

Faust Lives On

Some-time in 2014, I was invited to take part in a discussion on a crisis in Ukraine. I accepted more out of curiosity: now, who would host a debate about a country, hardly anyone here had heard of; except vaguely in the context of a tank deal! To be honest though, I had a vested interest as well. Stratfor, an American think tank had recently described Ukraine as Russia's *Strategic Depth* – and musing over such abstractions was my favourite pastime.

SD is a sound concept; all nation-states strive to create one to improve their room for manoeuvre. The best illustration of how a country compensates for its inherent limitations is that of Israel. Unwelcome in the Region, besides marshalling many of its assets like technology and human resource, it anchors its *strategic depth* firmly in the United States. Forming alliances is another option. Since Pakistan proved to be a useful neighbour of Afghanistan – affording the landlocked country a window to the outside world; is a source of many of its critical needs; and our territory has historically hosted Afghans looking for safe havens – Kabul reciprocated by serving as a buffer against any threats from the North, and offered flank protection in our wars with India. This is a good case of countries reinforcing each-other's security parameters.

When I went to give my tuppence on the crisis eight years ago, besides keeping the NATO away from one of its softer underbellies, I didn't have much idea what all Ukraine meant for the Russian interests. In the wake of Moscow's invasion early this year, the matter was becoming so convoluted that I had to reach out to many of my old friends to make some sense of it. Following are a few nuggets that I collected as a result of my labour of love.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the successor state of Russia had indeed been hemmed-in. An all-weather access to the Baltic Sea for example was no longer available; it had lost its link to Crimea, where it had an important naval base, and which had been gifted to Ukraine; NATO kept creeping eastwards violating the spirit of an end of the Cold War truce; Minsk agreement that had helped ease the earlier crisis was rescinded by Kiev; and the sole superpower had no time for the advice given by its own iconic Kissinger to make the troublesome land a bridge between the East and the West.

If all that was not bad enough, the neo-Nazi militias under the patronage of Kiev were killing ethnic Russians at an alarming rate. Little wonder that Professor Mearsheimer, not an unknown name in the American strategic community, has blamed the West for *provoking* the Russian invasion.

Looking at the costs, risks and gains; the Washington imposed sanctions in the aftermath of the invasion mainly affect Europe, especially Germany; and only in the next place, Russia. US stands to benefit – for now – because soon the Europeans will be buying the more expensive American Fracking-Gas. No surprise that Kiev's efforts for a negotiated settlement with Moscow have been repeatedly scuttled by the Big Boss (remember how a decade ago, it used to sabotage talks with our own tribesmen!)

All the above falls in place as one goes back to the 1990s when the US started cultivating some key personnel in the Ukrainian hierarchy, and in last two decades invested five billion dollars as stated by its once the point person for the region – Victoria Nuland.

If the preceding narrative gives the impression that the American and the European interests were not in sync, it's not only correct but also pretty obvious. Europe, because of the size of its population and economy, had the potential to be a rival power. Ever since it was closing ranks and creating common currencies, the chances that it might one day become one were looking more likely. The prospects of Euro replacing or competing with dollar, were already sounding alarm bells, but as many a voice – though silenced in quick time – was clearly indicating this preference, it called for serious action. Europe's infatuation with the Ostpolitik (look-east policy godfathered by the late German Chancellor Willy Brandt) was always a cause of concern in Washington. Now that both Brussels and Moscow were hobnobbing with Beijing, firmly identified as the eventual enemy, time had come to put the Old Continent in its place.

Of course, the Europeans saw it coming. Some like Schroeder and Chirac, former German and French leaders, did try to defy the unipolar order when they, in 2003, refused to join the second bulldozing of Iraq. But they were rendered ineffective because in the meantime Europe itself was being split in two with the *New Europeans*, who had suffered under the Soviet Regime, going over to Pax Americana via some colourful and flowery revolutions.

A German politician of the old school, Egon Bahr, who reached the ripe age of ninety-three because he spared no one, once publicly labelled all the country's chancellors as American Agents. The current crop of European leaders has taken servility beyond any strategic depth. One has met and known a good number of thinking heads who describe the continent that had once colonised the world, as now an American Dependency – and the EU as the NATO's Fifth Column. Presently their favourite description of the region that once produced leaders like Bismarck and Napoleon, is that of a bridgehead for the new US-led Eurasian security architecture. According to them, the US was now waging a war of attrition against Russia and will do so till the *last Ukrainian*. Regardless of how it ends, the EU will then be tasked to re-build the war-torn country.

A war of aggression is how the West officially defines Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some of the independent analysts would explain it as Moscow's desperate effort to breakout of the increasingly tighter stranglehold.

Make no mistakes; I'm not criticising the US for how it has gone about positioning itself in this War of the Titans. In a masterly stroke it has set back the plans of its potential rivals for the top spot – Europe, Russia, and China – by decades. Chinese ingress in a crucial region through its ambitious Belt & Road Project has been checked, and the Euro is (so an economist) in the death-zone. NATO's eastwards expansion was probably a red herring – conveniently whitewashed as a few former members of the Eastern Block exercising their sovereign right to join a more benign alliance. Another feather in the Cowboy hat is that along with the governments of its post-modern colonies, their media too speaks their master's voice. Credit for breaking the myth of Independent Media goes to Vladimir Putin.

The US could afford to lose in Afghanistan but this now is the Armageddon. The good news is that if they survive this apocalypse, the Europeans would finally find out that it's not only the refugees who track back the route the quintessential colonists took to flatten the third world countries – but also the fire and brimstone.

And finally, a message to the country that has ignored the warnings of one of its greatest philosophers. Goethe had foretold the fate of Faust who sought Mephisto's help for worldly gains, but had to sell his soul in the bargain. In Pakistan too we at times have struck such deals, but succeeded only when we took our own decisions at great risks and costs. Not letting go our nuclear pursuits and fighting for our strategic depth in Afghanistan are but two such examples. In the 1960s and 80s, we refused to have our relationship with China and Iran dictated by the US – and were all the better for that.

Anyone in Islamabad who maybe toying with the idea that only a Faustian Deal would get us out of our present pickles would not even survive to regret this choice.

Europe Calling.

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