



11 January 2025

Unregulated mining of soapstone

Context: The mining of soapstone in Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand, has become a major issue, with the Uttarakhand High Court recently pulling up the authorities for unregulated mining practices.

About the Issue:

- The issue centers around the rampant unregulated mining of soapstone in villages within the Kanda tehsil of Bageshwar district. To stop the unregulated mining in the region, high court appointed to commission to find the causes of unregulated mining's in the region and its effects on local populations and ecology.
- The High Court-appointed commissioners submitted a report on January 6, 2025, revealing alarming findings regarding the environmental and cultural impacts of unregulated mining in the region. The report highlighted the involvement of local authorities in facilitating unregulated mining.
- It pointed out that the definitions for semi-mechanized mining are not clearly defined, yet environmental clearances are being granted to mining operations using heavy machinery.

What is the Environmental and Social Concern?

- **Environmental Concerns:** The unregulated mining operations have resulted in land subsidence, where the ground sinks due to the destabilization caused by the extraction of soapstone. The erosion and loosening of soil, especially in areas with loamy soil, make the region highly prone to landslides, particularly during the monsoon season. The lack of green belts, buffer zones, and protective structures around the mines has exacerbated soil erosion and destabilization.
- **Social Concerns:** The mining activities are affecting the daily lives of local communities. The traditional Kumaoni Bakhli houses, which were once resilient to seismic activities, are now suffering structural damage due to the shifting ground. Additionally, water scarcity and pollution have been linked to the mining operations, impacting the local population's quality of life. The land subsidence has also threatened significant cultural sites, such as the Kalika Temple, which has cracked floors due to the destabilization of the land.

About the Soapstone:

- Soapstone is a soft, metamorphic rock primarily

composed of talc, and it is widely used for construction, design, and art. In India, soapstone reserves are concentrated in Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. Soapstone is utilized in the making of countertops, sculptures, sinks, and is an important mineral in various industries like cosmetics and pharmaceuticals due to its soft and heat-resistant nature.

Uses of Soapstone:

Soapstone has a variety of uses in different sectors:

- **Construction and Design:** Soapstone is often used for countertops, sinks, and hearths due to its smooth texture and resistance to heat.
- **Art and Sculptures:** The soft and easy-to-carve nature of soapstone makes it a popular material for sculptures.
- **Industrial Uses:** Talc, derived from soapstone, is used in the manufacturing of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and in the production of rubber and paint.

Winter Storm in the US

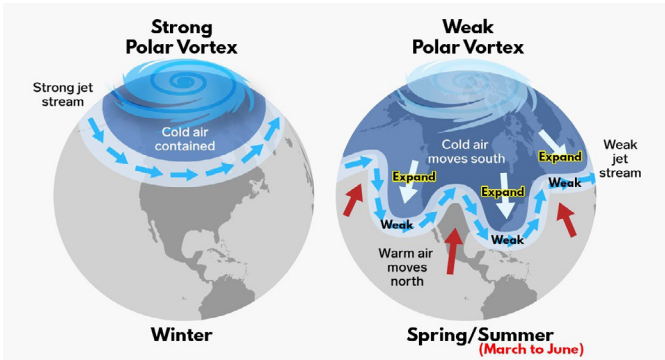
Context: A winter storm sweeping across the United States over the weekend has left at least five people dead, caused widespread school closures, hazardous road conditions, and power outages. The extreme weather is primarily driven by the expansion of the polar vortex, a powerful cold air system that has caused temperatures to plummet across large portions of the U.S.

What is the Polar Vortex?

- The polar vortex is a vast area of low pressure and cold air that typically remains over the Earth's polar regions, swirling like a wheel around the North and South Poles. There are two types of polar vortexes:
 - » **Tropospheric Polar Vortex:** This occurs at the lowest layer of the atmosphere (about 10 to 15 kilometers above the Earth's surface), where most weather phenomena occur.
 - » **Stratospheric Polar Vortex:** Located around 15 to 50 kilometers above the Earth, this vortex is strongest during autumn and disappears in summer.
- The polar vortex is a natural, recurring feature of Earth's atmosphere, but when it weakens or shifts from its usual position, it can have a significant impact on global weather patterns, particularly in the U.S., parts of Europe, and Asia.

