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1. India's stakes in Iran-Israel conflict — and why it does not want tensions to escalate

Why in News?

Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel with drones and missile which caused immediate concern in New Delhi. The Ministry of External Affairs quickly issued a statement expressing India's "serious concern" at the escalation of hostilities, and called for "immediate de-escalation".

The Ministry of External Affairs is closely monitoring the evolving situation and the Indian embassies in the region are in close touch with the Indian community.



An escalation had been expected.

As the war clouds hovered over West Asia, New Delhi advised Indians to not travel to Iran and Israel till further notice, "in view of the prevailing situation in the region". "All those who are currently residing in Iran or Israel are requested to get in touch with Indian Embassies there and register themselves," the MEA advisory said.

From 2020 to 2024, there is a pattern to Iranian retaliation.

The Iranian attack was in response to the suspected Israeli strike on April 1 on an Iranian consular building in Syria's Damascus that killed 12 people, including a senior general. It

follows a playbook from four years ago. American intelligence officials had warned on April 12 that Iran could carry out reprisal attacks in the next 48 hours.

In January 2020, when former Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani was killed, Tehran responded days later by firing ballistic missiles at US forces stationed at al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq.

At that time, Iran had attacked two bases in Iraq that housed American troops with a barrage of missiles, fulfilling Tehran's promise to retaliate for the killing of the top Iranian commander.

Cut to April 2024. Iran fired scores of drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles — with the vast majority intercepted outside Israel's borders. He said warplanes intercepted over 10 cruise missiles alone, also outside Israeli airspace.

However, handful of missiles landed in Israel. Rescuers said a 7-year-old girl in a Bedouin Arab town was seriously wounded in southern Israel, apparently in a missile strike. A missile struck an army base, causing light damage but no injuries.

The Iran attacks have the potential to push India to a difficult spot. Here's why.

A potential response by Israel threatens to escalate the situation and expand the conflict. This is a big worry for New Delhi, which has already flagged the possible expansion of the conflict. India has strategic ties with both Iran and Israel — and for decades, it has been able to balance between the two sides. But if the conflict widens, it would be difficult for it to maintain an ambivalent position.

India has a very deep strategic relationship with Israel, especially in the context of defence and security partnership. In the last decade or so, it has grown and has been made public — unlike in the past. This has led to India lending support to Israel in the first few hours of the October 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas.

The two sides have strong concerns about extremism and terrorism, as both have suffered during the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks. Israel has also emerged as a major defence supplier, along with the US, France and Russia, and New Delhi remembers that it has stepped up to help during times of crisis, including the Kargil war in 1999.

At the same time, India has managed to maintain a strategic relationship with Iran, as Tehran has been one of the major suppliers of crude — which has suffered setbacks due to sanctions. Besides, both countries have shared concerns on terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The two countries have similar concerns on Taliban's treatment of minorities and the lack of an inclusive and representative government in Kabul.

Chabahar is another strategic economic project, which acts as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia — since Pakistan denies land transit to Indian goods.

In the context of such deep ties with both Israel and Iran, New Delhi has difficulty in choosing sides.

There have been a few difficult moments in the past too.

The Israel-Iran tension has spilt over to India a few times — much to New Delhi's discomfiture. The one major case was the February 2012 attack on an Israeli diplomat's wife in New Delhi, and it was alleged that Tehran was behind the attack.

In recent years, there have been diplomatic verbal face-offs between the Israeli ambassador and the Iranian embassy in Delhi. In 2021, after Israel envoy Naor Gilon called Iran "the biggest destabilizer" in the Middle East, the Iranian embassy in New Delhi called Gilon's comments "the childish remarks" of an "evil-minded Zionist envoy," and Israel a "terror house" and a "selfish and bloodthirsty regime."

New Delhi has always asked the two sides to calm down and maintain restraint in a "friendly third country".

An escalation between the two countries has direct and tangible consequences for India.

