Russian Recognition of Donbass Region

What is the issue?

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to recognise the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk republics practically brought the Minsk peace process to an end.

What is the recent tension in the Russia-Ukraine issue?

- Russian President Vladimir Putin has formally recognised the Donbass region enclaves of Eastern Ukraine – Luhansk and Donetsk as separate republic countries.
- Mr. Putin has also ordered Russian peacekeepers into the region, a move that could spark off conflict with Ukrainian troops.
- These actions would change the course of the present diplomatic efforts.

What is the status of Donbas region?

- Donbas, located on the Russian border, has a majority Russian-speaking population, like Crimea.
- After the fall of the Russian empire, the region was incorporated into the newly created Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918.
- Donbas became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, created under Lenin.
- During the Second World War, the Nazis took the region
- In 1943, after defeating the Nazis, the Red Army took Donbas back.
- In 1991, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the region became part of the newly born Ukraine nation until the 2014 Euromaidan protests.
- Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (collectively known as the Donbass) broke away from Ukrainian government control in 2014 and proclaimed themselves independent "people's republics", until now unrecognised.
- According to the Minsk II agreement, Rebels need to
    - enforce a full ceasefire in the Donbas region
    - pull out heavy weapons
    - start talks on holding local elections
    - allow the Ukrainian troops to restore control of the border with Russia
- Ukraine is supposed to
    - devolve more powers to the Donbas republics
    - introduce constitutional reforms codifying the decentralisation of power
    - announce an amnesty to the rebel fighters
- These terms were never implemented, mainly because Kiev was not particularly supportive of it.

What does Russia's action signify?

- The recognition of the two separatist groups as governments signals that Russia is no longer interested in talks on the basis of the Minsk accords.
- The conflict in the region has been frozen since the 2015 ceasefire but now that Russia has recognised the regions, Mr. Putin can move troops and heavy weaponry to Donbas openly.
- Russia has destroyed the hopes that the threat of conflict would recede once Russian troops along the Ukraine border and in Belarus withdrew.
- On the downside, Moscow faces sanctions and international condemnation for abandoning the Minsk process after long maintaining that it was committed to it.
- It is a clear sign that the situation is not going to be managed without NATO sitting down to serious negotiation over the security guarantees.
- There needs some discussion on regulating the expansion of NATO to Russia's neighbouring countries and the heavy presence of western troops and weapons in the region.

The Minsk Protocol *(Minsk-1) with the Minsk Memorandum was signed in 2014 to prevent war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas.*

The Minsk-2 *(Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk agreements) was signed in 2015 to end the fighting in the rebel regions and hand over the border to Ukraine's national troops.*

What does it mean to India?

- When External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has been travelling to Germany and France, trying to shift the focus of European interlocutors to the Indo-Pacific, it is Russia's actions that dominate the conversation.
- Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan is visiting Moscow, the first by a Pakistani PM in over two decades which needs a close watch.
- The timing of the tensions is more inconvenient, given that the delivery of Russian S-400 missile systems is underway, and the U.S. administration is still to decide on whether to waive or impose CAATSA sanctions against India.
- India's statement at the UNSC that appealed for diplomacy and de-escalation, while making no critical comment about Mr. Putin's announcement reflects the difficult position of New Delhi which appears to have now entered a new phase.

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