

Why Ukraine was the last straw for Putin

ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY AND ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

Amidst the ongoing invasion and meltdown of governmental structures in Ukraine's capital, Kiev, we need to look at the reasons behind this crisis.

Russia's imperialism seems to be at war with democracy in Ukraine. But this battle has waged for long. With the conclusion of World War II, a new geopolitical order was established in Europe and the world. The United Nations was created to resolve conflicts between sovereign states through use of soft power.

But post-World War II, the world was divided into two ideological camps. The USA championed rising democracies while the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) supported several left-wing dictatorships. To counter the threat of communism and the USSR's influence, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) was created in 1949.

The USSR continued with its arms and space race, technology and manufacturing race with its socialist ideals pitched against the west, but eventually the economy gave in and Michael Gorbachev decided during the late 1980s to open up the socialist regime with his policies of 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost'.

But three republics revolted and signed their exit from the USSR at a famous meeting in a forest lodge in the last of Europe's pristine forests, in Belarus. These three were the republics of Russia led at that time by President Boris Yeltsin, Ukraine, and Belarus. Others followed and the USSR imploded very quickly, with the resignation of Michael Gorbachev on 25 December 1991, the last President and leader of the USSR.

With the end of what is called the 'cold war', the presence and utility of Nato immediately came into question. Instead of being dismantled, it continued to bring former USSR



allies and republics into its fold. At present Nato has 30 members, out of which 11 nations are ex-members of the Soviet sphere or the former USSR (Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

The United States is the largest investor and indirect guarantor of security of all Nato members. It comes with an enormous economic price. All members need to contribute a certain percentage of their GDP to run Nato, of which the largest share is supposed to be contributed by the US.

A 2020 estimate indicates that US spent 3.7 per cent of its GDP on defence while other Nato members only contributed an average of 1.77 per cent of their GDP. But how much of this was spent on Nato?

Hence, the Trump administration was resolute on withdrawal of US from Nato, referring to other Nato members as 'freeloaders' and the

organization as an 'obsolete one'.

Russia as the largest economy amongst the former Soviet republics saw rapid privatisation post the collapse of USSR, giving rise to a coterie of ultra-rich Russian oligarchs, many of whom invested in oil and gas. Russia's economic boom followed with the large exploitation of its gas and oil reserves.

Russia supplies around 65 per cent of Germany's gas and about 40 per cent of the needs of the European Union. Much of this comes from the North Sea through Russia's Nord Sea pipeline into Germany, but Ukraine is also very rich in fossil fuels and precious minerals. Ukraine contributed over a third of the USSR's GDP while the union was alive. It continues to be a prize catch, rich in precious minerals required not only for nuclear power but also for batteries or energy storage.

Had Nato been disbanded in 2018, the crisis at Ukraine could have been averted. Possible Nato

expansion into Ukraine has been the final trigger for this war, but Nato allies dithered. Trump's resolve to disband Nato jinxed this project, but even after Trump, the new Democratic regime in the US appears to have dithered in deciding to admit Ukraine.

Other former USSR republics have already joined Nato without any threat of Russian invasion. The exception in case of Ukraine may be its geostrategic position, grains, minerals, and hydrocarbons. Ukraine used to produce around 25 per cent of all the agri-output of USSR; a fifth of its current food exports still go to Russia while 17 per cent lands up in EU nations. Capture of this country can boost the food security of Russia. Most of these foodgrains used to leave the country through Crimean ports, and Crimea was captured by Russia in 2014. Ukraine also possesses 1.09 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves and perhaps more, as exploration shifted focus to Siberia

while the USSR was still alive.

Ukraine possesses 220,700 tonnes of uranium, a strategic mineral required for running nuclear power plants as well as for arming thermo-nuclear military capabilities. After dissolution of the USSR, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan possessed Soviet-made nuclear devices. At the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed on 5 December 1994, these independent nations give up their nuclear warheads in lieu of security guarantees by Russia, US and UK. One of the guarantors, Russia, is the aggressor in the current crisis while the other two are reluctant to use any hard power to help the democracy under attack.

The recent estrangement of Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence and its preparation to join Nato has gotten Russia's attention. This would have brought Nato, an anti-Soviet military alliance, to the doorstep of the Russian hydrocarbon heartland in the Caspian and Volga basin.