For New Delhi, a potential escalation as a result of the tension means an impact on mainly three accounts: its people, its economic interests and strategic needs.

Firstly, while there are about 18,000 Indians in Israel and about 5,000-10,000 Indians in Iran, about 90 lakh people are living and working in the Gulf and West Asia region. Any conflict that expands will end up posing a risk to the Indian community that is based in the region.

Secondly, India's economic interests are tied to energy security — the West Asia region contributes to India's 80 per cent of oil supplies, which a potential conflict will impact. India has been able to minimise the impact of oil prices due to the Russia-Ukraine war by buying Russian oil at discounted prices, but this conflict will have an adverse impact on energy prices.

Thirdly, India has invested in a strategic relationship with major Arab countries, Iran, and Israel. New Delhi sees the region as its extended neighbourhood, and it has been working with all sides in the turbulent region to push for the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic corridor, which has strategic as well as economic benefits for Delhi. A conflict has the potential to unravel the consensus that has been built around the peace in the otherwise combustible region.

India's position that there should be "immediate de-escalation" and "step back from violence" and "return to the path of diplomacy" is, therefore, crucial to its national interest.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

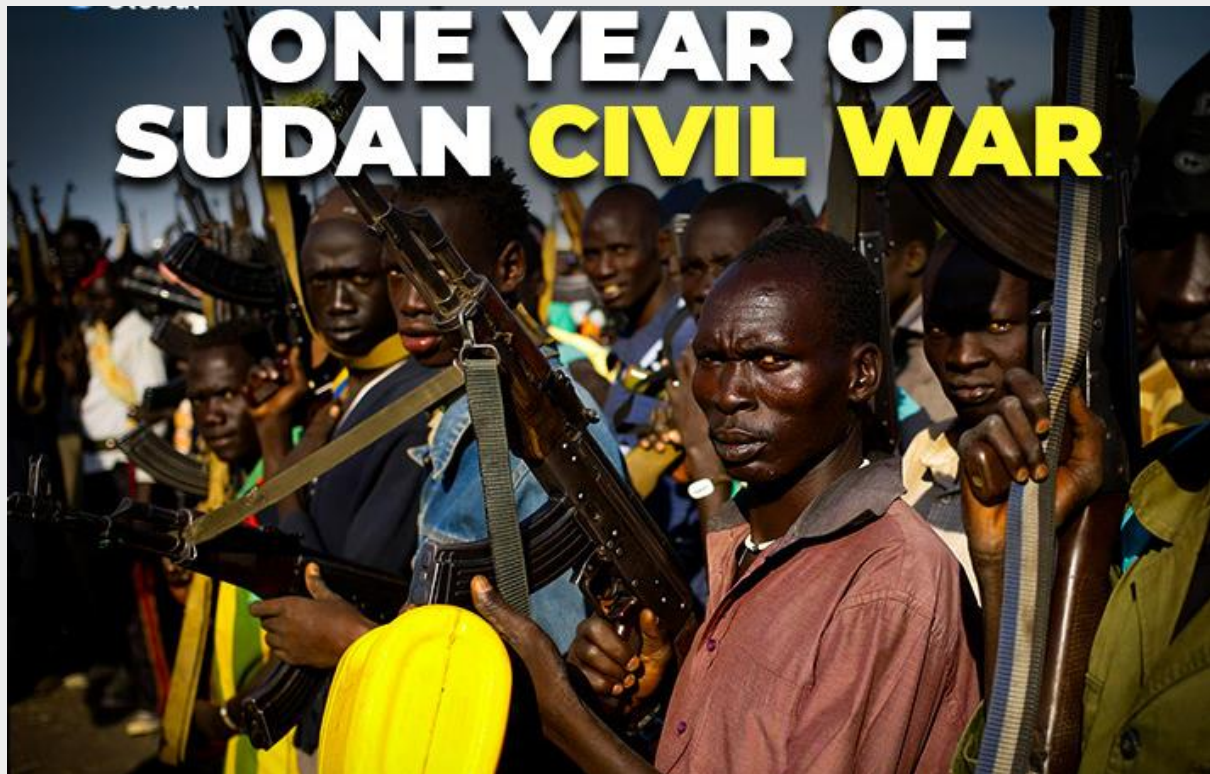
Source: Indian Express

2. A year after fighting broke out in Sudan, what is the state of the conflict?

Why in News?

