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India Must Lead in Securing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb

Context

- The emerging threat of a **Bab el-Mandeb Strait crisis**, following tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, underscores the vulnerability of global maritime trade.
- The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints.
- Any disruption **could threaten nearly one-third of India's trade**, making maritime security a strategic and economic priority.
- India must therefore adopt a proactive, rules-based maritime strategy to secure vital sea lanes.

Understanding the Strategic Importance of Bab el-Mandeb

- The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, situated between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, **connects the Suez Canal with the Indian Ocean**.
- It is indispensable for trade between Asia, Europe, and Africa, facilitating the movement of energy supplies, container cargo, and commercial shipping.

- Any blockage would force vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit time, freight costs, and supply chain disruptions.
- Following the Gaza conflict, the **Houthis (Ansarallah) launched attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea**, disrupting one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

Major Consequences

- Around 40 commercial vessels were attacked.
- Over 2,000 ships avoided the Suez Canal, opting for the Cape of Good Hope.
- Freight charges and marine insurance premiums increased sharply.
- Egypt suffered significant revenue losses from reduced **Suez Canal** traffic.
- India's imports, exports, and supply chains experienced delays and higher logistics costs.
- The crisis demonstrated how regional conflicts can quickly disrupt global trade and economic stability.

Why the Present Situation is More Dangerous?

- The current geopolitical environment presents greater **uncertainty than in 2024**.
- Iran's reported support for Houthi threats has increased regional tensions.
- The United Nations **Security Council remains divided**, limiting prospects for coordinated action to uphold freedom of navigation.
- The United States is increasingly focused on Iran, creating uncertainty about sustained Red Sea security operations.
- **China may continue protecting its shipping independently** through bilateral arrangements rather than collective maritime efforts.

Implications for India

• Economic Impact

- Simultaneous disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb could severely affect India's energy security, trade, supply chains, exports, and inflation by increasing transportation and insurance costs.

• Impact on Indian Seafarers

- India is one of the world's largest suppliers of merchant seafarers.
- Restrictions on Red Sea operations would affect the employment, safety, and welfare of thousands of Indian sailors while disrupting maritime commerce.

India's Strategic Response

• Build a Multilateral Maritime Task Force

- India should establish a Trade Protection Task Force with France and Japan, both of which maintain naval bases in Djibouti.
- The task force should escort commercial vessels, conduct coordinated patrols, deter attacks, and ensure uninterrupted maritime trade.

- **Strengthen Regional Diplomacy**

- India should deepen engagement with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Red Sea littoral states that share an interest in protecting maritime commerce and regional stability.

- **Enhance Maritime Domain Awareness**

- The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) should be leveraged for real-time intelligence sharing, monitoring shipping movements, and coordinating multinational naval operations.

- **Promote a Rules-Based Maritime Order**

- India should advocate adherence to UNCLOS, international maritime law, and freedom of navigation through joint rules of engagement and protection of commercial shipping.
- This approach aligns with India's vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and its commitment to a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific.

Remaining Challenges and the Way Forward

- **Challenges**

- India's response must address several constraints:
 - Escalating West Asian geopolitical tensions.
 - Lack of international consensus.
 - High costs of sustained naval deployment.
 - Balancing ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Western partners.
 - Ensuring the safety of Indian seafarers during prolonged crises.

- **Way Forward**

- India should **establish a multinational maritime security mechanism**, strengthen naval interoperability with France and Japan, expand cooperation with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
- India should **also enhance IFC-IOR capabilities, diversify trade routes**, build resilient supply chains, increase strategic petroleum reserves, and champion a rules-based international order through sustained diplomatic and naval engagement.

Conclusion

- The Bab el-Mandeb Strait has become a **critical test of India's maritime strategy**.

- The Red Sea crisis demonstrated that **disruptions at strategic chokepoints** can have far-reaching economic and geopolitical consequences.
- As a leading maritime power, India must combine naval capability, regional diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and maritime domain awareness to secure vital sea lanes.
- **A proactive and cooperative approach will safeguard India's trade**, strengthen regional stability, and reinforce its vision of SAGAR, ensuring that the Bab el-Mandeb does not become a **Gate of Tears for global commerce**.

India Must Lead in Securing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb FAQs

Q1. Why is the Bab el-Mandeb Strait strategically important for India?

Ans. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a vital maritime chokepoint through which nearly one-third of India's trade passes.

Q2. What was a major consequence of the 2023-24 Red Sea crisis?

Ans. The crisis disrupted global shipping, increased freight and insurance costs, and delayed India's trade.

Q3. Why is the present Bab el-Mandeb situation considered more dangerous?

Ans. It is more dangerous because of rising Iran-U.S. tensions, a divided UN Security Council, and uncertainty over international maritime security efforts.

Q4. What maritime initiative should India undertake to protect its trade?

Ans. India should establish a multinational Trade Protection Task Force with partners such as France and Japan to secure shipping routes.

Q5. How does the proposed maritime strategy support India's regional vision?

Ans. It strengthens India's SAGAR vision by promoting secure sea lanes, regional cooperation, and a rules-based maritime order.

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