**Imperialist obsessions**

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Vladimir Putin recently termed the collapse of the Soviet Empire as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. Putin had always been obsessed with “Imperialist urge”, for that, he needed to rule the superpower. However, reclaiming the lost glory of the faded Soviet Union in early 2000 was far more challenging with the emergent ‘unipolar power’ USA establishing her unchallenged New World Order. As America got embroiled in two expensive ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, Putin quietly remained engaged in recollecting shattered Russia, that would complement him in asserting beyond frontiers, regions. Authoritarian Putin ruthlessly oppressed internal dissent and enforced police reforms for indefinitely extending his rule. Learning from the Georgian conflict, he modernised military technologically, consolidated nuclear formidability and jettisoned the rigidly centralised Soviet era command structure to render it lean and effective. Ruling revived Russia, Putin came decisively hard on the Chechnya separatist movement, and actively oversaw Russia’s victory in Georgia in 2008. Subsequently, he annexed Crimea in 2014 prompting US sanctions impacting the country’s economy. At the same time Putin sponsored separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine through the Russian speaking populace in the Donbas region, and declared its Donetsk and Luhansk provinces as independent countries. In parallel, he reinvigorated the Russian energy-based economy through reforms and a significant increase in the price of oil and gas, expanded trade with Europe mainly in terms of natural fossil minerals. In that, Putin successfully made the EU dependent on Russian energy supplies. Prior to the Ukrainian invasion, Russian trade with the EU was in excess of € 257B, in that oil imports from Russia amounted to € 99.8B.
With China, ‘energy’ became the economic centrepiece of the Sino-Russia relationship as total trade between two countries amounted to $146.9B in 2021. This economic led convergence afforded Putin greater leverage against the US regionally and beyond, particularly in the case of Afghanistan, Iran, and economic sanctions in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation. Russia is China’s second largest oil supplier and the third largest gas provider as it exported 16.5B cubic meters (Bcm) to China last year. In all these years, Putin pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy, and revived Moscow’s great power role in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In 2015, Putin military intervened in Syria, stalemating America in dislodging President Assad through a massive air campaign against ISIS and rebels. This event became a game changer, shedding ambiguity, if any, on his ambition to reassert power beyond Russian frontiers at a time, once the USA was reconfiguring for the Asia-Pivot in the Indo-Pacific after limiting itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. Notwithstanding collaboration with China to nudge American influence far from their interests, Putin silently resented China’s emergence as the global competitor to the US, which he perceived to be at the cost of Russia.
For imperialist and resentful Putin, creating a global crisis at the cost of European security became an irresistible temptation to wean America from China. America’s humiliating retreat from Afghanistan added to his urge. The design was meant to revive the superpower prestige of Russia, for that militarism in Ukraine became appealing on multiple accounts. To invade Ukraine, Putin could garner domestic approval by animating decades’ old-deep rooted Russian resentment on Ukraine’s existence, as Russians and Ukrainian are thought to be one nation, which was unnaturally split in two countries. To de-capacitate Ukraine, he derived much convincing from Russian force modernisation, successes in Crimea, and support of separatist movements in the Donbas Region. A fractured Trans-Atlantic relationship, the legacy of the Trump era figured as an exploitive advantage for Putin. While resting comfort on Biden’ domestic challenges in the aftermath of the Afghanistan fiasco, and his preoccupation with China, Putin did not anticipate serious resistance from energy dependent Europe too. China in his calculation was supportive, as the former could emulate Russian adventurism over the Straits of Taiwan. Economic sanctions by the US and Europe were thought to be blunted by Russian forex reserves of $ 640B, and energy export to third countries. As Putin prepared to invade Ukraine, he created strategic ambiguity by bombarding justifications. His reasons included Russian insecurity amidst NATO expansion along her borders, concerns on American nuclear forces in Europe, so called moral support to Russian speaking separatists in the Donbas region, “demilitarising and de-Nazifying Ukraine”, deposing Ukrainian puppet government, and Reuniting Great Russia by absorbing Ukraine, etc. In the midst of confusion, he conveniently defied the Ukraine related treaties, Russia signed after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Russia was among signatories of “Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances” in 1994, that prohibited using force against former ex-Soviet Union states as these surrendered nuclear weapons. In 1999, Russia became part of the “Charter for European Security”, which guaranteed the inherent right of each participating State to choose alliances. Against these overt aims, Putin eyed bigger gains which could complement his obsession of emerging as third power in the global order, denying sea access to Ukraine and destroying her military to render it a compliant state. Aggression also aimed at threatening European Security and dissuading NATO from further expansion.