When push comes to shove, former KGB boss Putin has always responded with brutality. On 5 February 2000, the human rights violations of Russian police at Novye Aldi near the city of Grozny, followed by rape, murder of Muslim minority Chechens, was testament to his brutality. He used the same tactics of bombing civilian targets in the Chechen-dominated Grozny that he is adopting in Ukraine.

The conflict has changed the world order, bringing war to the doorstep of Europe for the first time since 1945. International agreements, customary laws and institutions such as the U.N. Security Council have proven incapable of handling the situation. If nothing is done soon, this could trigger armed conflict once again on a massive scale.

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100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

In an interview with a representative of the Times, Sir Benjamin Robertson gives an interesting account of the visit to the Volga famine area in Russia which he recently undertook at the request of Lord Emmott's Committee of the Russian Famine Relief Fund. Sir Benjamin speaks without bias, and gives credit to the Soviet authorities for what they are now doing in the direction of relief work; but the state of affairs he describes is so terrible that it should serve as a warning, if further warning be needed, against the political ideas which have brought Russia to ruin. The origin of the famine in the Volga area may be ascribed to climatic conditions which the Soviet Government could hardly avert. There can be no doubt, however, that the causes which intensified the famine - requisitions of grain stocks, of which the country has been "absolutely denuded," the practical breakdown of transport, and the cessation of trade - were directly traceable to administrative failure. The distress in the more severely affected area is described by Sir Benjamin as "appalling" - "infinitely greater" than anything he has ever seen in all his experience in India. In this country, when local scarcity has to be faced, prompt and well organised measures of relief serve to reduce the distress to a minimum. In Russia, on the other hand, - for lack of a "satanic Government" - the whole rural population in the famine-stricken region is "absolutely starved."

NEWS ITEMS

EAST INDIAN RAILWAY STRIKE

The strike on the East Indian Railway continues, yesterday being the 37th day of the dispute. Although no fresh developments have to be reported, the position appears to be a trifle more hopeful, the steady pressure of economic circumstances having a wholesome effect on the men. There is a distinctly better feeling prevailing at the chief railway centres, and both sides appear to be willing and even anxious to discuss terms. Agitators, however, are still busy, and there is yet some uncertainty as to what the workers may do under the influence of impassioned speeches. The goods train service is gradually improving, and industrial firms both upcountry and in the Calcutta district have expressed entire satisfaction with the coal distribution scheme instituted by the Coal Transport Officer.

REDUCTIONS IN DEMANDS FOR GRANTS

DELHI, MAR 10
The Legislative Department is flooded with notices, which are pouring in every hour for reductions in the demands for grants which will come up before the Assembly at its five continuous sittings next week, while the number of motions so far received has reached two hundred. Fifty of them which are available show that these ask collectively for a reduction of about six and a quarter crores. Forty-five of these emanate from members of the democratic party, with Mr. Rangachariar, the Finance Minister of the party, topping the list with no less than twenty-seven motions, asking in the aggregate for a reduction of above five crores, sixty-six lakhs. Mr. J.R. Pantula will ask for a reduction of twenty-seven and half lakhs under the head of taxes on income.

FIGHT FOR PACIFIC TREATY

Senator Lodge is leading a stubborn fight in the Senate with the irreconcilables for the ratification of the Pacific Treaty. Senator Lodge declared that the Treaty had led to the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which prevented England from exercising her influence in the Far East in the interest of peace. The Treaty replaced the Alliance by a political system actuated by peace in the Pacific. Was the United States, asked Senator Lodge, to stumble on the threshold of its own undertaking, and sink back into the sullen solitude of a hermit nation armed to the teeth? Senator Reed declared that if what he had said was true the Treaty was a farce and accomplished nothing more than the agreements which were in force at present.

LORD LYTTON AND WOMEN OF BENGAL

The official report of Lord Lytton's reply to the deputation of women which urged him to obtain enfranchisement for the women of Bengal shows that Lord Lytton said that there was no fear of his going to India and finding himself at the head of the Government in a country the women of which were just beginning their struggle for freedom. You know the matter does not rest in my hands, said Lord Lytton, but you may be assured that I will do what I can to help in their struggle for better education and freedom. I confidently expect that during my stay in Bengal a great advance will take place in the education of women and the realisation of their political aspirations.

