Russia’s Priorities in Syria

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n
- As the civil war winds down, the once overlapping interests of Moscow and Tehran are disentangling.
\n
- Russia now faces a big dilemma in West Asia on defending its allies.
\n

\n\n

How did the Syrian Conflict pan out?

\n\n

\n
- President Vladimir Putin decided to send Russian troops to Syria in September 2015, at a time when the Assad regime in Syria was on the brink of collapse.
\n
- The Islamic State (IS) had then already declared Raqqah in eastern Syria as its de facto capital and had a formidable ground force.
\n
- Other rebels (US allies) had captured Damascus suburbs, and parts of Aleppo, Ghouta, Idlib province and southern towns like Daraa and Quneitra.
\n
- Several rebel factions were breathing down on Damascus and the Mediterranean coastal belt, the last stronghold of the regime.
\n
- But presently, after 3 years of war, the Mr. Assad is safe and his regime has recaptured most of the territories it lost in the early days of the war.
\n
- This turnaround owes it greatly to the coordinated efforts of Russia, Iran and the Assad regime and various Iranian proxies.
\n
- Supported by Russian air power, Iran backed Hezbollah fought alongside the Syrian Army on the ground against rebels and jihadists.
\n

\n\n

What were the differences in intentions?

\n\n

\n
- While they were partnering in the war against common enemies, the Russians and Iranians had different goals in Syria.
\n
- **Russian Aim -** For Mr. Putin, the Syrian intervention was a big gamble, through which he sought to bolster Russian stakes in the middle-east.
\n
- While the Obama regime was indecisive on which side to take in the conflict, Mr. Putin put his weight solidly behind the Assad regime.
\n
- As the regime is currently safe, Russia wants to exit soon and doesn't want to get caught up like the US in Afghanistan.
\n
- Therefore, Moscow is continuously pressing the Assad regime to be ready for a lasting political solution to the crisis by incorporating significant changes.
\n
- **Iranian Aim -** Contrarily, Iran does not want any radical change in Syrian regime as such a move will weaken its standing in Syrian polity.
\n
- Syria's political position is critical for Iran to exercise a strong regional influence stretching across – Bagdad, Damascus and Lebanon.
\n
- Notably, Lebanon lies on the Mediterranean coast and both Syria and Lebanon share borders with Israel and have active Shia Militia networks.
\n
- Hezbollah has already built a strong base along the Lebanon-Israel border, and Iran plans to strengthen such build-ups to strategically pressurise Israel.
\n

\n\n



\n\n

What are the emerging cracks?

\n\n

\n
- While the war calculus forced Russians and Iranians to downplay their differences, the winding up of conflict has led to cracks in the alliance.

\n
- Russia is now feeling less reliant on Iran, and Tehran is growing wary of Moscow's game plans, which is clearly laid down priorities.
\n
- Notably, Russia has even resisted provocations from Turkey, US and Israel in order to stay focussed to its mission in Syria by avoiding risky escalations.
\n
- Russia completely controls Syria's airspace and has worked out de-confliction mechanisms with the U.S. and Israel to avoid direct attacks on each-other.
\n
- Significantly, while the U.S. has mostly carried out strikes against the IS, Israel has used Syrian air space only to attack Iran and Hezbollah (Russian allies).
\n
- Mr. Putin's lukewarm interest in defending his allies and his lack of concern for increasing role of Turkey in Syria has put Iran in a fix.
\n
- Russia's call for all foreign troops to exit Syria immediately after the war was also dismissed by Iran, which has now stated that it would retain troops.
\n

\n\n

What are Iran's concerns?

\n\n

\n
- Iran doesn't have many allies and Trump had also scrapped the Iranian Nuclear Deal, which has made Iran's diplomacy tougher.
\n
- Return of possible economic sanctions is another issues that it presently making Iranian polity nervous.
\n
- At this juncture, it won't be possible for Iran to antagonise Russia, as containing Saudi, Israel and the US in the region is no easy task.
\n
- This unique situation has put Mr. Putin in a commanding position in the region, and he seems to have got enough room for muscle flexing.
\n
- While Russia is trying to balance Turkish, Israeli and Iranian interests in the region, the geo-political complexity might make the game tough.
\n
- Notably, Turkey is part of NATO and Israel is the strongest ally of US in the region, with naturally pits them against Russia (cold war hangover).

\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n\n

\n