

SIX MONTHS OF RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE IN UKRAINE

War tests West's unity

Now, Ukraine is on life support, Russian troops are suffering significant losses, and the rest of the world is dealing with acute food shortages, skyrocketing inflation, the possibility of a nuclear calamity.

INTERNATIONAL DESK

Still reeling from the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world didn't need a war. The pandemic, which could have united the world, instead exposed and highlighted the divisions between the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong and the East and the West.

And the war in Ukraine has widened those divisions.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24, many expected a quick victory. However, six months later, after thousands of deaths and widespread destructions, the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II has turned into a grinding war of attrition. Though Russia now occupies roughly 20 percent of Ukrainian land, Putin's offensive has largely stalled.

The conflict has expedited the geopolitical changes already in motion. Alliances, worldviews, and energy markets have been tested while Europe has experienced its largest refugee crisis since World War II.



RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE



conflict were to end tomorrow, it will take years to repair the damage it caused.

Many believe the war has pushed Russia towards China more. The neighbouring countries, which are not natural allies, have formed a 'no-limit' relationship before the Ukraine offensive. Though China has not taken a side, President Xi Jinping, acknowledging Russia's security concerns posed by external forces, criticised western sanctions on Moscow and vowed to expand economic cooperation between the two countries.

The controversial visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan allowed Moscow to align with Beijing more closely. But, analysts say, that wasn't enough to make Beijing back Moscow openly.

Dmitri Trenin, who holds positions at both Russia's Institute of World Economy and International Relations and the Higher School of Economics in Russia, says Russia-China ties are pretty strong. According to Trenin, the war has completed Russia's pivot to the East, ending what he describes as a 300-year Western orientation, "for better or for worse."

"Moscow," he says, "is already shifting resources in that direction. The ambassadorship in Beijing is going to be more important than DC, Delhi more prestigious than Berlin and Tehran will outrank Paris."

The conflict has also allowed India, a rising regional power, to assert its rights and take a bold independent foreign policy. India has mostly defied western calls to avoid Russian oil and pointed to the hypocrisy that, despite the sanctions, most European countries still getting fuel from Russia.

Surprisingly, many movers and shakers of the western world, not only political pundits in Beijing and Moscow, are now proclaiming that "Western hegemony is nearing its end".

At a closed-door meeting with France's top diplomats, as reported by several media, French President Emmanuel Macron said that "the international order is being upended in a whole new way. It is a transformation of the international order. I must admit that Western hegemony may be coming to an end".

Comparing today's China, Russia and India with the US, UK and France, Macron reportedly said these countries no longer believe in Western politics but are pursuing their own "national culture".

According to him when these emerging nations find their own national culture and begin to believe in it, they will gradually get rid of the "philosophical culture" that Western hegemony has instilled in them in the past. And this is the beginning of the end of Western hegemony.

And he is not alone. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently said that the Ukraine war showed that the West's dominance is coming to an end as China rises to superpower status in partnership with Russia.

The world,

Blair said, was at a turning point in history comparable with the end of World War Two or the collapse of the Soviet Union: but this time the West is clearly not in the ascendant.

"The world is going to be at least bi-polar and possibly multi-polar," Blair said. "The biggest geo-political change of this century will come from China, not Russia."

China's economy is forecast to overtake the United States within a decade and it leads in some 21st-century technologies such as artificial intelligence, regenerative medicine and conductive polymers.

"China's place as a superpower is natural and justified. It is not the Soviet Union," said Blair, who was prime minister from 1997 to 2007. Its allies are likely to be Russia and Iran, he added.

Posing a big challenge to US supremacy, China and Russia have moved to boost direct trading between their currencies shunning the dollar.

The non-dollar transactions, a de-risking strategy, have gained momentum as many neutral countries have expressed their concerns about the 'arbitrary' sanctions imposed by the West. Saudi Arabia plans to price some oil contracts in the yuan, while India is exploring a rupee-ruble payment structure.

So far, the United States and Europe have largely stood together in the face of Russia's invasion. The sweeping sanctions remain in place and they are eagerly assisting Ukraine's military. Realising Putin's fears, Nato is on the brink of expansion, as Sweden and Finland are poised to join the alliance, the latter's accession set to expand the group's border with Russia by more than 800 miles.

However, the longer the war will drag on the greater will be the risk of Western divisions over Ukraine.

This united front faces its greatest test this winter, as gas supplies come under strain and Putin's leverage over the continent grows. For now, Europeans are feeling the pain in their wallets, but questions surrounding the effectiveness of sanctions may multiply as the cold sets in.

The US and the EU have signed energy deals to avert the dire situation in Europe in winter as supply from Russia, which supplies about 40 percent of the EU's gas needs, becoming more unpredictable.

