**The Ukraine crisis**

BY A I Z A Z A H M A D C H A U D H R Y 2022-04-08

THAT Russia would invade Ukraine on the very day that President Putin was hosting the Pakistani prime minister in Moscow came as a surprise to nearly all in Pakistan.

The US had been indicating the likelihood of a military attack by Russia on Ukraine. But most observers in Pakistan were sceptical of such a likelihood and felt that UkraineRussia tensions would probably continue to simmer.

As soon as the invasion was announced, policymakers in Pakistan had to take a position and fast. There were two contrasting schools of thought. The first argued that since Pakistan had recently adopted a policy to maintain ties with every major global power, it made pragmatic sense to take a policy line that would not undermine this opening with Russia. Proponents of this argument would suggest that the US had itself committed aggression against sovereign countries and was an unreliable friend.

Much in line with this thought, the position that Pakistan accordingly adopted comprised two key elements: de-escalate the conflict and resolve it peacefully.

There was another prevailing view, however. The second school of thought claimed that Pakistan had enjoyed sustained periods of close engagement with the US, and even now the US remained its largest trading partner, while political and economic cooperation with Russia was practically negligible. When Pakistan chose to abstain from the vote at the UN, advocates of this perspective were quick to question why Pakistan was seemingly provoking the US and Europe with its policy line.

But ultimately, it should not become a question of which side Pakistan should support. After all, Pakistan has good bilateral ties with both the US and Russia. What should matter is whether Pakistan is upholding the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. In the age of unilateralism and doctrines of pre-emptive strikes, it is imperative that Pakistan take a position based on the abiding principles of interstate conduct.

Looking at the principles of interstate conduct, the facts on the ground affirm that Russia had invaded a sovereign country.

Such aggression could not be condoned as this was a violation of international law.

Therefore, for many the position that Pakistan had taken fell short of the principled position that Pakistan previously adopted in the crises in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. Pakistan always stood for respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of fellow nation states. Perhaps this is what the army chief meant when he asserted at the recent Islamabad Security Dialogue that `aggression against a smaller country cannot be condoned`To many, this position made sense. After all, how could Pakistan accept the logic of a larger state invading a relatively smaller neighbour? Would countries like India not be encouraged to adopt such unilateral kinetic actions against their neighbours in pursuit of establishing their hegemony? There has rightly been talk of Russia`s security concern that if Ukraine were to join Nato, it could bring Nato`s missiles right to the Russian border and threaten Russia`s security. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 is cited as a precedent America had reacted strongly to the Soviet decision to deploy missiles in Cuba, just 145 kilometres off the US coast. Still, Russian concerns were not considered earnestly, and gradually the ambit of Nato inched closer towards Russia`s borders.

Prima facie, the crisis could be resolved if the US and Europe extend assurances to Russia that Ukraine would not be included in Nato. However, the situation has now become more complicated. For starters, the Russian forces appear to be stuck in a pro-tracted conflict, and have not been able to achieve a swift victory. The people and armed forces of Ukraine, duly aided by European countries, have demonstrated resilience thatRussia had not anticipated. Secondly, the humanitarian disaster has become acute, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing to neighbouring countries. Pressure is mounting on Russia to end its military operation and commence meaningful negotiations with Ukraine, with possible guarantees coming from three permanent members of the UN Security Council: the UK, France and China.

The voting at the UN General Assembly indicatedthat141statessupportedUkraine`s right to defend itself against the Russian invasion. There were some (35 to be exact) that chose to abstain. They included China, India and Pakistan. The debate has entered another round at the Security Council, and will also figure in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Pakistan must adopt the principled position of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, call upon Russia to end its military operation, and urge all parties to resolve the conflict through talks.

The question is not about whose side Pakistan is on but about the principles of interstate conduct. m The writer, a former foreign secretary, is DG Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad and author of Diplomatic Footprints.