

Growing ties with Russia

By Anwer Mooraj Pak - F. Lelation

THE Greek philosopher Heraclitus once wrote that nothing is permanent and that everything is in flux. This is certainly true of relationships between nations where former enemies have become friends and coalition partners, and former allies have become bitter rivals and at times enemies. This observation certainly applies to the new current political alliances that appear to be forming.

Early in February 2003 President Musharraf, after receiving an invitation from Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation, ended the 30-year diplomatic estrangement that existed between Pakistan and Russia, that colossal monolith that stretches across 11 time zones. Ever since the three-day visit, analysts have been anxiously watching developments for signs of shifting strategic partnerships for the two south Asian rivals.

For this initiative, President Musharraf must be given full credit, for he displayed considerable alertness and sagacity in trying to stabilize his country's future, commercially and militarily. The meeting was a successful one, conducted in a spirit of bonhomie, even though it was tempered somewhat by the Kremlin's announcement that Putin had telephoned the prime minister of India that the meeting with their arch rivals would not affect the cordial relations the Russians enjoyed with the Indians.

In fact, after the historic session ran well past its scheduled end, the Russian leader quipped that he was not at all surprised. The last visit by a Pakistani head of state to his country took place 33 years ago. They obviously had a vast agenda to cover and discuss.

A basket of diplomatic and cultural accords was signed during the two-hour session, and both leaders appeared pleased by the outcome. A year later in February, the Pakistan foreign secretary, Riaz Khokar, addressing a visiting Russian delegation to Pakistan, led by Russian deputy foreign minister, Anatoly Safanov, reiterated the commitment of the government of Pakistan to reinvigorate its relations with Russia and expand bilateral relations in all fields, particularly defence and communications.

another way, "communism was little more than the new face of eternal Russia."

These analysts see Russian culture as unchanging, a culture which has bred an ethnic, collectivist and authoritarian nationalism that is infused with anti-western sentiments, exaggerated claims of uniqueness and an apocalyptic sense of mission.

In spite of occasional snubs and rebukes, no Pakistani government has ever been willing to cut the umbilical cord with the United States. As long as one can remember, the Soviets have always been regarded as the bad guys in this neck of the woods.

Ever since Liaquat Ali Khan decided to fly west instead of north, the Pakistani public was fed on a diet of intense anti-socialism, funnelled through newspapers and magazines, motion pictures and television, which depicted Russia and its satellites as a society of extreme repression where the people lived in constant fear of purges and the midnight knock on the door. To this was added the belief that the Soviets were atheists and the United States the only really open society in the world.

One of the great disadvantages from which the Russians suffer, is that outside the ambit of the former Soviet Union, not too many people speak Russian, and so anything that appears on the western news channels is swallowed by the English speaking world hook, line and sinker. A case in point is the truly shocking recent Beslan carnage.

The western television networks had been at it for three days. The scenes, fierce and clumsy, weren't choreographed in the sweeping Hollywood style that casts terrorist attackers in the safe past tense. The siege demonstrated a rare visceral power and had a freshly minted terror. Even the attractive female Asian announcer on the BBC, who has never

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Russian organizations, it was agreed to work towards the prompt settlement of issues like Pakistani debt restructuring, financial obligations, the promotion of inter-bank relations and the establishment of most-favoured-nation status in trade and investment.

What has caused this sudden about-turn in relations between the two countries, after decades of alliances with each other's enemies? The superficial answer is that both presidents were exploring new diplomatic horizons and channels so that they could widen the spectrum of trade.

The more plausible answer, however, is that there have been increasing signs of tension in Islamabad's relations with Washington, especially after the religious parties, who have an abiding grip on the popular imagination, took over the government of the NWFP, and after Washington's attempts to improve strategic and diplomatic ties with New Delhi. Israel's agreement to supply the Arrow air defence missile system to India, which has been seen as part of the same strategy, has been particularly irksome to Islamabad.

Conversely, Moscow hasn't taken too kindly to the way India has recently developed strategic and in-depth relationships with the United States. President Putin possibly saw Musharraf's visit in terms of a Kremlin bid to enhance Russia's role in South Asia, at a time when other strategic partnerships are shifting. It is a replay of the old nineteenth century balance of power game, where weaker nations ganged up against the stronger one.

However, attempts to overhaul memories of a bitter past, when Pakistan became a staging area for US-backed Afghan Mujahideen fighters who took on the invading power, will take a very long time. What is interesting is that the Mujahideen, who were reactionary and retrogressive in outlook, and who also had the support of the Pakistan army intelligence network, was attacking a people that had built roads, hospitals and schools and provided education to Afghan women and girls. This last named positive gesture of the Soviets was quickly extinguished by the Taliban when they came to power on the lame excuse that they didn't have the resources to provide education to women.

It will take a huge effort and a long time to change attitudes towards Russia. There are still analysts in this country who haven't altered their perceptions of the Great Bear and harbour strong views on Russian nationalism, which they see as a malevolent force and follow a tradition of belief in an unchanging national culture which has persisted from the days of Tsarism to the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Put

prospects.

been seen to display any emotion stronger than ladylike distress over a broken tea-cup, was visibly moved.

The world was told that the terrorists were Chechens who were trying to settle old scores with the Russians. But, were they all Chechens? Aslanbek Aslakhonov, President Putin's adviser for north Caucasian affairs, didn't think so. In fact, he said that when he spoke to them in the Chechen language they couldn't understand a word of what he was saying.

The destruction of the Soviet Union 13 years ago, was the greatest disaster that befell the people of the Third World. Not only did it rob the nations of Asia, Africa and South America of the opportunity of playing off one superpower against the other, it triggered a chain reaction which resulted in, among other things, the disintegration of the former state of Yugoslavia. In 1991 the 74-year old USSR, once described by Winston Churchill as ...a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma...disbanded and 15 former Soviet republics spun off on independent trajectories. The communist parties in Italy, France and India still look back nostalgically to the days when the hammer and sickle fluttered loftily in the wind.

President Putin is aware that such sentiments are still being expressed in present day Russia, where people long for the simple securities and certainties of the Soviet period when nobody went hungry, when everybody had enough clothes to wear, where one could see the Bolshoi ballet or hear a Brahms symphony for the equivalent of a dollar, and living conditions for the majority of the people were about the same.

President Musharraf certainly did his homework before he stepped into the plane for that historic meeting with Putin. Russia may no longer be a military giant, but it is still an industrial colossus. It nurtures an economy which for all its clumsiness still produces sophisticated weapons, and twice as much oil, steel, cement, aluminium and rubber than the United States.

The Russians are still better educated and more cultured than most people in the world. Moscow University has always been on a par with the Sorbonne and Cambridge. In fact, a former commander-in-chief of the Pakistan Navy, a highly cultured and urbane individual, chose Moscow, rather than a university in the United States, Germany or Britain as the place of study for his two sons. He certainly knew something that the majority of parents who rush blindly to the West didn't. Russia is the country of the future.