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# VIF Expert Groups Reports



Edited by Naval Jagota



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# Editor's Note

In the month of April 2022 Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) organized six expert group interactions with most of them being hybrid. All the interactions covered the relevant and engaging topics in the world and the region i.e. Sri Lanka, Ukraine and Pakistan's political scene, with their ramifications to the various groupings, regions and to India specifically. This edition contains views on issues affecting USA, Europe, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, West Asia and their impact on India.

In the West Asia experts group the discussion was focussed on "Regional and Geopolitical Contestation in the Red Sea". The key speaker for the session was Dr. Michael Barak, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and Lecturer at Lauder School of Government Diplomacy and Strategy in The Reichman University (IDC), Herzliya.

As the stability of India's neighbourhood is at major risk with Sri Lanka, one of India's major neighbours, in turmoil and reeling under severe economic and political crises. In one of the sittings of the Strategic group, discussions were focused on analysing the "Developments in Sri Lanka and its Implications". The topics covered were causative factors of the economic crisis, political crisis, China's role, India's actions and the way ahead.

The meeting of the Pakistan study group (PSG) was held in a virtual format and the agenda's main items were: Pakistan- Imran Khan's antics, his popularity and future strategy, his and PTI's future, Former Opposition's

strategy leading to the successful completion of the no-confidence motion, Shahbaz Sharif as PM, challenges before him, Nawaz Sharif's return, can opposition unity hold?, Possibility of early elections.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to various historic decisions, notably, the EU's decision to supply defence and military equipment to Ukraine. There are also ongoing debates in Finland and Sweden regarding joining NATO, with massive public support in both countries in favour of the same. The countries have also indicated an interest in the opening of bases, the very notion of which was previously quite taboo. There have been differential effects of the conflict on Europe, with some states bearing a greater share of the burden. To discuss these aspects the Europe experts group met virtually and assessed the situation in Ukraine with a key focus on evaluating the European perspective of the conflict.

The US experts group met virtually to assess the latest iteration of the India-US 2+2 Meeting conducted in the backdrop of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The discussion was geared towards assessing the Indo-US relationship given the challenges of their differing positions on Russia and Ukraine, with a special focus on the defence aspect of the relationship.

There is no better teacher of warfare than war itself. As the war in Ukraine entered the third month of conflict, it presented an ideal opportunity to assess the war aims of both sides and to draw crucial military lessons. The VIF organized a strategic discussion to assess the operational and tactical aspects of the Ukrainian war to draw out relevant operational and tactical lessons from the conflict for the Indian Armed Forces.

The coordinators and researchers associated with the expert and dialogue groups, think tanks and interactions have put unfaltering efforts to coordinate the meetings, to provide range and diversity of views as well as capture the discussion for the reports.

**Naval Jagota**

**New Delhi**

**May 2022**

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# Regional and Geopolitical Contestation in the Red Sea

Prepared by Hirak Jyoti Das

*The West Asia Experts Group Meeting was virtually held on 7 April 2022 by the Vivekananda International Foundation, the discussion was focussed on “Regional and Geopolitical Contestation in the Red Sea”. The key speaker for the session was Dr. Michael Barak, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and Lecturer at Lauder School of Government Diplomacy and Strategy in The Reichman University (IDC), Herzliya. The members attending and contributing were Amb. Anil Trigunayat (Coordinator); Dr. Meena Singh Roy; Lt. Gen. R. K. Sawhney (Retd) and Director, VIF, Dr. Arvind Gupta.*

## **Introduction**

The Red Sea region is crucial for geopolitical and geo-economic reasons. The location of the Red Sea is highly strategic, connecting the Mediterranean Sea, Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. There are 10 states close to the Red Sea hosting a combined population of roughly 620 million people. 10 percent of global trade is carried out and 30,000 merchant ships traverse through the sea per year. The region has highly potential for tourism and poses itself as an economic epicentre.

## **Non-state Actors**

The threat posed by non-state actors such as the Houthis, Al Shabab, and Al Qaeda is an area of concern for all states in the region. Houthis’ growing naval

capabilities could seriously endanger navigation, trade and supply of oil, gas, food items and other commodities. Houthi forces between January 2017 and June 2021 have attacked Saudi and Emirati ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The maritime routes through the Red Sea have been used to destroy assets of Saudi led coalition. Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia is highly concerned about Houthis' possible control over Bab Al Mandeb. Egypt in fact had sent warships and troops to protect Bab Al Mandeb from Houthi control.

The Red Sea region is prone to piracy disrupting maritime navigation and global commerce. The scale of piracy has gone down after interventions by the US and European states. Illegal activities especially drug and human trafficking however has continued through the Red Sea passage.

### **Regional and Extra-regional Actors in Red Sea**

There is high degree of competition among state actors to hold strategic ground in the Red Sea region. Djibouti hosts military bases of the US, China, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, UK and Saudi Arabia suggesting the importance of the Red Sea for these states. The UAE has reached agreement to build ports in Eritrea and Somalia.

Iran's growing capabilities has allowed it develop stronghold in the region. Iran has provided tactical inputs and weapons to the Houthis and deployed warships to protect its merchant ships. Islamic revolutionary Guards Corp. (IRGC) has conducted training in Indian Ocean and Red Sea indicating its strategic interest. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia share concern about Iran's aspirations in the Red Sea. Israel fears that the Iran led axis that includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen under Houthis could threaten its security. Iran also provides military support to Hamas and in case of future conflict between the Gaza based group and Israel, Houthis could attack Israeli cities. Tel Aviv is likely to adopt both military and non-military measures to resist Iran's assertive posture in the Red Sea region. The Abraham Accords have offered an opportunity for Israel to increase cooperation with Persian Gulf states including maritime patrol, intelligence sharing etc.

For Saudi Arabia, the Red sea is considered as a central pillar of security. Muslim pilgrims from Eastern African states traverse through the Red Sea to reach Jeddah port. Saudi Arabia is also keen to utilise the Red Sea routes to develop economic infrastructure and strengthen ties with states in the Horn of Africa. The strategic

importance of Red Sea has contributed in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's continued involvement in Yemen. At the same time, Egypt intends to build military base in the Red Sea region to thwart Ethiopia. Turkey through its Blue Homeland doctrine intends to connect Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, and Black Sea. Turkey's plans to build port in Sudan have been derailed due to pressure from Saudi Arabia.

India could significantly contribute to security of Red Sea by aligning with the US, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. India as well as the US is concerned about China's inroads in the Red Sea region. India is also concerned about Pakistan's entry in the geopolitics of the Red Sea.

# Developments in Sri Lanka and its implications

Prepared by Cdr. Shashank Sharma

*A Strategic Discussion was held at VIF on 11 Apr 2022 to analyse the “Developments in Sri Lanka and its Implications”. The meeting was chaired by Dr Arvind Gupta and moderated by Lt. Gen. Ravi Sawhney (Retd). The key speakers were Mr. Nitin Gokhale, Amb. Ashok Kantha, Mr. PM Heblikar and Mr. Akshay Mathur. Discussants included Gen. NC Vij (Retd), Amb. TCA Rangachari, Lt. Gen. Anil Abuja (Retd) and Brig. Rahul Bhonsle (Retd). The salient outcomes of the discussion are appended in the succeeding paragraphs.*

### **Introduction**

The stability of India’s neighbourhood is at major risk with both Pakistan and Sri Lanka, two of India’s major neighbours, in turmoil and reeling under severe economic and political crises. Sri Lanka is faced with its biggest economic crisis since independence in 1948 and its situation could also be compared to multi organ failure, not auguring well for chances of recovery in the near future.

