

Final Mock - Current Affairs

Q2 - Introduction

Middle East became an arena of proxies with more prominence since Arab Spring. The area is engulfed in civil war that involves both sectarian and ethnic conflicts. One of those arenas is Syria, bordered with Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. As a result, millions got displaced into neighbouring countries including Turkey. The regime of Bashar-ul-Assad was strongly backed by the Russia and Iran who had their own vested interests. There are various reasons for the fall of Assad regime and the rise of HTS. Among these reasons are the interest of Turkey in the region, the weak Shi'ite rule of Assad, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Implications include Israel territorial expansion, a shock to Iran's and Russia's influence, the threat of ISIS and the rise in Turkish influence.

Reasons for the change in Syrian Regime

The interest of Turkey in Syria:

Turkey lies on the Northern border of Syria. The regime of Assad posed two challenges to Erdogan. First, the Assad's regime caused an influx of Syrian refugees to the country with estimated figure of 3 million. This put burden on the resources of Turkey. Secondly, the Kurdish separatist movement became a security threat to Turkey. Not only was Kurdistan movement

conducting terror attack on Türkiye but also challenged its territorial integrity. These separatists had taken refuge in Syrian ~~part~~ territories. Hence, Türkiye allegedly supported HTS in toppling the ~~the~~ regime of Assad to achieve its interest on the challenges mentioned above.

The weak rule of Assad regime:

Assad family ruled Syria for 50 years. However, the Shiite ruler was weak on its own. It has an active support of Russia and Iran. During the Arab Spring, it could not suppress opposition without Russian support. The country was divided into various factions, each challenging the regime. The general popularity of Assad was based on his oppressive rule with human rights violations. Hence, he was easily toppled by HTS without any major bloodshed.

The major global conflicts involving Assad's allies:

i) Russia-Ukraine War

Russia is fighting Ukraine for more than 3 years now. With sanctions, its resources have stretched thin. With rising threat of NATO, it is investing its resources to grow stronger. Hence, its attention and aid diverted more towards Ukraine. Syria didn't get military support this time like ~~at~~ the last time.

ii) Iran- Israel Conflict

Iran was another major ally of Assad regime. However, Iran could not afford tussles with HTS when it was actively fighting Israel, directly and through proxies. Major leaders of Iran's proxy such as Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas and Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah were eliminated. Hence, its influence and power over Syrian territory weakened too. Therefore, HTS was easily able to topple Assad's regime.

Implications of the regime change in Syria

Israel territorial expansion:

As soon as HTS toppled the Assad's rule, Israel took two major actions. Firstly, it conducted hundreds of air strikes in Syria. This was done to destroy major military sites before they fell into the hands of HTS. Israel claimed that this could become a major threat to them from Syria. Hence, the destruction of military assets was crucial. Secondly, it has stretched its buffer zone in Golan Heights and added new territories, including geo-strategic locations that can be used to do surveillance of Hezbollah. They also included territories used by Iran to send aid to Hezbollah.

A major shock to Russian and Iranian influence in the region:

i) Russia and Syria

After the fall of Assad's regime, Russia was forced to evacuate its military base in Syria. Post-Soviet Russia showed its rising dominance through its major influence in Middle East via Syria. The changed regime took a toll on its Russian influence in the region.

ii) Iran and its Proxies

The Syrian territory was used as a transit by Iran to send military aid and manpower to Hamas and Hezbollah. Now the transit network has been jeopardised with fall of Assad's regime. This poses great challenges to Iran to provide logistical support to its proxies. Thereby, weakening its influence severely. The presence of IRGC in Syria has diminished. Hence, Iran lost its glory of power in various regions.

Turkish dominance in the region:

Turkey opened diplomatic channels with the new Syrian regime. With the ball in its court, Turkey

will provide tough time to Kurdish separatists. Possible operations could be launched to suppress the group. Moreover, thousands of refugees have started returning home which has eased the Refugee pressure on Turkey and Europe.

Conclusion

Fall of Assad has been a great game changer in the region with Iran and Russia as the losers and Turkey and Israel as winners.

Kurdish separatists will face greater pressure while Iran has to try and establish diplomatic channels with the new regime. Syrian refugees returned to their homes with hopes of a life in a more stable homeland.

However, it should be noted that the regime is still prone to instability due to presence of various militant factions in Syria including ISIS.

Q4. The world has taken a shift from Unipolar order of the West to Multipolar order. Those challenging US hegemony include Russia and China, the territorial-giants situated spread over Asia. Hence, they have regrouped together to counter U.S and achieve its various interests in the region. Among economic interest are trade of oil, energy, technology and crucial minerals. Strategically, they are trying to move towards de-dollarisation and increase their influence in the world.

