



Delhi Policy Group

**WEBINAR
ON
"THE UKRAINE CONFLICT AND ITS STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS"
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Transcript of DPG Senior Faculty's Remarks

Moderator

Ambassador H.K. Singh, Director General

Konbanwa to our friends in Japan, good morning to our partners in the US, and good afternoon to our audience in India.

I am Hemant Singh, Director General, Delhi Policy Group, and it is my great pleasure to welcome panellists and participants alike in this DPG Webinar on "The Ukraine Conflict and its Strategic Implications".

This conflict is now into its second year, and despite its catastrophic humanitarian consequences and devastating economic impact, protagonists are still prioritising military victory. Risks of escalation to a wider conflict are rising as Europe radiates instability.

We have a stellar panel for you to assess developments related to Ukraine and present a range of perspectives.

Ambassador Kenichiro Sasae will kick off the discussions. He is the President of the Japan Institute of International Affairs, and a very distinguished diplomat who has held the key positions of Vice Minister at Gaimu-shō and Japan's Envoy to the US.

Prof. Kazuto Suzuki is Professor at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Tokyo and Director of the Institute of Geoeconomics, International House of Japan.

Eric Brown is Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C., where he studies Asian and Middle East Affairs, International Security, US Diplomacy and Strategy.

Amb. Nalin Surie will take the lead among the Indian panellists. He is Distinguished Fellow for Diplomacy at DPG, and has vast experience of Europe, both East and West.

Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda is Senior Fellow for Military Strategy at DPG and a well-known authority on security issues.

And Brig. Arun Sahgal is Senior Fellow for Strategic and Regional Security at DPG, and a renowned expert on global strategic stability.

Let me now begin this session with some opening remarks as the Moderator.

As conflict rages in Ukraine for the second year, the world stands divided and at a dangerous impasse. If anything, fault lines are hardening.

Russia has dealt a harsh blow to world order with its military aggression, and is paying a heavy price for it, but its invasion was widely anticipated. The issue of Russia's place in the European order has persisted since the end of the Cold War, and still awaits a resolution.

In the ongoing battle of narratives, rational discourse is missing. Talk of continued war and even escalation is being normalised, while appeals for restraint and peace are sidelined. It is being suggested that a just and lasting peace must be achieved on the battlefield, and with no compromises.

Blending such absolute war aims – even when these are linked to political principles – with the necessary strategic pragmatism, will not be easy. But the fact is that peace cannot be imposed by subjugation; it will require a substantial measure of accommodation.

So, let me briefly outline certain salient issues related to this crisis.

First, what has the conflict done?

It has fragmented the international community, with a majority of the world's nations not taking sides between the great power protagonists. This trend will only grow as the conflict continues, and the rivalry between the US-led West, and the Russia-China axis, intensifies.

It has reinvigorated the West, which has coalesced around the G7 and NATO, while Russia and China have countered with an unprecedented "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era".

It has raised the spectre of a wider conflict, once again emanating from Europe's failure to manage deep-rooted civilisational antagonisms.

It has, at least thus far, marginalised the role of diplomacy and resort to the peaceful settlement of disputes.

It is bringing cooperation on global issues to a virtual standstill.

And it is marginalising the interests of the Global South, which is of great concern to India as it chairs G20.

Now, what is the conflict really about?

There are of course several viewpoints, but at its origins it is mostly about dominance over European security architecture, and perhaps even a return to the post-history, unipolar moment of 1991.

However, a continuing conflict will not heal Europe's civilisational rivalries and ethno-religious divides, which will most likely continue to fester without resolution for decades, creating prolonged instability.

It is being suggested that Europe today can be Asia tomorrow. This line of thinking overlooks the fact that the historical and civilisational realities in Asia are distinct, divergent from Europe, and have different drivers. There is no NATO in Asia, and no Asian NATO. Asia today comprises several rising and strategically independent powers, and is increasingly multipolar.