### **The Crisis in Sri Lanka**

A few years back no one would have expected Sri Lanka to land up in this situation – its high ranking on social indices and infrastructure development plans camouflaged the simmering crisis. Today the country is faced with huge external debts and depleted foreign exchange reserves. People are out on the streets protesting against shortage and rocketing prices of food and essentials, petrol, as

also long power outages. The country doesn't have enough foreign exchange to foot the import bills for daily essentials like energy (petroleum products), food, dairy etc.

### **Chronology of the Economic Crisis**

The Sri Lankan economy has been inching towards the present crisis for a long time. Going back to the year 2006 - at the beginning of the Eelam war (2006-2009) - Sri Lanka's debt was 90% of GDP. Culmination of the war in 2009, saw a recovery phase as the debt improved to 71% of GDP. By 2014 the GDP had improved significantly riding on the tourism industry. However, from 2014 to 2019 there was a 38% increase in debt, particularly after the change of government in 2015. By 2019 the debt had again gone up to 91% of GDP and the foreign exchange reserves fell to \$ 6 billion owing to indiscriminate borrowing by the government. Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves have dipped 70% in the last two years and now stand at \$ 2 billion while repayments of \$ 4.5 billion are due this year. As of 2021, Sri Lanka's external debt was at 110% of GDP.

### **Causative Factors - Economic Crisis**

The crisis did not develop overnight. The cumulative effect of long-term profligacy of leaders and ill-advised policy decisions led to the precipitous decline of the economy. Sri Lankan economy had seen an upswing in the post-civil war era, however the prevailing structural problems were not addressed and they continued to drain the economy. The problems included inability of the country to diversify its economy, excessive dependence on export of just tea, rubber and garments, inflow of remittances from the million strong Sri Lankan workforce abroad and limited domestic capacity. The country therefore possessed a very narrow revenue base.

The economy was in a decline since 2014 but the problem was compounded in 2019 when Gotabaya Rajapaksa reduced Value Added Taxes (VAT) by almost 50% from 15% to 8%, abolished nation building tax and several other levies as part of his poll promises in the run up to the elections. Although the decision was reversed in the year 2020, it brought huge losses to an already strained economy.

Other major factors leading to the crisis include the infamous Easter bombings of April 2019 which brought Sri Lankan tourism industry on its knees and so

did the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020. The GDP of Sri Lanka shrank by 3.6% as a consequence of various welfare measures instituted to ameliorate the hardships brought on by the pandemic. The tourism industry contributes over 12% to the country's GDP and the fall in revenue from tourism caused a drop in Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves. Fixing the exchange rate of one U.S. dollar to 203 Sri Lankan Rupees by the Central Bank led to a drop in foreign remittances from overseas Sri Lankans. Any possibility of tourism picking up was quelled by the Russia-Ukraine conflict - Russians and Ukrainians make up almost 50% of tourist arrivals. It bears a mention that India is the biggest contributor to Sri Lanka's tourism Industry.

The Rajapaksa decision in 2021 to ban chemical fertilizers and switching to organic fertilizers severely impacted the output of tea, paddy and rubber which are Sri Lanka's key exports, raising food prices.

Sri Lanka is completely dependent on import for most of the basic commodities for daily use including medicines, food, fertilizers, fuel etc. The country does not have adequate livestock and imports dairy products, mainly milk powder. Daily use commodities thus make up a major part of the import bill.

The Rajapaksa governments (2005-2015 and 2019-till today) have been largely responsible for the decline of Sri Lankan economy owing to a toxic mix of mismanagement of the economy, large borrowings for infrastructure development, corruption, unviable populist welfare measures and nepotism over the years. The government went for big infrastructure projects such as Hambantota port, Hambantota airport and Colombo port city project which were commercially unviable and have not yielded any returns till date. All the existing structural problems in the economy were compounded by actions of President Kotabaya Rajapaksa since coming to power in 2019.

### **Political Crisis**

Post the civil-war, Rajapaksa government had consolidated the support base of the Sinhala majority with support from the Buddhist clergy that rallies behind Sinhala majority based ethno-nationalism. As a consequence, the present government has limited support base among the nation's minorities. However, the current economic crisis has eroded the Sinhala support base and there are countrywide protests against the Rajapaksa government cutting across ethnic lines. The ruling

party has lost majority support in the parliament and the entire cabinet has resigned. Efforts by President Kotabaya Rajapaksa to set up an interim national unity government has been rejected by the opposition. There is a widespread call for resignation of both Mahinda and Kotabaya Rajapaksa.

### **The External Debt**

Sri Lanka's bilateral loans amount to only 7.7% of the GDP. The Chinese government loan makes up just 10% of Sri Lanka's external debt which is about the same as that from the Japanese government. Japan is the largest holder of debt in Sri Lanka with India coming second and China third (not including loans from China exim bank and China Development Bank). The quantum of loan from Chinese state-owned enterprises and commercial contracts are not easily ascertained. The Chinese loans to Sri Lanka, although substantial, are not the main reason for the latter's economic collapse. Among the various components of loan, it is the sovereign bonds which are the bone in the throat for Sri Lanka because unlike government loans, these cannot be restructured.

Not to forget, Sri Lanka even after culmination of the civil war continues to retain a highly oversized army. Its defence budget has been steadily rising over the years and is a contributory factor to the present state of Sri Lankan economy.

### **India's Actions and Way Ahead**

Sri Lanka being a neighbourhood country is of great strategic significance to India. Any developments in the country are of grave concern to us. Unfortunately, over the years Sri Lanka has always held the perception that India harbours imperialistic and hegemonistic intentions towards Sri Lanka.

It is imperative for India to be the first responder to any crisis that afflicts Sri Lanka and make efforts to ensure stability in the region. As part of its neighbourhood-first policy, India has been proactive in its response to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka having extended a \$ 2.4 billion equivalent line of credit (LOC), provided 270,000 tons off Petro products, 40,000 tons of grains and medicines. However, these provisions are likely to run out by the mid of May.

India while providing support to the Sri Lanka needs to be cognizant of the sensitivities of Sri Lankan people and should not be seen as propping up Rajapaksa

government or playing favourites. India must not interfere in the political process of Sri Lanka. Certain sections in Sri Lanka can already be heard complaining about projects being awarded to India as *quid pro quo* for Indian assistance - Trincomalee oil farms, western container terminal at Colombo port etc. Indian actions should be seen to be in support of the ordinary citizens of Sri Lanka only and not seen as getting involved in domestic politics of Sri Lanka.

Beyond India's individual capacity, India can garner support from QUAD countries and help in marshalling loans from international financial institutions.

The Sri Lankan establishment is also making attempts to build relations with India. Sri Lankan High Commissioner to India Milinda Moragoda recently indicated Sri Lanka's intentions of integrating with eight sectors of Indian economy as envisioned in Sri Lanka's *Integrated Country Strategy (ICS)* paper for enhancing India-Sri Lanka relations released by Sri Lankan High Commission in August 2021. The High Commissioner has also been invited by FICCI for exploring opportunities of investment by Indian businesses in Sri Lanka. Some promising fields indicated include fisheries, electronic battery management etc.

