**The Ukraine conundrum escalates**

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| In 1823, US President James Monroe promulgated the Monroe Doctrine. It unambiguously designated the Western Hemisphere/Latin America as the US’ exclusive sphere of influence and perimeter of security and foreclosed it to all foreign interventions, whatsoever. The USSR however overtly infringed upon this US exclusive zone in 1962 by deploying nuclear armed tactical, medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles in Cuba. It was to supposedly bolster Fidel Castro’s communist regime; however, it also critically brought Continental US within range of Soviet ballistic missiles. The US promptly “quarantined” (euphemism for blockade) Cuba and militarily coerced the USSR to withdraw from there. In the ensuing negotiations/compromise, Nikita Khrushchev got the US to agree to not invade Cuba and to remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey and Italy. |

Today, the US is ostensibly replicating the same in Eastern Europe. While reneging on a solemn commitment to the contrary, it has aggressively expanded NATO into Eastern Europe and is now luring Ukraine to join it. NATO has thus drastically circumscribed Russia’s sphere of influence, has penetrated deep into its perimeter of security and trampled all over its “security red lines”. If Ukraine joins NATO and invokes Article 5 (collective defence) this will tantamount to pitching the whole of the US-led West with all its military, economic, technological, diplomatic and political might against Russia. The ensuing strategic environment will allow the US to massively coerce Russia into ostensive submission. This incremental existentialist threat has forced Russia to respond. It is moving into the Donbass and Ukraine to restore strategic balance.

US imperatives for confronting Russia are diverse and manifold. One, it cut the USSR to size once and now wants to scuttle Russian ambitions in Europe. Consequently, NATO is literally sitting at its doorstep in all its might. Two, it wants to snuff out all pretensions that Russia might have to challenge its global hegemony, with or without China. Three, US grand strategic design aims at neutralising Russia and China piecemeal. If Russia is suitably humbled, chastened, weakened and circumscribed then a Russo-China united front becomes inconsequential. Four, the US feels compelled to dictate the limits of Western Europe-Russia relationship and obviate the emergence of any permanent economic stake between them. Five, the US would like to replace Russia as the major source of oil and gas to Western Europe (especially Germany) with itself and the Gulf Arab states. Six, the US’ military-industrial complex stands satiated with the prospect of yet another war. Seven, if war erupts it will be on a European battlefield and at the cost of the Europeans with Continental US safely ensconced across the Atlantic; unless it comes to an exchange of intercontinental ballistic missiles!

The US has a whole gamut of multidimensional options at its disposal. At the geopolitical level, it will absorb Ukraine (and probably Georgia) into NATO and practically encircle Russia from the West. It will also want to prevent China from coming to Russia’s rescue in any way. At the diplomatic level, it will demonise and isolate Russia as an aggressor and sanction all those who support it. It will challenge Russia at all international fora especially at the UN/UNSC and vilify it internationally. Militarily, the US and its allies are already mustering their forces in Europe and reinforcing NATO’s eastern flank states including Ukraine. A favourable strategic balance is thus being created by them. At the economic level, sanctions in the international finance and banking systems are already under way. In the information domain, the US-led West is already hysterically portraying President Putin as the villain of the piece. Restrictions in the technological domain are in the pipeline, too.

President Putin, too, has options. One, he can wait for a diminished oil and gas supply (including the suspension of Nord Stream 2) to have its economic and social impact on Western Europe. It is a two-edged weapon and will magnify the effects of high inflation due to the Covid pandemic. This could eventually cause civil unrest and fissures in the cross-Atlantic alliance. Two, he could improve the terms on which he sells oil and gas to Western Europe and make it even more difficult for them to ditch Russia. Conversely, he could manipulate the international oil prices and send them searing through the stratosphere. Three, he could ensure Chinese support in fighting off the slew of sanctions that the West is implementing progressively. Four, he has already moved troops into the two separatist “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics” to support them against Ukraine. This gives him strategic options. It acts as a deterrent to Ukraine attacking the two recently declared “independent republics” and importantly creates a buffer between Ukraine and mainland Russia. Furthermore, it can be the bridgehead through which major Russian forces can be launched into Ukraine, when required. Additionally, forces launched from the Donbass region could move and link up with Crimea and thus create a solid front or reinforce/enlarge the buffer being created in the Donbass. Moreover, in a multi-pincer movement, a prong from the Donbass region, another from Belarus and yet another one from Odessa could envelop and reduce Kyiv/Ukraine. It is reportedly under way. Russian forces could thus occupy operational space inside Ukraine and obviate all future kinetic operations against Russia from there. Five, a limited war in Ukraine could destabilise it sufficiently to cause it to postpone joining NATO. Russia’s ingress into the Donbass and Ukraine is thus a well-considered one.

Large-scale war on a European battlefield, yet again, would be anathema to the Europeans. Do European and US interests genuinely converge against Russia, considering the lopsided economic cost a confrontation would impose on Europe (especially Germany)? Prudence demands that the further expansion of NATO eastwards be put off for a while. During this interim period, a buffer zone from Finland in the North to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the Black Sea and Georgia should be accepted by all. This could allow the geopolitical environment to improve, stabilise and allow for a peaceful resolution of this issue.