**Russia & S. Asia**

BY A . G. N O O R A N I 2022-09-10

A LEADER`S greatness lies in altering fundamentally the course of history. The West, barring a few, has not been fair, still less kind, to Mikhail S. Gorbachev who breathed his last over a week ago. He brought about an end to the Cold War; liberated Eastern Europe, established finally friendly relations with the US and other Western countries, ended the Cold War with China and settled the old boundary dispute with it by a simple remark `let the boundary row midstream of the River Ussuri`.

This was shortly ahead of his visit to Beijing which proved a big success.

He also changed fundamentally the course of relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan. A change in relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union was indicated of all places in New Delhi in 1986. Gorbachev was about to end his first visit to India. In November 1986, he addressed a joint press conference with prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Let me quote from the of ficial Soviet transcript in extenso.

`Question to Mikhail Gorbachev: `You have expressed the hope for an early settlement of the Afghanistan problem. What is the basis of your hope? You have spoken about an Asia-Pacific security plan. How does Pakistan fit into it and in what way? What are your suggestions for improving an understanding between the Soviet Union and Pakistan and what irritants you think have prevented good-neighbourly friendly relations?` Answer: `As for our proposals on establishing a zone of peace and security in the Indian Ocean, they are close to the views of the Indian Government presented by Mr Prime Minister here.

`We are ready to participate in a process which would lead to security for all the littoral states, including Pakistan. This would meet the interests of the entire Indian Ocean community, the interests of development and cooperation.

`As for the sources of our optimism about the settlement of the situation around Afghanistan, I think there are new developments both in the Cordovez Mission [and] in the striving of other states, including the Soviet Union, to have this problem settled. ...

`Lastly, relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan. We are known to have always cooperated with Pakistan and rnade our contributions even in difficult tirnes to lessen tension in that part of Asia. We are ready to act in this manner today as well. We hope that Pakistan, too, will think over its position with a view to general interest in the normalisation of the situation in the region.

He knew fully well that the war in Afghanistan could not be ended without the help and cooperation of Pakistan. Relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan werenot always bad. In 1956, A.I. Mikoyan, first deputy premier of Russia, said that the future of Kashmir would, in the ultimate analysis, be determined by the people of Kashmir.

At Tashkent in January 1966, the Soviet leader Kosygin played mediator. In March 1969, Marshal Grechko, the Soviet defence minister, visited both India and Pakistan. To India he presented the draft of a treaty. That the Soviet Union was veering towards nonalignment in Indo-Pak disputes was brought out sharply in the remarks made by the visiting Soviet minister for culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, when, at a news conference in Madras, a correspondent asked her about the supply of Soviet tanks to Pakistan. Mrs Furtseva retorted `Didn`t we supply arms to your country?`, adding, `We have friendly relations with both India and Pakistan and we believe thatif we do not support your country and not be friendly with Pakistan the conflict between the two countries would be deeper.

A correspondent persisted: `Will it not be better if the Soviet Union refrained from arms supply to both India and Pakistan`. TheSoviet minister`s reply was devastating: `I do not know of any government which has so far refused to receive arms. Will you please name such a government?` However, not always has the supplier obliged the suppliant for arms.That the Soviet Union was determined to establish a rapport with Pakistan was evident from the remarks which Grechko made in Pakistan. He said that Pakistan was being supplied with Russian arms in order to fight her `enemy`. The Soviet deputy naval chief Smirnov reportedly said that `a powerful Pakistan Navy would be a good precondition for peace in this part of the Indian Ocean.

Grechko was due to visit Dacca, but news of the second clash between Soviet and Chinese forces on the Ussuri obliged him to cut short his visit.

Since the Tashkent Declaration, the results of Soviet mediation, the USSR tried to play a mediatory card between India and Pakistan. It changed in the Bangladesh crisis in 1971. In this century the Russian Federation has been overtly friendly towards Pakistan, with its traditional trade and defence ties with India intact.

The Soviet Union`s tilt against Pakistan is gone. Russia-Pakistan relations are friendly. Gorbachev would have approved of it heartily.  The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.