On the security front, it would be prudent for India to examine the likelihood of influx of Sri Lankans into India and likely implications.

There is a need for India's corporate world and private sector to get involved in critical areas of development and non-traditional areas of security in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has also expressed interest in joining India and its endeavours in the fields of *underwater domain awareness* and *blue economy*. India's private sector, considering the exceptional circumstances in Sri Lanka, could find attractive opportunities for investment to the benefit of both the parties, thus aiding the recovery process.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka should target India's 2-tier and 3-tier cities for tourism as people in these cities also have disposable incomes. The Indian establishment could help Sri Lanka in this regard.

The coming 6 to 8 months are a ripe opportunity for India to improve its perception among the people of Sri Lanka by way of its actions in assisting Sri Lanka to recover from its biggest crisis yet.

## **China's Role**

Chinese response to the Sri Lankan economic crisis has been conservative and guarded till date. China is surely expected to provide assistance to Sri Lanka. However there appears to be some resentment among Sri Lankans on the excessive dependence of Rajapaksa on China for infrastructure projects. It is common knowledge that China in lieu of loan repayments tends to seek strategic assets as it did in case of Hambantota port 99 years lease. China is deeply entrenched into the political ecosystem of Sri Lanka and is therefore not likely to lose or cede ground in Sri Lanka. The Chinese were seen gifting food packets to all political parties and making contributions to leading Municipal Corporation in Colombo. Sri Lanka's dependence on China for infrastructure is likely to continue in the future.

## **Prognosis and Way Ahead for Sri Lanka**

**Political Situation.** Sri Lanka in the near future is expected to be embroiled in political uncertainty. President Gotabaya being a tenacious politician is refusing to step down. There are however no indications of any Impeachment process being initiated against the president. There is a need for the establishment to find an interim political arrangement to tide over the economic crisis as elections are not an option at this stage. Although fissures are seen appearing within the Rajapaksa family, there being no viable alternative for the Rajapaksas, Gotabaya is likely to remain in power for some more time.

**Economic Situation.** Sri Lanka needs to undertake urgent measures to pay for its fuel and commodities import bill and for repayment of sovereign loans which are due in July. Although loan from IMF cannot be considered to be a panacea for Sri Lanka's economic woes, it is the only option available. It is promising to note that discussions with IMF have commenced. Sri Lanka would have to also source funding from World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc and others bilateral loans from countries. Poor economic rating by rating agencies would be a major obstacle in sourcing funding from the international market or from other countries for refinancing their loans.

Sri Lanka is displaying all the classic symptoms of a failing State and its situation is akin to a multi-organ failure. It would have to do more than just approaching IMF to recover from the crisis. IMF assistance has not bailed Pakistan out of its

financial crisis and cannot be expected to be a panacea for Sri Lanka either. Sri Lanka would have to do more in terms of tightening its belt, fiscal discipline, making serious structural changes in the economic and political policies in order to come out of this situation. Meanwhile the coming 6 to 8 months are a ripe opportunity for India to improve its perception among the people of Sri Lanka by way of its actions in assisting Sri Lanka to recover from its biggest crisis yet.

## Pakistan: Imran's Popularity and Future Strategy

Prepared by Aakriti Vinayak

*A meeting of the Pakistan Study Group (PSG) was held in virtual mode on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022. The agenda's main items were: Pakistan- Imran Khan's antics, his popularity and future strategy, his and PTI's future, Former Opposition's strategy leading to the successful completion of the no-confidence motion, Shabbaz Sharif as PM, challenges before him, Nawaz Sharif's return, Can Opposition unity hold?, Possibility of early elections. The Meeting was attended by the following: Shri. Arvind Gupta, Amb. Satish Chandra, Ms. Shalini Chawla, Shri. Rana Banerjee, Shri. CD Sahay, Shri. Sushant Sareen, Amb. DP Srivastava, Amb. G Parthasarathy, Lt. Gen. Ravi Sawhney(Retd), Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh (Retd), Shri.Tilak Devasher, Amb. Gautam Mukhopadhaya and Gp. Capt. Naval Jagota.*

The month of April was eventful to say the least for Pakistan. The first ten days of the month was full of political chaos and uncertainty. Eventually it resulted in the removal of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader Imran Khan from the prime minister's office through a vote of no confidence. During his tenure he built multiple narratives especially on the foreign policy front. However things became difficult for him once he lost the support of the army. Army had maintained a neutral stance with regards to Imran Khan. However as far as the reports were concerned Pakistan army had asked Imran Khan to resign after the OIC conference. After Khan's removal as Pakistan's Prime Minister, he has kicked off a defiant campaign by pulling crowds through marches and Jalsas. There is social media campaign against the new PM Shahbaz Sharif. He is also using the narrative of regime

change and foreign conspiracy. Khan is using an explicit anti-USA rhetoric by stating that it was an American plot to topple the PTI government. Future looks hazy for the Khan as his support base, which comprises of urban rich is likely to crumble. Importantly his relations between the army remain tense.

Subsequently after the no confidence motion parliament elected unopposed Shahbaz Sharif as 23rd prime minister of the country, bringing to an end the political uncertainty that had gripped the nation. He was only candidate left in the race after former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi announced that his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party will boycott the voting and staged a walkout. Sharif had secured 174 votes. Though Shahbaz Sharif is considered to be an able administrator, the new Prime Minister will have to face some major challenges ahead foremost being to handle the economic crisis and keeping the political alliance intact. Economy is in dire straits in Pakistan as local prices for gasoline, food, commodities, steel and semiconductor chips are witnessing a sharp increase. Inflation is at all time high, Fiscal balance is out of sync and there is historic trade deficit of over \$35 billion. Further recommencement of International Monetary Fund's \$6 billion bailout will be a key priority for the new government. The sword of IMF's tough conditionalities hangs on Pakistan. Another major challenge for the Shahbaz Sharif government is the opposition unity. Though as far as opposition unity is concerned the glue that has brought them together is likely to stay, the future looks uncertain. However army's support to the government will play an important role for its survival.

As far as the elections are concerned the Election Commission of Pakistan has already informed President Arif Alvi that the fresh elections are not possible before October. However Khan will use these narratives to his advantage to put pressure on the new government to conduct elections at the earliest. On the question of India and Pakistan relations the new government is expected to have a modest stance as India Pakistan relations under the Imran Khan government was at the lowest ebb. Though there will be no major breakthrough in India and Pakistan relations, as Kashmir will remain the main issue. In fact on India Shahbaz Sharif stated, "We want peace with India, but peace is not possible without resolution of the Kashmir issue".

## European Perspective on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Prepared by Avantika Menon

*The Europe Experts Group met virtually on 20 April 2022 to discuss and assess the situation in Ukraine with a key focus on evaluating the European perspective of the conflict. The discussion was moderated by Amb. Anil Wadhwa, who also delivered the opening remarks. The meeting saw in attendance several distinguished guests like Amb. Bala Venkat Verma, Dr. Garima Mohan, Dr Arvind Gupta, Prof. K.P Vijaylaxmi, Amb. P.S. Raghavan, Lt. Gen. R.K. Sawhney (Retd) and Gp. Capt. Naval Jagota.*

### **The European Debate**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to various historic decisions, notably, the EU's decision to supply defence equipment and military equipment to Ukraine. There are also ongoing debates in Finland and Sweden regarding joining NATO, with massive public support in both countries in favour of the same. The countries have also indicated an interest in the opening of bases, the very notion of which was previously quite taboo. There have been differential effects of the conflict on Europe, with some states bearing a greater share of the burden. Countries like Poland, which have been intensely critical of the EU, have taken a centre stage now, both in terms of supplying assistance to Ukraine and also in dealing with the refugees. However, this has also reinforced divisions in Europe, particularly between East and West, with Germany increasingly being viewed as a major laggard.

