

SHAKING UP EUROPE'S SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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

The commencement of Russian military action in Ukraine brings down the curtain on the first act of a bizarre drama that has been playing out over the past eight months. At the heart of it is the instability in the post-Cold War security order.

The first act began with a meeting between U.S. President Biden and Russia's President Vladimir Putin in June last year, promising to reverse seven years of relentless U.S.-Russia acrimony. Mr. Biden's decision to reach out to Mr. Putin signalled a U.S. geopolitical rebalancing, seeking a modus vivendi with Russia and disengagement from conflicts in Europe and West Asia, to enable a sharper U.S. focus on domestic challenges and the external challenge from its principal strategic adversary, China.

Mr. Putin saw this reengagement as an opportunity to revive Russia's flagging economy and expand its freedom of political action globally.

However, he wanted this engagement on equal terms. Russia would cooperate in this geopolitical rebalancing if its concerns are met, so that it does not constantly have to counter moves to probe its territorial integrity and constrain its external influence — which is how Russia sees the strategic posture of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and U.S. policies.

Russia has repeatedly articulated its grievances: that NATO's expansion violated promises made prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union; that Ukraine's accession to NATO would cross Russia's red lines; and that NATO's strategic posture poses a continuing security threat to Russia.

NATO's expansion as a politico-military alliance, even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, was at the U.S.'s initiative. It was intended to temper European ambitions for strategic autonomy from the sole superpower and to counter Russia's resurgence. Recent experience shows it may not be succeeding in either goal.

NATO countries today span a geography of uneven economic development and a diversity of political traditions and historical consciousness. Moreover, the original glue that held NATO together — ideological solidarity (free world against communist expansion) and an existential military threat — dissolved with the collapse of communism and the Warsaw Pact. There is no ideology to oppose and threat perceptions vary, depending on geographical location and historical experience. This heterogeneity means a diversity of interests. American leadership has normally succeeded in papering over differences, but the growing ambitions of countries is making this increasingly difficult.

The current crisis in Ukraine has illustrated the divisions, and exposed the limitations of the U.S.'s ability to bridge them. The irony is that the divisions are of the U.S.'s making. Its pressure on NATO in 2008 to recognise Ukraine's membership aspirations and its encouragement for a change of government in Kyiv in 2014, provoked the Russian annexation of Crimea. The subsequent armed separatist movement in eastern Ukraine (Donbas) led to the Minsk accords of 2014-15, which provided for a special status for this region within Ukraine.

Ukraine considers this an unfair outcome, and the U.S. has supported its efforts to reinterpret the accords to its advantage. While some European countries supported this line, France and

Germany — which brokered these agreements — have periodically tried to progress implementation, in the effort to break the impasse and resume normal engagement with Russia, which serves their economic interests.

In recent months, the U.S. signalled that it would support the full implementation of the Minsk accords, but apparently found it difficult to shake the entrenched interests sufficiently to make it happen. This may have finally convinced Mr. Putin that his concerns would not be met through negotiations.

U.S. interests have also divided NATO on energy security. For Germany, the Nord Stream 2 (NS2) Russia-Germany gas pipeline is the cheapest source of gas for its industry. Others deem it a geopolitical project, increasing European dependence on Russian energy. This argument masks self-serving interests. Ukraine fears the diminution of gas transit revenues, and also that if its importance for gas transit declines, so will Europe's support in its disputes with Russia. The U.S.'s "geopolitical" argument against NS2 dovetails neatly with its commercial interest in exporting LNG to Europe, reinforced by U.S. legislation for sanctions against companies building gas pipelines from Russia. Increasing LNG exports to Europe is explicitly stated as a motivation for the sanctions. European countries that oppose NS2 are ramping up their LNG import infrastructure to increase imports from the U.S.

The manner in which NATO countries implement the promised harsh sanctions against Russia will demonstrate whether, how much and for how long, this crisis will keep them united.

It is too early to say what Mr. Putin's endgame is, and how costly this adventure will be, in terms of lives and destruction, as well as in its political and economic impact. Without justifying the manner in which Russia has chosen to "right" the perceived "wrongs", it has to be said that this crisis results from a broken security architecture in Europe. A sustainable security order has to reflect current realities: it cannot be simply an outgrowth of the Cold War order, and it has to be driven from within. Also, a European order that does not accommodate Russia's concerns through genuine negotiation cannot be stable in the long term. France's President Emmanuel Macron has been making this point forcefully, arguing for Europe to regain its strategic autonomy. He has called NATO "brain-dead" and said that Europe, as a "geopolitical power" should control its own destiny, regaining "military sovereignty" and re-opening a dialogue with Russia, managing the misgivings of post-Soviet countries.

India has to brace itself for some immediate challenges flowing from the Russian actions. It will have to balance the pressure from one strategic partner to condemn the violation of international law, with that from another to understand its legitimate concerns. We were there in 2014, and managed the pressures. As Russia-West confrontation sharpens further, the U.S. Administration's intensified engagement in Europe will inevitably dilute its focus on the Indo-Pacific, causing India to make some tactical calibration of actions in its neighbourhood. Geopolitics, however, is a long game, and the larger context of the U.S.-China rivalry could, at some point in the not too distant future, reopen the question of how Russia fits into the European security order.

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