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1. Mount Etna and volcanic vortex rings



Introduction

Since last week, Mount Etna, the largest volcano in Europe, and among the world's most active and iconic volcanoes, has been sending up almost perfect rings of smoke into the air. The rings are a rare phenomenon that scientists refer to as volcanic vortex rings, which are produced roughly in the same way as the smoke rings that some cigarette smokers are able to blow out of their mouths.

But first, the setting — what and where is Mount Etna?

Mount Etna, sometimes referred to simply as Etna, is an active volcano on the east coast of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, lying just off the toe of the Italian "boot". Etna's peak is the highest in Italy south of the Alps, and it is Europe's largest and one of the most active volcanoes.

Etna's summit has five craters, which are responsible for most of the volcano's eruptions; there are also "flank" eruptions that occur out of 300-odd vents of varying sizes along the slopes of the mountain.

Etna has been a World Heritage Site since 2013, and according to UNESCO, the volcano's eruptive history can be traced back 500,000 years.

And what are volcanic vortex rings?

Vortex rings are generated when gas, predominantly water vapour, is released rapidly through a vent in the crater. The vent that has opened up in Etna's crater is almost perfectly circular, so the rings that have been seen above the mountain are also circular.

Relevance: GS Prelims

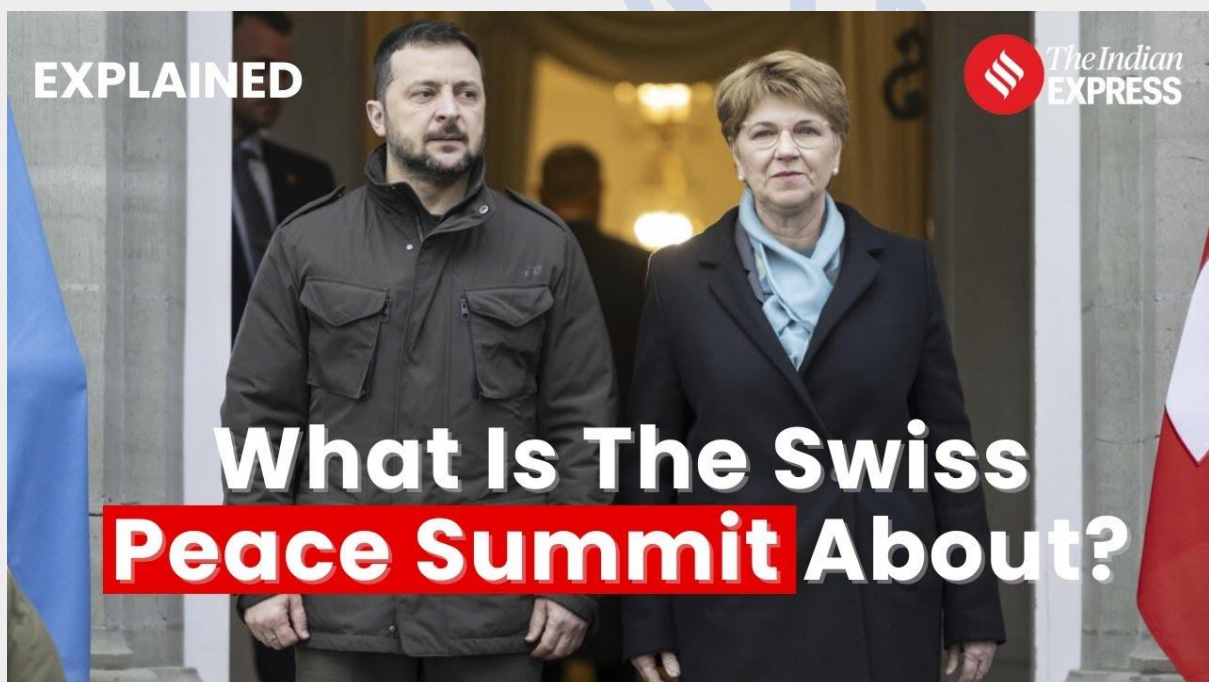
Source: Indian Express

2. Switzerland's peace bid amid Russia-Ukraine war

Why in News?

With the Russia-Ukraine war in its third year, Switzerland will host a peace conference at Bürgenstock on June 15-16, immediately after the June 13-15 G7 Summit in Italy.

Switzerland wants India to participate in the conference, to which some 120 countries will be invited at the level of Heads of State/ Government. It remains to be seen whether US President Joe Biden will be able to take time out in the middle of his re-election campaign, or whether Russia's President Vladimir Putin and China's President Xi Jinping, who have announced a "friendship without limits", will attend.