Sudan has faced conflict for a year now. Just a few years ago, Sudan seemed on the precipice of peace and change, after the three decades-long regime of dictator Omar al-Bashir was ousted from power.

However, fighting broke out in the country last year among rival groups who are vying for power. Recently the Indian Embassy in capital Khartoum issued a notice to Indians to take "utmost precautions." Several Indian workers, particularly from the Hakki Pikki tribal community from Karnataka, are in Sudan. Today, Sudan is close to a famine and around 25 million – half the total population – are in need of assistance.



Why is Sudan at war?

Sudan is seeing violence and fighting among groups amid an attempt to transition its polity from an autocracy.

In 2019, military generals ousted Omar al-Bashir amid a popular uprising. People within the country and major powers were critical of his rule on account of corruption, rising costs of living towards the late 2010s, and repression of social groups.

Between the years 1992-1996, Sudan also played host to Osama Bin Laden who had heavily invested in the country's infrastructure at the time. The US then declared Sudan as a "state sponsor of terrorism" in 1993 and the United Nations imposed sanctions on it the next year.

After his regime was toppled in 2019, civilian groups and the military decided to share power and an agreement to the effect was signed. Abdalla Hamdok was appointed the Prime Minister until elections were held.

However, a military coup under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), took place in 2021.

The RSF was founded by the former dictatorial ruler Omar al-Bashir as an Arab counterinsurgency militia. Bashir wanted to crush a rebellion in the region of Darfur that began more than 20 years ago due to the political and economic marginalisation of the local population.

The military coalition assured elections will take place and blamed the civilian groups for causing instability due to infighting. Critics believe that the military was reluctant to give up power to civilian leaders, having long played a role in Sudan's political and economic affairs.

In April 2023, Burhan and Dagalo's rift over the RSF's role in Sudan came to the fore.

What is the situation in Sudan now?

The army is believed to have made several advances of late, having claimed territory in Khartoum recently. Saudi Arabia and the United States led talks in Jeddah last year "to try to reach a truce between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), but the negotiations faltered amid competing international peace initiatives."

More than 14,700 people have been killed in the war, according to Amnesty International. Nearly 9 million people have been forced to flee their homes either to safer areas inside Sudan or to neighboring countries, according to the United Nations. This also poses a challenge to the larger region.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

3. Gopi Thotakura to be the first Indian space tourist: What is space tourism?

Why in News?

Entrepreneur and pilot Gopi Thotakura is set to become the first Indian to venture into space as a tourist on the NS-25 mission of Blue Origin — a company founded by Jeff Bezos, who is also the founder of Amazon.

