The Russia-Ukraine Border Crisis: Europe's Moment Of Reckoning

The relations between the European Union (EU)–Russia persistently provoke hostility as illustrated by the natural gas crisis across Europe in October and November, and now the deployment of forces by Russia at the Ukraine border. The West has labelled Russia's movement as aggressive actions; however, the Russians have denied such accusations by claiming they are moving in their own territory. The western intelligence services believe around 100,000 troops have been deployed by Russia, but Russian President Vladimir Putin has dismissed any rumours of any imminent threat of invasion. Furthermore, Moscow has countered by accusing Ukraine of deploying 125,000 people in the eastern front.

The EU has often blamed Russia for its recent problems as tensions grew scathingly over Russia–Ukraine issue and the migrant crisis on the Belarus–Poland border. The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had warned Russia against any form of military adventurism in Ukraine or Poland; however, Kremlin officials were quick to retaliate by asking Europe not to blame Russia for all its problems. The increased tensions between Russia and the West could lead to regional instability as Putin claimed the US-led exercises in the Black Sea to be provocative which since then has heightened the tensions between Moscow and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting held on 30 November in Riga, the ministers focused on three major issues—Russia's military deployment around Ukraine, actions taken by the Belarus government against the migrant crisis at the Polish border, and NATO's role in arms control. NATO forces voiced a united opinion against the Russians and urged Kremlin to be more transparent, de-escalate, and reduce tensions, however, failing to abide would lead to Russia facing economic and political crisis. The US and Britain have warned Russia against any new military aggression against Ukraine as the transatlantic allies look to strengthen NATOs defense, resilience, and capacity. This narrative once again instils faith in the flickering status on the role of NATO in European affairs after Kabul's fall, the question of European strategic autonomy became prominent. The EU is finding ways to achieve its strategic autonomy to move on from Washington's purview by investing in the idea of the creation of a true

European army, but the recent crisis has showcased the importance and relevance of NATO on the European shores. Ukraine is not a NATO member, therefore Article 5 of the NATO treaty which highlights "Collective Defense" does not apply to Ukraine, but NATO member states consider Ukraine as a highly valued partner. NATO members have provided political and practical support to Ukraine as the former German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas had reiterated on sending an unmistakable message to the Russian government and promised NATO's support for Ukraine.

Similarly, in the Group of Seven (G7) meeting held on 11 December, in Liverpool, leaders warned Russia of "massive consequences" if Moscow furthers its military aggression against Ukraine. Moscow, however, has demanded a legally binding agreement that would assure NATO will not expand eastwards or place its arsenal near to the Russian territory. The G7 leaders also reflected on the status of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline as the new German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock suggested that the gas pipeline would not be active in the events of further escalation by Russia. The EU has already imposed sanctions on the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor, who have carried out clandestine operations by financing the mercenaries in Ukraine, Libya, and Syria.

The EU's position is comprised as it braces itself for a cold winter marred by rising energy prices and demand, a fourth COVID wave, anti-lockdown protests across Europe, the threat of a new migrant crisis at the Belarus–Poland border. Under this weakened position, Kremlin has caught the EU off-guard, with Putin's instrumentalising Europe's energy crisis and Lukashenko's suppression of pro-democracy protests has further exacerbated the EU's woes. President Lukashenko has threatened the EU by deliberating on shutting down a key pipeline (Yamal–Europe Pipeline) carrying Russian gas to the EU. Both Kremlin and Gazprom have refused to comment on Lukashenko's ultimatum and Putin has restated his stance asking the EU to negotiate with Minsk directly and avoid using Russia as an intermediatory between Brussels and Minsk. Out of the total gas flows from Russia to the EU, around 20 percent flowed through Belarus via the Yamal–Europe pipeline, and any unilateral action by Lukashenko would worsen the energy crisis across Europe, especially at the onset of the winter season and the fourth COVID wave.

The US has also accused Russia of orchestrating the migrant crisis between Belarus and Poland and Belarus and the Baltic States, but Russia has denied such

claims and further cautioned the NATO forces of the perils of crossing the 'red line'. Since the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has declared its ambitions to align with the West by joining the EU and NATO which infuriates Russia citing the geographical proximity of NATO in the Russian footsteps. Ukraine's geographical proximity with both the EU and Russia enables it to extend its cooperation across both sides, especially owing to deep historical and cultural ties with Russia. However, after Crimea's annexation in 2014, Ukraine sought greater links with the EU and the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2017, has further established a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the two. This is a major milestone towards EU integration, however, Ukraine has not been declared as a candidature country for EU membership and with multiple regional instability brewing in Ukraine, the prospects of Kyiv joining the bloc remains minuscule. Nonetheless, in case of any conflict, Kyiv hopes that the EU aided by NATO would be ready to stand alongside Ukraine to protect the European territory against the Russian forces.

The new German government has taken office, and at the G7 meeting, Ms. Baerbock quoted Liverpool's anthem, "You'll Never Walk Alone" which also happens to be the motto of Germany G7 presidency in 2022. Whether Ukraine will receive adequate support from the European Commission or not, only time will tell. The Eastern Partnership summit that took place on December 15 in Brussels provided an opportunity for the EU to solidify its commitment to Ukraine. The summit provided an opportunity to further European initiative in the region, especially after Europe chose to remain silent over the Nagorno–Karabakh (Azerbaijan and Armenia are both members of the Eastern Partnership) conflict last year. Furthermore, the EU could aim at exploring its nascent Global Gateway infrastructure fund to develop transport and energy corridors in Ukraine. Amidst the debates on European strategic autonomy and European sovereignty, it remains to be seen if the EU can put aside all the major differences within the bloc and take collective action to facilitate a sustainable action plan to help Ukraine.

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