Armenia and Azerbaijan - Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh Region

Why in news?

Tensions escalated recently at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulting in the death of at least four Azerbaijani soldiers.

What is this conflict about?

- Territorial disputes and ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Central Asia is on for approximately four decades now.
- These have impacted the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the South Caucasus.
- Conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region began following the breakdown of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.
- The conflict lasted till approximately 1994, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan claiming this strategic territory.
- At that time, the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum.
- This was boycotted by Azerbaijan.
- In the referendum, people chose independence over joining either of the two countries.
- The conflict between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh persisted.
- It reached a particular low with Armenia and Azerbaijan accusing each other of having instigated ethnic cleansing.
- The situation worsened when the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, an administrative unit, decided to vote to join Armenia.
- This was due to the fact of the large Armenian population there.
- By 1992, the violence had increased.
- Thousands of civilians had been displaced, compelling international bodies to take notice.
- In May 1994, thus, Russia mediated a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

How effective was the ceasefire?

- The conflict continued, and there have been instances of ceasefire violations

and violence instigated from both sides.

- The border between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been tense since 2018.
- This was particularly after Azerbaijan moved troops into the area, close to its border with Georgia.
- But this area has been relatively calm for the past 2 years.
- This is a break from the violence that the disputed region has witnessed for over 30 years.
- In April 2016, the region was particularly tense because of violent fighting between the two countries.
- This came to be known as the Four-Day War.

What happened recently?

- It was not immediately clear what started the current round of fighting.
- Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defence said 4 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in the artillery fire near the Tavush region, in northeast Armenia.
- Five other soldiers were injured.
- Reports suggested that two Armenian soldiers had also been injured during this incident.
- Following the killings, Armenia and Azerbaijan were engaged in a verbal spat.
- The Azerbaijani president has said that the Armenia's political and military leadership would bear the entire responsibility for the provocation.
- This has added to his government's claim that Armenia had started the fighting.
- Armenia in turn said Azerbaijan had triggered the conflict.
- According to a BBC report, Azerbaijan had said it had destroyed an Armenian fortification and artillery.
- It had also inflicted casualties on "hundreds" of Armenian soldiers.
- But this is a claim that Armenia had denied.
- Armenia's Defence Minister had implied that in this latest round of conflicts, Azerbaijan may have captured "advantageous positions".
- He had added that Armenian forces "do not shell civilian targets in Azerbaijan and only target the engineering infrastructure and technical facilities of the Azerbaijani armed forces".
- Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev had said peace talks with Armenia had stalled over the ongoing conflict.

Is there a possibility of a war?

- An all-out war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is unlikely due to a number of factors.
- In this disputed region, there are hundreds of civilian settlements.

- The residents here would be directly impacted and potentially displaced if any large-scale war were to break out.
- Turkey recently released a statement that it would back Azerbaijan “in its struggle to protect its territorial integrity.”
- However, any military escalation would draw regional powers like Turkey and Russia more deeply into the conflict.
- This is something that would not be preferred by either Ankara or Moscow.
- There is also the question of the network of oil and gas pipelines and strategic roads.
- Access to these might be blocked or interrupted for the region at large in case of a large-scale fighting.
- For both Armenia and Azerbaijan, this would create immediate challenges.
- Given these, a war would not be in the interest of both the countries.

Source: The Indian Express

