Caucasus Crisis

Why in news?

There is an ongoing fight between Armenian rebels and the Azerbaijani Army in Nagorno-Karabakh, a self-declared republic within Azerbaijan.

What is the problem?

- This fight risks becoming a wider regional conflict.
- Recently, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russia-mediated ceasefire after days of fighting.
- But, the ceasefire crumbled immediately amid a blame game.
- Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, seems determined to press ahead with its offensive.

What is the story behind?

- The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is decades old.
- The region is largely populated by ethnic Armenians.
- It is located within the international boundaries of Azerbaijan.
- Under the Soviet Union, it was an autonomous province that was part of the Azerbaijan republic.
- In 1988, when the Soviet power was receding, the regional assembly in Nagorno-Karabakh voted to join Armenia, triggering ethnic clashes.
- After the Soviet disintegration in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan went to war over this largely mountainous, forested enclave.
- By the time a ceasefire was reached in 1994, the rebels had established their de facto rule, with support from Armenia and Russia.
- The rebels extended their influence to the Armenian border.
- Ever since, the border has remained tense.

What makes the clashes now far more dangerous?

- **External intervention** makes the clashes now far more dangerous.
- Turkey has called Armenia a threat to peace in the region.
- The Azeris and Turks share ethnic and linguistic bonds.
- Also, the pre-Soviet Azerbaijan was a local ally of the Ottomans when they invaded Transcaucasia in the last leg of World War I.
- For Turkey, which is trying to expand its geopolitical reach to the former

Ottoman regions, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is an opportunity to enter the South Caucasus.

What is the problem for Turkey?

- Turkey also has a particularly bad relationship with Armenia.
- But its problem is that Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

What is the privilege for Armenia?

- Russia enjoys good economic and defence ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- But Armenia, as a CSTO member and host to a Russian military base, has more weight.
- In a wider conflict, Armenia could trigger Article 4 of the CSTO treaty and ask for Russian help.
- And if Moscow responds favourably, that would pit Russia against Turkey, a NATO member.

What is Russia trying to do?

- Russia, already involved in military conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and Libya, may not like opening another front.
- That is why it has re-emphasised its neutrality and hosted talks for a truce.
- But it will be forced to take sides if the conflict spills into Armenia.

What is needed?

- Both sides should understand the situation and call off the hostilities.
- Nagorno-Karabakh has in the past witnessed large-scale ethnic violence.
- Instead of risking a regional war, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Karabakh rebels should go back to the ceasefire and open up diplomatic channels.

Source: The Hindu

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