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Russia-Ukraine Conflict: The Humanitarian Quandary Amidst Contested Sovereignty



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The world was gradually recovering from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and moving towards normalcy with analysts predicting that a post-Covid era is coming into the view. However, in the course of these transitions, the international community found itself grappling with an acute humanitarian and security threat emerging out of Russia's invasion of Ukraine since the end of February 2022. The military intervention by Russian troops in Ukraine's soil has intensified the tensions between the West and Russia leading to a 're-envisioning' of the cold war-like scenario in the present times.

The source of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is multi-layered rooted in Ukraine's complex history of independence from the erstwhile Soviet Union. Russia's offensive posture emanates from its vulnerability towards the growing security concerns in the region due to Ukraine's ambitions of becoming a part of NATO and the EU. The membership not only guarantees to strengthen Ukraine's security structure in the region, but the tilt also implicates an expansion of the West, particularly the US, in the eastern part of Europe. It challenges the

geopolitical space of control that previously belonged to the Soviet splendour- a fact that is despised by the current Russian President, Vladimir Putin.

Hence, in geopolitical terms, the cause of the intervention is President Putin's desperate attempt to regain the lost glory of Russia, by establishing control over the territories which earlier belonged to the Soviet's sphere of influence. In President Putin's mind, the Cold War division of the world order has lingered on (where the sphere of influence over the countries was divided into two zones belonging to the US and the Soviet Union respectively) as he has put forward his conditions to the West in his draft treaties to the US and NATO in December

2021- that NATO would restrict upon its eastward extension and not include any Eastern European country including Ukraine into the alliance. Russia also asked for a demilitarisation of the countries, such as Latvia, Estonia and other Balkan countries, which were a part of the Soviet Union and have entered into the NATO's alliance after 1997. So, the simultaneous functioning of the two-fold factors were largely responsible for Russia's military intervention in Ukraine- first, a geopolitical quest to get back its sphere of influence like the erstwhile Soviet Union and second, an urge to diminish security threat arising out of NATO's expanding horizon of influence in the Eastern European region.

As a result, this Russian venture has signaled two things – *first*, it has led to the contestation with the concept of sovereignty and *second*, inflicted upon a huge humanitarian crisis in the region posing a challenge to the international community as to how to respond to the emerging crisis.

Contested Sovereignty

Putin's idea of a geographical space belonging to Russia's reign of power; thereby, attempting to push the sovereign boundaries beyond Russia's terrain has severely underestimated Ukraine's sovereignty as an independent nation-state. Ukraine's separate identity as a democratic and sovereign country after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been consistently challenged by Russia under Putin's regime. In 2014, Russia has already annexed Crimea and fuelled separatism in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Putin has shown no sign of hesitancy in encroaching upon the sovereign borders of Ukraine's independent territory as it firmly discards Ukraine's historical journey of independence and considers that it rightfully belongs to Russia owing to its common heritage and culture with the former Soviet Union and fell under the Soviet's sphere of control. Putin makes that statement across in a 2021 article that considers Russians and Ukrainians as "one people, a single whole".

Therefore, the Ukrainian crisis speaks of contested histories and sovereignty- Ukraine visualises itself as a sovereign state of Europe, Putin considers Ukraine to be an extended part of Russia. It showcases how the concept of sovereignty and geographical boundaries are modified according to the whims and fancies of a bigger power at the cost of diminishing the territorial integrity of smaller countries. The question, therefore, arises whether sovereignty is meaningful only when it is valorised by the powerful nations? Ironically, Russia has been a supporter of non-interference, political autonomy and sovereignty of nation-states following the Westphalian system. But it was evident through the efforts of integrating Ukraine as an extended part of Russian territory, how Putin has violated the terms and conditions of the founding principles of sovereignty and defied the 'rules-based' international order. In this attempt to invade Ukraine, Russia has also breached the terms and conditions of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994 which involved negotiations between the ruling Presidents of Russia, the US, Britain and Ukraine during that period. As per the memorandum, Ukraine gave up on its nuclear arsenals in return for security assurances of recognition of its independence and sovereignty. Putin's actions have been widely condemned by the international community as it threatens international peace and security- this has come particularly from the West comprising of the US and the EU countries who believes in the territorial sanctity and sovereign space of Ukraine and considers that being a democratic country, it can rightfully make its own geopolitical decisions.

Ukraine, therefore, finds itself caught between the West and Russia debating over its independent sovereign identity as an autonomous nation-state. However, the contestation of

sovereignty is not a new phenomenon- as we have seen in the case of Israel and Palestine over centuries. Further, history has also witnessed how the majority community has defied the sovereign boundaries of countries according to their 'ultra-nationalistic' lineage leading to state-sponsored violence against the minority community or the 'outsiders' – as in the case of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire during World War-I or the Rohingya massacres in Myanmar in South Asia.

The Unfolding Humanitarian Crisis

The aggression against Ukraine by Russian military troops have turned the balance of the European region topsy-turvy. The war threatens to destabilise the region with millions of Ukrainian civilians getting displaced and neighbouring countries dealing with a huge influx of refugees, such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova, Romania and Russia itself. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 steered the mass exodus of Ukrainian people, the former 2014 war in Donbas has also generated a large refugee crisis in the region. Presently, according to UN reports, almost around three million people have fled Ukraine due to the war. The military escalation has resulted in the loss of life, injuries and demolition of civilian buildings and infrastructure. As of March 14, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) reports that there have been at least 1,834 casualties including 691 getting killed. Moreover, the increasing flow of refugees in the bordering states has also triggered massive economic pressure on the EU's growth. The cost of the war brings with it the possibility of a recession and mounting inflation pushing the EU's economy to the brink- with sanctions being imposed on Russia's gas and oil by the Western world, the situation in the region is likely to deteriorate further.

As the future of the conflict remains uncertain, the difficult question arises as to how to bring parity between the demands of the two countries, by striking a balance between Putin's security concerns and protection of Ukraine's sovereignty. This is also necessitated by the present world order which is already facing the consequences of the war. Therefore, a quicker ground of negotiation needs to be created by the international community before the situation completely goes out of hand and Ukraine falls into pieces trying to combat the Russian military might. So far, the international community's approach to the crisis, despite being responsive, has been quite slow as compared to Russia's fast-paced scale of annexing Ukraine into its territorial ambit.

