

UPSC CURRENT AFFAIRS NOTES 16-10-2023

PALK STRAIT

India and Sri Lanka on Saturday launched a ferry service across the Palk Strait under a new roadmap for greater connectivity, nearly four decades after the link between Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu and Kankesanthurai in Jaffna was disrupted by the civil war in the island nation.



The ferry service is expected to boost travel and trade with Kankesanthurai, the Sri Lankan port located closest to ports on India's west coast.

About Palk Strait

It is a strait that connects India's Tamil Nadu state to the island nation of Sri Lanka.

The strait is named after Robert Palk, a British Raj administrator of the Madras Presidency (1755-1763).

Pamban Island (India), Adam's (Rama's) Bridge (a chain of shoals), the Gulf of Mannar, and Mannar Island (Sri Lanka) border it on the south.

It connects the northeastern Bay of Bengal to the southwesterly Gulf of Mannar.

Palk Bay is another name for the strait's southwestern section.

The strait stretches for 40 to 85 miles (64 to 137 kilometers), is 85 miles long, and is less than 330 feet (100 metres) deep.

Several rivers flow into it, including the Vaigai River of Tamil Nadu.

The port of Jaffna, the commercial centre for northern Sri Lanka, lies on the strait.

Facts regarding Adam's Bridge

Adam's Bridge is a line of limestone shoals that connects Pamban Island, also known as Rameswaram Island, off the south-eastern coast of Tamil Nadu, India, and Mannar Island, off the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka.

According to geological data, this bridge was formerly a land route between India and Sri Lanka.

The 50-kilometer-long bridge connects the Gulf of Mannar (southwest) to the Palk Strait (northeast).

Some of the sandbanks are dry, and the sea in the area is very shallow, barely 1 to 10 meters deep in spots, making navigation difficult.

Scientists believe Ram Setu is a natural structure formed due to tectonic movements and sand getting trapped in corals.

The structure has significance in both Hindu and Muslim mythology.

While the Hindus believe this is the bridge built by Lord Ram and his army to cross to Lanka and fight Ravan, as per Islamic legend, Adam used this bridge to reach Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, where he stood on one foot for 1,000 years in repentance.

The back story around Palk Strait

Fishermen of India and Sri Lanka have been unable to agree on how to share the fish in the narrow Palk Strait separating the two countries.

The strait is known to be a breeding ground for rich marine resources, especially shrimp.

Although India and Sri Lanka agreed to divide the strait with an imaginary boundary line in the 1970s the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) – Indian fishermen, from the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, and Puducherry, are frequently arrested by the Sri Lanka Navy for “poaching” or engaging in “illegal” fishing activity in Sri Lanka waters.

Several rounds of bilateral negotiations between the two governments and talks between fishing community leaders from both sides have been held over the years, but a solution remains elusive.

Status of Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel Amid War

According to the sources, Saudi Arabia is putting US-backed plans to normalise ties with Israel on ice, signalling a rapid rethink of its foreign policy priorities as war escalates between Israel and Palestinian group Hamas.

The US has been working for months to broker a deal that would improve relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The highlight of the deal is that Saudi Arabia will recognise Israel for the first time since the latter's establishment in 1948.

The kingdom has so far shied away from formalising ties with the Jewish state primarily because of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Saudis have been demanding (since the beginning) Palestinian statehood.

More than resolving the Palestinian question, Riyadh now wants security guarantees from the US in exchange for recognising Israel.

Specifically, the kingdom seeks protection from Iran, which has been its arch rival for decades now.

Saudi Arabia wants an agreement with the US that would be as close as possible to a mutual defence pact - in which any attack on the kingdom would be seen by Washington as an attack on the US.

The deal also includes US support for a Saudi civilian nuclear programme and US approval for the sale of sophisticated weapons to the kingdom.

Israel, which is technologically advanced in a wide range of fields, will also help Riyadh move its economy beyond oil.

How will the Formalisation of Ties with the Saudis help Israel?

