India and Northern Sea Route

Why in news?

Murmansk, the beginning point of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), is witnessing the rising trend of Indian involvement in cargo traffic.

What is Northern Sea Route?

- It is the shortest shipping route for freight transportation between Europe and countries of the Asia-Pacific region, straddles four seas of the Arctic Ocean.
- **Coverage-** It runs around 5,600 km, the Route begins at the boundary between the Barents and the Kara seas (Kara Strait) and ends in the Bering Strait (Provideniya Bay).
- **Save distance**- Distance savings along the NSR can be as high as 50% compared to the currently used shipping lanes via Suez or Panama.
- The traditional Suez Canal route is 8000 km longer than Northern Sea passage.
- **2021 blockage**- The 2021 blockage of the Suez Canal, which forms part of the widely-used maritime route involving Europe and Asia, has led to greater attention on the NSR.
- **Navigability**- Arctic Ocean remain icebound during most of the year, the icebreaking assistance is organised to ensure safe navigation along the NSR.

What are the advantages of Northern Sea Route?

- **Profitable**-It is a strategically important *transport artery*; it is economically profitable when comapared with Suez Canal.
- **Save fuel-** It will save fuel due to reduced distance.
- **Cost effective-** The shorter distance reduces the cost of staff labor and chartering vessels.
- The route does not charge payments for the passage unlike Suez Canal.
- **Time saving-**There are no queues (unlike, for example, the Suez Canal);
- **Safety**- There is no risk of a pirate attack.

Why Arctic region is so significant for India?

- **Impact on India-**The vulnerability of the Arctic region leads to unprecedented changes in the climate.
- This may have an impact on India in terms of economic security, water security and sustainability.

Arctic region is the region, which is above the Arctic Circle and includes the Arctic Ocean with the North Pole at its centre.

- **Svalbard Treaty-** India's engagement with the Arctic can be traced to the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1920.
- **Conduct studies**: Indian conducts studies regarding atmospheric, biological, marine, hydrological, glaciological events.
- **Arctic Council-** Arctic Council addresses the issues faced by governments in the region and the indigenous people of the Arctic.
- India is an *observer state* in Arctic Council including China.
- **Himadri research station**- India's first permanent Arctic research station located at Spitsbergen, Svalbard, Norway.
- It is located at the International Arctic Research base, Ny-Alesund.
- **Infrastructural base-**
    1. Multi-sensor moored observatory was inaugurated in 2014
    2. Northernmost atmospheric lab was launched in 2016
- **Successful expeditions**- India conducted around 13 successful expeditions to Arctic till 2022.

- **Arctic Policy of 2022-** It mentions that the country's approach to economic development of the region is guided by UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Potential for minerals**- The region constitutes the largest unexplored prospective area for hydrocarbons remaining on the earth.
- There may be significant reserves of coal, zinc, and silver.
- **Institutional support**- In 2018 India renamed National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research to National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research.
- It shows India's refocusing priorities in Arctic region.

What are the driving factors for India to participate in the NSR development?

- **Growth in cargo traffic-** India engagement in NSR is on the constant rise and during 2018-2022, the growth rate was around 73%.
- Last year, the volume of cargo traffic was 34.117 million tonnes.
- **India-Russia trade-** India increasingly imports crude oil and coal from Russia in recent years.
- The record supplies of energy resources for the Indian economy are possible due to such a reliable and safe transport artery as the NSR.
- **Transit route-** NSR assumes importance, given India's geographical position and the major share of its trade associated with sea transportation.
- **East meets East**- In 2019 India and Russia signed Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor (CVMC) project.
- It is signed as one linking with another organise international container transit through the NSR.
- **Reduce travel time**-The 10,500 km-long CVMC, passing through the Sea of Japan, the South China Sea and Malacca Strait, will bring down transport time to 12 days.
- This is almost a third of what is taken under the existing St. Petersburg-Mumbai route of 16,000 km.

- **Chennai Port Trust study-** Fuel and fertilisers are some of the cargo that can be imported from Russia to India through CVMC.

What lies ahead?

- **NSR development plan-** It is approved until 2035 by Russia, this sets the cargo traffic target as 80 million tonnes and 150 million tonnes for 2024 and 2030.
- The plan approval took place amid economic sanctions imposed by the West against Russia following the latter's war with Ukraine.
- **Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor project-** Workshop featuring stakeholders from the two countries, is expected to be held in the second half of October.

References

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