**Russia, Ukraine and NATO**

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Russia denies any designs to invade Ukraine. However, Moscow is wary of NATO’s efforts to expand eastwards in the direction of Russia’s borders. Russia has accused Ukraine of taking help from NATO in not only getting arms from NATO but also training of its personnel, alleging this is in line to retake the Donbas region.

Ukraine on the other hand is unhappy with Russia trying to interfere with Kyiv trying to build a stronger relationship with NATO. The tensions between Ukraine and Russia flared after Ukraine entered into a trade/political deal with the European Union in 2013. Ukraine also feels Nord Stream 2 pipeline that directly allows Russia to connect gas supplies with Germany is a direct threat to its security. Since 2014, both countries are in what’s known as the Russo-Ukrainian War with Russia backing separatists against Ukrainian soldiers in the Donbas region. Thousand have lost their lives since.

NATO will react strongly against Russia if any action of unfriendly nature, short scale or an invasion takes place. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in a December 1 interview with CNN stated, “We have a wide range of options: economic sanctions, financial sanctions, political restrictions.”

The purpose of these sanctions will be to push back Putin to ensure he does not cross the red line. Russia’s interest in Ukraine has many angles. 27 of NATO countries are in Europe. Some are countries that were former members of the Soviet Union. Ukraine therefore can be a gateway to NATO connection for others. The member states have an understanding that in a situation where one of them is threatened physically, all others will join in defence against the aggressor. NATO’s engagement has practically been suspended since Russia invaded and annexed Crimea.

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Ukraine has been dubbed as “the breadbasket of Europe.” Ukraine has been so far unable to use this gift as it should have been. Presently Ukraine only cultivates 32 hectares annually. But it has a huge scope for cultivation and can indeed “feed the world.” [ Atlantic Council, March 4, 2021] “Ukraine is already among the top three grain exporters and a world leader in areas such as soybeans and sunflower oil. Ukrainian agricultural exports enjoy a growing profile in key global markets like China, Egypt, India, Turkey, and across the European Union.”

Will Putin invade Ukraine? There can be no clear-cut response to this but Biden thinks he will. In a press conference he stated, I’m not so sure he is certain what he’s going to do. My guess is he will move in. He has to do something.”

What is clear is, that Moscow wants less meddling and relationship building between NATO and Ukraine. Also, less control of Eastern Europe. Ukraine is, today, a strategic ally of the US. With NATO and the US just out of the longest war they have fought in Afghanistan, will they be willing to engage on another front for a prolonged face-off with Russia? If NATO thinks of placing sanctions on Russia- that’s not a wonderful idea. Bloomberg, in an article dated January 23, 2022, states that Russia remains the top oil and natural gas supplier to EU nations. In a nutshell, the European Union partners may not exactly react joyously to this suggestion as they stand to face repercussions that the US does not. Russia reportedly is the fifth-biggest trade partner to European Union. So, if sanctions are imposed, a shrewd guess would be they will be different kinds of sanctions by different states. The policy may be the same but actions may differ.

Sanctions are never without reactions. Without some kind of payback. It can have an impact but not to a degree that it reverts any step taken by Russia. Even short-term repercussions will lead to a stand-off of the relationship with Russia, carrying the hostile posture to another level. Throwing down a gambit must only be done if NATO is prepared for the reaction by Russia in full. “Russian President Vladimir Putin countered that Russia would be forced to act if US-led NATO placed missiles in Ukraine that could strike Moscow within minutes….Putin said Tuesday that military exercises and other moves by the West and Ukraine threaten Russia’s security, warning against crossing the Kremlin’s “red lines.” [DEC 01, 2021]

What the players must understand is that is not about Ukraine. The issue for Russia is about Ukraine and NATO. Putin’s demands to turn verbal platitudes into agreements is aimed to put a stop to any wish from the western block that poses a threat to Russian security. Will the US and its allies be willing to ratify any agreement that addresses Russian security concerns? If done, it will be acknowledging the Russian stance of Ukraine’s strategic reorientation so to speak. However, Putin needs to come to some kind of a middle ground if he wishes to avert a wide-based confrontation. Any decision based on a unilateral approach is bound to die a natural death. With European counties and the US supporting the Ukrainian position for obvious reasons, Russia has two choices: either accept that Ukraine is firmly in NATO block or fight against this. One cannot but understand that Russia was ousted from Afghanistan by the US and cannot be exited by the thought of Ukraine becoming a cushion for the US thrust into the Russian southwestern end. Would Russia opt for a partitioned Ukraine? One cannot strike the option off the books. It will not be a great option but one where everything is not lost.

Though the situation is still fluid and nothing is yet certain, Russia may likely end up controlling areas of Ukraine if not the whole of Ukraine.

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