Saudi Arabia is the richest and most powerful of the Arab countries. A formal relationship will bring economic benefits to Israel.

It would give legitimacy to the State of Israel in the mostly-Muslim region and help the country become a significant player in West Asia.

The deal will bestow political gains upon Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who is battling deep divisions in Israeli society over the policies of his far-right governing coalition, including attempts to muzzle Israel's judiciary.

A deal with Saudi Arabia would shift the focus to a source of national pride and unity.

What's in the Deal for the United States?

The US is looking at the growing Chinese influence in the region. The US hopes that giving security guarantees to Saudi Arabia will stop the kingdom from getting closer to China.

Recently, Beijing successfully mediated an agreement that restored formal ties between the Saudis and Iran, long-time rivals in the region.

This signalled the arrival of China as a global power-broker, a role for which only the US has so far had the required influence and financial strength.

Washington also wants to improve its fraught relations with Riyadh.

They have been traditional allies, but in recent years, the two countries have had several confrontations, including over the murder of US journalist (Jamal Khashoggi) by Saudi agents.

What would the Palestinians get in the Deal?

The Palestinians are not directly involved in the negotiations of the deal.

But unlike the US-brokered 2020 Abraham Accords, which helped Israel gain recognition from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, they haven't been completely sidelined.

Saudi Arabia has publicly said it remains fully committed to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, in which Arab nations offered Israel normalised ties in return for a statehood deal with the Palestinians, and full Israeli withdrawal from territory captured in 1967.

However, Saudi Arabia has indicated that a deal is possible even if it falls short of providing Palestinians an independent state, as the hope of a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict remains low.

Why is the US Pushing the Deal Now?

A deal would be a huge foreign policy victory for Biden.

President Joe Biden's administration wants Israel and Saudi Arabia to ink the deal before the US Presidential elections (in November next year) - the campaign for which will pick up speed by early summer.

Another factor is Iran, which doesn't seem to agree to stop its nuclear programme.

This makes it all the more important for the US to strengthen ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, both of whom see Iran as an enemy.

Citing Deepfakes, Government to make WhatsApp Disclose Source ID

Why in News?

The Central government is looking to invoke a law that would require WhatsApp to share details about the first originator of a message.

The basis for this are multiple deepfake videos of politicians circulating on WhatsApp.

A deepfake is a digitally forged image or video of a person that makes them appear to be someone else.

It is the next level of fake content creation that takes advantage of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Artificial intelligence refers to the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think like humans and mimic their actions.

It can create people who do not exist and it can fake real people saying and doing things they did not say or do.

Origin of the Term 'Deepfake':

The term deepfake originated in 2017, when an anonymous Reddit user called himself "Deepfakes."

This user manipulated Google's open-source, deep-learning technology to create and post pornographic videos.

The videos were doctored with a technique known as face-swapping. The user "Deepfakes" replaced real faces with celebrity faces.

Deepfake technology is now being used for nefarious purposes like –

Scams and hoaxes,

Celebrity pornography,

Election manipulation,

Social engineering,

Automated disinformation attacks,

Identity theft and financial fraud.

Deepfake technology has been used to impersonate former U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, etc.



China:

In China, it is mandatory for deep synthesis service providers and users to ensure that any doctored content using the technology is explicitly labelled and can be traced back to its source.

The regulation also mandates people using the technology to edit someone's image or voice, to notify and take the consent of the person in question.

When reposting news made by the technology, the source can only be from the government-approved list of news outlets.

European Union:

The EU has an updated Code of Practice to stop the spread of disinformation through deepfakes.

The revised Code requires tech companies including Google, Meta, and Twitter to take measures in countering deepfakes and fake accounts on their platforms.

They have six months to implement their measures once they have signed up to the Code.

If found non-compliant, these companies can face fines as much as 6% of their annual global turnover.

United States:

In July 2021, the US introduced the bipartisan Deepfake Task Force Act to assist the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to counter deepfake technology.

