**Rising tensions in Europe**

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The specter of a new conflict is haunting millions of people in several parts of Europe after Moscow amassed 100,000 troops close to the Ukrainian borders. Another 100,000 could be mobilised at short notice.

The United States and its allies view this Russian move as an attempt to threaten Kyiv that has been trying to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Moscow seems to have a dogged determination to prevent Ukraine from joining this Washington-led military alliance which was formed in the past to battle the menace of red revolutions that swept through several parts of Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

The Russians have been apprehensive about the expansion of Nato, asserting that the West wants to encircle the largest country on the earth, threatening its security. Moscow accuses the West and the US of reneging on their promises that they made to Gorbachev regarding the non-expansion of the Western military alliance. The reformist leader of the Soviet Union had been assured that not a single inch expansion would be made.

Though there were no written agreements about these promises, the last communist leader of the Soviet Union and a number of other Russians have claimed in the past that such assurances were held out verbally to the champion of Perestroika and Glasnost whose efforts led to the easing of tensions with the capitalist world, abolition of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of Warsaw Pact, a Moscow-led military alliance formed to counter Nato.

The West asserts that no such assurances were ever held out to Gorbachev. The prominent think tank of the UK Chatham House wrote in its 2021 publication that the (former) USSR was never offered a formal guarantee on “the limits of Nato expansion post-1990”. John Lough, the research associate who authored the section, asserted that Moscow merely distorts history to help preserve an anti-Western consensus at home. But such Western assertions are fiercely challenged by Russians who believe that such an understanding regarding the non-enlargement of Nato did exist between Gorbachev and the West. Nikolai Sokov, a former Russian diplomat who served in the foreign ministry in Moscow between 1987 and 1992, challenged this Western claim. Sokov told Radio Free Europe last year: "The Chatham House piece is very bad -- it sounds to be a piece produced by the Ideology Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union."

Russians feel that Nato’s attempts to include Ukraine into the Western military alliance flies in the face of such assurances which could jeopardise the security of the giant country. Moscow witnessed with great disquiet the enlargement of Nato during the last 30 years. First it was the former communist countries of central and eastern Europe or their successor states that became the part of what Russians call an anti-Moscow alliance and later three members of former USSR namely Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania that joined it. Russian analysts believe that such an enlargement brought the 30 member military pact close to the borders of Russia and that the inclusion of Ukraine would still bring them closer.

This has infuriated not only Russian nationalists but a number of ordinary Russians who believed that easing tensions with the West and ending the cold war would bring peace and security to their country, keeping it away from conflicts and wars. They assert that Nato’s moves are meant to drag Moscow into a new conflict that could have catastrophic consequences for the Russian nation which was devastated twice by the West – the first time during the invasion of Russia by Napoleon in the 19th century and the second time during the Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union at the height of the World War. Some Russians believe that the invasion of their country by the Western powers after the communist revolution of 1917 was also orchestrated by Western powers that dealt a severe blow to the economy of the country besides tearing apart the social fabric of Russian society.

To ease the current tensions, Western leaders seem to be flexible towards some of the conditions by Moscow but over the issue of Ukraine joining Nato they are inflexible. The two sides have also started hurling veiled threats causing a surge in the temperature. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN recently that there were two paths before Washington and Moscow: “There’s a path of dialogue and diplomacy to try to resolve some of these differences and avoid a confrontation. The other path is confrontation and massive consequences for Russia if it renews its aggression on Ukraine. We are about to test the proposition about which path President Putin’s prepared to take.”

Many fear that such statements do not augur well for the peace and security of Europe. Both Europe and Russia suffered a lot because of conflicts and wars in the past. The continent suffered more than 30 million casualties during the first and second world wars besides witnessing an unimaginable destruction on an epic scale. Many argue that since the US did not suffer as badly as Europe during World War II, its leadership does not comprehend the gravity of matter. They believe that European leadership should follow an independent line opening dialogue channels with Russia that not only borders the continent but is very much a part of European civilisation.

These tensions have also raised questions about the utility of Nato that should have been abolished a long time ago. It is logical to ask: if the military alliance had been formed to counter the communist threat then why should it exist after the demise of the communist bloc? The Western military alliance has become a modern war machine, acting as a global policeman. Its activities are not only draining out resources but also playing havoc with the lives of millions in several parts of the world. At the moment when the world is grappling with the effects of pandemic, there is no justification for Western leaders to pump billions or possibly trillions of dollars into this world war machine.

According to some estimates, only the United States has wasted more than $14 trillion on various wars and conflicts since September 11. The US and its Western allies have a large military budget which could be spent on the welfare of people and to fight environmental degradation which is the biggest enemy of humanity. More wars and conflicts would only add to the woes of the over seven billion souls that inhabit this planet.

It seems that Moscow has also not learnt anything from history. It was its hegemonic and expansionist policy in the past that dragged it into different conflicts, dealing a severe blow to its economy and leading to the demise of the Soviet Union. Despite the collapse of the USSR, Moscow is still one of the biggest spenders on defence in the world.

Russian President Putin needs to normalise relations with Europe diverting this much needed money towards the welfare of his people instead of wasting it on troop mobilisation and war preparations, which would be extremely expensive in the long run. If Moscow really wants to be a global leader then it should along with other countries mobilise public opinion not only against Nato, which is a permanent war machine, but against nuclearisation and armament as well. The world needs money to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and fight diseases. The dismantling of Nato and banning experiments on lethal weapons can be one of the ways to achieve this aim.

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