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The Critical Minerals Age - Strategic Imperatives for India and the World

Context:

- The article explores the **rising significance of critical minerals** in shaping **global geopolitics, economic strategies, climate action, and technological advancement**.
- It draws **historical parallels** with earlier ages named after metals and emphasizes the urgent **need for India to explore and secure its own mineral resources** to support economic and strategic goals in the 21st century.

Historical Evolution of Metal Use in Civilisation - From the Chalcolithic to the Critical Minerals Age:

- Around **7,000 years ago**, the human transition from Neolithic to Chalcolithic age marked the beginning of metal usage.
- **Subsequent epochs: Bronze** age and **Iron** age defined by increasing metal use.
- **19th-20th centuries:** Coal and oil drove the first and second **Industrial Revolutions**
- **21st century:** Defined as the critical minerals age, due to the **central role of rare minerals** in modern technology.

Strategic Importance of Critical Minerals in Global Politics:

- **Geopolitical drivers:**
 - **US foreign policy** under Donald Trump prioritized control over mineral-rich regions like Canada, Greenland, and Ukraine.
 - **China** wields influence via rare earth mineral dominance, using it as a **geo-economic weapon in trade conflicts**.
- **Domestic policy shifts in the US:**
 - Vast federal lands opened for mineral exploration.
 - **Fast-track clearance mechanisms** introduced (reduction in approvals time from one year to less than a month).

Climate Change and the Technological Shift:

- **Climate-driven demand:**
 - **Green technologies** (EVs, solar, wind) are highly mineral-intensive.
 - EVs use **six times** more minerals than conventional vehicles.
 - Offshore wind plants consume **nine times** more minerals than fossil fuel plants.
- **4th Industrial Revolution technologies:** AI, robotics, big data, digital infrastructure require minerals like –
 - Copper (for conductivity and data centres).
 - Lithium, cobalt, nickel (for batteries).

Supply Chain Concentration and Strategic Risks:

- **High dependency and geographic concentration:**
 - **Cobalt** – mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo.
 - **Nickel** – Indonesia controls ~50% of global mining.
 - **Rare earths** – China has a 66% share in mining, over 90% in processing.
 - **Lithium** – dominated by Australia, Chile, and China.
- **Processing bottlenecks:**
 - **China** dominates processing of copper, aluminium, rare earths, and other critical minerals.
 - This **monopoly** can halt global industries, especially EV and clean energy sectors.

India's Position and Strategic Imperatives:

- **India's challenges**
 - **Under-exploration** of mineral reserves.
 - **Dependence** on imports for key minerals.
 - **Lack of domestic processing infrastructure.**
- **Strategic solutions:**
 - **Emulate** US-style fast-track policies for exploration and processing.
 - **Prioritize** domestic exploration to ensure self-reliance in manufacturing.
 - **Leverage** India's geological wealth for mineral independence and industrial competitiveness.

Conclusion:

- The **21st century** is unequivocally the **age of critical minerals**, which lie at the intersection of climate change, geopolitics, and technology.
- For India to emerge as a manufacturing and strategic power, **securing a reliable and indigenous supply of these minerals** is not optional but essential.

The Critical Minerals Age – Strategic Imperatives for India and the World

FAQs

Q1. Discuss the role of critical minerals in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and climate change mitigation.

Ans. Critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and copper are essential for green technologies and digital infrastructure, making them central to both climate action and the 4IR.

Q2. How is the global supply of critical minerals concentrated, and what are its strategic implications?

Ans. The supply of critical minerals is heavily concentrated in a few countries—especially China, Congo, Indonesia, and Chile—posing strategic risks of supply disruptions and geopolitical manipulation.

Q3. Why has the 21st century been termed the “Critical Minerals Age”?

Ans. Due to their indispensable role in electric vehicles, renewable energy, AI, and digital infrastructure, critical minerals are now driving global technological, economic, and strategic shifts, akin to how coal and oil defined earlier eras.

Q4. What are the key challenges India faces in securing critical mineral supply chains?

Ans. India faces challenges such as under-exploration of its mineral-rich geology, overdependence on imports, and lack of processing capabilities, hindering its manufacturing and strategic autonomy.