The measure directs the DHS to conduct an annual study of deepfakes — assess the technology used, track its uses by foreign and domestic entities, and come up with available countermeasures to tackle the same.

India:

In India, currently, there are no legal rules against using deepfake technology.

However, specific laws can be addressed for misusing the tech, which include Copyright violation, Defamation, etc.

News Summary:

As the country heads to Lok Sabha elections in 2024, the Central government is looking to invoke a law that would require WhatsApp to share details about the first originator of a message.

The basis for this are multiple deepfake videos of politicians circulating on WhatsApp.

The Government is in the process of sending an order to the messaging company under the Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021, seeking the identity of the people who first shared the videos on the platform.

This would be the first time that the Central government will directly send an Internet platform an order under Section 4 (2) of the IT Rules, 2021.

Provision of Disclosing the Identity of a Person under the IT Rules:

The IT Rules say that online messaging companies will be required to divulge the identity of a person who first sends a particular message on their platform.

The order for the requirement, colloquially known as traceability, can be passed either by a court, or the government.

The orders, however, can only be issued for the purposes of prevention, detection, investigation, prosecution or punishment of an offence related to national security issues, public order, friendly relations with a foreign government, among other things.

No order, the rules say, shall be passed in cases where other less intrusive means are effective in identifying the originator of the information.

Stand of WhatsApp

WhatsApp, which is the most used messaging platform in India, has said that the provision is a threat to its end-to-end encryption system which keeps communications between two people private from even the company itself.

It has questioned the technical feasibility of enforcing the measure, saying it will break its security systems and lead to mass surveillance.

Stock Split

A stock split happens when a company increases the number of its shares to boost the stock's liquidity.

It is a corporate action in which a company issues additional shares to shareholders, increasing the total by the specified ratio based on the shares they held previously.

Although the number of shares outstanding increases, there is no change to the company's total market capitalization as the price of each share will split as well.

The most common split ratios are 2-for-1 or 3-for-1 (sometimes denoted as 2:1 or 3:1). This means that for every share held before the split, each stockholder will have two or three shares, respectively, after the split.

The number of shares increases, but the price per share goes down in proportion.

Why is a stock split done?

It is done to infuse liquidity and to make shares affordable for various investors who could not buy the shares of that company before due to high prices.

It is sometimes aimed at helping a company meet the minimum requirements to remain listed on an exchange. This is because some stock indexes are price-weighted, meaning a company wishing to join the index would need to have, among other criteria, a price that falls within a certain band.

What is a Reverse Stock Split?

It is the opposite transaction, in which a company lowers, instead of increasing, the number of shares outstanding, raising the share price accordingly.

The total value of your shares would remain consistent.

SARASWATI SAMMAN 2022



Tamil writer Sivasankari was honoured with the 'Saraswati Samman' in 2022 for her book of memoirs titled "Surya Vamsam."

Key Highlights

Saraswati Samman is an annual award for outstanding prose or poetry literary works in any of the 22 languages of India listed in Schedule VIII of the Constitution of India. It is named after the Hindu goddess of knowledge, Saraswati.

It was instituted by the K.K. Birla Foundation in 1991. The award carries a cash prize of ₹15 lakh, a citation, and a plaque.

Saraswati Samman 2022 was recently awarded to a Tamil writer Sivasankari for her book of memoirs, *Surya Vamsam*.

"Surya Vamsam" is a two-volume work of memoirs that not only traces the journey of an innocent child becoming a renowned author but also captures the societal transformations over the course of seven decades, as stated in the award citation.

The selection for this award was made by a Chayan Parishad (Selection Committee) led by former Supreme Court judge Arjan Kumar Sikri.

Sivasankari, born in 1942, has a literary career spanning over five decades, during which she has authored 36 novels, 48 novelettes, 150 short stories, five travelogues, seven collections of essays, and three biographies. Many of her works have been translated into various Indian languages, as well as English, Japanese, and Ukrainian

UN approved a Kenya-led security mission to troubled Haiti

The UNSC has approved international intervention in the form of a foreign security mission, led by Kenya, to restore security, and control spiralling violence in Haiti.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted to adopt the resolution in this regard.