Domestic politics in Germany is also in flux, with the coalition government in

hot water as the social democrats are feeling a lot of pressure due to their old linkages with Moscow. While the public support in Germany is highly in favour of both supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine and an oil embargo; the Chancellor is not there yet. Consequently, all of his actions so far seem to be falling short within the public narrative. France is currently formulating a model to provide security guarantees to Ukraine based on and rooted in classic EU style rather than NATO's Article 5. The ongoing French elections can be a major turning point as Le Pen has traditionally held antagonistic positions toward both the EU and NATO. With France in the driving seat of the EU's response to the crisis, the French elections and the resultant outcome must be closely monitored.

There is also an emerging debate on the sustainability of economic sanctions. There is no clarity on how long they will last. Already certain western companies have started to resume their production in Russia. This is particularly true of the tire industry, where Russia plays a major role in the supply chains, and several big companies (German companies like Continental), have restarted their factories on the outskirts of Moscow. Thus, the question of the longevity and breadth of sanctions is starting to see a lot of pushback within Europe. Advisors and economists are increasingly warning that the sanctions coupled with China's Zero Covid strategy will have major consequences on the supply chains in Europe. The massive use of military equipment and the need for replenishment and restocking of hardware used in the war will also lead to large-scale supply chain hold-ups and issues in supply chain management of key military instruments. This thus brings to the fore a very crucial question, how long can the West rely on economic sanctions as an instrument? While an oil embargo is being determined as a natural next step to increase the hurt on Russia, countries like Hungary and Germany are emerging as major holdouts; meanwhile, France is busy crafting the blueprint for the same. Hence, even with regard to sanctions, there is a lot of internal debate and division within Europe.

### **The Russian Take**

Russia believes that it is not an occupier of Ukraine. It doesn't want to extend its presence in Ukraine beyond what is necessary. It appears very keen to end the conflict as quickly as possible. It believes that the West desires to prolong the conflict for as long as possible to further economically squeeze Russia. With the seemingly unending sanctions, which will inadvertently bite more as time passes

by, Russia has a long drawn rocky economic recovery in front of it. It will have to increasingly seek alternatives and scramble for partners that will continue to trade in order to keep its economy afloat.

### **The European Perspective of the Indian Position**

The narrative in Europe is dominantly in favour of Ukraine with a belief that Ukraine can successfully hold its position and may even gain an offensive position in other areas against Russia. The West largely views India's position on the matter as problematic. Either India is perceived as neutral or it is perceived to be in cahoots with China and Russia on one side. These views are widely visible in the western media narratives. However, this position seemingly doesn't find any legs in the official circles. In fact, there continues to be a tremendous amount of goodwill still and the official line is that business is as usual with India. Several important visits and activities continue to take place, although the agenda will now be largely focused on Russia and the current situation. Hence, the European position on India appears to have evolved to be more nuanced than it used to be.

Even in terms of pressure on India and China, different approaches are being applied to both. The European response to China has been markedly different. In addition to the news of China actively aiding Russia in the conflict, the recently convened EU-China summit was rather tense. Thus, China has visibly been placed in a very different position from India. The West has been presented with an opportunity to drive a wedge between India and Russia by painting it as an unreliable partner. However, the western public and media narrative continues to be extremely critical of India, inadvertently making it difficult for the officials to be more understanding of its position. Thus, the narrative needs to be managed much better for any progress in this relationship.

The Europe-India partnership is not as multifaceted as the US-India partnership. As the current crisis is an emotive issue for the Europeans, unlike with the US where India's stance is understood relatively better, this extent of understanding has not been visible in Europe.

### **The Indian Perspective**

India must focus on long term solutions instead of quick fixes and tactical moves. It is suggested that the focus be on safeguarding its military interests, particularly

the availability of spare parts for the next two-three years. This has to be done as a priority regardless of the sanctions in place. India should refrain from focusing its political energies on symbolic ways of signalling to the world about its oil imports as it is rather self-defeating. The core interest should be military aspects and the sole focus must be on safeguarding these interests. The flippant notion that India can get these parts and equipment from other ex-Soviet states and NATO countries must be discarded. Even the latest equipment in the post-Soviet countries is severely outdated.

As far as its narrative position is concerned, India should have a strong pushback and train a harsh spotlight on the extent of the collateral damage of this conflict. There have been tremendous adverse rippling consequences across multiple sectors. From energy, food grains, and essential supplies to rising inflation and falling GDP, the most marked impact has been on the poorer, developing economies. There is a diplomatic niche for India, where it can use its position and stance to rally for these collateral damages. India needs to sharpen its arguments and take them forward in both the G7 and the G20. This will also help shape India's narrative more positively and cast it in a much softer light. In the long run, it is important to have a positive position; a vision besides simply neutrality. As the war continues to drag on with no end in sight, crafting a positive narrative with a focus on the far-reaching repercussions, is imperative.

### **The Evolving Europe-US dynamic**

There has been a sea change in how the US is perceived in Europe. The key factor driving this change has been the election of President Biden, who happens to be a committed Transatlantist. Additionally, large portions of his senior staff are also Transatlantists which has sparked reassurance in Europe that America is back in. The crisis in Europe has further reinforced the necessity of a strong US presence and commitment in Europe. The reinforced transatlantism has reinvigorated the trust in the US and its security guarantees; Europe increasingly needs the US to stay engaged in the European theatre. However, there is also looming anxiety regarding the upcoming mid-term elections and what lies ahead if Trump happens to be re-elected.

As the crisis rages on, the military infrastructure of Ukraine is almost on the brink of collapse. Its oil refining capacity is also on the brink of collapse. With

weapons pouring in from the West, it appears that the battle in Donbas will be quite fierce and consequential. In case of an incomplete military victory for Russia, the situation will only further worsen.

The economic squeeze on Russia is still on and will have unpredictable consequences. The looming default is a big issue. The divisions in Europe regarding the divisive oil embargo in addition to an incomplete military victory for the Russians will lead to a major inflexion point.

It is interesting to note that approximately 35,000 refugees are also actively going back to Ukraine, a warzone, indicative of harsher situations in the host countries. Thus, the situation is quite intricate and the complete ramifications of this conflict on Europe can only be clearly assessed and determined with the passage of time.