Let me amplify. The US holds complete sway over its European allies. But a European leader recently came to Asia to assert strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US on relations with China – which just happens to be the main source of authoritarian expansionism in Asia. His remarks, cautioning Europe not to get trapped in "crises that are not ours", only drew attention to Europe's actual lack of political will, or capability, to play a meaningful role in Asia's strategic equations.

Finally, and to sum up, what does the conflict indicate?

First, that the main source of US power and influence resides in the Euro-Atlantic. US pre-eminence is under major challenge in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, that the US is mostly absent on the Eurasian heartland, and can leverage only limited power from its allies in the Indo-Pacific maritime, where it must lead primarily with its own strength.

Third, that an over-extended US, and a battered Russia, are opening up greater strategic space for China, which is consolidating its power and expanding the reach of its influence across "broader Asia".

Fourth, that the future of world order will not be determined in Europe, but in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, depending on how the increasingly all-pervasive competition between the US and China plays out.

And fifth, it is becoming more imperative than ever before that the US, India and Japan, and their other regional partners, reinforce efforts to ensure a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Panellists

Ambassador Nalin Surie, Distinguished Fellow for Diplomacy

The timing of this webinar is eerily prescient. So much has happened earlier in the month that has a serious bearing on our deliberations today. President Macron and EU Commission President Von der Leyen have been to China. So have Japan and Germany's foreign ministers. The Taiwan president has been to the USA; Finland has joined NATO. The Chinese Defence Minister has paid an important visit to Russia and there has been a huge leak in the US of classified documents pertaining to the Ukraine war and the way ahead.

There are credible reports that both the Russian and Ukrainian sides are seriously preparing for a so-called spring offensive, the outcome of which may determine how the future will pan out and including any possible resolution to this war in Ukraine.

Importantly, the G7 foreign ministers have very recently finished a prolonged meeting in Karuizawa, Nagano where they have deliberated at length on Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific and China among other issues. Their views are significant since it is the G7 that is the principal driver on the Ukrainian side that will determine the direction the war will take and related aspects; including about an ultimate compromise to end the war.

It bears reminding that this is a European war, imposed on the rest of the world because of the unfinished business, post the end of the Cold War, of establishing dominance of the US-led order in Europe. Strategic security in Europe has been seriously undermined by the Ukraine war. The course of the war and related actions taken have effectively upended the existing global order and institutions and is imposing huge costs and disabilities on the developing world which had nowhere near recovered from the double whammy of the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regrettably, only lip service has been paid to the problems of development, poverty alleviation and the technological upgradation of the developing world.

Ironically, the G7 foreign ministers' declaration of 18 April 2023 seems to suggest that business as usual is feasible in matters of international governance!

Whether one likes it or not, China is now embedded on the side of Russia on the Ukraine war issue. This is because it suits China as much as it suits Russia.

Both need each other and have openly acknowledged this even though they may not agree with each other on all aspects of policy or ideology. But, they have both agreed that “it is unacceptable to replace recognised principles and norms of international law with the rules-based order”. They describe their renewed partnership as a “strategic choice”. They do not accept the “hypocritical narrative of the so-called democracy against authoritarianism” tool. In fact, both China and Russia believe that the West led by the United States is seeking to contain their nations and undermine their development and destinies.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has emboldened the DPRK to strengthen its nuclear and missile arsenal which they see as a legitimate means of defending their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Taiwan has, willy-nilly, become an integral part of the narrative and the question being asked is whether China can do a Ukraine to Taiwan.

As we meet today, possibly on the eve of what might be the beginning of the spring offensive by either side in the Ukraine war, the least we can agree on is that the situation is fraught with great danger and unless good sense prevails or is made to prevail, the outcome will certainly be a catastrophe for Europe, but will not spare those in the rest of the world either. The latter are helplessly, even haplessly, being forced to pay a huge price for the games being played in Europe for control over the future narrative for European stability and integration as also for global governance, development, security and stability.