Where is Haiti?

Haiti occupies the western one-third of the island of Hispaniola, situated between Cuba and Puerto Rico, which it shares with the Dominican Republic.

The Atlantic Ocean borders Haiti's northern shores, while the Caribbean Sea is to the west and south.

Violence in Haiti

Haiti has experienced a surge in violence over the past year as armed groups took control of large parts of the country, including the capital Port-au-Prince.

This has resulted in widespread killings of nearly 2,800 people, including 80 minors, between October 2022 and June 2023.

Human rights groups have reported a rise in sexual violence and crimes against women.

In addition to this, mass looting and burning of houses have led to the displacement of thousands of people, with around 200,000 fleeing their homes.

As per estimates, almost half the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.

News Summary:

UN approved a Kenya-led security mission to troubled Haiti.

Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry first sought international support to assist the national police in October 2022.

This was after the country plunged into a crisis when a group of gangs called G9 and Family seized control of the entry of the main fuel port Varreux in the capital.

They were protesting the PM's decision to cut fuel subsidies.

To make matters worse, there was a shortage of bottled water in the backdrop of a new outbreak of cholera.

As the crisis deepened and overwhelmed the short-staffed police force, Haitian leaders turned to the international community for help.

They sought a specialised armed force to counter gangs and their sponsors.

About the mission

Not operated by the UN

Unlike the U.N. peacekeeping mission to Haiti that ended in 2017, the multi-national security mission approved by the UNSC will not be operated by the United Nations.

Kenya has volunteered to lead the force. Other countries like the Bahamas, Jamaica and Antigua and Barbuda have also offered support.

Operational support to the Haitian National Police

The force will provide operational support to the Haitian National Police.

This includes building its capacity to counter gangs, improve security conditions in the country and secure ports, airports and critical intersections.

The forces will have the authority to make arrests in coordination with Haitian police.

It also intends to create favourable conditions in the country to pave the way for elections. Polls have not taken place in Haiti since 2016.

Support from US

The United States has made it clear that it won't send its troops.

It, however, has pledged \$100 million in logistical support like intelligence, communications, airlift operations and medical aid.

What led to the delay in intervention?

Haiti's troubled past with foreign military interventions is being viewed as the primary reason for the delay in the deployment of a multinational security mission to counter the gang violence in the country.

The last time a force was sent to stabilise Haiti was in 2004 when former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown in a rebellion.

This was followed by a U.N. peacekeeping mission — the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) which went on from 2004 to 2017.

The mission was marred by allegations during its deployment in the country.

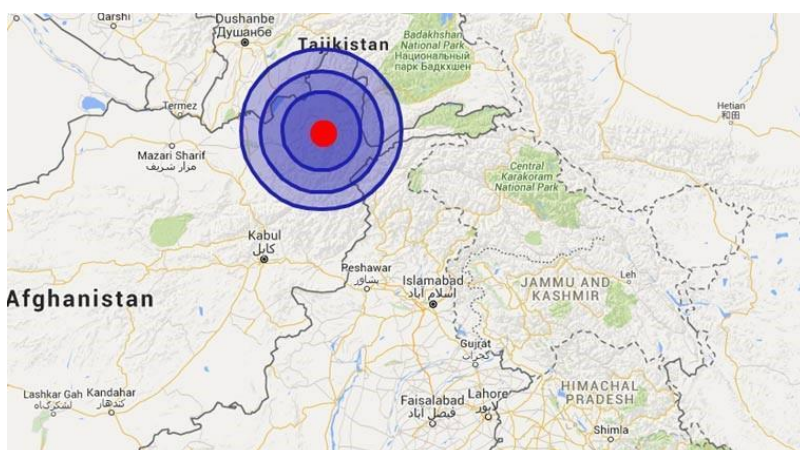
A sewage runoff from a peacekeeper camp was blamed for causing a cholera epidemic which saw more than 10,000 deaths.