# India-US 2+2 Meeting: Assessing the Indo-US relationship

Prepared by Avantika Menon

*The US Experts Group met virtually on 22 April to assess the latest iteration of the India-US 2+2 Meeting conducted in the backdrop of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The discussion was geared towards assessing the Indo-US relationship given the challenges of their differing positions on Russia and Ukraine, with a special focus on the defence aspect of the relationship. The meeting was moderated by Amb. Arun K. Singh and saw in attendance several distinguished guests like Dr. Tanvi Madan, Lt. Gen. Anil Abuja (Retd), Gen. N.C. Vij (Retd), Lt. Gen. R.K. Sawhney (Retd), V.Adm. Satish Soni (Retd), Prof. K.P. Vijaylaxmi and Gp. Capt. Naval Jagota.*

## **Introduction**

The Fourth Annual India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was conducted on 11 April 2022, preceded by a virtual meeting between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The meeting was held amid the ongoing geopolitical crisis, with the Russia-Ukraine war showing no signs of abating. Surprisingly, both parties did acknowledge the elephant in the room and shared assessments of energy and food security concerns, and the impact on the defence supply chains. The discussion also took into concern the repercussions of this conflict on Russia-China relations with a focus on the potential mitigation strategies for these externalities. Overall, there was an acknowledgement of differences and an attempt to manage them to find a way forward. There was also a broader discussion of the regional picture, not limited to the Indo-Pacific. In addition to discussing the concerns regarding the developing situation in the Solomon Islands, the

discussion also extended to developments in South Asia, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Besides the usual roster of energy, climate and health, this iteration of the dialogue also saw a particular emphasis on higher education.

### **Defence Cooperation**

Defence and security have gradually emerged as the strongest pillar in the Indo-US partnership. The inaugural 2+2 dialogue held in 2018 was postponed twice due to prevailing concerns over CATSA and the Iran sanctions on both sides. The positive outcome of this inaugural dialogue can be largely attributed to the robust defence-related initiatives from both ends. The defence acquisition council sanctioned 1B USD worth of acquisition of NASAM 2 with an additional DSC approval for 24 MH60 multi-role helicopters for the Navy. Hence, since the very first 2+2 dialogue, defence has emerged as the strongest pillar. The following dialogue in 2019 was marked by the signing of the industrial security annexe and the commencement of a Tri-service amphibious exercise. The 3rd 2+2 held in 2020, was highlighted by the conclusion of the third foundational agreement, BECA and even greater military cooperation with the CENTCOM and the Africa command. A dynamic exchange of Naval Liaison Officers (LO) was established, with the Indian Navy LO going to Bahrain and the US Navy LO coming to the Gurgaon Information Fusion Centre (IFC). Most notably, this 2+2 set the stage for a smooth transition from the Trump to the Biden administration. These annual 2+2 meetings have significantly deepened the Indo-US cooperation and have largely been driven by the defence component of the relationship.

According to the recently released joint statement, India and the US are launching a new defence exchange program between the US Space Command and India's Defence Space Agency. They will be deepening cooperation across Cyber and Space, with the expansion of information sharing across all key war-fighting domains. Both the states have also agreed to launch new supply chain cooperation measures that will enable them to swiftly support each other's priority defence requirements. As a defence industry leader in the Indo-Pacific and the net provider of security in the region; the US has identified new opportunities to extend its operational reach. Concrete measures have been taken to extend the operational reach of both Indo-US militaries and to enhance interoperability across the expanse of the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Navy is also scheduled to join

the combined maritime forces based in Bahrain as an associate member. The two countries have also committed to conducting more high-end exercises together.

### **Defence Cooperation in the 2+2**

In the 2022 dialogue, the focus has been on building a partnership for Indo-Pacific cooperation. There is an added emphasis on science, technology, innovation, space, cyber, artificial intelligence and building resilient supply chains. Considerable emphasis is also being laid on deepening engagement under the aegis of the Joint Technical Group which on the Indian side is headed by a senior official from the DRDO while on the US side is led by the Under-Secretary of Defence on Research and Engineering. An important MoU on Space Situational Awareness (SSA) has also been signed and the two states are also planning an inaugural Defence Space Dialogue in addition to the existing Defence Cyber Dialogue. A similar dialogue on Artificial Intelligence is in consideration, with the US also offering training to the Indian military in these domains.

At the operational level, with all the foundational documents in place, the focus is on operationalizing LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA. Under LEMOA both sides are carrying out replenishment on sea, air and ground refuelling which significantly enhances the operational reach of both the countries. COMCASA has ameliorated communication and BECA has facilitated the exchange of key geospatial information. The recent standoff with China in Eastern Ladakh has highlighted the importance of information sharing which in this case also alludes to intelligence sharing. Thus, both sides have decided to create a framework for the real-time exchange of information across all domains. Particularly, this time there was emphasis also on building underwater domain awareness which is hitherto an unexplored and critically sensitive area.

Both the states have also made great strides toward deeper naval cooperation, notably; India has agreed to join the Combined Maritime Task Force in the Gulf as an associate partner. This Task Force is a 34 nation multinational maritime force in the Arabian Gulf, commanded by a U.S Navy Vice Admiral. As an associate partner, Indian Navy ships are likely to work with maritime patrol aircraft and coordinate operations, share information and be plugged in for domain awareness. The wide array of bilateral and multilateral exercises conducted regularly across services reiterate the importance of the military to military cooperation between

the two states.

Under the auspices of the DTTI, both sides have been working on air-launched UAVs and have been looking at additional programs for countering unmanned aerial systems. There is also an interest in transforming India into a regional hub for the P8Is. Raytheon technologies along with other key subsidiaries are increasingly looking at greater investment in India. An emphasis has been laid on manufacturing for the world rather than simply domestic consumption.

### **Prioritizing the Indo-Pacific Theatre**

The US administration has been taking several steps to indicate that the Indo-Pacific continues to remain an important and pivotal theatre. This has been visible across the series of visits and engagements in the region that have persisted in the midst of the Ukraine crisis. In a recent fact sheet released by the Department of Defence, two out of the four listed 'priorities' explicitly mentioned China. There is a notable prioritization of the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific followed by the Russia challenge in Europe; thus as far as the US Department of Defence is concerned, China continues to be the pacing challenge and threat for the United States.

The latest iteration of the Indo-Pacific strategy has significant mentions of both India and the Quad, conveying the idea that while Russia is a European challenge, the US views China as a far more pressing, global challenge. It is interesting to note that there has also been a slight reframing in the Indo-Pacific strategy; they have opted to drop the democracy versus authoritarianism framing. This change appears to stem from the realization that the original framing was neither widely palatable nor attractive. Hence, there has been a marked shift in the messaging, even in terms of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

The reinvigorated Quad is continuing with full steam with the next leader's summit scheduled in May. So far the differences on Russia have not fractured the grouping, as all four states are actively working towards moving forward with the Quad mechanisms and managing their differences.

### **The China Challenge**

The signalling from the US seems to suggest a continued focus on the China

challenge. It is important to note that the NATO Foreign Minister's meeting in early April saw in attendance ministers from Australia, Japan, Singapore and New Zealand, with everyone awaiting NATO's 2030 agenda. Thus, instead of just a European theatre or a Pacific theatre, one can see the US now facing a broader Eurasian theatre challenge. China's visibly supportive posture toward Russia in the crisis has further stoked the negative sentiments for it within the US.

There is now a bipartisan view within the US of China as a challenge and the recognition of it as the only country with the military, economic, technological and information prowess capable of threatening the US' interests.

However, there is also an ongoing debate regarding the objectives of the US in its competition with China. Several hold the view that a regime change in China should be the end goal. But the mainstream view which is reflected in the Indo-Pacific strategy prefers the objective of moulding China's strategic calculations by shaping its regional landscape and deterring it from activities that harm the US and its partners' interests.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis has brought home the urgency of the challenge in the Indo-Pacific; both in terms of the lessons that China is learning and in the sense that the timeline for Chinese action in the region is much shorter than generally perceived. This is not only limited to thinking about Taiwan scenarios but also about potential South China Sea scenarios and Chinese action at the China-India LAC.