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As the Arctic warms more rapidly, the temperature difference between the poles and lower latitudes decreases, weakening the polar vortex and making it more susceptible to disruptions.

Bijapur Maoist Attack

Context: On January 6, 2025, suspected Maoists attacked a police vehicle in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district, killing nine personnel from the District Reserve Guard (DRG). This attack mirrors the April 2023 incident in Dantewada, highlighting how lapses in standard operating procedures (SOPs) can lead to tragic consequences. Maoist group is part of Naxalite groups in India.

When does the Polar Vortex cause Extreme Cold?

- The polar vortex typically keeps cold air locked near the poles. However, when the vortex weakens or becomes unstable, cold Arctic air can escape and move southward, causing a drop in temperatures across regions that are usually warmer. This can lead to extreme winter conditions, even in areas as far south as Florida.
- Under normal circumstances, the jet stream—a fast-moving band of wind in the upper atmosphere—plays a crucial role in keeping the cold air trapped near the poles. The jet stream usually follows a circular path around the Earth, helping to maintain a balance between warm air to the south and cold air to the north.
- When the polar vortex weakens, however, the jet stream loses its stability and becomes more "wavy." This fluctuation allows high-pressure systems to push cold air southward, along with the rest of the displaced polar vortex system.
- When the polar vortex is displaced, it can lead to severe winter storms, which are characterized by freezing temperatures, snow, and ice. These storms often disrupt daily life, causing traffic accidents, power outages, and school and business closures. They can also lead to dangerous conditions for those who are exposed to the cold for extended periods, increasing the risk of hypothermia and frostbite.

Is Climate Change Impacting the Polar Vortex?

- The relationship between climate change and the behavior of the polar vortex is an area of active research. Some scientists believe that global warming, particularly in the Arctic, may be affecting the strength and stability of the polar vortex.
- In recent years, researchers have observed that the Arctic is warming at a faster rate than other parts of the world—a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification.

About SOPs in Maoist Zones:

- Operating in the jungles of central India, where Maoist guerrilla warfare tactics thrive, security forces follow strict SOPs to minimize casualties. These include:
 - » **Avoid Vehicular Movement:** Minimizing vehicle use and preferring civilian vehicles to avoid detection.
 - » **Unpredictable Movements:** Changing routes and timings to prevent being tracked by Maoists.
 - » **Cross-Country Movement:** Using foot or bike patrols to remain undetected.
 - » **Pre-emptive Measures:** Conducting Road Opening Parties (ROP) to detect IEDs.
 - » **Local Intelligence and UAVs:** Utilizing local informants and aerial surveillance to track Maoist activity.

How Maoists Prepare for Attacks:

- Maoists use their deep understanding of the terrain and local networks to plant IEDs, often months in advance. In the Bijapur attack, the Maoists had prior knowledge of the convoy's movement and had planted the IED earlier, despite an ROP being conducted.

About Naxalism in India:

- Naxalism, also known as Left Wing Extremism (LWE), is a significant challenge to India's internal security. The areas affected by Naxalism, often referred to as the 'Red Corridor', are primarily located in tribal and rural regions across various states.

Reasons for Naxalism:

- Naxalites seek to overthrow the Indian state through

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violent means, rejecting democratic processes like elections. They advocate for revolution, driven by ideologies rooted in Maoism, which calls for a violent upheaval to establish a new order.