The question is whether an acceptable compromise can be worked out to end the Ukraine war. So far both sides have laid out their harsh redlines. But I am an eternal optimist and would like to believe that the latest G7 foreign ministers’ communiqué on Ukraine is less rigid on how the war there can begin to end, than earlier suggestions. Perhaps Japanese colleagues here can shed some light on this. I only hope I am not wrong. (Interestingly, the Japanese foreign office has said that 100 minutes were spent by the ministers discussing Ukraine.)

For peace to return to Ukraine and Europe, the lead will have to be taken by the United States. Some European countries have already asked China to help bring Russia to the table. Is the United States on board with this approach? Maybe Eric can weigh in on this.

The Sino–Russian partnership will indeed impact on Asian and Indo-Pacific stability and security. Signs of this are already visible. As the war in Ukraine persists or intensifies, this impact may well grow. The latter may encourage NATO to seek a role in the region for itself. It has already given itself an opening for this at its Madrid summit (June 2022 - para 16). Importing Europeans problems into Asia and the Indo-Pacific would be most unfortunate and seriously impinge on the evolving multipolarity in Asia and the Indo-Pacific architecture. This does not, however, mean that countries in Asia and the Indo-

Pacific cannot bilaterally or plurilaterally, enter into appropriate strategic, economic, and technological partnerships with one another.

The grave danger, uncertainties and disruptions that have arisen due to the war in Ukraine are compounded by the relatively gloomy economic prospects for the world economy in the near future. There is thus an urgent need to begin the search for the light at the end of the tunnel and for establishing a fresh architecture for European strategic stability that unites rather than sustains historical divisions. The principles underlying the Indo-Pacific architecture could serve as the underpinnings for this purpose.

Let me stop at this stage.

Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda (Retd.), Senior Fellow for Military Strategy

I will talk about the military aspects of the Ukraine war, during the coming months of 2023.

The war has become a grinding stalemate, with bloody battles in the East and a heavily fortified frontier in the South where the Russians are on the defensive. Both sides are now readying for a renewed conflict in the spring or summer of 2023.

Ukraine is training and arming 12 brigades for a spring offensive. About 60,000 troops are being trained by the US and NATO and offensive equipment is being supplied to them.

On the Russian side, the 300,000 reservists that were mobilized last year are available, though some would have already been utilized in the winter fighting. The balance could be employed for a further push into the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

So what are the prospects of a major military victory by either side? Such a victory could possibly lead to an end to the war. However, in my assessment, the prospects of either side gaining a significant victory are slim. I say this for the following reasons.

Ukraine

The 12 brigades for the planned offensive are not yet fully trained or equipped. The leaked Pentagon documents revealed that the spring offensive could be launched as early as 30 April, but that appears unlikely.

Indications are that the planned offensive could go South towards Crimea, as this has the most strategic significance. However, this is also the area where the Russian Army has created very formidable defences that comprise extensive minefields, anti-tank obstacles and hardened bunkers. These could limit any Ukraine advance.

The Ukrainian forces are facing an ammunition shortage. Air-defence missiles for the Russian-origin equipment like the S-300 have almost run out. Artillery ammunition is being rationed due to limited availability. The EU has approved the delivery of artillery ammunition worth one billion Euros to Ukraine, but this could take time.

In view of this, it is unlikely that Ukraine could replicate the success that they had in the 2022 counter offensive.

Russia

The winter offensive in the East has bogged down at Bakhmut. The Russians could put in more troops in the offensive, but the past performance of the Russian Army does not inspire much confidence.

The Russians have suffered major losses in equipment and are now pulling out old, mothballed equipment for the fighting.

The Russians have not been able to effectively employ airpower to support their ground offensives.

Thus, the Russian Army may hold on to their positions or make limited gains, but a significant military victory appears unlikely.

Future of European Security

Irrespective of how the war ends, European security in the future will be dominated by the security-insecurity paradox between Russia and NATO. NATO will look at Russian aggression with suspicion while Russia will be concerned about the growing military capability of NATO. There is a need to realistically assess Russia's security concerns.

