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As Russia Builds Up, NATO Readies its Arms Out of ‘Fear’

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Just as the emergence of a “pro-Russian” Donald Trump has sent waves of uncertain future of NATO, the rise of Russia and its massive military and economic build up has also added to the ‘fears’ of European allies of the US, leading the later to send, on Monday January 30, its thousands of troops and heavy weaponry to Poland, the Baltic states and southeastern Europe in what it is being called its biggest buildup since the Cold War. The deployment of a full armoured brigade, returning US tanks to Europe for the first time since 2013, offers reassurance of Washington’s support for European allies who, for their own stakes, continue to showcase Russia as a “villain”, ready to attack and destroy them. Hence, the presence of 3,500 US soldiers, who will be joined by another 1,600 as well as helicopters and aircraft next month. While this is also a part of a wider, multinational buildup of NATO nations, Lt. Gen Ben Hodges, the US army’s top commander in Europe, said that the build-up also underlined reassurance Donald Trump gave to the leaders of Britain, Germany and France over NATO’s continued importance.

Keeping NATO alive is, therefore, very much on the cards. And as the US and its allies pump more soldiers and weapons into Europe, the question of anti-Russia heat cooling down in the future starts looking meaningless. In fact, this build up indicates that anti-Russia heat is most likely to continue to stay the ultimate logic for the European allies of the US to advocate both a tough stance towards Russia i.e., imposition of sanctions, and continuation of NATO as the primary defence and attack force. Therefore, what we are seeing today has not happened since

the end of Cold War. A part of this new military build-up has, as a matter of fact, not been seen since the Second World War. Some 300 US Marines landed in Norway this month for a six-month deployment, the first time since World War Two that foreign troops have been allowed to be stationed there.

This massive militarization is a reaction against Russia's resurgence as one of the most important global players, capable of leaving deceive influence on shaping and determining geo-political matters. Nothing else could have showcased Russian resurgence than its success in Syria against the foreign funded "rebels" and terror outfits.

Whereas this military success is partly a reflection of Russia's economic recovery after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this success also equally indicates the speed at which Russia is building itself up. What has particularly alarmed the West is Russia's re-opening of abandoned Soviet military, air and radar bases on remote Arctic islands and to build new ones.

The Arctic, the US Geological Survey estimates, holds oil and gas reserves equivalent to 412 billion barrels of oil, about 22 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas. Its recovery and induction into Russia's economy would considerably help it reduce the economic burden caused by the Western sanctions (read: Europe is already opposing possible lifting of sanctions on Russia) and allow it to further its position in the region and the world—something that the West is finding difficult to reconcile with or even accept as a matter of fact.

The expansion has far-reaching financial and geopolitical ramifications. The Arctic is estimated to hold more hydrocarbon reserves than Saudi Arabia and Moscow is putting down a serious military marker there to compete in the High North with traditional rivals i.e., Canada and the US.

To this end, that is to neutralise US and its allies's dominance, Russia is building three nuclear icebreakers, including the world's largest, to bolster its fleet of around 40 breakers, six of which are nuclear. No other country has such a big nuclear fleet, used to clear channels for military and civilian ships.

Russia's Northern Fleet, based near Murmansk in the Kola Bay's icy waters, is also due to get its own icebreaker, its first, and two ice-capable corvettes armed with cruise missiles. 'Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, our Arctic border areas were stripped bare, ' said Professor Pavel Makarevich, a member of the Russian Geographical Society. 'Now they are being restored.'

Russia's Arctic build up has naturally caused alarm bells to ring in Washington where, as with many other important foreign policy posts, the office of the State Department's Arctic envoy, remains so far empty. And while the new US Defence Secretary James Mattis has described Russian steps as "aggressive" in his confirmation hearing, this stance seems to be a misfit in the overall policy framework that Trump seems to be in the middle of making these days.

This was clearly evident from the readouts both Washington and Moscow issued after Putin and Trump had their telephonic conversation the other day. Neither the Kremlin readout nor the

White House's mentioned the word "sanctions" and both sides later maintained that the topic simply did not figure.

Yet, as the Russian readout discloses, the leaders "stressed the importance of rebuilding mutually beneficial trade and economic ties between the two countries' business communities, which could give an additional impetus to progressive and sustainable development of bilateral relations."

Corollary to this readout came an announcement by the government-run Russian Direct Investment Fund about various projects aimed at drawing American investments to Russia. However, the key question is: can business be done with sanctions still looming large over Russia? Or, as some political pundits have argued, Trump and Putin have arrived at an "understanding" with regard to possible lifting of sanctions in the near future.

With Trump constantly indicating prospects of "better relations" with Russia, deployment of US troops in Europe, a decision which was originally taken by the out-going president Obama, appears to be more of a tactic, on the part of the Trump administration, to pacify the US' European allies' 'fears' than an actual push towards 'containment' of Russia in the Baltic/European region.

Otherwise, Trump's 'anti-sanction' mood is quite visible. As such, while Trump refused to rule out dropping sanctions at a press conference with Theresa May, British prime minister, in Washington on Friday, May compellingly insisted, "we believe sanctions should continue."

Again, there is no reference to sanctions in the joint statement issued after Trump's call to German Chancellor Angela Merkel although the latter strongly pleaded for keeping sanctions in place.

The political triangle is thus clearly visible on the cards as Trump and Europe are not on the same page vis-à-vis Russia. While the US cannot afford politically and strategically to 'abandon' Europe, the damage the Obama administration has done to American position in the Middle East particularly, and internationally generally, requires mending relations with Russia.

What makes Trump different from Obama, in this context, is that instead of going out, unlike Obama, for an outright victory against Russia, Trump is likely to engage Russia in a tight bargain and re-claim some space it has lost during last 3 years or so.

In simple words, whereas NATO's build up, duly supported by the US, does assure Europe of the US support, it is equally going to serve as a bargaining point for the US in bargain with Russia over the latter's built up in the Arctic and elsewhere i.e., the Middle East, where it has already acquired a long-term military presence. Therefore, as Russia re-builds itself, NATO readies its arms and Trump sharpens its bargaining axe. The triangle is taking a clear shape!