Origins of Naxalism:

- The movement began in 1967 in Naxalbari village, West Bengal, with a tribal-peasant uprising against local landlords. Leaders such as Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal, and Jangal Santhal spearheaded the rebellion, marking the birth of the Naxalite movement.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist):

- In 2004, two major Naxal groups, the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) and People's War, merged to form the CPI (Maoist). By 2008, most other Naxalite groups had joined the CPI (Maoist), which became the dominant organization in the movement. The CPI (Maoist) and its affiliates have been designated as terrorist organizations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

Naxalism's Geographical Reach:

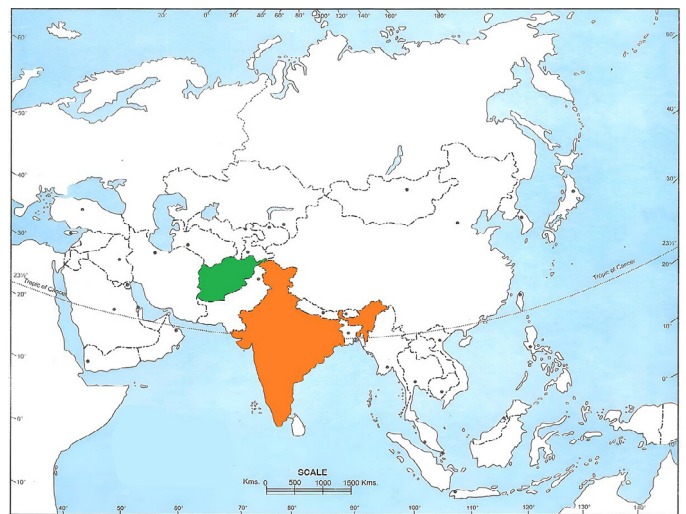
- The most severely affected states include Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar. West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh are partially affected, while Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh experience milder impacts. The Maoists are also attempting to expand into the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, with plans to link the Western and Eastern Ghats. Additionally, incursions into Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are raising concerns about strategic implications for the region.

First high-level diplomatic talks between India and Afghanistan

Context: On January 8, 2025, India and the Taliban held their first high-level diplomatic talks since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met with Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai. This meeting marked a shift from previous lower-level engagements, signaling an upgrade in India-Afghanistan relations. The talks focused on critical issues such as security, humanitarian aid, and trade via Iran's Chabahar port.

What Issues Were Discussed in the Meeting?

- **Security Concerns:** India raised concerns about Afghanistan potentially being used by anti-India terror groups. The Taliban assured India it would address these security threats.
- **Humanitarian Assistance:** India confirmed its commitment to providing essential aid, including food, medicines, and vaccines. The Afghan side appreciated India's previous shipments, which included wheat and earthquake relief materials.
- **Development Projects:** The two sides discussed India's involvement in future development projects to help meet Afghanistan's urgent needs.
- **Trade via Chabahar Port:** The use of Iran's Chabahar port for trade was highlighted as a vital step for regional connectivity. India has been granted a reprieve from US sanctions on this port, facilitating trade with Afghanistan.
- **Sports Cooperation:** The discussion also touched on strengthening cricketing ties, with India supporting Afghan cricketers by providing training facilities.



What is India doing for Afghanistan?

India has been actively involved in aiding Afghanistan through humanitarian support and development initiatives:

- **Humanitarian Assistance:** India has sent shipments of essential supplies, such as wheat, medicines, and winter clothing.
- **Health Sector Support:** India plans to further aid the health sector, including providing medical resources.
- **Refugee Rehabilitation:** India is assisting in the

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rehabilitation of Afghan refugees, especially those returning from Pakistan.

- **Development Initiatives:** India is exploring the possibility of engaging in long-term development projects in Afghanistan.

Importance of Afghanistan for India

Afghanistan holds significant importance for India for various reasons:

- **Geopolitical Considerations:** Afghanistan's strategic location, bordering Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia, is crucial for India's security and counterterrorism strategy.
- **Trade and Connectivity:** India's use of Chabahar port enhances trade ties with Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.
- **People-to-People Ties:** India shares deep cultural and historical ties with Afghanistan, which is important for India's influence in the region.