Russia-China Economic Collaborations to counter U.S

Sanctions on Russia and ^{energy} impo_r trade with China:

After the Russia-Ukraine war, US and the West slapped sanctions on Russia. Being an energy producing country, Russia realised it as a major threat to economy. Moreover, it needed economic strength to counter NATO threat in Ukraine. Hence, it established energy cooperation with China. China agreed to buy oil from Russia at relatively cheaper prices. However, it cushioned Russian economic shock. Consequently, Russian pursued its interest in Ukraine.

The technological equipments provided by Russia to China:

Russia has provided advanced military equipments to China. Majority of Chinese Jet engines are from Russia. This is crucial amidst rising U.S-China tension in Indo-Pacific region, particularly over South China Sea and Taiwan. China is urgently expanding its military power to show its dominance in region and to avert threat to its major sea trade sea routes posed by U.S.

On the other hand, China is providing Semi-conductors to Russia which is essential for technological equipments like smartphones.

Strategic Cooperation of Russia - China

De-dollarisation and BRICS:

U.S. has established dollar as the dominant currency. It used dollar as a weapon to suppress countries economically to impose its interest. Russia is already facing sanctions while China is actively expanding its sphere of influence and reduce U.S. hegemony. Moreover, U.S. is already in trade war with China during the time when Trump imposed 60% tariff on Chinese goods during his first term as president. Hence, China and Russia are trading goods and services in their own currencies. Currently, the trade between them has reached staggering \$230 billion. Moreover, diplomatic channel of BRICS has been utilised to collaborate with other countries to undermine dollar. A weak dollar would mean weaker U.S. influence globally.

Russia - China dual veto power in U.N:

U.S. has repeatedly exploited its veto power to advance its strategic interests. Russia and China on the other hand too have veto powers. This way they could collaborate to undermine U.S. interests and further their interests. Moreover, this could be one way to expand global influence.

Geo-political collaboration through BRI:

Belt and Road initiative is a major project of China to expand its influence in Asia. The project includes huge investments in transport, energy, agriculture and transit trade. However, U.S. openly rejects this initiative and propagates the idea of a debt trap to deter countries from investing or collaborating. Russia, on the other hand, has shown keen interest in the initiative. If Russia territory is analysed, it spreads all the way into Eastern Europe. In events of direct confrontation with U.S. in Indo-Pacific region, China has established alternative route through Russia to maintain trade with various Central Asian and European countries. Hence, U.S. cannot bully or pressure China to compromise.

Conclusion

China and Russia has enhanced total trade volume with Russia exporting oil to China and sharing its military technology. China has increased trade of semiconductors to Russia. All this trade is conducted in respected currencies of both the countries. This has undermined U.S. threats of sanctions, as both the countries head towards de-dollarisation. Finally, the China mitigated absolute threat to its trade routes in Indo-Pacific region by establishing trade routes through Russia. However, it must be noted that both Russia and China fear overreliance to each other.

Q6 - Introduction

Recently, Pakistan conducted air-strikes in the Paktia province of Afghanistan. The move was strongly condemned by Taliban government who claimed it as direct attack on them. Since the establishment of Taliban government in 2021, Pakistan has been facing a new wave of terrorism. It has lost innocent civilians and security personnel to attacks from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Pakistan was disappointed with Afghan regime for its support to Taliban (TTP). However, Pakistan cannot ignore ideological similarities between TTP and Afghan government. It is applying various pressure tactics but the situation persists. Possible recommendations include both force and diplomatic channels to reach a solution.

Critical analysis of relationship between TTP and Taliban govt

Similarities between the two groups.

Pakistan and Afghanistan Taliban two branches of one tree. In fact, TTP was formed due to its influence from Afghan Taliban in the past. There are prominent similarities between them. Firstly, both the groups favour a hardcore extremist Islamic Shariah to run the affairs of the country. Secondly, both the groups are from same ethnicity of Pashtoun with similar cultures, norms, traditions and values.

The anarchy in tribal regions of Afghanistan:

Taliban government, based in Kabul and Kandahar, runs the affairs of the country. However, the govt is not in direct control of the region. Rather, the regions have their own heads ~~that~~ who do not lie under direct control of govt. Albeit, they recognise the govt. of Taliban. Taking action against TTP by Afghan govt would mean weakened control. Hence, it would be a 'suicidal' mission for the govt if it took action.

