**Europe in the middle**

Marwan Bishara

Friday, Feb 18, 2022

After months of military build-up and weeks of intensive diplomacy, the crisis in Ukraine is at a critical juncture. It may turn towards a military confrontation or towards a negotiated resolution. Either way, Ukraine and the rest of Europe are likely to pay the price. They would have to make the big concessions for peace and the greater sacrifices in war.

That is why, leading European powers France and Germany are trying hard – harder than either Russia or the United States – to end the crisis peacefully and to bridge the differences between the nuclear superpowers, but without appeasing the Kremlin or angering the White House.

Like the US, EU countries have vowed to take massive punitive measures against Russia in case of an attack on Ukraine. But unlike Washington, Brussels is avoiding threats and ultimatums in favour of appealing to Russia to lift military pressure from Ukraine’s borders and to accept a diplomatic roadmap to peace and security.

Though they are the world’s third and fourth-largest weapons exporters, France and Germany have thus far refrained from sending arms to Ukraine to avoid provoking or rather angering Moscow.

This has once again put the two continental powers at odds with the US and the UK, which have been enthusiastic suppliers of arms to Ukraine, as British Prime Minister Boris Johnson follows in his predecessor Tony Blair’s footsteps, becoming the US president’s own English poodle.

Yet, both sides have been super careful to tone down their differences to avoid the kind of diplomatic showdown witnessed on the eve of the war against Iraq in 2003.

Paris and Berlin proved Washington and London wrong and the blowback from the invasion of Iraq was a total nightmare for Western unity, security and credibility.

But the Biden administration reckons the mistake that should not be repeated is not Iraq, but Georgia, which Russia, albeit provoked, invaded in 2008. Or for that matter, Ukraine in 2014, when an undeterred Russia moved in and annexed Crimea.

By raising the alarm, US President Joe Biden does not want the West or Nato to be caught off guard again, or to live with Putin’s fait accompli. For the US president, ‘Putin has no soul’ and therefore cannot be trusted.

By contrast, the more pragmatic Europeans, notably the Germans, do not think of Russian souls and spirits; they think of Russian gas and nukes. Europe is largely dependent on Russian energy sources, and is in a short range of its nuclear missiles. The EU is also Russia’s largest trading partner, accounting for more than a third of its total trade.

It is in that context that France helped broker the ceasefire between Russia and Georgia in 2008, and established, along with Germany, the ‘Normandy Format’ in 2014 to facilitate face to face negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, which paved the way for the Minsk agreements in the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Although these were welcome developments to avoid further war at the time, there is a widely held belief that Georgia and Ukraine were coerced to sign unfavourable accords under Russian military threat, all of which explains why Moscow is so adamant and Kyiv is so hesitant about their implementation.

Today, as the US clenches its fist and the EU extends a hand to Russia, the Kremlin may wonder if they are playing good-cop bad-cop in order to gain time, arm Ukraine, and defuse Russia’s momentum. Or, more likely, that their disagreements are real and could be exploited in Moscow’s favour.

Indeed, the West is not united in its approach towards Russia even if it is united in its support of Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence. On the scale of zero to 10, with hawkish America at 10, I would say, Britain is at eight, Poland – six, France – four, and Germany – two. And Viktor Orban’s Hungary, the odd man out seeking greater security and nuclear cooperation with Russia, is at one or even zero.

The Kremlin has been exploiting Western disagreements to advance its supremacy, starting with the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Putin made his position crystal clear in a 2007 landmark speech at the Munich Security Conference 16 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, accusing the US of “having overstepped its national borders in every way” and denouncing its almost “uncontained hyper use of force” in a world where no one feels safe.

And for the past 15 years, the logic of Putin’s strategy from Georgia to Syria through Ukraine has been to counter that of the US. It is no wonder, he sounds sceptical of US strategic designs to the point of disdain.

During Tuesday’s news conference with the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Russian leader warned the West against Nato’s creeping expansion, while rejecting its vague diplomatic rhetoric and open-ended negotiations that lead to nowhere.

Putin’s nuanced approach to Western interests has led him to engage Europe on Ukrainian security, while insisting, to France’s chagrin, on engaging America, and only America, on issues concerning Russian and by extension European security.

Excerpted: ‘The West – united on Ukraine, divided on Russia’.

Courtesy: Aljazeera.com