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Disquieting developments

The new Ukrainian Parliament's overwhelming vote last week in favour of the country opting for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a contentious signal from a pro-western government to further cement Kiev's strategic ties with the West. The decision reverses the country's policy of non-alignment with any political and military grouping, codified under former President Viktor F. Yanukovich in 2010. Instead, it paves the way for Ukraine's strong military and strategic engagement with European powers and the United States. Eventual entry into the military alliance may still take years. But the current context of the continuing separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine lends the legislative step a provocative edge, from a Russian

standpoint. Moscow has characterised Ukraine's move as confrontationalist; one that is consistent with its decade-long and stout opposition to the eastward extension of the military alliance. The Russian stance is also in sync with influential thinking in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union that grew sceptical of the relevance of NATO in a post-Cold War scenario. Whereas the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact followed the emergence of the new democracies in the former Eastern Europe, NATO has continued to expand in the more than two decades since.

Clearly, Kiev's latest move cannot be viewed in isolation. Earlier in December, both Houses of the Congress adopted the Ukraine Freedom Support Act with the avowed objective of countering threats from Moscow to the territorial integrity of the Slavic nation. The Russian response has been the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to promote regional trade. The Kremlin came under criticism for the annexation of Crimea following a referendum earlier this year. Its alleged role in aiding Ukrainian separatist groups with military equipment has since remained in the spotlight. Meanwhile, the United Nations said last month that nearly a thousand people have been killed since September 2014 when the ceasefire between the Ukrainian forces and separatist rebels came into force. Besides, the months-long conflict has claimed a few thousand lives. Moreover, the number of people who have registered as displaced by the conflict has risen by over 50 per cent to 460,000 in the same period. In the absence of swift and concerted diplomatic initiatives to address the scale of the humanitarian tragedy, the region runs the risk of prolonged instability. That is in the interest of neither Russia nor the western powers. Kiev's overtures at this juncture to join NATO would merely raise the rhetoric and deepen mutual suspicion.