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C O N T E N T S

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

The War in Ukraine must end 1

ARTICLES

Iran Factor in India's Afghanistan Policy *Rajan Jha & Jita Mishra* 5

Re-Linking the Landlocked Countries: India's Connectivity Initiatives and Options for Nepal and Bhutan *Nihar R Nayak* 26

OPINION

Tawang - Trashigang Corridor to boost development in India's Eastern Border Space *Jajati K. Pattnaik* 44

BOOK REVIEW

Development, Governance and Gender in South Asia – Perspectives Issues and Challenges by Anisur Rahman & Niharika Tiwari Reivewed by *Ghulam Mustafa* 59

THE WAR IN UKRAINE MUST END

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February has exposed the weaknesses of the 'World System' today and pointed to the existing vulnerabilities in the post-Cold War international politics. It has made it necessary to reflect on the need for generating a global consensus on the ways states would interact with one another to ensure peace and harmony in the world. This might require revisiting the norms and values the states of the world had supposedly agreed to uphold in their behaviour towards one another as well as in conducting their affairs within their territories.

In this context, the nature of politics that characterised Russia's interaction with countries in its near abroad, especially in the west, that emerged after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, hint at the 'problematique' of Russian diaspora, concerns about their well-being and the treatment they received in countries where they were/are in minority. For these diasporic Russians there was an expectation gap (what they expected from the nascent states) in one sense and an inertial emotional unity with their co-ethnics in Russia across the border, on the other. Russian interventions in Moldova (Transnistria), Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Ukraine (Crimea and Donbas) can be understood from these perspectives. Both Russia and Ukraine have a lot to explain and account for as far as their behaviour is concerned.

Russian invasion and the so-called 'annexation' of Crimea in 2014, assertion of Russian speaking population in the Donbas region, disproportionate military action by Ukraine against them, elevated sense of insecurity in Ukraine and its inclination to join NATO and ultimate Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine are inter-related events revealing the causal links among them, wherein lie the seeds of peace and reconciliation in the Russian neighbourhood. Over the last more than 90 days, Russia has sought to establish its control over the Donbas region, attack Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital

and carve out a land corridor to Crimea. It has tried to maximise its gains in Southern Ukraine and even cut off Ukrainian access to Black Sea! It has defied sanctions by the US and the EU, which has not seemingly affected its war ambition too much in the short term.

Ukraine in turn has suffered heavily. However, it has won the support of the West in terms of money and materials. Even the Scandinavians, who usually adopt a pacifist line in world politics, have chosen to assist Ukraine in their armed resistance against the Russians. Ukrainians have fought back and slowed down Russian advance in the South and around Kyiv. In all probability, even if Russia manages to hold on to the territories it has occupied, its control is unlikely to go unchallenged. Ukrainian resistance is assuming the shape of guerrilla war where the citizens spontaneously join the efforts to give the enemy a bloody nose. Like perhaps in Afghanistan, a prolonged Ukrainian resistance movement will be endorsed and sponsored by the West and pose a critical challenge to Russia in military terms. Russia will also find it difficult to cope with the long-term adverse effect of sanctions, while managing its prolonged war with Ukraine. The Russian and American experiences in Afghanistan in the past point in that direction.

In this scenario, many analysts expected Russia to declare a ceasefire after acquiring Mariupol and ensuring land access to Crimea and hoped Ukraine would reluctantly accept it. However, it seems at the moment that even if Russia were to do so, Ukraine, now supported by the west, may not agree to stop the war. Russia may find the adage true, as they say: 'it is easier to start a war than to end it'.

The Ukrainian situation has had a ripple effect around the world, but more so in the immediate European neighbourhood. It was inevitable that sanctions on a country that has had economic interdependence with many countries in the world, would hurt both ways. Russia was a major exporter of hydrocarbon, fertilizers and food materials. Some of the African countries rely heavily on either Russian or Ukrainian wheat. Rising energy prices in the adjacent region in Europe has had a crippling effect on regional economy. The war has affected global

economy and politics in many ways. The NATO stands reactivated. Countries relying on Russian energy in Europe are ambivalent about their response to Russia, even after sanctioning it under pressure from the US. It could force the US and its allies in Europe to refocus on its Trans-Atlantic commitments and dilute its efforts to contain China in the Indo-Pacific theatre. The war in Ukraine, many would also argue, may hasten decline of the US as the most dominant power in the world.

All in all, a crisis like this is unlikely to fade away so soon. It would require innovative thinking on the part of peace makers to stop the war and draw lessons from the Ukrainian experience to preclude the possibility of any future war in the Eurasian region. Russia has to remind itself of its Afghan debacle while the US and its allies need to understand Russian sensitivities in the region. While it is not a good idea to divide the world into 'spheres of influences', one has to recognise that the sensitivities of regional powers do inescapably play a role in determining the contours of regional politics.

India has walked a tight-rope so far. It has condemned indiscriminate killings during the course of the war (like in Bucha) and called for peace. It has appealed to both Ukraine and Russia to resolve the issue through dialogue.

It is as much difficult for Ukraine to disregard its territorial losses as it is for Russia to forego its gains to strike peace. At the heart of it, there must be an inter-ethnic peace building as well. Russian impatience with Ukrainian behaviour towards its Russian-speaking citizens partly explains Russian belligerence, which also has to be taken into account while working for peace.

So far, the talks between the two sides have been inconclusive mainly because both parties have talked past each other and refused to climb down from their stated positions. This is where efforts need to be made to help the two warring parties to arrive at an understanding that would facilitate their honourable exit from the war. ■