US Recognition of Armenian Genocide

Why in news?

U.S. President Joe Biden has fulfilled a long-pending American promise by recognising the Armenian Genocide.

What happened during the Armenian Genocide?

- The Ottoman Empire suffered a humiliating defeat in the Caucasus in 1915 at the hands of the Russians.
- The Turks blamed the Armenians living on the fringes of the crumbling empire for the setback.
- The Turks accused the Armenians of treachery.
- The Ottoman government unleashed militias on Armenian villages.
- Armenian soldiers, public intellectuals and writers were executed.
- Hundreds of thousands of Armenians, including children, were forcibly moved from their houses in eastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) to the Syrian desert.
- Many died during this exodus and many others, after reaching the concentration camps in the deserts.
- Between 1915 to 1922, in the First World War, thousands of Armenians perished due to killings, starvation and disease.
- The Armenian Genocide thus refers to the systematic killing and deportation of hundreds of thousands of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks.

What are the conflicting claims?

- It is difficult to estimate the total number of Armenians who died during the genocide.
- But the Armenian diaspora says that approximately 1.5 million died.
- Turkey rejects that number and claims that some 300,000 Armenians may have perished.
- The International Association of Genocide Scholars estimates that more than 1 million Armenians may have died.
- Turkey has acknowledged that atrocities were committed against Armenians.
- But it is opposed to calling it a genocide, which it considers as an attempt to insult the Turks.

Why is the US acknowledgement significant?

- At present, 30 countries officially recognise the Armenian Genocide.
- Most countries including India have not formally recognised the Armenian Genocide.
- They have primarily adopted this stance in the interests of their wider foreign policy decisions and geo-political interests in the region.
- Former U.S. President Obama too failed to deliver on his campaign pledge to recognise the genocide.
    - This had been rooted in concerns about straining the US's relationship with Turkey.
    - U.S. needed Turkey's cooperation on its military and diplomatic interests in the Middle East, specifically in Afghanistan, Iran and Syria.
- Former President Donald Trump, like his predecessors, stopped short of a formal recognition of the genocide, mainly because of Turkish opposition.
- The acknowledgement by the US government now would have little legal impact on Turkey.
- But it would perhaps give other countries the impetus to also acknowledge the genocide.
- The US acknowledgement or wider acknowledgement of it in the international community may be unwelcome for Turkey.
- However, failing to remember or acknowledge the fact of a genocide only paves the way for future mass atrocities.
- The facts must be as clear and as powerful for future generations as for those whose memories are seared by tragedy.

What is the likely impact on US-Turkey ties?

- Mr. Biden's move comes at a time when the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey has been in steady decline.
- The ties had been strained over a range of issues.
- In 2016, Ankara accused the U.S.-based Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen of being the mastermind of a failed coup.
- It asked the U.S. government to extradite him, a demand Washington paid no attention to.
- Also, Turkey went with the decision to buy the S-400 missile defence system from Russia, despite strong opposition from the U.S.
- This prompted American leaders to oust Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet training programme and impose sanctions on their ally.
- Besides these, there are foreign policy differences between the two countries with regard to Syrian crisis.

- Now, Turkey's Foreign Minister has said that such moves (as the genocide recognition) would only set back the already strained relationship.
    - "Statements that have no legal binding will have no benefit, but they will harm ties."
- Notably, both are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

What is Turkey's response?

- Ankara has challenged the "scholarly and legal" basis of Mr. Biden's announcement and has warned of consequences.
- But there may be little that Turkey can really do in retaliation without jeopardizing its own interests.
- Turkey's economy has also been suffering.
- A combination of these factors could result in a muted response from Turkey.

What is the way forward?

- While the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the US would be symbolic, it would mean much for the Armenian diaspora.
- For Turkey, the overreaction to anyone calling the Armenian massacre a genocide is not doing any good in foreign policy.
- So, instead of being defensive about the crimes of the Ottoman empire, the modern Turkish republic should demonstrate the moral courage to disown the atrocities.
- It should not allow the past to ruin its present interests.

Source: The Hindu, The Indian Express

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