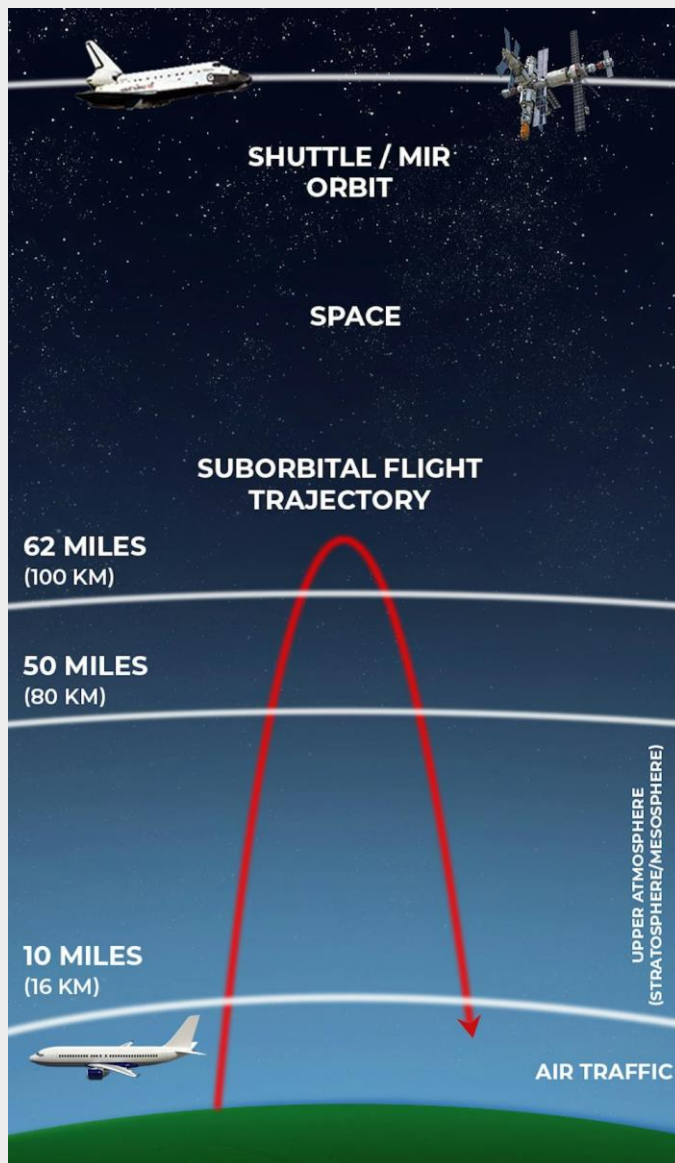
Thotakura has been selected as one of the six crew members for the mission, whose launch date is yet to be announced. If the mission is successful, Thotakura would be the second Indian to go into space. The first one was Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, who flew to the Salyut 7 space station on a Soviet spacecraft in 1984.

Who is Gopi Thotakura?

A graduate of the US-based Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Thotakura flies jets commercially. He is also a co-founder of Preserve Life Corp — a global centre for holistic wellness and applied health located near Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

What is space tourism?

Space tourism is essentially a section of the aviation sector which seeks to provide tourists with the opportunity to become astronauts and experience space travel for recreational, leisure, or business purposes.



There are two main types of space tourism, sub-orbital and orbital. The sub-orbital spacecraft takes passengers just beyond the Kármán line — it lies nearly 100 kilometres above our heads and is considered to be the boundary between Earth's atmosphere and outer space. The passengers get to spend a few minutes in outer space and then come back to Earth.

The NS-25 mission, which Thotakura is a part of, is a sub-orbital mission. Thotakura and his other crew members will be taken to outer space via New Shepard, a fully reusable sub-orbital launch vehicle developed specifically for space tourism by Blue Origin.

The orbital spacecraft, on the other hand, takes passengers much further than the Kármán line. Usually, passengers can spend from a couple of days to more than a week at an altitude of nearly 1.3 million feet.

In September 2021, Space X's Falcon 9 took four passengers to an altitude of 160 km where they spent three days orbiting the Earth.

What are the challenges?

Currently, space tourism is expensive. A passenger generally has to pay at least a million dollars to reach outer space. This amount is out of reach for almost everyone.

Moreover, several studies have pointed out that space tourism may lead to environmental damage as rockets emit gaseous and solid chemicals directly into the upper atmosphere.

A 2022 study done by researchers University College London (UCL), the University of Cambridge and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that the soot emissions from rocket launches are far more effective at warming the atmosphere compared to other sources.

Safety is also a concern when it comes to space tourism. Despite high safety standards, a total of 676 people have flown into space and 19 of them have died, as of November 2023. This means that approximately 3% of astronauts died during their space flight which is quite a high fatality rate.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

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