Russia-Ukraine Border Conflict

What is the issue?

The massive mobilisation of Russian troops on the Ukraine border and occasional outbreak of violence in the contested Donbass region has pushed both countries to the brink of an open conflict.

What is the history of conflict between Ukraine and Russia?

- **Annexation of Crimea** - Ukraine was one of the republics within the USSR during the cold war days, and has remained a strong ally of Russia till 2013.
- While it was planning to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, Russia sternly objected to it leading to tensions.
- Russia subsequently annexed "Crimea" (Russian speaking province in Ukraine) by force and declared its sovereignty over it with people's support.
- The resultant conflict has so far claimed about 10,000 lives and displaced millions with no lasting resolution in sight.
- **Naval skirmish over the Sea of Azov** - After Crimea's annexation in 2014, Russia gained control over both sides of the Kerch strait.
- In May 2018, Russian opened a 12-mile-long bridge over the Kerch Strait, which has also become the physical gateway to the Sea of Azov.
- To prevent the Ukrainian boats from passing under the bridge, Russia placed a cargo ship below it.
- Later, the Ukrainian vessels' attempt to travel from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov was denied by the Russian coast guard.
- However, Ukraine insists that the patrol of the Kerch Strait was authorised under a bilateral agreement with Moscow.
- Thus the naval skirmish over the Sea of Azov proves again the Russia's irreversibility of its annexation of Crimea.
- **Russian backed rebels** - Russia has been criticised for its involvement in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine.
- There, Russian-backed separatists have been fighting with Ukrainian troops.
- In May 2021, Moscow has allegedly deployed thousands of troops as well

as tanks and artillery near Ukraine's eastern border and has mobilised troops in the annexed Black Sea region of Crimea.

- **Current conflict -** Belarus, a Russian ally was blamed for the migration crisis in the EU's Polish border.
- Russia flew bombers near Poland's borders earlier this month.
- In the Black Sea, Russian President Vladimir Putin dispatched vessels to shadow U.S. warships.



Why is the current conflict more aggressive than the earlier ones?

- There were similar scenes earlier this year but after U.S. diplomatic intervention, Moscow pulled back.
- This time, the Russian moves appear to be part of a larger strategy of force-projection across Russia's western perimeter, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.
- Russia views Ukraine as a Western aircraft carrier parked just across southern Russia because of the U.S. influence on Ukraine.
- Russia's aggressiveness could have partly been driven by the assessment that the U.S. has strategically weakened after its Afghan withdrawal and its preoccupation with China's rise.
- Ukraine says an estimated 90,000 Russian troops have massed near the border which could be a prelude to another Russian invasion.

What are the Minsk Agreements?

- **The Minsk Protocol (Minsk-1)** with the **Minsk Memorandum** was signed in 2014 to prevent war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas.
- The representatives of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine (TCG – Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE) and the representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR,LNR) signed the agreement.
- The Protocol was followed by an additional Memorandum, which detailed the conditions of a ceasefire.
- The agreement failed to stop fighting, however, it significantly reduced fighting in the conflict zone for months.
- **The Minsk-2** (**Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk agreements)** was signed in 2015 under the mediation of France and Germany to prevent an open conflict.
- It was designed to end the fighting in the rebel regions and hand over the border to Ukraine's national troops.
- Ukraine was required to delegate more power to the breakaway regions

and introduce constitutional reforms, codifying their special status.

What are the practical ways to ease the tension?

- Ukraine's reluctance to implement the agreement and its growing military, economic and political ties with the West seem to have prompted Russia to put Ukraine under direct military pressure.
- Ukraine lacks the military resources to deter its giant neighbour and there is no guarantee that the West would come to its help in the event of a Russian invasion.
- Russia might make tactical gains from an invasion but such a move could further deteriorate its already ruptured ties with the West.
- The practical solution is to revive the Minsk peace process.
- The West should push both sides to resume talks and live up to their commitments as per the Minsk agreement to restore relative peace on the border.

References

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