Suez Canal Blockage

Why in news?

The Suez Canal has been blocked after a large cargo ship ran aground while passing through it, bringing traffic on the busy trade route to a halt.

Why is Suez Canal significant?

- Suez Canal is a critical shipping artery that connects the Mediterranean and Red Seas through Egypt.
- It carries over 12% of world trade by volume.
- A human-made waterway, the Suez Canal is one of the world's most heavily used shipping lanes.
- Built in 1869, it provides a major shortcut for ships moving between Europe and Asia.
- Before its construction, these ships had to sail around Africa to complete the same journey.

Why is the Suez Canal blocked now?

- The vessel blocking Suez is the Ever Given, a Panama-registered container ship.
- It was on its way to Rotterdam in the Netherlands from China.
- The 2018-built vessel, which is 400-m long and 59-m wide, got stuck here due to a mishap caused by bad weather.
- It was passing northwards through the Suez Canal in order to enter the Mediterranean Sea.
- The ship weighing 2 lakh tonnes ran aground and got stuck sideways across the canal.
- It is suspected of being hit by a sudden strong wind, causing the hull to deviate and accidentally hit the bottom and run aground.
- It is thus blocking the path of other ships waiting to cross through on both sides.
- None of the crew members was injured.
- The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) is now trying to refloat the Ever Given using rescue and tug units.
- Diggers are also trying to free the ship from the canal's bank, where it is lodged.

What are the implications?

- The Ever Given is the largest vessel to go aground in the Suez Canal.
- Incidents such as this are rare, but can have massive ramifications for global trade when they happen.
- The effort to remove the ship and make the canal fully functional again could take several days.
- The alternative route between Europe and Asia around Africa is a week slower than the Suez route.
- So, a daylong blockage could have a severe impact on global trade.
- Any such delay could also lead to a shortage of container vessels and boxes.
- This is because 30% of all container ships in the world pass through the Suez.
- As per SCA data, in 2020, nearly 19,000 ships, or an average of 51.5 ships per day, with a net tonnage of 1.17 billion tonnes passed through the canal.

How significant the canal is to Egypt?

- The 150-year-old canal was controlled by British and French interests in its initial years.
- But, it was nationalised in 1956 by Egypt's then leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.
- Over the years, the canal has been widened and deepened.
- In 2015, Egypt announced plans to further expand the Suez Canal.
- This was aimed to reduce the waiting times and double the number of ships that can use the canal daily by 2023.
- Egypt heavily depends on revenues from the canal.
- After the blockage, it is diverting the ships to an older channel to minimise disruption to global trade.
- The blockage has already led to a long queue of vessels waiting to cross the canal.

Source: The Indian Express

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