Is Dhaka moving slowly towards doom?

TASNEEM TAYEB

Dhaka, the nucleus of Bangladesh's economic success, is the most densely populated city in the country (and perhaps in the world), accommodating more than 47,000 people per square kilometre (as of 2018). The megacity alone accounts for one-fifth of GDP and nearly half of the country's jobs. Dhaka is also the fourth least liveable city in the world, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual global survey in 2021. The country's commercial lifeline has been subjected to haphazard and unplanned urbanisation, as a result of which it is now facing an existential crisis of its own.

Dhaka is plagued with high levels of pollution, unbearable traffic congestions and unplanned cluster of habitats mushrooming everywhere. The city often finds itself at the top of the Air Quality Index (AQI), with scores as high as 288 - AQI score between 201 and 300 is considered "poor," while 301 to 400 is considered "hazardous."

The average driving speed of seven kilometres per hour is not only physically taxing for the commuters, but also takes a toll on the economy. A 2017 World Bank study suggests that 3.2 million working hours are lost every day due to Dhaka's traffic congestion. A 2018 study by the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) reveals that traffic congestion costs the economy a staggering Tk 37,000 crore every year.



Given that these data are four to five years old, one might assume that the current scenario has only become worse. An article by The New York Times reporter Lisa Friedman, hosted on the Cities Alliance website, suggests that each year about 500,000 people migrate to Dhaka from rural and coastal areas. With the land mass remaining constant, it is only natural that this growing population burden would take a toll on the city.

Then there are the unplanned roads and alleys, which make the city even more vulnerable to disasters and make disaster management more challenging. Let's take the fire incidents as a case in point. These incidents are a recurring phenomenon in Dhaka - for many reasons ranging from violation of guidelines

and usage of residential areas for commercial purposes, to lack of basic fire safety measures in the buildings. Managing fire hazards has been made even more difficult in many localities because of the narrow roads that are inaccessible for large vehicles carrying heavy equipment.

Moreover, the desperation of people who migrate to Dhaka from other parts of the country is often exploited by some vested interest groups, leading to criminal activities and increased pressure on law and order management. And with unemployment increasing - many employers had to lay off workers to mitigate the pandemic-induced losses - the migrants remain prone to the lures of income opportunities by unscrupulous individuals.

And people still keep migrating to Dhaka in the hopes of building a better life. And why not? Dhaka city, along with the greater Dhaka region, account for 48 per cent of all the jobs in Bangladesh. All the major infrastructures of governance, including the secretariat, are based in Dhaka. The best educational institutions and medical facilities are concentrated in Dhaka. Who would not want to have these facilities?

The question is: For how long would we be able to sustain this rampant concentrated urbanisation? A report presented at the Annual BIDS Conference on Development in 2021 says Bangladesh's per capita income and GDP was 11 per cent lower than its potential in 2017, as a result of excessive resource concentration and economic activities in Dhaka. The report further suggests that the country is losing between 6 and 10 per cent of GDP because Dhaka's growth rate exceeds the optimum rate. If this continues, in the long run, Dhaka's rapid urbanisation will become a liability for the nation's growth and development.

Do we want to keep watching as Dhaka crumbles down by the burden of overpopulation?

On multiple occasions, experts have recommended the capital's decentralisation to take off the extra population load. It is time for us to act on those suggestions now. This is not only about empowering local governance, down to the district levels, with decision-making abilities, or improving the educational and healthcare services across the 64 dis-

tricts, but also about creating economic hubs in all the regions. Every region has its strengths, and these strengths should be leveraged to create employment opportunities for the local people. The government should consider offering incentives to industries to relocate outside Dhaka. In addition, to support the industries, the government should build the necessary infrastructure and improve connectivity to ensure smooth trade and transactions.

