Odds over Islands in the Aegean Sea

What is the issue?

Greece and Turkey have had long-standing rival claims over the Aegean territory, even finding themselves on the brink of war over the issue.

What about the location of Aegean Sea?

- The Aegean Sea, spanning over two lakh square kilometres, is an arm of the Mediterranean Sea.
- It is located in the East Mediterranean Basin with the Greek peninsula to its west and Anatolia (Asia Minor) to its east.
- The Aegean is connected through the straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosporus to the Black Sea.
- The island of Crete can be taken as marking its boundary on the south.
- Greece and Turkey have been asserting rival claims over their borders in the Aegean Sea since the 1970s.
- They came to the brink of war in 1996 over a pair of uninhabited islets in the Aegean Sea, referred to as the Imia islets in Greece and as Kardak in Turkey.

What do international treaties say about Aegean islands?

- **Lausanne Treaty of 1923**- The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 was signed at the end of the First World War to settle the conflict between Turkey and the Allied Powers including Greece.
- The Treaty
    - defined the boundaries of Turkey and Greece
    - ceded several islands and territories in the Aegean Sea beyond three miles from the Turkish coast to Greece, with the exception of three groups of islands
    - obligated Greece to keep the islands demilitarised
    - opened up civilian shipping passage in the Turkish Straits
    - mandated Turkey to demilitarise the straits
    - mandated Turkey to cede Cyprus to the British
- **Paris Peace Treaties of 1947**- At the end of the Second World War, the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea were given to Greece, with the obligation of permanent and total demilitarisation.
- **Recognition of treaties**- Turkey recognises both these treaties.
- Greece argues that the 1936 Montreux Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits superseded the Lausanne Treaty as it gave Turkey the power to militarise the Turkish Straits.

What are the issues over the UNCLOS provisions?

According to the UNCLOS, the sovereignty of a coastal country extends beyond its land territory and internal waters upto territorial sea which is 12 nautical miles (nm) from the baseline of its coast.

- **Territorial seas-** In 1995, Greece ratified the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but Turkey did not sign it as it did not favour its interest in the Aegean Sea.
- Turkey claims a territorial sea of only 6nm and argues that if Greece extends its territorial waters, it would have control over two-thirds of the Aegean Sea, depriving Turkey of its basic access to international waters and trade routes.
- Turkey has even authorised its government to take necessary steps including military action, if Greece extended its rights to 12 nm.

As per the UNCLOS, the continental shelf extends to 200nm from the country's coastal baseline but is within its continental margin. EEZs also extend to 200 nm from the coastline.

- **Continental shelves and EEZs**- The continental shelf is defined as the seabed and subsoil that is the prolongation of a country's landmass, extending beyond its territorial sea.
- The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is a zone in which a country has special rights to exploration, use of natural resources, wind and hydro-power generation, and others.
- A country has sovereign rights over the natural resources in the water and the seabed and soil within its continental shelf.
- The Greek Continental Shelves extend to Eastern Greek islands near the Turkish Coast but Turkey contends that the continental shelf border should be determined on an equitable basis.
- Since the 70s, Turkey and Greece have had disagreements over their overlapping continental shelves and over offshore natural resources like gas and minerals held by these shelves.
- Ankara and Athens have also signed deals creating conflicting EEZs with countries like Libya and Egypt respectively.

What are the other issues that have caused friction over the Aegean Sea?

- **Militarisation-** Turkey is arguing that Greece is violating the Lausanne and Paris treaties, by increasing its military presence in the Aegean Islands.
- Greece argues that it has placed troops in some of the islands for self-defence as Turkey has deployed a large landing force called the Fourth Army that may seize Greek Islands.
- **Airspace violations-** UNCLOS states that a country has sovereign rights over the airspace above its territorial sea.
- Currently, Greece claims 6nm of territorial sea in the Aegean, starting from its coast and hence its internationally recognised airspace over the Aegean is also up to 6nm.
- Both Greece and Turkey have alleged that the other is carrying out flights near or over their coasts.

Both Turkey and Greece are members of NATO.

References

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