U.S.-Turkey Relations - F-35 Fighter Jet Programme

What is the issue?

- The U.S. recently terminated Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet programme in response to Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia.
- The US said that the sale by Russia violates the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, leading to a crisis in US-Turkey relations.

What is the INF Treaty?

- This is a landmark agreement which has been credited with curtailing the arms race in Europe towards the end of the Cold War.
- The INF Treaty was signed between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1987.
- Under this, both powers agreed to destroy two categories of lethal missile systems from their own stocks as a means to decelerate the nuclear arms race.
- There was a considerable build-up of missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads by both sides in their European spheres of influence.
- As this threatened the security of the entire continent, an expansive treaty as that of the INF was felt necessary.
- The treaty came to fruition after years of negotiations during the leadership of US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.
- The treaty provided for the elimination of intermediate-range and medium-range missile stocks.
- Importantly, it also allowed verification by observers from both sides, thus leading to the dismantling of 2,619 missiles in 3 years.

What happened after 1991?

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the successor state of Russia remained bound by the INF obligation.
- However, the end of bipolarity in global geopolitics diminished the treaty's utility.
- The rise of other military powers, especially China, led to calls for converting the INF into a multilateral agreement.
- This effort was made by both the US and Russia at the United Nations

General Assembly in 2007, but it did not deliver results.
- In February 2019, the Trump administration announced that the US was suspending its participation in the treaty.
- This was a reaction to what the U.S. believed as Russia's building of a prohibited missile.

What is the F-35 programme?

- The Joint Strike Fighter programme (F-35 programme) is described as the "arms deal of the century".
- The F-35 programme is an international weapons contract between the US and its allies.
- It is aimed at developing "fifth-generation" fighter jets.
- The signatories to the deal contributed capital for the research and development of the F-35 jet.
- The contract partners of the US in this treaty are categorized based on the quantum of their investment in the program.
- Level 1 partner UK pledged $2.2 billion to the program, followed by Italy and Netherlands at Level 2 with around $1 billion.
- Finally, Turkey, along with four others at Level 3, made contributions between $100-200 million.
- Based on the levels, the participant countries were offered technological transfers, training of pilots, and prospects for local manufacturing.

How is the U.S.-Turkey relations?

- Turkey and the US have been strategic allies since the Cold War, and both are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).
- NATO is, notably, a military alliance that was formed in 1949 to counter the Soviet influence.
- However, in the recent past, Turkey has drifted away from the US over serious differences in forging alliances as part of the Syrian War.

What is the U.S.'s present decision?

- Turkey recently acquired the S-400 missile system from Russia.
- [It is an advanced anti-aircraft system capable of defending against stealth aircraft that can evade radars, much like the F-35.]
- The US is concerned that this might jeopardise non-disclosable information regarding the F-35 jets.
- It fears that Russian engineers who would arrive in Turkey to install the S-400 might get access to such sensitive data.
- It could provide Russia access to the technological secrets underpinning

NATO's most sophisticated weapon systems.

- So the U.S. announced to terminate Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet programme.
- It also threatens to impose economic sanctions on Turkey under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).
- It is estimated that the decision to cancel the F-35's sale to Turkey would ensure losses of between $500-600 million for the US.
- For Turkey, it would result in losing out on manufacturing opportunities, and its pilots would have to cease their training in the US.

How does the future look?

- America, under the Obama administration, refused to sell Turkey the Patriot anti-missile system.
- [Patriot (MIM-104) is a long-range, all-altitude, all-weather air defence system to counter tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and advanced aircraft.
- Turkey considered this essential for its air defence in the context of the Syrian civil war.]
- So, Turkey's decision to acquire the Russian systems emanated in part from this earlier U.S. refusal.
- Turkey's forced ejection from the F-35 project now could also turn out to be counterproductive.
- Reportedly, Turkey is planning to buy advanced Sukhoi fighter jets (the Su-35 and/or the Su-57) from Russia to compensate for the loss of the F-35 planes.
- However, it could only further complicate the issue of NATO interoperability.

Source: The Indian Express, The Hindu

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