

Reflections on Russia-Ukraine Crisis

Delhi School of Transnational Affairs (DSTA) organised an online panel discussion on the theme 'Reflections on Russia-Ukraine Crisis' on April 12, 2022. The panellists included Ambassador P S Raghavan (Retd), Former Chairman, National Security Advisory Board of India & Former Ambassador to Russia, Nandan Unnikrishnan, Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation and Nidhi Razdan, Consulting Editor, NDTV. The discussion was moderated by Prof Harsh V Pant, Director, DSTA. The session was concluded by Dr Bipin Kumar Tiwary, OSD, DSTA along with three Post-Doc Fellows of DSTA, Dr Beena, Dr Junjun Sharma Pathak and Dr Raj Kumar Sharma.

In his opening remarks, Prof Pant highlighted that a number of assumptions pertaining to global security, international politics, the liberal world order and the nature of warfare have changed after Russia-Ukraine conflict. This event has also profoundly impacted India and has brought consequences for India's foreign policy although New Delhi is at a diplomatic sweet spot in order to deal with the fallouts of this crisis.

Ambassador Raghavan highlighted following main points during his presentation.

- India's neutral stand on Russia-Ukraine conflict has not gone down well with the Western countries. Two main reasons for India's such a response are:
 - One is the nature of India's defence relationship with Russia where New Delhi is dependent on Moscow for military supplies. We cannot overlook this fact while Indian military faces an aggressive China on our northern frontiers.
 - Second aspect is geography as India shares same region (Eurasia) with Russia and there has been turbulence in areas like Afghanistan and Central Asia that equally impact both India and Russia.
- The Western hypocrisy is evident from the fact that they did not condemn Pakistan even when it unleashed terrorism against India as Pakistan was important for their operations in Afghanistan.
- The sanctions on Russia by different countries have been carefully crafted and energy sector has not been impacted harshly. The EU depends for 61 percent of its hydrocarbon supplies from Russia while the US has not banned uranium supplies from Russia. Another sector left untouched by the US is fertilisers (potassium) while Japan will continue to invest in the Sakhalin project in Russia's Far East. Likewise, there are many carve outs in the sanctions as different countries want to shield their consumers from energy price rise.
- The process of India's arms import diversification has been slowed down by bureaucratic issues and concerns over technology transfer. It is not that India is willingly dependent on Russia and attempts to wean away India from Russia (as the West believes it wants to do) is like running away from geography. Russia is a geographical reality for India in Eurasia which New Delhi cannot ignore.
- This war has some lessons for India as we need to enhance our strategic communication between our foreign policy and national security.

- Russia-China proximity is a reality which is a cause of concern for us. India should be looking at three factors here:
 - Reduce dependence on Russian military hardware.
 - As long as Russia has an ambition of its own without being dependent on any other country, India will be important for Russia in sustaining this desire.
 - Reduction in tensions between the US and Russia would bring relief for India.

The second panellist, Nandan Unnikrishnan highlighted history of this conflict through following main points.

- Finance is now a full-fledged weapon of war and it is as effective as hypersonic missiles.
- This is a war between Russia and the US while Ukraine is a proxy in it.
- This war has also destroyed the myth of objectivity in world media as one sided picture of war is emerging which is dominated by the pro-Ukraine Western media narrative. There is selective coverage of this war to suit the governments and public opinion in the West. 2-3 Twitter accounts which were operated by US Marines to point out inconsistency in Western media narrative were shut down by the US.
- From 1991 to 1994, the US and Russia were able to cooperate and ensured that Ukraine and Kazakhstan gave up their nuclear weapons. Today, Ukraine regrets this decision.
- After the disintegration of USSR, Russia looked towards the West for economic and security integration while it resisted NATO's expansion in the Eastern Europe.
- Today, NATO is almost all over the Europe including many former countries of the Soviet Union. Ukraine's constitution mentions that it would seek NATO membership as is evident from developments in 2017 and 2019. Geneva process between the US and Russia last year did lead to some hopes but the trigger for the war was failure of the Normandy process.
- Minsk agreements were signed by the European leaders and they were part of it. Normandy process was started to expedite the Minsk agreements. However, Ukraine was denying and unwilling to stay as a neutral country while Germany and France were unwilling to pressurise Ukraine on this issue. Solution to this problem is when the US joins this conversation but it seems focused on a regime change and in the process, eastern and southern Ukraine will be lost to Russia.
- India's dependence on Russia for military hardware is already reducing while diversity in arms imports for India does not need to mean moving away from Russia and becoming dependent on the US. It should mean self-dependence and not attempts to move away from one dependency (Russia) to another one (the US).
- Security element of Quad has been diluted by creation of AUKUS. Things would have changed for India had the US supplied New Delhi with nuclear technology. India's interests would suffer if the war goes on for too long and it is up to the US to join the conversation and help in stopping this war.

The third speaker, Nidhi Razdan shared the media perspective on the Russia-Ukraine war.

- Ukraine has mastered the art of propaganda as President Zelensky has been all over social media while he has been addressing different Parliaments in the Western countries.
- He has been wearing the army fatigues while he has not removed his t-shirt since the beginning of the war to convey his support for the Ukraine's army. On the other hand, Putin has stayed away from the media while conspiracy theories have come up regarding his health.
- From Indian media's point of view, it is a TV war as their crew is present in Ukraine but the print media has not given it deep coverage. Media, including even in the democracies is not free anywhere. This also applies to India. However, a multi-dimensional picture of the Ukraine war has emerged from India compared to the Western media.
- The Western media has been standing with Ukraine. Killing of civilians and the Bucha massacre had prompted India to give out strong statements. There is no doubt that Putin and his regime are brutal while the West is calling a spade a spade but the US has a history of engaging with the autocrats in the past which shows its hypocrisy.
- Putin should not be given a free pass after he has openly violated territorial integrity of Ukraine. India was wise to stay out of it in the beginning but as the war has progressed, it has become uncomfortable for India. We seek to distinguish ourselves in terms of China on the issue of human rights and this may become further difficult for India if the war is prolonged. We have to see our way forward as an axis is developing between Russia and China while Moscow may end up being the junior partner of Beijing which would impact our national security.

***Report Prepared by Dr Raj Kumar Sharma, Maharishi Kanad Post-Doc Fellow, DSTA,
IoE, DU***