### **Challenges and the way forward**

Currently, within the US administration, the Indo-Pacific hands seem to be winning the debate; however, will this momentum slow down if the transatlantists start winning the debates? This will need to be watched out for. Correspondingly, these discussions within the US have also been affected by the overt anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiment seen within the Indian populace.

While the partnership seems to be firing on all cylinders with the defence and security aspect emerging as a load-bearing pillar, it has been stressed that there is a need for a far more balanced approach. While India is quite forward-leaning on trade, the US doesn't seem to be as interested in any significant discussions for the same. Concomitantly, the economic side is noticeably unable to keep pace

with developments and advancements in the other aspects. The defence pillar has been overburdened and needs to be balanced out by spreading and enhancing the relationship across multiple facets.

Additionally, while an industrial security annexe has been signed for deepening industry collaboration, the requisite private industry cooperation is still lacking. A thorn at the side of the cooperation between defence, cyber and space agencies is that within India, these agencies are civil and nascent. Thus, greater inter-agency cooperation will require a little more fine-tuning.

Even within the robust defence relationship, there have been two separate aspects: one is operations related while the other is technology related. In the operations related aspect, the relationship has fared exceedingly well with Malabar going from strength to strength. However, the technology aspect hasn't fared as well in comparison.

The DDTI has so far failed to fulfil its objectives. While it started with seven working groups and multiple programs, none have materialized so far. Thus, even the progress of the ongoing UAV project is fuzzy at best. On a positive note, the GoI has moved the onus onto the private indigenous industry which will hopefully drive the DDTI further.

With a big push for the DDTI coming from the U. S., it has been suggested that India use this opportunity to incentivise the start-up industry via IDEX; additionally, it is recommended that offsets be converted into a fund, that can be placed through IDEX and can be geared towards transforming the defence start-up economy.

India maintains a strategically significant position within the Indo-Pacific. However, this important role can only be sustained by building the requisite defence capabilities and capacities.

## **Conclusion**

The larger theme of these dialogues continues to be cooperation for maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific against Chinese assertions, developing interoperability and enabling India to build its defence capabilities.

At present, the US administration seems to be signalling that there is an

understanding of India's approach to the conflict. It has been explicitly stated that India will make its decisions in accordance with its own interests. Even during the meeting, it was acknowledged by the US that the Indo-Russia relationship happened to evolve and grow at a time when the US was not willing to step in as a partner. However, now the US has shown a growing inclination to become the security partner of choice for India. Knowing the mercurial vicissitudes of US politics, it is tough to determine how much confidence India can place on these statements and declarations.

Convening the meeting at this time inherently sends an important signal, that while differences will arise, they cannot be allowed to come in the way of progress in this budding relationship and that it is important to continue to build that momentum even as the crisis in Eastern Europe smoulders on.

## Operational and Tactical Aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian War 2022

Prepared by Avantika Menon

*There is no better teacher of warfare than war itself. As the war in Ukraine enters the third month of conflict, it presents an ideal opportunity to assess the war aims of both sides and to draw crucial military lessons. The VIF organized a strategic discussion on 28 April 2022 to assess the operational and tactical aspects of the Ukrainian war to draw out relevant operational and tactical lessons from the conflict for the Indian Armed Forces. The discussion was moderated by Lt. Gen. R. K. Sawhney (Retd) and saw in attendance distinguished guests like Gen. N.C. Vij (Retd), Lt. Gen Rakesh Sharma (Retd), Lt. Gen. Phillip Campose (Retd), Air Mshl. M Rajesh Kumar (Retd), V. Adm. Satish Soni (Retd) and Gp. Capt. Naval Jagota.*

There have been a lot of changes on the ground since the incipience of the conflict on 24 February. The evolving situation has moulded the aims and objectives of both Russia and the West. Although the Russians have not captured Kyiv, their grip on the eastern and southern parts has tightened. There are also questions being raised about whether Russia will open up another front, bringing Moldova into its politico-military objectives as well. Meanwhile, the West has continued their support of Ukraine with aid from the US approximating over 3B USD so far. With continuing arms and equipment supplies; ranging from howitzers, and drones, to anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the West seeks to prolong the war to further weaken Russia.

## **Review of the Ground Operations**

At the operational level, two military districts are fighting: the Russian Western and Southern Military Districts. The 6<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army was fighting in the Sumy Axis and they were tasked with creating a linkup to Kyiv North. The Southwest Belarus group had 6-7 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) which came in from the west of the Dnieper River and were tasked with protecting themselves from any attacks coming from the Polish side. It is important to note that they were not tasked with capturing Kyiv. The Southeast Belarus group came from Belarus, on the eastern side of the Dnieper River and was tasked to advance towards Kyiv. It had 8-9 BTGs. The Brysansk Group came from the tri-junction of Belarus, Crimea and Ukraine and was also tasked to proceed toward Kyiv, it had 3 BTGs. The Belgorod group had 4 BTGs and advanced towards Sumy; the Voronezh group had 13-14 BTGs. The Rostok group which came from the Russian mainland had 6 BTGs and progressed towards Donetsk and Luhansk. Lastly, the Crimea group had 13 BTGs. Thus, there were around 100 BTGs brought about, with the greatest strength being focused towards the east, and down south. Two groups, the Kuban group with 6 BTGs and the Smolensk group with 6-7 BTGs were kept in reserve. Concomitantly, the major thrust was not towards Kyiv (North), but towards the South and South-east.

A BTG on average has an infantry being carried via troop carriers, a BMP company, a second BMP company and a tank company. Instead of an armoured regiment going in with 2-4 combined groups, they reconfigured themselves into BTGs composed of people from the Engineer Company, anti-aircraft battery and SAM battery. Intermittently, they switched between either having one mechanised company and two tank companies or two BMP companies and one tank company. It is interesting to note that the Chinese have also configured themselves to this line of thinking, unlike Indians. There were also several private military companies of all types fighting on the ground, namely, the Wagner Group (Russians), the Blackwater Group (Americans) and the Chechens.

The Russians also occupied two nuclear plants. Chernobyl was occupied to deter any hassles to the sensitive region from the ultra-right Ukrainian fighters. It is interesting to note that the IAEA was notified in advance of this occupation. The second nuclear plant, Zaporizhzhia, was also occupied with the same objectives in mind and was similarly notified to the IAEA.

After finishing capturing Kherson, the Russians moved to Mariupol and then to Zaporizhzhia, indicative of a mapped timeline being followed step by step. The method in the system becomes visible with a close analysis of the timings of the various operations.

**Operations in the South and Southeast:** Crimea is dry with extremely limited sources of water. In 2014, as soon as it was lost to the Russians, Ukraine began damming the river which fed the canal, the primary water source for this arid region. The damming of the river effectively blocked 85 per cent of Crimea's water supplies. There was also no land bridge connecting Crimea to the mainland. After capturing it in 2015, the Russians began building a 19 km long bridge which was completed by 2018. In the meantime, drinking water to Crimea was largely being supplied via trucks from mainland Russia.