Critical Analysis of Pakistan and Afghan Taliban relationship

Historical glance to their relations:

During GWOT, Pakistan declared war on Afghanistan's Taliban by becoming the proud non-NATO ally of U.S. However, the relationships improved, as the Afghan Taliban led by U.S repeatedly accused Pakistan of aiding Taliban. It was infact Pakistan who facilitated Doha Accords in 2019 which led to rise of Taliban in government. Therefore, Pakistan was hopeful that this to Afghan Taliban would ensure that TTP does not attack Pakistan. The rise in TTP attacks is disappointed and

Frustrated Pakistan leading it to resolve the pressure tactics. The Afghan Taliban insisted that Pakistan should hold talks with TTP and denied providing safe haven to the militants. The talks failed repeatedly, and Afghanistan was used as refuge by TTP, evidently.

Pressure tactics applied by Pakistan on Taliban government:

Pakistan applied various measures to force Afghan govt to take action against TTP. Firstly, it forced many Afghans refugees to return to Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan is in crisis, it does not have the resources to cater such an influx of refugees. Therefore, the move was condemned by Taliban. Secondly, Pakistan closed transit routes and enforced passport system. Thirdly, it conducted air strikes in Afghan territory where TTP resided. The use of force frustrated Afghan government which threatened the diplomatic regime relations with Pakistan's Western Neighbour.

Possible recommendations, to this issue

Diplomacy with Afghan govt:

Pakistan must realize that it cannot afford

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conflict with Taliban. This is because it is internally unstable with prominent political and economic crisis. Secondly, it is not in Pakistan's best interest to trade with Western neighbour when India is lingering on its back door. Hence, it should enhance diplomatic relations in the following ways:

i) Establish dialogues with TTP that facilitated by Afghan govt:

Pakistan should persistently insist TTP's big brother to sit in the talks and establish peace between both the parties. Although this has ~~rem~~ failed in the past, an effective dialogues still have possibility. Pakistan must realise that TTP is a proxy used by neighbouring country. Therefore, dialogues should be initiated keeping that in mind.

ii) Development of areas of ex-FATA:

Pakistan must realise that its negligence in regions of FATA, the areas where TTP could generate. It should spend huge amounts in developing the region by ~~providing~~ expanding economic activities, providing infrastructure, health care, education and rule of law. ~~A~~ Project like CPEC could be effectively expanded to these areas with development of SEZs. The rich untapped resources could be exploited to develop the region. Grievances of people should be heard and addressed.

iii) Use of force to eliminate TTP

Pakistan must convey the message that it is fully capable of destroying TTP if Taliban did not take action. However, a hotline should be established between both the countries when force is used. Pakistan must clarify its stance of attacking TTP to cushion the stocks of force on its action.

Q8 - Introduction

CPEC is the major project of Belt and Road initiative by China with a staggering investment of \$60 billion in Pakistan to make it a reality. Although it progressed during its phase I with various energy and transport projects, the second phase is witnessing a slow down. There are various reasons to this such as pressure from IMF, terrorism, political instability and economic instability.

SAPs of IMF and Extended Fund Facility:

IMF aided Pakistan to stabilise its economic crises. Last year it provided Bailout package of \$3 billion to prevent it from defaulting. Currently, it has agreed on lending \$7 billion through Extended Fund Facility. However, it

provided some conditions to Pakistan in the form of SAs. This is broadly a move to liberalisation as govt reduces its intervention in private sector. TTP is preventing Pakistan to selectively provide tax incentives to Chinese investors. Moreover, it has shown reservation in SEZs. This has reduced Chinese involvement slowing down CPEC.

Security threat to Chinese Investors:

Chinese investors are routinely being targeted by terrorist factions of BLA and TTP. This has resulted in Chinese investors to reduce investments in the country. The confidence has further shattered on facing attacks despite of security and assurance from Pakistan's govt. Consequently CPEC slowed down.

Economic Instability and slow growth:

Pakistan went through a huge economic turmoil recently. Although it has gained traction, the country has projected slow economic growth for the future i.e. around 3%.. Moreover, the country is engulfed in huge energy crises forcing many industries to shutdown and disinvest. Such risky situation poses risk to investment which has led to slow growth of CPEC.

Political instability persists:

Political instability in the country automatically deters investors for following reasons, firstly, the govt is prone to end before its tenure. The promises and policies it gave investors do may change with new govt. Secondly, an instable political environment further results in weak govt who can not effectively implement policies. Lastly, a political turmoil increase risk of security and worsen economic crises.