Background of conference

Switzerland has taken the initiative at the request of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The idea is to "provide a platform for a high-level dialogue on ways to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace for Ukraine based on international law and the UN Charter," the Swiss government said.

Switzerland had earlier hosted a Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) at Lugano in July 2022, and a National Security Advisors Meeting in Davos at the beginning of this year.

Swiss history of mediation

Neutrality is a foundational principle of Switzerland's foreign policy. It has had a tradition of being the protecting power since the 19th century. It acted as the protecting power during the two World Wars, and held nearly 200 protective power mandates during World War II.

Switzerland represented India's interests in Pakistan and Pakistan's in India between 1971 and 1976. Over the last two decades, Switzerland has been the protecting power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the US and Iran, Russia and Georgia, and other pairs of mutually hostile governments.

The country also has a history of hosting negotiations or mediating in conflicts. It hosted talks between the government in Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2006, and took initiatives for peace in Nepal, and the Middle East.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, however, Switzerland has leaned towards Ukraine, and has joined the Western sanctions regime against Russia.

India's position

Since the outbreak of the war in February 2022, India has walked a diplomatic tightrope between Russia and Ukraine. It did not explicitly condemn the invasion, but it did call for an international probe into the Bucha massacre and expressed concern over nuclear threats issued by Russian leaders. India abstained from voting against Russia in several resolutions at the UN Security Council.

In September 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Putin that "this is not the era of war" — a formulation that found an echo at the G20 Summit statement in Bali in November 2022. At the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, India was able to forge a consensus, and get a joint declaration to which both the US-led West and Russia, backed by China, agreed.

Modi has had at least five phone conversations with Putin and at least four with Zelenskyy since the beginning of the war. He has also met both leaders in person on the sidelines of multilateral summits.

During their telephone conversation last month, the Ukrainian President thanked India for its support for his country's sovereignty, and said it would be important for Kyiv to see New Delhi attend the peace conference in Switzerland.

The Indian government has pitched itself as being supportive of any peace process, and is willing to play a role. New Delhi believes that it has the credibility of being a non-partisan player in the world.

"From the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, India has been emphasising on dialogue and diplomacy. India is ready to contribute to any peace process," Modi has said.

For New Delhi, which aspires to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the conference presents an opportunity to shape the conversation at the global high table. It has positioned itself as a voice of the Global South, and had conveyed the impact of the war on

the world's developing and less-developed countries to the world's major economies during last year's G20 summit.

The G7 Summit and the Switzerland conference will be held days after the results of the Lok Sabha elections are known on June 4.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

3. What is the 'axis of resistance'

Why in News?

US President Joe Biden on Friday said he expected Iran to attack Israel "sooner than later" — a move in retaliation for the strike, widely believed to be carried out by Israel, on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Syria, which took place almost two weeks ago, killing seven Iranian military officers.

The breakout of a state-against-state war between Iran and Israel would further escalate the ongoing conflict in the Middle West, which began after Hamas, a Palestinian militant group, attacked Israel on October 7, 2023.

Sources told that the retaliation could include attacks carried out both by Iranian forces, and proxy groups around the region. These proxy groups include Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. Together, they call themselves the "axis of resistance". Notably, the Syrian government is also part of the coalition.

