**The looming crisis in Ukraine**

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Thursday, Feb 10, 2022

The year was 1962 and the cold war was gaining momentum. The Soviet Union was trying to deploy nuclear installations in the backyard of the United States as the latter had deployed them in Turkey which was the former’s backyard.

The US felt uncomfortable, and the point came when the Cuban Missile Crisis got to the most critical juncture in the cold-war period. Suffice it to say that it could turn the cold war into the hottest ever war in human history. Thanks to the Kennedy-Khrushchev compromise, the dust settled causing unimaginable misery.

Fast forward to the present, in the uncertain times of Covid and global economic instability, the biggest crisis between the US and Russia since the cold war has emerged now. Moscow is unwilling to compromise on Ukraine and frequently conducts military drills to deter Ukraine from joining the Western camp. Washington is reluctant to step back as it would only enhance Putin’s standing within and without Russia. While at the center of the conflict, Ukraine finds itself ignored in the international media as the whole focus remains on the dragons. If they fight, Ukraine will be on fire.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 in a bid to show its regional hegemonic designs. Its intentions make it clear that it will not let Ukraine slip away. According to many analysts, the US has been adamant at expanding Nato by aspiring to add Ukraine into it. Professor John J Mearsheimer, the renowned realist scholar, has years ago called the Ukraine crisis a West’s fault. The US has long followed the Monroe Doctrine and expects other countries to abide by the rules and stay away from the American/Western hemisphere. But it has not restricted itself from interfering in other regions. Great powers usually do this which has historically led to armed conflicts. Geography is a great friend to the US while it is not for other regional powers.

Russia, a regional power, fears the expansion of Nato. The Western aspiration of adding Ukraine in Nato and the EU is seen by Russia with wary eyes. As the West hints at sending forces to Ukraine, Putin is rubbing his own matchstick. More than 100,000 Russian troops surround Ukraine from the three sides. For Russia, Ukraine is a matter of vital strategic importance. Any miscalculation in this apparently unwanted conflict may lead to an escalating confrontation.

Ukraine, where the East meets the West, is at the present, stuck between a rock and a hard place. It acts as a buffer between Russia and US-backed Europe. When it was tried to include Georgia and Ukraine into Nato in 2008 in the Bucharest Summit, Vladimir Putin called the move unacceptable and termed it as “a direct threat” to Russia. Consequently, a Georgia-Russian war broke down. Putin blames the West for having backtracked on its verbal promise — allegedly made at the end of the cold war — of not expanding Nato eastwards. Putin insists that the then US secretary of state, James Baker, committed to Gorbachev that Nato would not expand to the East if Russia accepted German reunification. However, since German reunification, 14 countries have joined Nato. For Russia, Ukraine is the red line.

The Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine was passed in 2016, under which Nato has been assisting Ukraine on a small scale through 16 different programmes including defence and security. Nato works on the principle of collective defense. However, it can, at least theoretically, not protect Ukraine militarily as long as the country does not formally become a part of the organisation. And Russia won’t let it be.

For Putin, oil and gas is the leverage and Russia could use it as a deterrence. Europe is apparently not so likely to take fast steps in showing ambition for adding Ukraine to the EU/Nato. More than 40 percent of natural gas and one quarter of crude oil comes from Russia in Europe. Military escalations can affect the oil prices worldwide. Moreover, Ukraine is a European breadbasket and a major exporter of grains in the Global South. A geopolitical conflict in this fertile land can potentially lead to food insecurity in some parts of the world including Europe. Ukraine’s Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov writes in the Atlantic Council, “A major war in Ukraine would plunge the whole of Europe into crisis”. He adds, “The future of Europe itself is at stake, and it will be decided in Ukraine”.

Ukraine is one of those geostrategic places where a hostile conflict can emerge in the 21st century. China does not have many stakes in Ukraine and would not like to indulge in the conflict. However, one’s enemy’s enemy usually becomes a friend — and the common enmity towards the US could push Russia and China closer to each other. As the US lifts its focus from other places and puts it around China, especially in East Asia, it can be expected for good that the Ukraine crisis will be resolved, at least for now, with talks and not with bullets. However, like all conflicts, miscalculations can be dangerous. Both Russia and the US know this well.

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