Q5. What lessons can India draw from the U.S. approach to critical mineral exploration?

Ans. India can emulate the U.S. by expediting exploration clearances, opening up more land for mineral development, and building domestic capacity to reduce foreign dependency.

Exiting Refugee Status, Getting Back Dignity

Context

- Two **recent developments**, one in India and another in Sri Lanka, **have rekindled debate around the long-standing presence of Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu.**
- While appearing unrelated, **these incidents sharply illustrate the core dilemma that continues to shadow refugee policy in India:** whether to repatriate or integrate those displaced by past conflicts.
- These **cases not only highlight legal and humanitarian tensions but also expose inconsistencies** in India’s approach to refugee management.

The Legal and Moral Crossroads: Supreme Court’s Remark and Judicial Attitudes

- The **first development involves the Indian Supreme Court’s refusal to intervene in the Madras High Court’s decision** that reduced the sentence of a Sri Lankan refugee convicted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.
- **The convict, having completed his sentence, sought to remain in India,** citing personal grounds.
- However, the Supreme Court dismissed his appeal, reinforcing the High Court’s directive that he **must leave the country.**
- **What shocked many was the oral observation made** by the Bench, that **India is not a Dharamshala (free shelter) for refugees worldwide.**

- This **comment appeared to deviate from India's historically empathetic stance** toward displaced communities.
- **Indian courts have often leaned toward humanistic interpretations** in refugee cases.
- This **shift in tone raises questions about whether security concerns and political expediency** are now overriding humanitarian considerations.

Sri Lanka's Detainment of a Returnee: A Cautionary Tale

- In a parallel incident, **a septuagenarian Sri Lankan refugee who voluntarily returned from Tamil Nadu was detained by Sri Lankan authorities** on arrival, allegedly for leaving the country without valid documents.
- This **occurred despite the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in facilitating his return.**
- Though **he was eventually released after public outcry**, the episode exposes the risks faced by refugees considering repatriation, even under official supervision.
- The **Sri Lankan government's response**, specifically that of Transport Minister Bimal Rathnayake, revealed that **such detentions are the result of outdated legal frameworks that treat voluntary repatriates as criminals.**
- His **assurance of immediate policy change offers hope**, but it also underscores the need for systemic reform in both host and origin countries.

India's Contrasting Policies: Tibetan vs. Sri Lankan Refugees

- A deeper issue lies in the **stark policy disparity between the treatment of Tibetan and Sri Lankan refugees.**
- **While Tibetans, numbering around 63,000, have enjoyed relative freedom** and formalised government support through the 2014 Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy (TRP).
- **No such framework exists for the nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan refugees**, the majority of whom reside in Tamil Nadu.
- **Tibetans are spread across several Indian states** and enjoy access to government schemes, education, and employment in both public and private sectors.
- In contrast, **Sri Lankan refugees, most of whom live in rehabilitation camps, face barriers to integration.**
- Despite hundreds obtaining professional degrees, employment **opportunities remain scarce due to the absence of legal recognition and corporate hesitancy.**
- This **situation underscores the urgent need for a parallel policy** that enables Sri Lankan refugees to pursue dignified livelihoods.

Policy Recommendations: The Case for Durable Solutions

- India's longstanding default position has been repatriation, **the belief that Sri Lankan refugees should eventually return home.**

- However, **with over 40 years having passed since the first arrivals in 1983, this stance appears increasingly untenable.**
- **Many refugees have spent their entire lives in India;** for them, Sri Lanka is a distant and unfamiliar land.
- At the same time, **Sri Lanka's own legal framework continues to penalise those who left during the civil war,** making repatriation risky and, in some cases, inhumane.
- A **comprehensive and inclusive policy,** modelled perhaps on the Tibetan example, **would offer a more durable solution.**
- It **could allow refugees to participate meaningfully** in Indian society, access employment, and pursue education without the perpetual uncertainty of forced return.
- This **does not preclude repatriation for those who choose it;** rather, it enables choice, agency, and dignity.