Challenges before India:

India faces several challenges in dealing with the Taliban-led Afghanistan:

- **Security Risks:** Ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a haven for anti-India terror groups is a major concern for India.
- **Political Sensitivities:** India's engagement with the Taliban is sensitive, given concerns over human rights, particularly regarding women and minorities.
- **Regional Dynamics:** India must navigate complex relations with neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran while engaging with the Taliban.
- **Sanctions Risk:** Although India has been exempted from US sanctions on Chabahar, there is still a risk of future sanctions, particularly with the shifting US political landscape.

Power Packed News

India is the world's fastest growing major economy

- According to the United Nations, India has retained the position of the world's fastest growing major economy with an estimated growth rate of 6.6%. Hamid Rashid, the head of global economic monitoring of the United Nations, said that India's economy can grow even faster at a rate of 6.8% next year.
- According to the United Nations "World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025" report, India's economy will be boosted by services and export growth, especially pharmaceuticals and electronics.
- Global growth has remained stable at 2.8%, while in advanced economies it remained at 1.6%. China's growth rate is estimated to be 4.8%, which may be 4.5% next year.
- US growth is estimated at 1.9%, which is less than last year.



Lionel Messi to receive Presidential Medal of Freedom

- Lionel Messi became the first male footballer to receive the 'Presidential Medal of Freedom'. This honor is given for contribution to America's prosperity, values and world peace.
- US President Joe Biden presented this award to him. Messi is the second player to win this medal after Megan Rapinoe.
- He also won the Ballon d'Or and FIFA Men's Best Player Award in 2023. In July 2023, he joined Inter Miami from Paris Saint-Germain.



Tuhin Kanta Pandey becomes Revenue Secretary

- Tuhin Kanta Pandey recently replaced Arunish Chawla as Revenue Secretary. Chawla has been made the Secretary of the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM).
- In September last year, Mr Pandey, a 1987 batch IAS officer of Odisha cadre, was appointed as the Finance Secretary. He has

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been associated with the Finance Ministry since 2016.

- The senior-most secretary in the Finance Ministry is appointed as the Finance Secretary.
- The Finance Ministry has six departments - Revenue, Economic Affairs, Expenditure, Financial Services, DIPAM and DPE - and the senior-most bureaucrat in the ministry is designated as the Finance Secretary.

Bima Sakhi Yojana: Goa's new initiative

- Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant launched the 'Bima Sakhi Yojana', which aims to make insurance services accessible to all.
- The scheme has been launched in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and mainly focuses on empowering women between 18 and 70 years of age.
- Under this scheme, women who have passed class 10 will receive special training in financial literacy and insurance awareness. They will also be given a stipend for the first three years.
- The trained women will be able to work as insurance agents and the Bima Sakhis who perform well will get an opportunity to become development officers in LIC.
- The initiative aims to increase employment and sources of income for women. Goa is the second state after Haryana to implement this scheme.

Marathi language given classical language status

- The Marathi language was formally given the status of classical language after a government order issued on January 8, 2025.
- Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat handed over the order to Maharashtra's Marathi Language Minister Uday Samant.
- Although the Union Cabinet granted classical language status to Marathi on October 3, 2024, the official notification has been issued now.
- The Maharashtra government will send a proposal to the Center to ensure the benefits of classical languages to the Marathi language.
- Tamil became the first classical language in 2004, Sanskrit got this status in 2005.

P. Jayachandran passed away

- P. Jayachandran, a famous singer of South Indian film music, died on 9 January 2025 in Thrissur, Kerala. He was 80 years old.
- He sang more than 16,000 songs in many languages including Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Kannada. He was also known as Bhava Gayakan.
- Jayachandran has been awarded the National Film Award for Best Playback Singer, Kerala State Film Award, Kalaimamani Award of Tamil Nadu Government and J. Received several honours including the C. Daniel Award.
- His voice was one of the most recognised voices in the Malayalam film industry.



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