There were also serious allegations of sexual abuse against the U.N. peacekeepers.

Since then, Haitians have been sceptical about the intervention of a foreign armed force.

Besides the country's troubled past with interventions under the aegis of the U.N., countries were also wary of lending support to Prime Minister Henry who does not enjoy the popular support of Haitians.

SHALLOW FOCUS EARTHQUAKE



Throughout its history, Afghanistan has witnessed numerous violent earthquakes, particularly in the mountainous Hindu Kush region, which shares a border with Pakistan.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), women and children make up the vast majority of earthquake victims in Afghanistan.

Earthquakes in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, hemmed in by mountains, has a long history of strong earthquakes, many in the rugged Hindu Kush region bordering Pakistan.



Location in Alpidic Belt (or Alpine-Himalayan Orogenic Belt)

Afghanistan is prone to earthquakes due to its location in the Hindu Kush region, which is part of the Alpidic belt.

After the circum-Pacific belt, the Alpidic belt is the world's second most seismically active zone.

It is a new mountain range that stretches from the Atlantic to the Himalayas.

When the African, Arabian, and Indian Plates collided with the Eurasian Plate, the Tethys Ocean closed, forming the Alpidic belt.

Seismic activity is caused by plate collisions at the convergent plate boundary.

Faultlines

A faultline is a line on the ground or on a rock surface that traces a geological fault.

A fault is a crack in the Earth's crust caused by the movement of two blocks of rock relative to each other.

When rock blocks move quickly, energy is released, resulting in earthquakes.

Plate collision is one of the factors that causes a fault.

Afghanistan is situated on top of several fault lines where the Indian and Eurasian plates collide.

Fault lines crossing Afghanistan



What is an Earthquake?

In simple terms, an earthquake is the shaking of the earth.

It is a natural occurrence. It is created by the discharge of energy, which causes waves to propagate in all directions.

Seismic waves are vibrations caused by earthquakes as they move through the Earth and are recorded on seismographs.

The hypocenter is the point beneath the earth's surface where the earthquake begins, while the epicenter is the location directly above it on the earth's surface.

Earthquake types include fault zones, tectonic earthquakes, volcanic earthquakes, and earthquakes caused by humans.

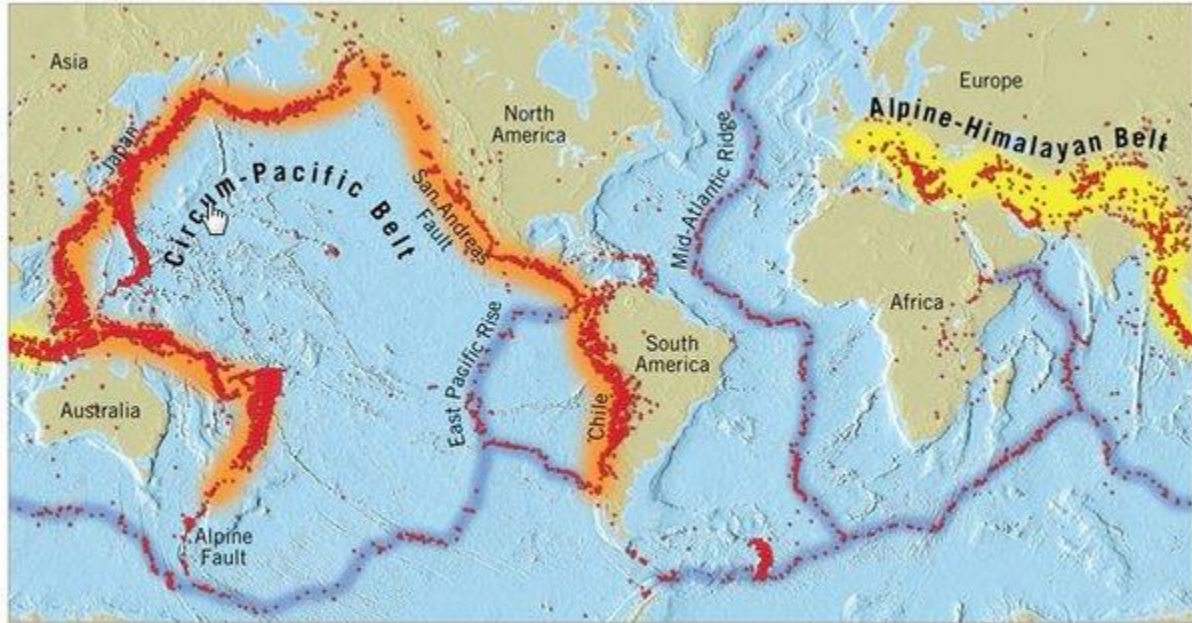
The earthquake events are scaled either according to the magnitude or intensity of the shock. The magnitude scale is known as the Richter scale.

