

Important Straits of the World, List, Key Details

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A strait is a narrow natural water channel that connects two larger water bodies, usually seas or oceans, and is often flanked by landmasses such as continents or islands. Straits have been at the centre of human history, shaping trade, culture, and geopolitics. They are not just physical features on the map but also strategic chokepoints, economic lifelines, and zones of cultural exchange. Straits are not just geographical features but the arteries of global trade, energy, and security. From the Strait of Malacca that sustains Asian economies to the Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb that fuel the energy needs of the world, their importance is unmatched. For UPSC, mastering these straits means not only memorising their locations but also understanding their strategic, economic, and geopolitical implications. In this article, we are going to cover the important straits of the world, their formation, and its strategic importance.

What are Straits?

A strait is a naturally formed narrow passage of water that links two larger water bodies, such as seas or oceans. These water channels are often bordered by land masses on both sides and act as natural connectors in global geography. Straits are generally the result of geological processes such as tectonic shifts, erosion, or rising sea levels.

They are important for:

- Navigation and trade, as ships use them as shorter routes.
- Geopolitics, since controlling a strait gives strategic dominance.
- Cultural exchange, enabling people, ideas, and goods to flow between regions.
- Climate regulation, as they act as corridors for ocean currents.

Straits Formation

Straits are formed due to many natural processes:

- Tectonic activity: Movement of Earth's plates can create narrow openings between land masses. Example: Strait of Gibraltar formed by the African and Eurasian plates.
- Water erosion: Continuous erosion by ocean currents or rivers can shape narrow channels.
- Glacial activity: Retreating glaciers may carve out deep, narrow waterways later filled with seawater.
- Sea level rise: Historical rise in sea levels submerged low-lying land strips, leaving behind narrow water channels.

Thus, straits are both geological marvels and strategic connectors.

Important Straits of the World

To understand their importance, let's explore the most well-known straits all over the world. These straits not only link continents but also act as strategic arteries of global commerce. The list of important straits in the world includes:

Bering Strait

- Connects the Bering Sea (Pacific Ocean) with the Chukchi Sea (Arctic Ocean).
- Lies between Russia (Asia) and USA (North America).
- Narrowest width: 85 km between Cape Dezhnev (Russia) and Cape Prince of Wales (USA).
- Contains Diomed Islands- Big Diomed (Russia) and Little Diomed (USA) separated by the International Date Line.
- It is geographically important as it marks the maritime boundary between two superpowers.

Dardanelles Strait

- Also called Hellespont, connects the Aegean Sea with the Sea of Marmara, and further via Bosphorus to the Black Sea.
- Located in northwestern Turkey; approx. 61 km long, narrowest width 1.2 km.
- Historically defended Byzantium and Ottoman Empires.
- Played a decisive role in the World War I Gallipoli Campaign.
- Under the Montreux Convention, Turkey controls military passage.

Taiwan Strait (Formosa Strait)

- Separates Taiwan and mainland China.
- Connects the East China Sea with the South China Sea.
- A major hotspot for US-China geopolitical rivalry.

Strait of Tartary

- Between Russia's Sakhalin Island and mainland Asia.
- Links the Sea of Japan with the Gulf of Tartary.
- Supports regional shipping and fisheries.

Yucatán Strait

- Lies between Mexico and Cuba.
- Connects the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.
- A vital shipping lane for oil and trade entering the Gulf.

Strait of Messina

- Separates Italy and Sicily.
- Joins the Tyrrhenian Sea with the Ionian Sea.
- Known for strong tidal currents and whirlpools.

Otranto Strait

- Lies between Italy and Albania.
- Connects the Adriatic Sea with the Ionian Sea.
- A vital link between western and eastern Mediterranean.

Cook Strait

- Separates North and South Islands of New Zealand.
- Connects the Tasman Sea with the South Pacific Ocean.
- One of the world's most dangerous waterways due to unpredictable currents.

Hudson Strait

- Located in Canada, between Baffin Island and Labrador.
- Connects the Atlantic Ocean with Hudson Bay.
- Historically vital for Arctic exploration and shipping.

Mozambique Channel

- Between Mozambique and Madagascar.

- Part of the Indian Ocean.
- Significant for oil routes and rich fishing grounds.

Strait of Hormuz

- Between Iran and Oman.
- Connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman.
- Carries over 25% of global seaborne oil trade.
- A critical chokepoint often in global headlines.

Bab-el-Mandeb Strait

- Between Yemen and Djibouti/Eritrea.
- Connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden.
- Gateway to the Suez Canal; handles nearly 12% of global trade.

Ten Degree Channel

- Lies between the Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands (India).
- Connects the Andaman Sea with the Bay of Bengal.
- Strategically important for India's maritime security.

Sunda Strait

- Between Java and Sumatra (Indonesia).
- Connects the Indian Ocean with the Java Sea.
- Important shipping route for Indo-Pacific trade.

Strait of Gibraltar

- Separates Spain (Europe) and Morocco (Africa).
- Connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea.
- Only natural entrance/exit to the Mediterranean.

Strait of Malacca

- Lies between Malaysia and Indonesia (Sumatra).
- Connects the Andaman Sea with the South China Sea.
- One of the busiest maritime routes, carrying ~25% of global trade.

Palk Strait

- Between India and Sri Lanka.
- Connects the Bay of Bengal with the Palk Bay.
- Historically and culturally significant for Indo-Sri Lankan ties.

Bosporus Strait

- In Turkey it divides Europe and Asia.
- Connects the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara.
- Along with Dardanelles, it forms the Turkish Straits – critical to NATO and Russia.

Bass Strait

- Between Australia and Tasmania.
- Connects the Tasman Sea with the Southern Ocean.

Davis Strait

- Between Greenland and Canada.
- Connects the Labrador Sea with Baffin Bay.
- Crucial for Arctic navigation.

Strategic Importance of Straits of the World

Straits have historically influenced trade routes, naval wars, colonisation, and diplomacy. Their strategic importance today includes:

- Global trade arteries that control 90% of world trade. It is seaborne, much of it through straits.
- Energy transport: Chokepoints like Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-el-Mandeb handle most global oil & LNG flows.
- Military bases: Nations secure straits to project power.
- Climate role: They regulate ocean circulation.
- Cultural crossroads: Straits like Gibraltar have long been points of cultural interaction.

Important Strait Points of Global Trade

1. Strait of Hormuz: Manages 25% of oil trade, 20% of LNG.
2. Bab-el-Mandeb: It is the Gateway to the Suez Canal, ~12% of trade.
3. Strait of Malacca : ~25% of world's shipping trade.
4. Turkish Straits (Bosporus + Dardanelles): Critical for Black Sea nations.

Difference between a Gulf and a Strait

The differences in between a gulf and a strait includes:

Aspect	Gulf	Strait
Definition	Large body of water partly surrounded by land	Narrow passage of water connecting larger water bodies

Size	Generally larger and wider	Narrower and elongated
Examples	Gulf of Mexico, Persian Gulf	Malacca, Hormuz, Gibraltar
Formation	Flooding of river valleys, tectonic activity	Erosion, tectonic shifts, sea-level rise
Significance	Harbours, fishing, tourism	Trade routes, naval strategy

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