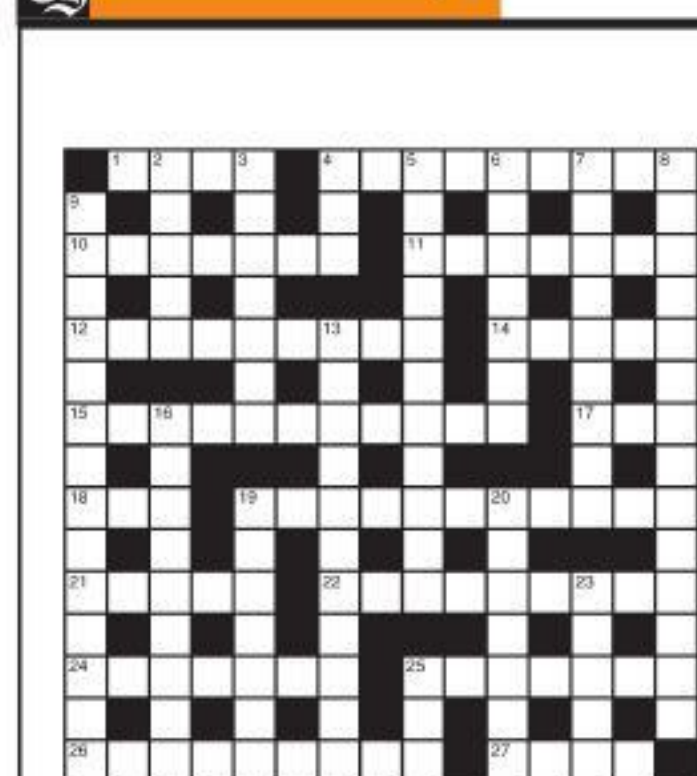
Moreover, medium-sized, climate-resilient secondary cities need to be developed across Bangladesh, so that people can find livelihood opportunities closer to home. People living in the coastal areas are especially prone to internal migration, and there should be a plan for their proper, constructive rehabilitation in the nearest secondary city, so that they do not find themselves lost in big cities without any livelihood support.

For Bangladesh, there is no alternative to developing secondary cities. We have big aspirations: we want to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, we want to become a developed nation by 2041. But without developing sustainable, economically efficient, climate-resilient cities, achieving these goals would be impossible. For a prosperous tomorrow, we need to act today, and the responsibility falls on the policymakers. It is high time they revisited their vision for Dhaka and took proactive measures to turn it into a liveable city.

The Daily Star/ANN.

CROSSWORD

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SOLUTION FOR 10 MARCH

A B U G T A I A
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ACROSS

- 1/27 Disengaged response, with dislike greatly reduced (8)
- 4 Hoping for a different outcome that's attractive (9)
- 10 Revived figure, idle, cut a plan that's incomplete (7)
- 11 Ship heading off - then a return to island? It shows reluctance to move (7)
- 12 Collection of writings left in church cell (9)
- 14 Help to secure credit

- coming with a sting (5)
- 15 Cryptic cultured Phi - something very attractive (11)
- 17 Inappropriate entry of oboe: very loud (3)
- 18 Eggs are very old when rejected (3)
- 19 Contradict sources of vigorous explanation provided by brand - it's pretence (4-7)
- 21 Light, light touch provided with hesitation (5)
- 22 Something telling son to nick a costly car (9)

- 24 Endless delay - equipment twice running short in Hawaiian location (7)
- 25 A sheep I included in account in Biblical language (7)
- 26 Testy behaviour resistant to change (9)
- 27 See 1
- DOWN
- 2 American prankster's obscure initiation of ritual (5)
- 3 Finished half of this part of the golf

- course (7)
- 4 Girl losing head, the fool (3)
- 5 Prepare anaesthetic for five? (5,6)
- 6 Mean to show anger after five taken into A&E (7)
- 7 Come between priest and one undergoing conversion (9)
- 8 End lack of interest, ditching one new way of resolving ties (4,10)
- 9 Holiday attraction, unlikely tool adopted by anti-racists? (9,5)

- 13 Telegram slipped under yellow mesh (7,4)
- 16 Source of poisoning? Induce discomfort with half of it (4-5)
- 19 Two-thirds of armies busy acquiring metal rifle (7)
- 20 Amount of greenery in meadow beginning to fall over long time (7)
- 23 Foolish way the game and league will end? (5)
- 25 Some muscles not present? Not half (3)

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

