

IS THE POST-COLD WAR SECURITY ORDER CHANGING?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Members of the Ukrainian State Border Guard Service patrol the area near the frontier with Russia in the Chernihiv region, Ukraine. | Photo Credit: Reuters

*After a weeks-long stand-off, Russia announced on Tuesday that it is pulling back some of its troops from areas close to Ukraine, signalling a possible de-escalation. But at the same time, it has said that its core security concerns, particularly on NATO's expansionary open-door policy, remain unaddressed. The crisis, whichever way it is headed, has brought the post-Cold War European security architecture into sharp focus, and triggered debates on whether the great power rivalry is back in the continent. In a conversation moderated by **Stanly Johny, P.S. Raghavan** and **Nandan Unnikrishnan** discuss the Russia-Ukraine crisis and what it means to the post-Cold War world order. Edited excerpts:*

P.S. Raghavan: Let me start with what you said about the European security architecture. I think what recent events have shown is that the post-Cold War European security architecture is not complete as yet. It is not as stable as people assumed it was. And at least since 2014, since we have seen this Russia-U.S. and Russia-Europe stand-off, the questions about what is a security equilibrium in Europe have constantly arisen. What the present action has done is dramatically pushed it to the fore. Of course, this has been going on for a long time; the troops build up was first reported in the end of October 2021. And it has been going on until it reached the stage where the U.S. said Russia has troops to invade all of Ukraine.

But what is President Vladimir Putin trying to do? I think he is responding to what U.S. President [Joe] Biden did in June last year when he extended a hand to Mr. Putin and said, 'look, I want a predictable and stable relationship with Europe'. The subtext was that he wanted the U.S. to get out of needless conflicts in Europe, West Asia and elsewhere — the withdrawal from Afghanistan was one demonstration of that — to be able to focus at least externally on the single principal adversary of the U.S., which is China. And what Mr. Putin is trying to say is, 'yes, if you want a predictable and stable relationship with Russia, Russia's security needs to be taken care of. I don't want to have to be constantly skirmishing with NATO all around my periphery. If my security is guaranteed, then we are on our way to have a predictable and stable relationship with the U.S.' Essentially, that's the deal that Mr. Putin is seeking.

Nandan Unnikrishnan: First, I have to address the question of whether Russia has got anything so far. It has definitely not got security guarantees. It had handed over its written documents in December and some of those have received a written response, which the Russian sources have described as inadequate. In some cases, they said the issues they raised had not been addressed, and there were responses to secondary issues, But there is a significant victory that Russia has achieved. It's not enough to diffuse the situation, but it is a victory. The U.S.-led West has at last recognised what Russia has been saying since 1994 — that the security architecture in Europe is not in accordance with what Russia considers the security architecture should be or, to put it bluntly, that it has security concerns about its own security, and that these have to be addressed. The fact that the West is willing to address and discuss this appears to be a big victory for Russia, because just till recently, these demands were dismissed as not serious.

Second, has the situation been diffused? I still believe that we are heading towards some kind of accommodation. The Russians used a very heavy hammer to attract attention. But do I believe that the Russians are going to invade Ukraine? I don't think so, as that defeats the purpose of acquiring a certain degree of security. If they invade Ukraine, that is over. The Russians may be successful; they may take bits and pieces of Ukraine or even half of Ukraine right up to the Dneiper river, but insecurity will only grow. So, the way forward is accommodation.

P.S. Raghavan: Let's remember that NATO is 28 European nations and two non-European nations — the U.S. and Canada. Europe is right next to Russia, Europe has been facing the brunt of the Soviet as well as Russian actions over the last many decades. It is obvious that Europe will look at Russia differently from the U.S. And it's important to understand that the impact of any action that NATO takes in terms of sanctions or security will first be felt in Europe, not in the U.S. So, naturally, Europe's interest is in accommodation. Europe's interest in sorting out this matter is immediate and existential, while the U.S.'s is strategic and long term. That is a distinction that one needs to keep in mind.

Also, I would like to point out that what Mr. Putin has achieved is, gradually the West has moved forward more towards meeting Russia's demands. Of course, it has not gone anywhere near ensuring that Russia's demands are fully satisfied. Russia has essentially three demands One, Ukraine and Georgia should not join NATO. Two, the Ukraine impasse should be resolved. Russia's view is that the U.S. in particular has obstructed the implementation of the Minsk agreement. And three, these mutual security guarantees that we've all been talking about. Now, increasingly, the West has been saying that Ukraine's entry into NATO is not on the cards. It's nowhere near happening. Of course, this is an informal statement and the Russians keep wanting a legal guarantee. But the Normandy process, which is the Russia-Germany-France-Ukraine initiative to implement the Minsk accords, is one of the fundamental demands of the Russians. And it looks like they are moving towards agreeing to that. The other point is about the mutual security guarantees. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Mr. Putin in a publicly televised address that the West has already agreed to a number of guarantees [including on missile deployments and military drills]. Here, again, the distinction between Europe and America is very important. The placement of short-term and short- and medium-range missiles on either side of the Russian border that is in Europe is very much in the interests of European security. Also, they want to agree on a minimum distance between the deployment of missiles, they want to have an agreement on prior notification or military exercises. So, a number of such confidence-building measures, in bits and pieces, have already been offered to Russia. And that was confirmed by Foreign Minister Lavrov to President Putin.

