

Why Russia is so eager to control Ukraine



ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY AND ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

A geopolitical crisis is looming large over the eastern border of Russia. There has been a massive military build-up by Russia close to Ukraine. The histories of the two nations are linked and until 1991, they were part of the USSR. Since independence in 1991, Ukraine had a pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovych, whose ambitions were aligned with Russian interests. The situation changed with 'The revolution of dignity', popularly known as the 'Maidan revolution', where a series of protests erupted across the nation during 2013-14, following Yanukovych's refusal to join political association and a free trade agreement with the European Union. The elected government was ousted, and power shifted towards the current pro-West Volodymyr Zelensky.

Following these incidents, the Crimean Peninsula, a geostrategic region in southern Ukraine, with the port of Sevastopol, was annexed by Russia on 18 March 2014. The annex-

ation was claimed by Russia as a mandate of citizens of Crimea, who are mostly Russian in origin.

Since that incident, bilateral relations between the two nations suffered. On 15 December 2018, the Kiev church severed its ties to the Russian orthodox church as per the decree of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This clearly showed the determination of the nation to break out from its former 'Soviet' roots, distancing itself from Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The situation got worse with Ukraine's growing proximity to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia was the successor to the erstwhile USSR, both in the Security Council of the United Nations and in its global presence. Since World War II, the Soviet Union had tried to protect its vulnerable western front by bringing Eastern European nations within its iron curtain. By 1945, Joseph Stalin, the then communist dictator of USSR, had realised that the open fields of western Russia would be difficult to protect by military might alone.

The initial success of Hitler's

Operation Barbarossa was due to the plain land geography of the Russian heartland. It is devoid of any mountains or any natural barriers. The reason for the dual-front war strategy of Hitler may have revolved around control of the oil-rich Caspian, Volga and Caucasus regions overlooking the Russian heartland. The situation was contained by exemplary Soviet resistance at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43. Some estimates say that 27 million Soviet lives were lost in World War II.

The situation in Ukraine is echoing warnings similar to those voiced before World War II. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost most of its Eastern 'buffer lands'. Poland, the Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) and Germany are pro-US and linked with the NATO alliance, which was originally an anti-USSR pact. If Ukraine also slips out of Russian influence, NATO will get a foothold in the Volga region and can threaten Russia's control over its hydrocarbon rich areas.

This global crisis is taking its toll over ordinary Ukrainians. A war

between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces has been waging in Eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, collectively called the Donbas region, since 2014. It is already proved to the world that the separatists are supported by Russia. Between 13,100 and 13,300 lives have already been lost in this futile civil war since 2014. The current military build-up of Russia alongside the Ukraine border accounts to more than 100,000 soldiers. The world's powers, including the USA, are fearing a Russian annexation of the region in similar fashion as the Crimean Peninsula.

These geopolitical instabilities point towards a common issue - the dependency of the world on hydrocarbons. Russia's paranoia revolves around its hydrocarbon resources which account for \$ 250 billion worth of exports in 2021. More than 40 per cent of these exports go to EU countries. This adds another dimension to the Ukraine crisis. With this dependency of Europe on Russia's hydrocarbons, it cannot support Ukraine in case of any imminent crisis.

Though EU and US uphold and defend democratic governments across the globe, the energy dependency on Russia makes them incapable of taking any meaningful steps to resolve Russian illegal occupation in Crimea in 2014 or in the recent military crisis in eastern Ukraine.

With climate change impacts battering the world, global powers are trying to distance themselves from carbon-intensive hydrocarbon energy. By limiting dependency on hydrocarbons, major world powers will be less bothered by politics in their neighbouring nations. The world will be a more peaceful place as superpowers will not use their economic and military might to scare smaller nations under their banner, just for the sake of safeguarding their hydrocarbon wealth.

Let's move towards renewables and nuclear energy to make the world a peaceful and clean place for all to live and flourish.

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100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

There seems to be a disposition in parts of England, notably Manchester and London, to follow the lead which has been set in America by what is known there as the Life Extension Institute. The basic idea of this institute is that members enroll themselves to secure medical attendance not when they are sick, but while they are well. Prevention is better than cure. Each member of the institute is periodically overhauled by specially appointed examiners according to standardised methods, and he is also entitled to the advice of a consultative board of recognised authorities in the various departments of medicine and hygiene. In order that strict professional secrecy may be observed medical histories, if members so desire are recorded at headquarters under a simple number. The service is available on payment of a fixed annual subscription, which does not, however, include domiciliary visits. In England, such a scheme should appeal specially to the middle classes, who at present get little benefit from either the hospitals or the National Insurance scheme, and who not only have to pay dearly for medical attendance when they are ill, but are often put off calling in medical aid till the illness has reached an advanced stage. The reasonable principle that the doctor should have a proprietary interest in health rather than in disease has been observed in China from time immemorial. It has been curiously slow in making its way into modern Europe.