The name

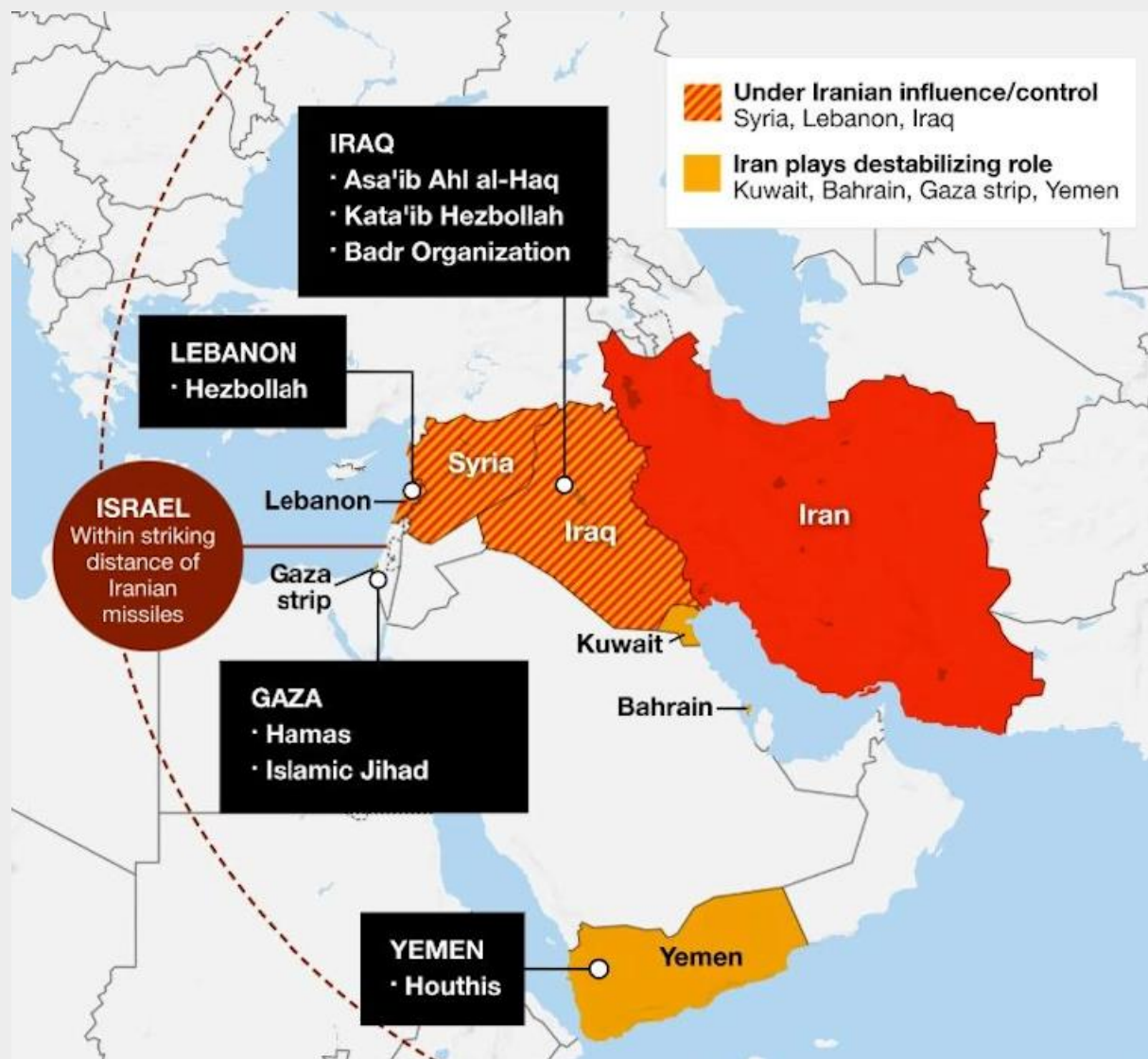
The Axis of Resistance (Persian: Mehvar-e Moqāvemāt; Arabic: Miḥwar al-Muqāwamah) is an informal Iranian-led political and military coalition in West Asia and North Africa. It most notably includes the Syrian government, the Lebanese political party and militant group Hezbollah, the Yemeni political and military organization Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement), and a variety of Palestinian militant groups.

Despite the alliance members' differing ideologies, they are all unified by their declared objectives of opposing the regional influence of the Western countries; Israel; the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf; and, specifically in the case of the Shia–Sunni divide, certain Sunni Islamists who are perceived as posing a threat to the Iranian ideology of Shia Islamism.

The growing political and military influence of the Iranian government throughout the region has played a role in fuelling a number of wars throughout the Arab world, particularly in the context of the Iran–Israel proxy conflict and the Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict, and has thus been cited as one of the main factors driving Arab–Israeli normalization; the equally informal Arab–Israeli alliance emerged between Israel and a number of Arab countries around 2019 in order to address their concerns regarding security threats from Iran or Iranian proxies.

Reach

Ali Khamenei, who has served as the Supreme Leader of Iran since 1989, has repeatedly defined the Islamic Republic government as a "resistance government" (i.e., against Western and Israeli influence). Though the Axis of Resistance operates primarily in the Middle East, the Iranian government has attempted to export the alliance's ideology at a global level; Iran and Iran-aligned proxies have attacked Jewish, Israeli, and American organizations abroad. During a meeting with Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel in December 2023, Khamenei formally called on the people of Cuba to form a similar coalition against the "bullying" of the United States and other Western countries.



Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations
Source: Indian Express and Others