Conclusion

- As the world observes **World Refugee Day** (June 20) under the banner of solidarity with refugees, **India must confront the contradictions in its refugee policy.**
- The **continuation of refugee camps for decades,** no matter how well-managed, erodes **the human dignity of those forced to live within them.**
- A **balance between repatriation and local integration** negotiated in consultation with all stakeholders including Sri Lanka, **offers the only humane and realistic path forward.**
- **India has the opportunity to reaffirm its humanitarian legacy,** not by turning away those who seek refuge, but by ensuring they can live with honour while they are here.

Exiting Refugee Status, Getting Back Dignity FAQs

Q1. Why was a Sri Lankan refugee's return to India denied by the Supreme Court?

Ans. The Supreme Court denied the refugee's request to stay in India because he had been convicted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and had previously agreed to leave the country after completing his sentence.

Q2. What happened to the elderly refugee who returned to Sri Lanka?

Ans. The elderly refugee was detained by Sri Lankan authorities upon arrival for having left the country without valid documents, even though his return was facilitated by the UNHCR.

Q3. How are Sri Lankan and Tibetan refugees treated differently in India?

Ans. Tibetan refugees benefit from a formal rehabilitation policy that allows integration and access to government schemes, whereas Sri Lankan refugees lack such a policy and remain largely confined to camps in Tamil Nadu.

Q4. What challenge do Sri Lankan refugee graduates face in India?

Ans. Sri Lankan refugee graduates, especially in engineering, find it difficult to secure employment because many private companies are reluctant to hire refugees.

Q5. What is suggested as a durable solution for Sri Lankan refugees?

Ans. A durable solution involves formulating a balanced policy that allows both voluntary repatriation and local

Blame Not the Messenger in India's Diplomacy

Context

- **History often cautions against blaming the bearer of bad news**, a lesson as old as Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra.
- Yet **in contemporary India, following the four-day military engagement** termed Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025), **Indian diplomats, the state's messengers, have found themselves criticised** not for the content of their message but for its perceived diplomatic ineffectiveness.
- Therefore, **it is important to evaluate the criticisms levelled at Indian diplomacy post-Operation Sindoor, exploring the deeper geopolitical and perceptual shifts** affecting India's international standing

Critical Appraisal of India's Diplomatic Messaging

- **Eroding International Support**
 - Despite a legacy of global solidarity following similar events in 2008 (Mumbai attacks), 2016 (Uri), and 2019 (Pulwama), **the international response to India's recent strikes was relatively muted**.
 - While condolences for the Pahalgam attack were abundant, **India did not receive the same breadth of unequivocal endorsement**, particularly from neighbouring South Asian states.
 - In contrast, **Pakistan garnered support from countries like China, Türkiye, Malaysia**, and organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).
 - **This asymmetry is perceived as a diplomatic failure to galvanise regional and global consensus against terrorism**, especially in light of India's past successes.
- **Diplomatic Gains for Pakistan**
 - **Pakistan's ability to manipulate multilateral forums**, even as a country widely known to support terrorist proxies, **underscores New Delhi's frustration**.
 - In April, **Islamabad successfully altered the UNSC resolution** on the Pahalgam attack **to remove references to The Resistance Front (TRF)**.
 - More **symbolic victories followed: Pakistan secured leadership roles in key UNSC counter-terror bodies**, accessed international loans despite Indian objections, and maintained engagement with the U.S., exemplified by the White House hosting General Asim Munir.
 - These **developments not only signify Pakistan's persistent diplomatic resilience but also raise questions** about the traction of India's global narrative.
- **The United States' Hyphenated Narrative**
 - Perhaps **most disconcerting for India** has been the **repeated equivalence drawn between India and Pakistan by U.S. President Donald Trump**.