NEWS ITEMS

NEW FEATURES IN TRIAL OF ARMSTRONG

One of the principal new features in the Armstrong trial was the evidence of Nurse Kinsey, who attended Mrs. Armstrong. She said she suggested a whole-time nurse as there was fear of suicide. Nurse Kinsey stated that Armstrong and his wife were on affectionate terms. Dr. Hincks stated that with the facts known today his opinion was that Mrs. Armstrong's death was due to chronic arsenic poisoning. As regards his treatment of Major Armstrong, Dr. Hincks claimed professional secrecy, but on being overruled stated that Armstrong had contracted venereal disease. He mentioned a conversation in which Armstrong questioned him regarding the amount necessary for a fatal dose of arsenic. Dr. Hincks said he was flabbergasted by the questions.

SERIOUS RIOT AT SOLONGA

A telegraphic report from the District Magistrate, Pabna, states that on January 27, he was present at Solonga hat, thana Raiganj, with an armed force under the Superintendent of Police and a Deputy Superintendent, for the purpose of preventing intimidation and picketing. Some volunteers who were picketing were arrested, whereupon a crowd, estimated at 2,000 strong, surrounded the party and threatened them with violence. The Magistrate, Superintendent endeavoured to quiet the mob but without success. The Deputy Superintendent was hit on the head and knocked senseless and the Magistrate and Superintendent were both assaulted. The mob were warned that if they did not disperse the police would open fire, but the only reply was a volley of stones. The police then fired blank cartridges without effect.

ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES OF INDIAN TIMBER

In the unavoidable absence of Mr. Montagu, Sir William Meyer presided today at the meeting of the Royal Society of Arts, when a paper by Mr. Alexander Howard, of a firm who are agents for the Government of India timbers in Europe, was read in his absence by his partner. The paper pointed out that the British market was beginning to recognise more fully the economic advantages of the use of Indian as well as foreign timbers. The Bank of England, at the new buildings in Finsbury Circus, had had the whole of the decorative woodwork made of Indian timbers and various firms were following that example. Experience gathered from the innovation of sending teak here in logs, instead of sawn, had convinced Mr. Howard of the advantage of marketing timbers in this form.

THE DISCONTENTED ELEMENTS

Speaking at the East African dinner in London tonight, Mr. Churchill made an important reference to the political problems of East Africa. He pointed out, as a curious result of the war, that the discontented elements in African and Asiatic countries seemed to think that they had only to express the wish that Britain should lay down the Government and Britain would comply. It was high time it was made clear that this was not the rule Britain intended to follow. He added, however, that French administrators of native populations took the greatest care to mingle with the natives and understand intimately their feelings in a manner which the more aloof and stand-off British official was not accustomed to adopt.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Alien and intimate

Mornings are glorious in Santiniketan. I was visiting Santiniketan in the sixties and staying in the home of the Vice Chancellor of Viswa Bharati University. There was a sizable lawn next door and, early one morning, as I woke I saw a man going around and around in a circle.

As I walked up to him, I saw a tall, bearded foreigner and was about to say Good Morning in English. He pre-empted me, by speaking in Bengali, and that too sardonically, "Finally, you are awake!" He justified the dig with his next sentence, coupled with an elaborate gesture of his arm, "Bright morning!"

Paul Detienne had displayed his three most characteristic plays in the very first moment of our encounter. He spoke Bengali better than a native. He loved sarcasm. His arms, like his face, were not just expressive, they were dramatically demonstrative.

These were not features one expected in a Jesuit missionary. But Detienne seldom did anything very expected. When he said he was Belgian, I quickly suggested, "Why don't we talk in French? I want to improve my French conversation." He countered, "But I want to improve my Bengali. I'd rather we talk in Bengali." After some haggling, we reached a deal. He will speak to me in Bengali; I will speak in French.

That created what Thurber



Illustration: Debabrata Chakrabarty

would have called "a hullabaloo of misunderstanding." Since I worked in an office near Park Street and he was often there for his work, our paths crossed frequently, and we stopped and talked at street corners. We attracted attention. Passersby stopped and chided me, "What's wrong with you? That sahib is talking Bengali and you are talking some gibberish. Can't you be polite and talk to him in English?" One time, when we went to the Flury's cafe for some tea, two persons, after hearing our conversation from the next table, came

to help me, "It is all right if you don't know English. Just tell us what you want to say in Hindi, and we will translate it for him in English."

