Return of Peace in Syria

Why in news?

As Syria enters the 13th year of its lethal civil conflict, a bomb explosion in Istanbul on November 13 2022, seems to have accelerated a diplomatic process which could bring peace to that tormented land.

What had happened?

- From November 2022, Turkey initiated "Operation Claw-Sword" with a series of bombings on Kurdish targets in both Syria and Iraq.
- Turkish attacks are directed at the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that includes the People's Protection Units (YPG) and, under American protection, controls large parts of northeast Syria.
- It has close ties with its domestic Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is viewed by Turkey as a terrorist organisation.
- Since May 2022, Turkey has been threatening to launch a military invasion against Kurdish positions in Syria.
- This has been postponed on Russian insistence, giving Turkey an opportunity to consider diplomatic options to serve its security interests.

What is the Russia-Turkey-Syria engagement?

- At the end of November 2022, the **Turkish President**, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, after an earlier conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, **proposed a re-engagement with Syria**.
- This re-engagement was started with meetings of Defence and Foreign Ministers, and climaxed with a summit of the three leaders.
- A tough anti-Kurd posture appeals to Turkey's nationalists, while improved relations with Syria will facilitate the return of 3.7 million Syrian refugees whose presence caused unhappiness among the Turks.
- Meeting of Defence Ministers took place in Moscow in December 2022 - first Minister-level meeting between Syria and Turkey since 2011.
- However, Turkey says that its troops will withdraw Syrian territory only when there is no terrorist threat - a reference to the SDF.

What are the regional diplomatic implications?

- Amidst the Ukraine war, Turkey has continued its balancing act between the USA and Russia:
    1. It has supplied drones to Ukraine, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
    2. But it has also facilitated agreements relating to grain supplies through the Bosphorus Strait in Turkey.

3. Also, it has refused to join the Western sanctions on Russia.

- Turkey and Russia continue to work closely together in Syria. On the Kurds' question, Russia and Syria's priority is to detach the Kurds from the U.S., and ensure the integrity of Syria.
- They hope to address Turkey's demand for a 30-km "security zone" across the Syria-Turkey border by replacing Kurdish militia with Syrian government troops.
- However, Turkey has not disengaged itself so far from the extremists of Hayat Tahreer al-Sham (HTS) that control the northern Idlib province.
- In the face of Turkey's threats to invade Syria in November 2022, the US evacuated its diplomatic personnel from the region, viewed as signalling little interest in protecting the Kurds.

What is the outlook for Syria?

- Syria believes it has a much stronger hand than earlier, as it is being increasingly **included within the Arab fold**:
  1. The UAE and Bahrain having opened embassies in Syria,
  2. In December 2022, a Syrian-Saudi dialogue on combating extremism took place in Riyadh, and
  3. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in December 2022, the Syrian flag flew on Riyadh's streets.
- The kingdom has encouraged this rapprochement with Syria to ensure that Arab interests are not diluted under Turkish and Iranian influence.
- **The US remains opposed to the Russia-sponsored tripartite talks** and the improvement of the regional states' ties with Syria.
- But it has little capacity to oppose Turkish initiatives in Syria or to provide effective support to the beleaguered Kurds.
- It retains 900 troops in northeast Syria, but has no idea regarding what purpose they are to serve.
- Again, Russia and Iran remain strong supporters of Syria's crucial interests.

What is next?

- Syria has so far shown no overt enthusiasm about high-level engagements with Turkey, hoping to obtain more firm Turkish guarantees relating to its interests.
- This is perhaps being facilitated by Iran: Iran's Foreign Minister met Mr. Erdoğan and his Turkish counterpart during his visit to Ankara, while the latter said he could meet the Syrian Foreign Minister in February.
- These trends suggest that the coming year, after more than a decade, could see the slow return to peace in Syria.

Reference

1. The Hindu | Signals of a slow return to peace in Syria



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