There is also a need for Europe to look inwards to address ethnic issues that have led to numerous conflicts. In the last 25 years, Europe has seen the Yugoslav Wars, conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine. Fighting in the Donbas region between 2014 and 2021 resulted in 14,000 deaths. There is an ethnic background to these conflicts. While there is a lot of talk about respect for territorial integrity, after 1990, seventeen new countries have been created in Europe.

***Brig. Arun Sahgal (Retd.), Senior Fellow for
Strategic and Regional Security***

State of Play

Ukraine is no longer a regional conflict; its repercussions are triggering a geopolitical competition for domination between two contending power blocs – the US-led West and Russia–China strategic alignment.

The US-led Euro-Atlantic power structure has taken complete control of European security, including enunciation of new NATO doctrine of deterrence by denial, through forward deployment of forces in frontline NATO countries.

The overwhelming preoccupation of the US with European security is largely distracting it from its principal and growing strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

For the second time in recent history, the US (and its allies) are allowing the focus to shift from the main arena of contestation, giving China time and space to expand its military power and influence. This will not only impact the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, but also regional security dynamics, in particular for US partners like India and Japan.

The reality is that China has largely consolidated its strategic space in Asia, while the US is absent and losing strategic relevance in continental Eurasia, Central Asia, and West Asia.

The China-Russia combine is strengthening its hold in the continental domain of Asia, as also the contiguous maritime space at both ends of the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, close Sino-Russian cooperation is being leveraged as a political and strategic hedge vis-à-vis the West. Close partnership with Russia is also helping China to access key military technologies in Aero Engines, Submarine technology, underwater domain etc., reinforcing its capabilities in key strategic domains.

Importantly, China has not only emerged as a principal challenge to US power in the Indo-Pacific, but is also extending its influence from West Asia to the African East Coast (Djibouti) to Southern Africa, playing an active role in fostering Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement and creating a new nexus of China-Iran-Russian cooperation.

Lastly, China's dominance of the South China Sea has allowed it to create a wedge between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, preventing seamless architecture and allowing China to deal with East Asia, South East Asia and the Indian Ocean region piecemeal.

US Response

The US is responding to these assertions, but mainly in Asia Pacific. The main arena of competition is South East and East Asia, extending to the Western Pacific.

To meet the challenge, it is focusing on capacity enhancement, rallying allies and partners, upgrading security posture, building coalitions, etc. but related to these areas only.

Being a nonresident power, the US requires time and effort to build capacities and influence to deal with China challenge.

Conflict in the Indo–Pacific, unlike in Europe, will be a direct confrontation between US and China, with allies playing a supporting role.

Shadowboxing over Taiwan, saber-rattling by North Korea and the South China Sea will be main areas of contestation.

Period of next 7–10 years is critical in terms of addressing the existing power differential between China and regional coalitions being assembled by the US.

Indian Perspective

With the Asia Pacific centrality of the US and allies, India must deal with the China challenge in the IOR/ South Asia on its own, with minimum support from the US and other partners.

Given India’s increasing military capability, progress in technology, and growing economy, China reckons India as an important medium-term challenge. This will make a force commitment by China an imperative in any conflict situation – second front scenario.

Despite diversity of theatres of operation, and given the existing architecture, a strong defence partnership with the US remains an important vertical of bilateral relations, based on interoperability and depth of engagement, cutting across the broader region or specific theatres from East Asia to the Indian Ocean.

It is imperative to develop a more broad-based strategic architecture encompassing a whole of Indo–Pacific approach.

Japan

As China looms large, Japan’s dilemma between its security and economic interests has deepened and is further likely to escalate.

This has forced Japan to relook at its national security and make substantial investments (\$100 billion) in upgrading its military posture, including counter strike capability.

In our appreciation, heightened China–US contestation will draw Japan into this vortex. Inevitably Japan will end up being a frontline state.
