**The Russia-US Ukrainian Standoff**

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The master of brinkmanship, Russian President Vladimir Putin, is back on the geopolitical and geo-economic chessboard in Ukraine after wresting the strategic enclave of Crimea. Russia has amassed over 100,000 troops; sent warships in the Baltic sea and extensive “military exercise” is underway. The Russians have handed over a list of demands to the US, which was handed over during the meeting of the US secretary of State Mr Antony Blinken and the Russian Foreign Minister Mr Sergey Lavrov in Geneva last week. As per details filtering from international media apparently, the US has given a written response to the Russian “demands.” In international diplomacy, optics and overtures are significant as the content of the communication/message. Historically, the diplomatic parleys take place in an environment of giving and take. Parties to the conflict, of course, bring to the negotiating table their respective maximal positions and efforts are made by both parties to find a mutually agreeable middle ground. What Russia did was, mobilising troops close to the Ukrainian border; conducting a menacing military exercise and bringing a list of demands for which they wanted return responses. The Russian diplomatic and military overtures, devoid of traditional diplomatic subtlety, could be based on some assumptions: one, the US, having experienced a humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan, must be licking its wounds and would be shy of involving its troops or political/diplomatic capital in Ukraine crisis; Second, the trade war with China initiated by former President Donald Trump has become too big a inferno, which President Joe Biden has not been able to putdown. In fact, the US-China relations are at their lowest ebb since the signing of Shanghai Communiqué between US President Richard Nixon and Chines Premier Zhou Enlai in February 1972. Third, the US and other western countries, who are members of NATO, appeared as a house divided from within, since Trump termed the Military Alliance “(NATO) as bad as NFATA” in June 2018 and there were reports that privately, he had discussed with his aides the possibilities of US withdrawal from the NATO since it was “too expensive.” Fourth, Joe Biden has so far failed to erode the “Trump’s Talsiman” in the two houses of the US Parliament. If anything, the political polarisation in the US body politics has further deepened to the extent that some analysts have started to worry about the future of democracy in the US. Fifth, the COVID-19 has brought to the fore huge challenges of public health and supply chain disruptions; testing the leadership and government capacity to cope with this major pandemic in the 21st Century.

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The question is that if the diplomatic efforts fail to produce a mutually acceptable solution and the crises spins out of control, and Russian President Putin while riding on his diplomatic and military victories in Syria and Crimea, indeed tries his luck with reclaiming the control over Ukraine and moves military forces into Ukrainian territory, the world could face potentially a global crisis in general and Eurasian peninsula in particular. So, the US and its allies have said that Russian military incursion in to Ukrainian territory would attract unprecedented sanctions including sanctions targeting the person of Mr Putin. The major western countries dependent on Russian gas are shying away at imposing punitive sanctions.

Especially Germany, which is the economic powerhouse of the EU, would desire a diplomatic solution to the present crisis. Moscow has not indicated willingness to accept a solution that does not address its core interests including the assurance that Ukraine will not join NATO and that NATO not carry out military exercises in Baltic and other east European states. The US, under Biden, would also not like a prolonged diplomatic wrangling with Moscow, least a destabilizing military confrontation in European continent.

The global stock markets felt tremors of the crises, European markets tumbled by 3.8 percent. In UK alone the jittery market wiped 53 billion pounds of the UK’S BLUE -CHIP share Index. The world economy can ill afford a military conflict between the two major powers, since all countries are experiencing unprecedented inflation and price hike, of all items specially the weak economies are experiencing e economic crisis and the resultant civil unrest. Will Putin swallow his pride and pull back from the brink without assurances from US that Ukraine will not join NATO, while the cost for US will be too high if it blinks and repeats the US weak/no response on Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014.

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