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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Guarding the Narrows: India and the Bab el-Mandeb Chokepoint

THE HINDU

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Guarding the Narrows: India and the Bab el-Mandeb Chokepoint

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A strait barely twenty miles wide can decide the price of oil in a landlocked district of India. The Bab el-Mandeb is that strait, and India can no longer treat its security as someone else's problem.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

When Houthi attacks on merchant shipping forced vessels to abandon the Red Sea and sail the long way around Africa, freight rates and insurance premiums spiked and delivery times lengthened across Asia and Europe. For India, a major energy importer and trading nation whose western trade leans on the Suez route, this is a direct economic and strategic exposure. The story sits at the junction of diplomacy and hard security.

GS Paper 2: India's foreign policy in West Asia, freedom of navigation, and its identity as a responsible regional actor. **GS Paper 3:** maritime security, protection of **Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC)**, and the navy's role as a **net security provider**. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **Bab el-Mandeb** ("Gate of Grief") connects the **Red Sea** to the **Gulf of Aden** and onward to the Arabian Sea, and is the southern gateway to the **Suez Canal** route; the alternative is the far longer **Cape of Good Hope** route around Africa; India's naval anti-piracy and escort effort in the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea is **Operation Sankalp**; the **Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)** is a multinational maritime partnership based in Bahrain; **SAGAR** stands for **Security and Growth for All in the Region**; and the **Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** at Gurugram is India's maritime-domain-awareness hub. For **Mains**, the argument is that India should be proactive but **calibrated** in SLOC protection and maritime-domain awareness.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Roughly a large share of world trade, and a very high share of seaborne oil, passes through a handful of maritime **chokepoints**: the **Strait of Hormuz**, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, the Malacca Strait. Chokepoints concentrate risk: block one and global supply chains buckle. The Bab el-Mandeb is the throat of the Red Sea corridor that carries Gulf and Asian goods to Europe through Suez.

When attacks made this passage unsafe, shippers rerouted around the **Cape of Good Hope**, adding thousands of nautical miles, extra fuel, more days at sea and higher war-risk insurance. Those costs pass through to importers and consumers. For India, whose crude and goods trade with Europe and the Mediterranean depends on this artery, the disruption is not distant news, it is an input-cost shock.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

India's stake is structural, not occasional

India imports the bulk of its crude oil and moves a large volume of trade through West Asian waters. A prolonged closure of the Red Sea corridor lengthens supply chains, widens the current account pressure through costlier freight and insurance, and can feed imported inflation. This is why maritime security is now an economic-security question for India, not merely a naval one.

India as a net security provider

India has steadily built the posture of a **net security provider** in the Indian Ocean Region: anti-piracy patrols since 2008, escort of merchant vessels, humanitarian and disaster relief, and rapid response to distress calls. **Operation Sankalp**, launched to protect Indian-flagged and other shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, extended that role during the current crisis, with warships responding to hijacking and drone-and-missile incidents. India acts to keep sea lanes open and to protect seafarers and cargo, consistent with its stand as a responsible maritime power upholding freedom of navigation under international law.

The instruments India can lean on

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT DOES
Operation Sankalp	Naval presence and escort in Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea
IFC-IOR, Gurugram	Real-time maritime-domain awareness and information sharing
SAGAR vision	Cooperative security and growth framework for the region
Combined Maritime Forces	Multinational patrols India can coordinate with, selectively
Bilateral partnerships	Coordination with regional and Indian Ocean littoral states

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Weigh three axes. **Dependence:** how exposed is India's energy and trade to this **chokepoint**? Very.

Capacity: can the Indian Navy sustain presence there? Increasingly, yes. **Calibration:** should India embed in every coalition or preserve strategic autonomy? The answer is proactive protection of SLOCs and seafarers,

coordination with partners where interests align, but avoidance of entanglement in the region's political conflicts. The goal is open sea lanes, not chosen sides.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Bab el-Mandeb secure -> Suez route open -> shorter, cheaper shipping -> stable import costs versus Bab el-Mandeb disrupted -> reroute via Cape of Good Hope -> higher freight and insurance -> imported inflation -> India deploys Operation Sankalp + IFC-IOR awareness

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Sustain calibrated naval presence.** Keep Operation Sankalp deployments protecting merchant traffic and seafarers, signalling reliability without political entanglement in West Asia's conflicts.
- ❷ **Deepen maritime-domain awareness.** Strengthen the IFC-IOR's information-sharing links so threats to shipping are detected early and shared with partner navies.
- ❸ **Coordinate, do not enlist blindly.** Work selectively with the Combined Maritime Forces and Indian Ocean littoral states under the SAGAR vision, preserving strategic autonomy.
- ❹ **Build resilience at home.** Diversify shipping routes, insurance and energy sourcing so a single chokepoint cannot dictate India's import bill.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This connects to UPSC's questions on the Indian Ocean as a strategic space, on India as a net security provider, and on the importance of chokepoints and freedom of navigation. The topical hook, the Red Sea disruption, is exactly the kind of current anchor examiners reward when tied to durable concepts like SLOC and SAGAR.

Practice question: "Securing sea lines of communication through West Asian chokepoints is now central to India's economic security." Examine, with reference to the Bab el-Mandeb disruption and India's response. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Hindu editorial page, Indian Navy on Operation Sankalp, Ministry of External Affairs on SAGAR, Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region

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