

➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

The global attention at this moment is on the serious Russian military build-up on Ukrainian borders. Russia has had a significant military presence on the Ukraine border since 2014 when it annexed Crimea. The fresh build-up commenced in October 2021. In early March there were estimated 100,000 troops and armour, missiles and other heavy weaponry. Another 30,000 troops, aircraft, S-400s, were moved north of Ukraine, into Belarus. Russia claimed that all this was part of joint military exercises. Divergent statements were flowing from different countries. The US was warning about the possibility of a “real” Russian invasion. The Indian embassy warned Indian citizens of the “uncertainties”. The German Chancellor said that the crisis should be resolved peacefully, and without military conflict. The Russian President was insistent that Russia has no plans to invade Ukraine. Russia could face painful economic sanctions in case of war.

Erstwhile Warsaw Pact countries were Soviet Union's military bulwark against NATO. The Pact began to dismantle after the spread of the Revolutions of 1989 through the Eastern Bloc, beginning with Poland. East Germany withdrew following German reunification in 1990. The Soviet Union itself was dissolved in December 1991. In the next 20 years, all the Warsaw Pact countries, outside the original Soviet Union, joined NATO, and so did the Baltic states which had been part of the Soviet Union. The Crimean Peninsula housed Soviet Union's main warm-water naval fleet in the Black Sea. Once Ukraine became independent, there were subtle arrangements between Russia and Ukraine for the former to use the naval facilities. But in the long term, Russia was keen to have greater control of the important strategic facilities. It engineered a so-called uprising in the Crimean peninsula in favour of joining Russia, and finally invaded and annexed Crimea in March

2014. Major differences with the West erupted after that. Ukraine and many other countries condemned the annexation and consider it to be a violation of international law and many Russian-signed agreements safeguarding the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The United Nations General Assembly also rejected the referendum and annexation, adopting a resolution affirming the “territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders”. Ukraine looked towards European Union and NATO for security and offered to join the military alliance. For Russia, this would mean NATO literally sharing its border with Russia. This was considered a security threat to the Russians.

In mid-December 2021, Russia issued a set of demands to withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian border. These demands include a permanent ban on Ukraine’s entry to NATO, reduction of NATO forces in Eastern Europe, and a pullback of the missile systems and military deployments from near Russia’s borders. As expected, these were rejected by the US and its NATO allies, and Russia was warned of retaliation by the US and allies if Ukraine was invaded. Any military conflict would mean loss of lives and have other implications for all. Europe has long depended on Russian natural gas, a significant part of it flows through Ukraine. Russia used stopping these supplies as a weapon against Western sanctions. Germany is the most affected by this. Russia will suffer a lot in case of further economic sanctions. The pressure from the Western alliance drove Russia closer to China. Summit of the Quad took place at the White House, in Washington on September 21. On February 11, 2022, the Quad Foreign Ministers met in Melbourne, Australia. The four ministers reaffirmed the recognition that the existing international order has been under challenge in various fields, including unilateral attempts to change the status quo and economic coercion.

Putin had a summit meeting at the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing on February 4, 2022. Russia offered a better natural gas supply deal to China. Statements were made eulogising their friendship and highlighting that they both were world powers. Diplomacy is still active and discretion may still be the better part of valour. It is hoped that the two sides will

show geopolitical maturity and give-and-take. Even if Ukraine does not join NATO for the moment, it will move further closer to the West. Meanwhile, India has maintained a wait-and-watch approach to the Ukraine crisis.

The first-ever in-person leaders' meeting of Quad shared the view of further deepening engagement and cooperation with each country and region for the realisation of this vision. They also reaffirmed their unwavering support for ASEAN's centrality and the ASEAN-led architecture and concurred to continue to support ASEAN countries. It was proposed to further promote practical cooperation in many fields, including maritime security, cyber security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Importance of adherence to international law, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to counter challenges to the maritime order based on rules was emphasised. There was a congruence of views on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan. They unanimously condemned the ballistic missile launches by North Korea. They expressed grave concerns about the situation in Myanmar.

