**Flashpoint Ukraine**

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Ukraine is growingly turning into a flashpoint between Russia and the US-led NATO member states. Russia has amassed over one hundred thousand troops around this former Soviet republic and is busy in military drills at several points along the common border.

Equally frenzied are the United States and its NATO allies, accusing Kremlin of trying to invade Kyiv. They are warning Moscow to de-escalate and pull back its military from the Ukrainian border.

Russia says its military build-up is aimed to counter NATO’s expansion in the region. It has warned the alliance not to attract countries in the region into its fold and withdraw its forces and weapons from Eastern Europe.

Last week, the European Union Foreign Ministers held a meeting in Brussels, expressing their resolve that any further ‘military aggression by Russia over Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe costs.’ They warned of ‘never seen before’ economic sanctions if Russia ever ventured to invade Ukraine.

The second-largest country of Europe after Russia, Ukraine had established relations with NATO soon after its separation from the erstwhile Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In 2008, it expressed its intentions to join the alliance.

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However, former President Viktor Yanukovych, after his election in 2010, shelved the plan to join NATO and declared Ukraine a non-aligned country. After his violent removal and the Russian invasion in 2014, the new Kyiv government again announced plans to join NATO and the EU.

Moscow perceives this plan as Kyiv’s intention to join forces with the anti-Russia Western powers. It has repeatedly demanded of NATO not to bring Ukraine and other former Soviet Republics into its fold.

Thirteen thousand people have been killed in clashes and skirmishes between the Russian and Ukrainian forces during the last eight years. The most serious confrontation took place between the two countries in 2014 during which Russia ‘annexed’ the Black Sea Crimean Peninsula in the south of Ukraine.

Military tension subsided between the two countries when France and Germany intervened and brokered a peace deal between Kyiv and Moscow. However, their political tension persisted, flaring up occasionally.

In early 2021, Moscow again concentrated troops on the Ukrainian border but pulled them back in April that year after conducting massive drills that aroused fears of an attack in Kyiv and the allied capitals. The crisis again surfaced in late 2021 when Ukraine and NATO accused Russia of planning a multi-dimensional invasion of the country.

Ever since the military and political tensions are constantly escalating, not along the Russia-Ukraine border alone, but in the entire region as the Western allies are supporting Kyiv in all respects. They are not only extending military support to Ukraine but are also providing generous economic assistance to it. Just last week, the European Commission announced a $1.36 billion financial package for Kyiv.

Border tension and the threat of a direct Russian attack are not the only concerns for Ukraine and its allies. There are also a large number of ethnic Russians in northern and western parts of that country, who are deemed as a source of instability inside Ukraine. Russia is being blamed for the hot uprising in east Ukraine.

Two days back, five Ukrainian military personnel were killed and five others injured when a young conscript snatched an AK-47 gun and ammunition from a rocket factory in the central city of Dnipro and opened fire on fellow soldiers.

Russia has constantly been demanding of the US-led Western powers not to intervene in its ‘sphere of influence.’

Last week, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken reaffirmed his country’s commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and ‘the right of states to choose their security arrangements and alliances.’

However, the Moscow-friendly approach of French President Emmanuel Macron is being perceived as a potential blow to the United States and its NATO allies. France, along with Germany, had not only brokered the 2015 peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, it still is continuing efforts to resolve their dispute diplomatically.

President Macron is not only endeavouring to de-escalate tension on the Russia-Ukraine border. He is making overtures to reset his country’s relations with Moscow. For quite some time, he is pushing for a dialogue between the Russian and the Ukrainian leaders.

Macron’s office hosted a meeting among French, German, Russian and Ukrainian officials last week. It plans to call them for another meeting next week. Macron is scheduled to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the situation. This diplomatic activism of France has annoyed both NATO and the United States.

Political observers attribute Macron’s pro-Moscow moves to the recently signed AUKUS agreement between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia under which, the United Kingdom will provide nuclear submarines to Austria to counter-balance the Chinese military might in the Asia-Pacific.

AUKUS dealt a serious blow to France as with its signing, France was deprived of its billions of dollars worth of an already signed submarine deal with Australia.

But other opinions say the diplomacy-focused approach of the French President over the Russia-Ukraine conflict is in keeping with the Post World War II tradition of France to carve out its independent geopolitical path.

Frankly speaking, the overtures of President Macron to Moscow on Ukraine issue have put a big question mark on unity and solidarity in the ranks of NATO. Even if he does not succeed to mend fences between Moscow and Kyiv, the Western alliance will never be able to place effective checks on Russia in Central and East Europe without the support of Paris.

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