But the delivery and costs are major issues. Last week, France and Germany have warned that fuel costs may rise tenfold, which is expected to trigger price hikes in almost all products and protests.

Cold winters helped Moscow defeat Napoleon and Hitler. Putin is now betting that sky-rocketing energy prices and possible widespread unrest this winter will persuade Europe to strong-arm Ukraine into a truce -- on Russia's terms.

But will Ukraine agree to cede the Donbas region to Russia? Will the US supply more long-range missiles than the current HIMARS multiple-rocket launchers risking a wider conflict? Can the united West somehow force Russia to pull back its forces from Ukraine?

Only time will answer those.

Tough 'balancing' act awaits South Asia, Bangladesh

Inflation, and food and energy insecurity, triggered by the war in Ukraine, have become major concerns for Bangladesh and many countries across the world. The Daily Star's Mohammad Al-Masum Molla sits with Prof Shahab Enam Khan of the international relations department at Jahangirnagar University and asks the expert how the conflict is affecting Bangladesh and the South Asia region.

What are the impacts of the war on Bangladesh?
Bangladesh is at a geopolitical crossroads. The necessity to understand geopolitics through the eyes of Dhaka has never been as complex. The Cold War-like situation posed by the Ukrainian war has deeply polarised the world. The East and the West are on the verge of a new global political order. And US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei has only intensified the Washington-Beijing tussle in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh feels the heat of these geopolitical events as high food and energy costs along with looming debt repayment schedules put a stain on the country's reserve. Multilateralism, a cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy, has been shaken by "Kremlinology", a word that we refer to understand the Kremlin's responses to world affairs.

How much has it affected Bangladesh and South Asia economically?

The global financial or food markets are not resilient enough against a prolonged war in Ukraine. We should keep in mind the catastrophic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate shocks. Russia and Ukraine export nearly one-third of the wheat and barley needed to feed the world. They are suppliers of more than 70 percent of the sunflower oil to the global market. Russian fertiliser is crucial for global food production. Sanctions on Russia, supply chain disruption in grains and energy, and ever-escalating freight pricing have made food security extremely volatile. Like neighbouring countries, this situation will continue to put pressure on Bangladesh in the coming months. Sustaining a stable foreign exchange reserve, controlling inflation to let consumers purchase electricity and food, and securing cost-effective energy and food supplies will be significant challenges for the region in the coming months.

How does it affect South Asian geopolitics?

The war is showing no signs of ending. The new arms race among the major powers is speeding up, and the sanctions on Russia have made access to energy difficult for countries in South Asia. The Cold War syndrome has put countries in a difficult situation in choosing sides and balancing strategic relations and trade priorities. The Bay of Bengal's rapid militarisation is just a matter of time. On top of that, the poor energy policies of these countries will keep them on their toes in the coming years.

Do you think this conflict is creating new polarisation?

There is an axiom in international affairs -- "place matters". The Russia-Ukraine landmass is considered worthy of war for three key issues: comparative agricultural advantages, navigable waters with access to the sea and warm water ports, and high deposit of natural and mineral resources. Hence, the war will continue until Kremlin is satisfied with its control over these three key issues. Ukraine's bid for Nato membership, and the US-Europe engagement against Kremlin are narratives that resonate with Beijing as it considers the West's efforts to contain its growth, both economically and militarily, unfair. So, it is natural to see a new tie between China and Russia. However, there is a limit to that. On the other hand, the US needs Europe and Nato to remain united amid challenging times. But this will be tested during the winter as Europe is still primarily dependent on Russian gas to heat homes. Yet, in practical terms, the countries will continue to negotiate to sustain national security and domestic economic stability.

Has this war pushed Bangladesh close to Russia or India?

Geographical proximity and political preferences are the critical reasons for closer and alleviated ties between Dhaka and Delhi. The two countries also enjoy close economic and security ties. The war has brought Delhi and Dhaka to work closer in the fields of energy and food security. Finding suitable fuel sources without compromising its national interests, Dhaka needs to synchronise its acts carefully to deal with the energy crisis effectively. Currently, Russia appears to be a key player in Bangladesh's energy mix. However, the war has slowed down economic activities between the countries.

Is it possible for Bangladesh to remain neutral?

So far, Bangladesh has impressively pursued a balanced relationship between two major power blocs led by the US and China. This has helped sustain its growth. However, nothing is constant in international politics. If the Cold War syndrome continues, maintaining the balancing act between the power blocs will be harder for Bangladesh. Unfortunately, a significant chunk of the Bangladeshi socio-political community is yet to learn and practice negotiations to secure Bangladesh's national interest -- be it in international or domestic politics, energy governance, financial integrity, or food security.

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FRENCH PRESIDENT
EMMANUEL MACRON



An excavator demolishes ruined buildings in Mariupol on August 27, 2022, amid the ongoing Russian military action in Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