Nandan Unnikrishnan: Mr. Putin feels that this is the most opportune moment for Russia to press forward its demands. I am not going to get into the question of whether he perceives the U.S. to be weak or not weak. We are aware that the U.S. still stays the pre-eminent power in the world. I think that Mr. Putin understands that the strategic interests of the U.S. are elsewhere currently: they are to deal with many domestic problems that the U.S. is going through, and at the international level, the focus is more on the Indo-Pacific. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is symptomatic of this desire to have stable relationships elsewhere in the world so that it can focus on what it considers to be its primary area of challenge, which is the Indo-Pacific. Incidentally, that's something that the Indians should also welcome. Having understood that, I think Mr. Putin feels that this is the most opportune moment to attract attention, through maybe some provocative behaviour, and try to push forth his demands and hope that a negotiation will result in something that is mutually acceptable or, as Henry Kissinger said, something that is to their mutual dissatisfaction.

P.S. Raghavan: In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. And we had this issue of territorial integrity and sovereignty. In spite of that, we found a way of not criticising the Russian action. Here,

everyone should be happy with the stand we have taken because we said that we want a diplomatic solution which addresses the long-term legitimate security concerns of all sides. And that is what all countries are saying they want. Now, what we would like to see and what Mr. Putin and Mr. Biden are trying to achieve is an accommodation, and there are these off-ramps available. And if these are taken, you then reach a situation of better equilibrium in Europe between Russia and the West. That can only be good for India.

Any exacerbation of this situation can be only good for China in a number of ways, which is why I found it quite amusing when the U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland said that China should persuade Russia not to take action in Ukraine. Why should China do that? It is in China's interest if there is greater exacerbation of the problem. The U.S. being bogged down in Europe is exactly what China would like. So, you're looking at a situation where these belligerent postures result eventually in a kind of amicable solution. I think it's good for India. It enables the U.S. to focus on the Indo-Pacific and on China, which is what India wants, and it leaves India free to deal with Russia without a censorious U.S. breathing down our necks with CAATSA and other sanctions for defense purchases.

Nandan Unnikrishnan: Since the 1950s, this is the closest that China and Russia have ever been. There are many factors for this. And let us also not forget that both of them have been declared an adversary by the U.S., in official documents. So, this is a peculiar situation where the demand being put on Russia is that while your partner calls you an adversary, you must behave towards them as a very good friend. I mean, you know, obviously, Russia is going to take steps to protect its interests. And if this moves it towards China, that is a price that they will have to pay. But on the other front, there are still many areas. If you look at it just even from the simple issue of pride, the Russians did not want to cow down to the U.S. and therefore the West as a whole, and that's what's led to the breakdown of the relationship with the West, because the West was not considering an equal partnership. Why would Russia then break one relationship, which it was seeking through the 1990s, and maybe even in the beginning of the 2000s, and opt for another option, where it will be a junior partner once again?

I don't think that is in the Russian psyche, being a junior partner. Therefore, I would say that it's a matter of concern for India; India should continuously monitor the situation. But at the same time, it has not reached a stage where Russia and China are in some kind of unbreakable partnership. I think they still have their differences. Those differences have not been bridged. And even on the issue of Ukraine, it suits China's interests to have the U.S. embroiled in Europe. If you notice the word Ukraine does not occur in that long joint statement that they have issued [after the Putin-Xi Jinping meet this month]. China does talk about Russia's legitimate security concerns and mentions NATO. But Ukraine is not mentioned, because China has as strong interests in maintaining a good relationship with Ukraine. And on Crimea, I think President Putin himself has acknowledged it, the statement that India made at the time was probably the strongest expression of support by anyone. So, in a nutshell, I think the Russia-China relationship is something that India should closely observe.

P.S. Raghavan: There are three issues. If the Ukraine impasse is dealt with in the Normandy process, if Ukraine is persuaded by the West to take forward the Minsk agreements, which have been approved by the UN Security Council, that is a clear plus for the settlement of the issue. The second is the issue which I consider almost settled. What Mr. Lavrov told Mr. Putin recently about security guarantees of placement of missiles, distances between the NATO deployments and the deployments on the Russian side, confidence-building measures, force postures... these are issues that, once you launch negotiations, will take time, but are clearly mutually beneficial. And these are not controversial either on the side of Europe, or in the side of Russia. The third issue is about Ukraine joining NATO. Please note that in all this controversy Crimea has not been mentioned at all. Neither the U.S. nor Europe has said that Russia should vacate Crimea as part

of the security guarantees. As long as Crimea remains with Russia, and as long as these two breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain [outside the control of Georgia], neither Ukraine nor Georgia can join NATO. Because one of NATO's principles before it admits a country is that the country should not have disputes over its territory. To, these three elements exist for a solution. And essentially, both sides are looking for an opportune moment to get off the tigers that they're sitting on in order to reach this agreement. .

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