Detienne relished such confusion. He would pull their leg and say, "English is a far cry for him. He can't even speak Bengali well. I am trying to teach him a little bit."

Sometimes he would drop by my office. If I was busy, he would not waste his time, but talk instead with my secretary, my assistant, or even the receptionist. In short order he knew their names, where they lived,

whether they were married, what they liked to eat. One time my assistant made the mistake, while serving him tea, of using the word 'sugar' instead of the Bengali equivalent, and Detienne said, "If you are a Bengali, and you don't know the Bengali word for sugar, you need to improve your language. If you know the word, but choose to use a word from another language, then you need to improve your idea of yourself." He said it gently and with a smile, but he detested the practice he had noticed of Indians mixing English words while speaking an Indian language.

I took him home to meet my parents and my brothers. He told Ashis, "I have a better beard than yours," and he deliberately poked Pritish by mispronouncing his name as British. My mother wanted to know about his family and Detienne disclosed that all his brothers, six of them, were priests in different countries, mostly Africa, except one. His mother had apparently said that she needed one near her and would not let him join the Jesuits. The youngest brother was to get married, and Detienne wanted the bride to wear a sari, a Benarasi, for the evening reception. My mother dictated the steps involved in wearing a sari; I translated her words into French and my secretary typed them out. We helped Detienne buy a beautiful sari and he carried it to Brussels. But my mother's instructions or my translation was poor, and the bride had to seek emergency help from the Indian Embassy



before the reception. But, reported Detienne, the bride looked gorgeous, and he was the hero of the evening.

A heavy price for my nomadic life is the number of friends one lost in pre-internet days. When I connected with Detienne again after twenty-five years, he had mellowed somewhat, but he still retained his proclivity for sarcasm and dramatic gestures. He was a literary celebrity, for he had produced a stream of witty, enjoyable books that had made him a best-selling Bengali author, a literary lion. I took it as a great compliment when one or two remarked that some of my own writing reminded readers of the flavor of Detienne.

I have a whole collection of Detienne's books. I woke up early this morning, made a cup of coffee and walked out on the deck with a Detienne book. I looked at Detienne's picture on the cover and half expected him to jump out, make an oversized gesture and say, "Finally, you are awake!"

I turned the pages and, toward the end, this is what I came across:

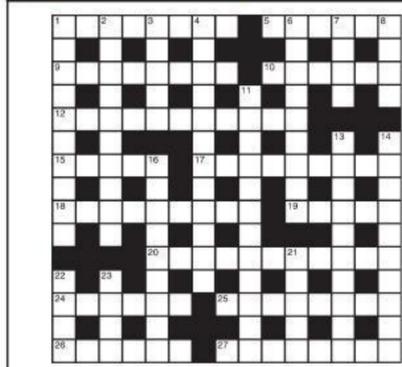
"My time has come to leave. I have finished all that I had to say. But not quite.

I will hope to see you again."

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CROSSWORD

NO 29165



ACROSS

- 1 Stuck up small head by mistake (8)
- 5 Upoar behind you and me (6)
- 9 State has plenty of time and means (8)
- 10 Stick poster in this place (6)
- 12 Meet and greet ghetto revolutionary (3,8)
- 15 Poisonous beast consumed by jerk (5)

- 17 Following overdose music producer, born in Sultanate, finds fixer (3-3,3)
- 18 Searched and managed to fire journalist (9)
- 19 Begin letter without introduction (5)
- 20 Brief special vehicle branch of the police (6,5)
- 24 Arouse interest in article about vigil (6)
- 25 Original member of family left out after bit of

- controversy (8)
 - 26 Attempt to embrace man with love in ideal situation (6)
 - 27 Stretches back to get steamy photograph (8)
- DOWN
- 1 Kills merriment aboard ship (10)
 - 2 Public dismissal is too much (10)
 - 3 Do butchers extract all

- nutritious offal first of all? (5)
- 4 Frame guides showing ways to access multiple places (8,4)
- 6 Suggestion from subordinate, tense individual (9)
- 7 Support lord vocally (4)
- 8 Cook ineffectual politicians upset (4)
- 11 Republican and Democrat droned on about keeping

- house plant (12)
- 13 Clumsy American couple thrive without Flo (10)
- 14 Factor in dirt engine churned up (10)
- 16 Loudly regret returning after tea with posh driver (9)
- 21 Second party for rascal (5)
- 22 Women behind drift (4)
- 23 Stun and partially confound a zealot (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