Two major democracies and global powers of the world, the US and India announced their annual budgets for the coming year. The US budget gave indications of its global commitments in which significant funds have been allotted to Ukraine contingency, NATO operations and the Pacific Defence Initiative (PDI). There is a clear bias towards naval and aerial platform acquisitions. There are greater allotments for missile defence systems, Hypersonic, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Electronic warfare and Space. India's defence budget focuses further on *Atmanirbharta* (indigenisation). Specific research funding has been allocated for academia and start-ups. More capital funds have been given to extend reach through naval and aerial platform acquisitions. There are funds allotted to corporatise the Ordnance factories that have recently been converted into Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU). Border infrastructure funding has nearly doubled. To commemorate 75 years of India's Independence, President Ram Nath Kovind attended the President's Fleet Review 2022 (PFR2022) of the Indian Navy on February 21 in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. More than 60 vessels of the Indian Navy

and Indian Coast Guard along with over 50 indigenous aircraft participated. Traditionally these reviews are a show of military power and display loyalty and allegiance to the sovereign and the state. This was the 11th Presidential Fleet Review since Independence. The ones in 2001 and 2016, were International Fleet Reviews. This event was followed by the Indian Navy's largest ever multilateral *Milan* exercise. The invitation for the exercise had been sent to 45 nations. The Indian Air Force's (IAF) Exercise *Vayushakti-2022* (Fire Power Demonstration), scheduled to be held at Pokhran, Jaisalmer, on March 7 in which about 140 aircraft were to participate was called off at the last minute.

This issue of the *Air Power Journal* brings into focus important geopolitical and air power issues. With muscle flexing by a rising China, there is a scramble for dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Air power has a significant role. While China's investments in military aviation and rising air power are being watched closely by the free world, there are significant air power assets among the four Quad nations. These pose significant coercive and deterrent effects. The conflict in Syria had many lessons and indicative trends for future air power. Syria had significant air assets of the US and Russia actively engaged and they continue to fly missions till date. The Russian and Syrian warplanes are regularly conducting joint patrols along the Golan Heights and the Euphrates River. Russian Su-34 Fullback, Su-35 Flanker, and A-50 early warning and control aircraft are flying with the Syrian Su-24 bombers, MiG-23 Flogger and MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jets. It is also Russia's way of demonstrating its military's long reach, and that it has plans to retain a military presence in Syria for long. The Russian Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers based in Russia's Khmeimim airbase in western Syria can strike any target in the Mediterranean Sea. NATO considers Syria as a potential "thorn in its southern flank". Other than Russia, the three main foreign air forces that routinely operate in the Syrian airspace are Israel, Turkey, and the United States. Russia is also concerned about Israel's airstrikes against Syria's western port of Latakia. Russia has fast-tracked the delivery of advanced S-300s to Syria. Turkish F-16s are equipped with long-range AIM-120 AMRAAM air-

to-air missiles, and regularly patrol the Syrian border. The USA has its F-35s and US Navy F/A-18 Hornets in the region.

Pakistan's first-use, asymmetric escalation nuclear posture has its implications for India. It becomes more complex because of Pakistan's economic mess, active extremist organisations dictating narrative, military's control over statecraft and nuclear weapons, and close strategic linkages with China. Pakistan has also had a poor proliferation record. Yet it is becoming clear that there is conventional conflict space below the nuclear threshold. India's No First Use (NFU) maintains a good balance between strategic consistency and strategic ambiguity. India is also getting much higher global acceptance as a mature nuclear power. India and Bangladesh share bonds of history, language, culture, and a multitude of other commonalities. The excellent bilateral ties reflect an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust, and understanding that goes far beyond a strategic partnership. Recent years have seen very warm give-and-take engagements. Also, 50 years of Bangladesh liberation was celebrated with great enthusiasm by both nations. China continues to woo Bangladesh, but geography demands that the interests of both India and Bangladesh must remain aligned.

Despite the unfortunate demise of General Bipin Rawat, India's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), the integrated Theatre Commands remain part of the national agenda. It is becoming clear that more inputs are required for steering these important defence reforms so that it brings greater operational capability and integration.

Location of the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) close to East Africa, India, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, and the greater Indian Ocean region than other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, gives them a greater strategic value. China has been looking at it for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to link Asia with Europe and Africa. India has had historically close relations with UAE and Oman. Indians make up the largest minority ethnic group in the UAE, making up roughly 38 per cent of UAE's total residents. India and UAE have just signed a major investment pact, over

EDITOR'S NOTE

\$100 billion in bilateral trade. The new economic partnership agreement includes reduced tariffs and enhanced market access for businesses on both sides. Oman too is home to a large Indian expatriate community and for Oman, India is an important trading partner. Oman has also been supportive of India's bid for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council. Oman is the first Gulf nation to have formalised defence relations with India. Both countries conduct regular joint military exercises. We cover all these and more in this issue of our Air Power Journal.

Happy Reading!

Jai Hind!



Air Marshal **Anil Chopra**
Director General, CAPS