Enhancing Iran’s role in Afghanistan

What is the issue?

Iran could help India enhance its role in stabilising Afghanistan as a responsible regional power.

What is the present situation?

- US has promised to withdraw half of its troops from Afghanistan by the end of April 2019.
- The U.S. will want to leave behind a stable country.
- Any peace settlement will stand a better chance of implementation only if it is supported by regional powers.

Who are the major regional powers?

- U.S. and Russia arranged talks on the Afghan peace process from 2014 to 2016.
- The meetings, known as the 6+1 group, included representatives from Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S.
- The process assumed that each of these countries was essential to the achievement of a political settlement in Afghanistan.
- Moreover, in November 2018, the U.S. and the Taliban joined for the first time, in the Russia-hosted conference, in the hope of promoting a negotiated solution to achieve peace and national reconciliation in Afghanistan.

What are the conflicts of interest between U.S. and Iran?

- The American and Iranian interests on Afghanistan were coincided in the past.
- Together with the U.S. and India, Iran supported the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001.
- Iran also supported the installation of Hamid Karzai as President and favoured the exclusion of the Taliban from his government.
- The situation has changed after the U.S. imposed sanctions on Iran post-2005 on account of its non-compliance with nuclear safeguards.
Following that, Iran started supporting the Taliban by providing them arms. Iran fears that American troops in Afghanistan could be used against it. U.S., on its part, have accused Iran of trying to extend its influence in western Afghanistan by providing the Taliban with money, weapons and explosives.

Why should Iran and U.S. act together?

- Advantages could range from stability in Afghanistan to increased trade prospects, especially in South and West Asia.
- At a time when Iran’s economy is weighed down by American sanctions, it would want to build up trade ties with neighbouring states.
- Iran could gain by strengthening trading ties with a secure Afghanistan.
- It has already supplanted Pakistan as Afghanistan’s largest trading partner in 2017.
- On its part, the U.S. would also gain since Iran is the geopolitical hub connecting South, Central and West Asia.
- Moreover, an improvement in U.S.-Iran relations would be welcomed by America’s European allies, who are opposed to Washington’s unilateral sanctions on Iran.

What should be the role of India?

- India will also be adversely affected if negotiations break down, which would then increase extremist exports from Pakistan to Afghanistan or India.
- Thus, India should explore the Iranian diplomatic options to secure Afghanistan.
- Looking beyond Chabahar, India, Iran and Russia were the founding countries of the International North-South Transport Corridor project since 2002.
- The corridor is intended to increase connectivity between India, Iran, Russia, landlocked Afghanistan, Central Asia and also Europe.
- It would also advance the trading interests of these countries.
- Playing a larger role in regional security would enhance both the status of India and Iran as regional powers as well as the stability of South, Central, and West Asia.

Source: The Hindu