](#)

to a substantial saving of run-off water. A comprehensive hydro-elevation (drainage) mapping needs to be drawn up covering the upstream-downstream watersheds with Chennai and the sea.

Wonderful flood carriers

Chennai has three waterways (rivers) that run through the city - Kosasthalaiyar river runs through the northern part of Chennai, the Cooum which takes care of central Chennai, the Adyar which caters to southern Chennai, and further south, the Palar which carries the flow. Each of these rivers also feeds numerous tanks before reaching the Bay of Bengal. There is the Buckingham canal which cuts across all the four rivers in close proximity to the sea. Unfortunately, these major drainage systems are in pretty bad shape due to heavy encroachments, more so on the flood plains. These rivers have also lost their gravity and velocity due to sludge and silt deposits. Several efforts have been made to restore these rivers as well as the Buckingham Canal, but the conditions remain far from satisfactory. Besides these major waterways, there are many macro and micro drains such as Okkiam maduvu, Mambalam canal, Velachery canal, Kodungaiyur drain, Otteri nallah, Virugambakkam / Arumbakkam canal, Veerangal Odai, Captain Cotton canal and the Villivakkam canal. These drains as well as the 2,900-kilometre-long Storm Water Drain network constructed in the GCC area also deserve year-long attention and maintenance.

Rising urban expansion

When the city limit was expanded from 174 sq.km to 426 sq.km, and the CMA to 1,189 sq.km, there was very little thought devoted to protecting the ecological hotspots in the expanded areas. Chennai has lost many water bodies (lakes and ponds) and much of the Pallikaranai marsh land and coastal wetlands. At present, the CMA is to be expanded from the existing 1,189 sq.km to 5,904 sq.km covering the entire districts of Tiruvallur, Chengalpattu, Kancheepuram and parts of Ranipet district as part of the Master Plan III.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A TIME-HONOURED CONNECT THAT WILL HELP BRIDGE THE GULF

CONTEXT: Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sultan of Oman, is visiting India from December 16 on a state visit. This is his first visit to India after taking over in January 2020 following the passing of Sultan Qaboos.

Oman is the closest neighbour to India in the Arabian Gulf region and a crucial pillar of India's West Asia policy, with their multi-faceted engagement increasingly taking on a more strategic shape in recent decades. Oman's location is of utmost strategic importance to India with key Omani ports abutting the coastline along the Arabian Sea as well as the Gulf of Oman leading into the Persian Gulf and towards the Gulf of Aden. Along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman completes the trio of key strategic

partners of India in the Gulf region. There is a large Indian community of almost seven lakh people which has contributed to the constantly evolving vibrant relations.

Oman is The India-Oman strategic partnership was signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Oman in November 2008 and is based on twin pillars of mutual trust and shared interests. Oman was one of the few countries to have been invited by India to its G-20 presidency as a guest nation earlier this year.

During the Cold War era, and even thereafter, when the Arab world was largely ambivalent towards India and was often soft and supportive of Pakistan, it was Oman which kept its doors open to India. In a conflict-prone region, Oman has always been an island of peace. It has pursued a foreign policy which is based on the twin strands of moderation and mediation, including a policy of deliberate neutrality in dealing with regional issues and conflicts. It has carefully balanced its close relations with the western powers and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a pragmatic approach to neighbouring Iran, maintaining that the Straits of Hormuz will not be closed. Even during the Persian Gulf crisis in 1990, when the United States and Iran were on the brink of a military conflict, it was Oman which played a key role in diffusing tensions.

Oman's key role in the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 is well documented and acknowledged too. During the GCC-Qatar diplomatic stand-off, Oman refused to join Saudi Arabia and other countries in breaking diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017. Much before the Abraham Accords were signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had made a surprise visit to Oman in October 2018, once again confirming the importance of Oman in the region.

India-Oman strategic partnership

Defence and security engagement form a key pillar of this strategic partnership and are governed by a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in 2005. Oman is the first Gulf country with which all the three wings of India's defence forces hold joint exercises. Since 2012-13, an Indian naval ship has remained on duty in the Gulf of Oman for anti-piracy operations. Oman has allowed overflights/transit by Indian military aircraft too. In recent years, both countries have cooperated in ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean region.

During the Persian Gulf crisis in June 2019, the Indian Navy launched 'Operation Sankalp' to ensure the safe passage of Indian flagged ships which most often operated off the coast of Oman. The MoU on Duqm Port during Mr. Modi's visit is a historic landmark in our security cooperation, providing basing facilities, Operational Turn Round and other logistics facilities to Indian naval ships operating in the region.

Trade and commerce forms yet another important pillar of engagement. Bilateral trade during FY2022-23 reached \$12.388 billion. There are over 6,000 India-Oman joint ventures in Oman, with an estimated investment of over \$7.5 billion.

India was the second largest market for Oman's crude oil exports for the year 2022 after China. In October 2022, India and Oman launched the Rupay debit card in Oman, a key footprint of India's initiative of promoting digital public infrastructure (DPI) in the world.

India and Oman are looking forward to increased engagement in strategic areas such as space cooperation — an MoU on this was signed during Mr. Modi's visit. The possibility of an agreement on joint exploration of rare earth metals, vital to modern electronic equipment, could add strength to the partnership. The proposed India-Middle-East-Europe Connectivity Corridor (IMEEC) infrastructure project to link India to Europe across West Asia could also see Oman playing an important role. There is a proposal from the South Asia Gas Enterprise (SAGE), a private consortium based in India, to lay a 1,400 km long

deep-sea pipeline from Oman to India for the transfer of gas. With IMEEC too looking at similar undersea connectivity, there could be convergence on it with Oman in the future.

India's gateway to West Asia

Apart from being India's oldest strategic partner in the region and closest neighbour, Oman is an integral part of all important groupings in the region; the GCC, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League. Its ability to manage rival ideologies and power games in the region makes it vitally important to India. Both countries consider themselves as ambassadors of peace and enjoy goodwill across ideologies in the world. Oman is, therefore, India's gateway to West Asia. And with the ongoing Israel-Hamas war testing the region to its limits, the visit of Oman's Sultan is timely and very important for India and the region.



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