The magnitude relates to the energy released during the quake. The magnitude is expressed in absolute numbers, 0-10.

The intensity scale is named after Mercalli, an Italian seismologist.

The intensity scale takes into account the visible damage caused by the event. The range of intensity scale is from 1-12.

Distribution of Earthquake



Circum-Pacific Seismic Belt:

The world's largest earthquake belt, the circum-Pacific seismic belt, is found along the Pacific Ocean's rim, where approximately 81% of our planet's major earthquakes occur.

It is known as the "Ring of Fire".

The belt exists along tectonic plate boundaries, where plates of predominantly oceanic crust descend (or subduct) beneath another plate.

Slip between plates and plate rupture produce earthquakes in these subduction zones.

Mid Continental Belt:

The Alpine-Himalayan belt (mid-continental belt) stretches from Europe to Sumatra, passing via the Himalayas, the Mediterranean, and out into the Atlantic.

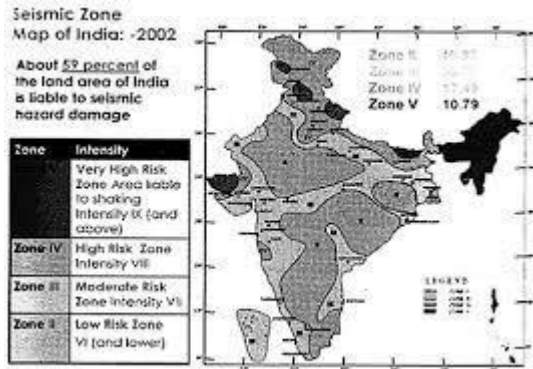
This belt is responsible for around 17% of the world's greatest earthquakes, including some of the most devastating.

Mid-Atlantic Ridge:

The third prominent belt follows the submerged mid-Atlantic Ridge. The ridge marks where two tectonic plates are spreading apart (a divergent plate boundary).

Most of the mid-Atlantic Ridge is deep underwater and far from human development.

Seismic Hazard Map of India



Because of the existence of technically active young fold mountains such as the Himalayas, India is one of the most earthquake-prone countries.

Based on scientific inputs relating to seismicity, prior earthquakes, and the region's geological configuration, India has been categorized into four seismic zones (II, III, IV, and V).

Previously, earthquake zones were split into five severity zones, however, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) organized the country into four seismic zones by combining the first two zones.

Seismic Zone II:

Area with minor damage earthquakes corresponding to intensities V to VI of MM scale (MM-Modified Mercalli Intensity scale).

Seismic Zone III:

Moderate damage corresponding to intensity VII of MM scale.

Seismic Zone IV:

Major damage corresponds to intensity VII and higher on the MM scale.

Seismic Zone V:

- The area is determined by the seismic of certain major fault systems and is seismically the most active region.
- Earthquake zone V is the most vulnerable to earthquakes, where historically some of the country's most powerful shocks have occurred.
- Earthquakes with magnitudes over 7.0 have occurred in these areas, and have had intensities higher than IX.