- His **statements have suggested a moral parity between the two nations**, offering unsolicited mediation on Kashmir and avoiding strong condemnations of terrorism.
- **Such remarks, even in the wake of ceasefire negotiations** and in close proximity to engagements with both Modi and Munir, **reveal a fundamental dissonance in strategic alignment between New Delhi and Washington.**

The Problem of the Message, Not the Messenger

- As the Shakespearean messenger in Antony and Cleopatra asserted, “I that do bring the news made not the match.”
- Likewise, **Indian diplomats can only convey what the government chooses to communicate.**
- In this light, **criticism must also be directed at the content and tone of India’s post-Sindoor messaging.**
- **Modi’s New Normal Doctrine**
 - The government’s evolving military doctrine, **articulated as a New Normal**, has alarmed some international observers. This doctrine comprises three key assertions:
 - **Terror equals war:** This formulation **lowers the threshold for military retaliation**, transferring control over escalation to individual terror actors.
 - **Rejection of nuclear blackmail:** While asserting strategic autonomy, it **introduces a rhetoric of nuclear brinkmanship** into the subcontinent’s discourse.
 - **No distinction between state and non-state actors:** This **blurs conventional boundaries in conflict**, suggesting that future attacks may provoke disproportionate responses.
 - While these positions may signal strength domestically, **they risk being interpreted internationally as destabilising postures**, particularly in a geopolitical climate already sensitive to territorial aggression.
- **Shifting Global Attitudes Post-2020**
 - **Recent global events, from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to Israel’s war in Gaza, have led to increased scrutiny of military responses** justified under the banner of counter-terrorism or self-defence.
 - **India’s failure to condemn Russia’s actions**, increased oil trade with Moscow, and silence on Gaza **have caused reputational shifts, particularly in Europe and the Global South.**
 - As a result, India’s appeals for support in its conflict with Pakistan appear to some as **selectively consistent**, undermining its moral credibility.

Image, Democracy, and the Credibility Gap

- Beyond policy and rhetoric, **India’s image under the Modi government has also undergone transformation**, posing challenges for diplomatic engagement.
- International concerns regarding **India’s democratic backsliding** have grown louder.
- **Controversial legislative changes** like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the abrogation of Article 370, internet blackouts, arrests of dissenters, and credible allegations of extraterritorial killings linked to Indian

agents have **all contributed to a narrative of shrinking democratic space.**

- During their Operation Sindoor outreach, **Indian diplomats were forced to address not just terrorism, but also human rights and civil liberties.**
- **Such issues undercut India's key comparative advantage over Pakistan:** its status as the world's largest democracy, with a pluralistic, secular ethos.
- **When India appears to blur that distinction, its diplomatic leverage weakens** correspondingly.

The Way Forward: Reimagining India's Diplomatic Playbook

- To restore its diplomatic edge, **New Delhi must rethink the substance and tone of its communication.**
- This means **reinforcing its image as a democratic, stable, and constructive global actor.**
- It means **balancing strategic autonomy with principled diplomacy.**
- And it means remembering that **in the arena of international relations, power without perception is often power squandered.**

Conclusion:

- **India's right to defend itself from cross-border terrorism is indisputable**, and its frustration at international equivocation is understandable.
- However, **effective diplomacy requires more than strategic assertion**, it demands narrative clarity, moral consistency, and alignment with global values.
- The **current criticisms do not reflect failures of India's diplomats** per se, but of **a broader misalignment between India's actions, messages, and the world's expectations.**

Blame Not the Messenger in India's Diplomacy FAQs

Q1. What event triggered the recent diplomatic tensions for India?

Ans. The diplomatic tensions were triggered by the Pahalgam terror attack and India's military response through Operation Sindoor.

Q2. Why has Indian diplomacy been criticised post-Operation Sindoor?

Ans. Indian diplomacy has been criticised for failing to secure strong international support and for allowing Pakistan to gain diplomatic advantages in global forums.

Q3. What is Modi's "New Normal" doctrine?

Ans. Modi's "New Normal" doctrine declares that any act of terror will be treated as an act of war, rejects nuclear blackmail, and states that India will no longer differentiate between state and non-state actors.

Q4. How has India's global image impacted its diplomacy?

Ans. India's global image has been affected by concerns over democratic decline, making it harder for diplomats to promote India as a rule-abiding and pluralistic democracy.

Q5. What key shift is needed in India's diplomatic strategy?

Ans. India needs to realign its diplomatic strategy by framing its global message with greater consistency, moral credibility, and adherence to democratic principles.