At the initial point of attack, the first tanks were deployed at Kherson. There were two main objectives for Russians in Kherson, one was the dam in question and the second was the bridge. The Russians captured the bridge over the Dnieper River and also bombed the dam and destroyed it on the very first day of the operation. On the second day, there was a counterattack launched by the Ukrainians and the bridge was recaptured. On the very same night, by the evening the Russians managed to go up another 50 km and captured the second bridge across the Dnieper River and also captured the main bridge which allowed them to push their forces further to Mykolaiv. The capture of this bridge was key in facilitating their build-up across the river. In the following days, by 2 March, the Russians captured the Kherson airport and railway station in addition to the other attached areas. After securing control in Kherson, the Russian troops moved towards the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, which was followed by establishing contact at Mariupol. It took the Russians 55 days to capture Mariupol. The Russian forces conducted an amphibious landing at the port city and gradually captured the port.

**Missile Usage:** On the first night of the operation, the Russians fired 120 missiles of all types at multiple targets. Across the first month, till the end of March, they ended up firing 1120 missiles. Thus, on average they were firing around 20 missiles a day. These missiles subsumed all types: air-launched, sea-launched and ground-launched. It is reckoned that post-March, the number of missiles launched is far lesser than the previous tally, but the data for those statistics aren't available as of yet. The missile strikes were targeted at pre-planned sites; there was a distinct lack

of dynamism. Most missiles have been fired at military installations and airfields, known locations of the Azov battalion and locations like the NATO-Ukraine Partnership for Peace Centre, where several Ukrainian soldiers were receiving training, near the Polish borders.

### **Operational Challenges**

For the Russians, the first fiasco took place at the Hostomel airport in Kyiv, where in an endeavour to establish an airhead, a Russian aircraft carrying several soldiers was shot down by a stinger missile. While establishing an airhead has been a go-to Russian strategy for a long time, the two attempts they made in Ukraine have so far failed.

A major issue for operations has been the delineation of an overly wide front of nearly 3000 km. Even the fight in Donbas has a frontage of 300 km. Consequently, the Russians have spread themselves very thin, with the only exception being the southern regions and Donbas where they have continued to focus themselves. The thin spread across the other territories makes it even more evident that they didn't mean business in those areas.

It is important to note that by using the terminology of a 'special operation' rather than a war, Russia was only able to mobilize 70 per cent of its troops. Declaring a war by Act entails the national mobilization of troops, however, when a war isn't declared, the troops are maintained at only 70 per cent of their strength with the rest in reserve. This lack of complete mobilization directly resulted in significantly less manpower being deployed along the 60 km long tank convoys. With 70 per cent manpower and 20 per cent initial conscripts that were soon withdrawn, manpower was running short.

There has also been a distinct lack of coordination between the air force and the ground forces. At present, two wars being fought: one in Kyiv and the other in Donbas. The war in Donbas is conventional with tanks, small rivulets, and bunkers; so far the Russians have been unable to break through this line of control.

Before their withdrawal from Kyiv, the Russians were occupying approximately 25 per cent of Ukrainian territory. At present, they continued to maintain a hold over the Southeast and East.

The ongoing talks of Russian intentions of going up to Moldova would require crossing Odessa, the third largest city in Ukraine, effectively opening a new front in the war. However, this can also be a red herring for the Ukrainians in order to tie them down to the BTGs located inside Moldova.

The larger part of the war was won by the Russians in the very first week (24 Feb-3 March). However, Russia severely underestimated the Ukrainian prowess. Ukrainians receiving training and equipment from the West was not taken into account by Russia. The prolonging of this conflict has bestowed the West with plenty of time and manoeuvrability to step in and help out the Ukrainians with the requisite expertise, arms and wherewithal. Operations with shorter spans can severely constrain the enemy by not giving enough time for any allies to step in.

### **Review of the Mechanised Operations**

The war in Ukraine has bust the myth of large scale conventional wars becoming obsolete. The notion of interstate wars being relatively short has also been debunked. With each passing day, it is becoming increasingly evident that even military juggernauts like Russia are fallible and can make crucial strategic miscalculations.

The Russian complacency at the beginning of the conflict can be attributed to their relatively easy victory in Crimea 8 years ago. This is primarily why it was wrongly assumed that a majority of the eastern Ukrainian populace will rise in support of Russia and revolt against Ukraine. In addition to this miscalculation, there was also a marked shortage of manpower in the offensive columns which were subsequently very weak. Additionally, while a characteristic Russian offensive usually begins by pounding with airpower and artillery; there was next to no pounding in this conflict with a few sparse missiles being spread over the entire area. Thus, mechanised columns were sent in without any manpower for close support and protection, and without preparatory pounding, while hoping for the same results. They were also using older equipment and have noticeably refrained from deploying some of their best equipment such as the Armata tanks.

With mechanised operations, a key mistake was made in choosing the timing of the operation. Having gone in at the tail-end of winter, they were faced with a terrain laced with a mix of snow, slush and mud. This forced them to stick to the motorable roads which were easily blocked by Ukrainians using concrete barriers and barricades. The slushy soil severely hindered the movement of the tank

columns. Also, the Russian BTGs appeared unable to work as cohesive combined arms teams. The infantry was also lacking, deficiencies of which were then made up for by using motivated paramilitaries.

The Russians were also plagued with logistical issues right from the get-go. Whereas on the other hand, the Ukrainians were provided with full battle-scene transparency, as well as modern, easily operable anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and anti-helicopter weaponry including armed drones by the US and other NATO countries, which they have used quite effectively. It has been approximated that so far a whopping 27,000 anti-tank weapons have been given to the Ukrainians. These have included around 5000 Javelins, and several fire-and-forget, top-attack weapons. The Russian T72s and T90s were not prepared for these top-attack systems, as their turrets happen to be the weakest parts of the tank. Thus, this equipment has made a huge impact on the dimensions of the war on the battlefield.

It is believed that anti-radiation missiles, particularly focused on commanders, have also been used. These missiles have been used to target headquarters and have been directly responsible for the significant Russian loss of several senior commanders and generals.

The Russians also seem to have learnt their lessons along the way, for instance, on the aspect of the vast frontage, they have pulled back and are focusing on the East and the South. The sinking of the Moskva seems to have acted as a wake-up call and has propelled them to correct their course.

The Russians are now concentrating on two pincer movements connecting the South and the East. They are trying to cut off all the Ukrainian soldiers within this area and are forcing them to surrender. With the Russians having learnt their lessons, albeit bitterly, things on the ground may see a significant change. The Russians seem to have changed tactics, deployed newer weaponry and are actively using artillery to flatten out the places that they are moving towards. The war appears to have only reached the halfway mark with the Russians showing no signs of falling back without fulfilling their base objectives.

### **Assessing the Air Operations**

Before the onset of the war, Ukraine had around 200 fighters, whereas Russia had the capacity to deploy 2000 fighters. It is believed that Russia has deliberately held

back to avoid the large extent of collateral damage that comes with a high surge air battle. Instead of using the air force in a classic campaign, they focused on Defence Counter Air (DCA) however even this was stopped midway, which was a big mistake. They should have undertaken the offensive counter air campaign to achieve lasting effects over the battle field while continuing with DCA. A standard campaign takes out the long-range missiles as they are easily identifiable owing to their bigger size. Even though their S300 system with approximately 300 launches still has 200 left, a large part of them are not serviceable, workable or are simply inadequate. The S300 also forced them to operate from a lower altitude, which is where they drew the most casualties.

