Armenia and Azerbaijan - Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh Region

Why in news?

Tensions escalated recently at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulting in the death of at least four Azerbaijani soldiers.

What is this conflict about?

- Territorial disputes and ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Central Asia is on for approximately four decades now.
- These have impacted the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the South Caucasus.
- Conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region began following the breakdown of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.
- The conflict lasted till approximately 1994, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan claiming this strategic territory.
- At that time, the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum.
- This was boycotted by Azerbaijan.
- In the referendum, people chose independence over joining either of the two countries.
- The conflict between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh persisted.
- It reached a particular low with Armenia and Azerbaijan accusing each other of having instigated ethnic cleansing.
- The situation worsened when the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, an administrative unit, decided to vote to join Armenia.
- This was due to the fact of the large Armenian population there.
- By 1992, the violence had increased.
- Thousands of civilians had been displaced, compelling international bodies to take notice.
- In May 1994, thus, Russia mediated a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
How effective was the ceasefire?

- The conflict continued, and there have been instances of ceasefire violations and violence instigated from both sides.
- The border between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been tense since 2018.
- This was particularly after Azerbaijan moved troops into the area, close to its border with Georgia.
- But this area has been relatively calm for the past 2 years.
- This is a break from the violence that the disputed region has witnessed for over 30 years.
- In April 2016, the region was particularly tense because of violent fighting between the two countries.
- This came to be known as the Four-Day War.

What happened recently?

- It was not immediately clear what started the current round of fighting.
- Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defence said 4 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in the artillery fire near the Tavush region, in northeast Armenia.
- Five other soldiers were injured.
- Reports suggested that two Armenian soldiers had also been injured during this incident.
- Following the killings, Armenia and Azerbaijan were engaged in a verbal spat.
- The Azerbaijani president has said that the Armenia’s political and military leadership would bear the entire responsibility for the provocation.
- This has added to his government’s claim that Armenia had started the fighting.
- Armenia in turn said Azerbaijan had triggered the conflict.
- According to a BBC report, Azerbaijan had said it had destroyed an Armenian fortification and artillery.
It had also inflicted casualties on “hundreds” of Armenian soldiers. But this is a claim that Armenia had denied.

Armenia’s Defence Minister had implied that in this latest round of conflicts, Azerbaijan may have captured “advantageous positions”.

He had added that Armenian forces “do not shell civilian targets in Azerbaijan and only target the engineering infrastructure and technical facilities of the Azerbaijani armed forces”.

Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev had said peace talks with Armenia had stalled over the ongoing conflict.

**Is there a possibility of a war?**

- An all-out war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is unlikely due to a number of factors.
- In this disputed region, there are hundreds of civilian settlements.
- The residents here would be directly impacted and potentially displaced if any large-scale war were to break out.
- Turkey recently released a statement that it would back Azerbaijan “in its struggle to protect its territorial integrity.”
- However, any military escalation would draw regional powers like Turkey and Russia more deeply into the conflict.
- This is something that would not be preferred by either Ankara or Moscow.
- There is also the question of the network of oil and gas pipelines and strategic roads.
- Access to these might be blocked or interrupted for the region at large in case of a large-scale fighting.
- For both Armenia and Azerbaijan, this would create immediate challenges.
- Given these, a war would not be in the interest of both the countries.

**Source: The Indian Express**