Attrition in the initial stages of the war is extremely critical, for instance, a 100 aircraft flying four sorties a day can generate 400 sorties and at the end of a month can generate 12000 sorties. Although an aircraft is a reusable platform, even losing 50 airplanes will halve the number of sorties. However, losing that same aircraft on day 30 will still have led to the generation of 11000 sorties, making initial attrition far more critical than total attrition. The very fact that the Russians have not been able to create the requisite space to reduce the attrition is indicative of the major flaws in their campaign design. An air land campaign has to be designed based on the specifics of the given situation and the objectives.

In this case, Russia's initial objectives of putting pressure on Ukraine weren't achieved and even their subsequent plan design doesn't appear to be well thought out and has caused a lot of losses. Even though the Russians were able to inflict a lot of damage to the Ukrainian air force on day one, they have failed to bring the Ukrainian air force to its knees; 50-70 aircraft continue to be available to them. These remaining aircraft are believed to be flying from secret locations and are carrying out night operations in signature guerrilla style.

Initial losses apart, the Russians seemed to have learnt some key lessons. In the battle at Donbas, Mariupol was bombarded quite heavily. 2-3 bombers were used to ensure air superiority. From the Ukrainian side, although limited in number, the PB2 drones have been used quite effectively. The use of UAVs is one aspect where the Ukrainians enjoy a significant advantage over the Russians. The Russians have failed to use their UAVs effectively which is punctuated by their lack of battle transparency in comparison to the Ukrainians. It is also reckoned that perhaps the Russians are holding off their best for NATO, as any NATO intervention will

first be by air and it is believed that the Russians may be keeping some reserves to specifically tackle this situation if it arises.

## **Naval Operations**

Although blessed with a sizeable maritime boundary of 24000km, prior to the annexation of Crimea, only the ports of Novorossiysk and Sochi were available to Russia. Their maritime space was seriously limited.

The acquisition of Crimea has also allowed them to forge a connection between the Sea of Azov, through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The Volga-Don canal connects the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Azov, and thereafter leading to the Black Sea, is navigable by small ships. Russia has small ships in its Caspian Sea fleet which can be brought into the Black Sea via the Sea of Azov.

Through a maritime lens, the beginning of the friction can be traced back to 2021, when US and UK naval ships were patrolling the Black Sea after a gap of three years. These ships remained in the region for 180 days. Simultaneously, the Russian naval deployments were also increasing, with warships from all regions converging into this area for a naval exercise from 13-19 February. The Russian Black Sea fleet has about 6 large warships, and 6 landing crafts and the rest are auxiliaries. Later, they also had six landing crafts joining them with two Moskva-type Slava class destroyers. This was the basic composition of the Russian naval deployment by 21 February. On the other side, a large part of the Ukrainian navy had been seized by Russia post its annexation of Crimea. There was only one frigate and two landing crafts left with the Ukrainians, with the main frigate too old and unsuitable for battle.

### *A timeline of the naval operations*

**25 February:** Capture of Snake Island.

**27 February:** Assault on East Ukraine.

**28 February:** Turkey closed down the straits for warships.

**2 March:** The Ukrainian frigate was scuttled.

**3 March:** Another patrol boat was lost.

**8 March:** The Russians claimed the blockage of the Ukrainian coast. Several small merchant ships were damaged.

**15 March:** Russian task forces were off Odessa. Satellite imagery showed a group of landing craft, thus an amphibious operation was being expected.

**17 March:** Additional SSBNs were put out to sea in the North. One Borei-class submarine, an SSBN, was hastened and deployed towards the Pacific Ocean.

**From Mid-march** onwards, the Russians were faced with a dilemma regarding their amphibious flotilla. While not truly amphibious, it can be used for transporting men and material from one port to another; landing on beaches with obstacles in place, however, is quite difficult and unlikely. Hence, it was simply not possible for the Russians to carry out classical amphibious operations. On the eastern side, they transported the men and material into the ports and ended up losing one of their LSTs in the process, thus this dilemma continues to persist.

**24 March:** Russian LST Orsk was struck by a missile while it was carrying men and material.

**28 March:** Russians announced a humanitarian corridor for the exit of 67 foreign warships.

**29 March:** Several moored sea mines started to break loose, with reportedly 420 mines adrift.

**13 April:** The cruiser Moskva was allegedly hit by a Neptune missile. It is important to note that the Russians didn't have any intelligence regarding the operationalization of these Neptune missiles. This was the first time in 40 years that a Russian ship of this size was sunk and the first time in 117 years that a Russian naval ship was lost. The damage control that followed this incident was also quite poor.

The Russian plan for the naval battle wasn't thought through. The deployment of a large vessel like Moskva so close to the coast was unnecessary.

### **Lessons for India**

The unfolding of this conflict has shattered several myths. While keeping wars relatively short to ensure success is being stressed, for India, which faces adversaries in largely mountainous terrain, wars can be anything but short. Efficient joint planning is very important. While India is making strides in that direction, it will take time.

With the kind of anti-aircraft systems currently in place, an air-land battle will have to be thought through extremely well. Cyber, Space and PGMs are three particularly critical requirements.

The Indian logistical model which is derived from the Russian model is 'push' heavy. These push models are ineffective and tend to clog the system. India must rethink its logistics, particularly in larger mechanised operations. In addition to battlefield transparency, ensuring encrypted communication is also essential and must be prioritized.

Smaller navies can significantly raise the level of threshold of intervention for even comparatively larger navies. In the current conflict, a navy with next to no ships has seemingly brought a much bigger navy to its knees. Old ships even if modernised are not fit for combat, they must be paid off. Many Indian naval ships suffer from this very affliction; they are not fit for combat. It is better to have a good operational, albeit smaller navy rather than a gargantuan old navy.

Ship crews find it very difficult to maintain vigil over prolonged periods. There is a need to switch to automated systems. The future lies in cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles, and the development of indigenous capabilities.

It is extremely crucial to develop key partnerships in the Indian Ocean. India should explore the option of including the US as either a junior partner or an observer in the tri-laterals that it has formed in the Indian Ocean.

The design of an air campaign is critical for its success and therefore joint planning is a must. Due to the increased density of stingers and other such elements on the aerial front, the current concept of an air-land battle is quite unsustainable

in contemporary conflict situations. Such situations require suitable standoff weapons in adequate numbers. Until rival forces are not disengaged with standoff weapons, heavy bombardment cannot take place. Therefore, standoff precision weapons are a must. Also, these weapons should be indigenous and in sufficiently large numbers.

Training is critical and is a key area of attrition. Losing a trained pilot is a much graver loss than losing an aircraft. With missiles and drones continuously increasing in importance, the development of anti-drone technology is key. Close range weapons systems are also coming back into the fray and need to be developed and tailored. These weapons can be designed and operationalized in a relatively short span.

As far as protected mobility, manoeuvrability and lethality are concerned, close battle tanks continue to be very important. However, the proliferation of several kinds of fire-and-forget anti-tank vehicles and top-attack drones puts the preparedness of India's current systems up to question. Pakistan already has Turkish drones, which have previously been used quite effectively in the Azerbaijan and Armenia conflict and are also currently being used by the Ukrainians. What will happen if India were to face these or other high-quality fire-and-forget anti-tank equipment and shoulder-fired stingers on future battlefields? These weapons are already available to both Pakistan and China, which brings to the fore another pertinent question, how ready is India? These developments can spell trouble for the mechanised forces. Unless India actualizes the requisite counter systems and plans, it will not be able to conduct its mechanised operations effectively in the foreseeable future.

## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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