

# India and the world of tom

By MK Bhadrakumar

*In view of Russia's resurgence and its emerging role in the Middle East, a US-India strategic partnership that was raring to go seems to have outlived its utility*

LIKE Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's dinner table in William Shakespeare's play, there will be an unseen presence in the Oval Office in White House on Friday when President George W Bush receives Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. That will be the ghost of the 17-year-old post-Cold War era. It died in adolescence — unnaturally and unnecessarily. Mr Bush can see the ghost and he knows it to be a metaphor for usurpation but like Macbeth's noble guests at the feast, Dr Singh may not.

The post-Cold War era came to a premature end on the night of August 7. The conflict in the Transcaucasus has impacted on Russia's relations with the United States, European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation — what to speak of the US' trans-Atlantic leadership role, NATO's future or NATO-EU relationship.

Most of all, Russia has transformed. All this leaves us with no option but to revisit the predications and assumptions on which India's new foreign policy took off in the early 1990s. Could Delhi anticipate — like Washington, the European capitals or Beijing — that Russia's resurgence was inevitable, that it was a matter of time before Russia would rise from its Soviet ashes? Our strategic community, which promptly trooped out of Russia-watching in 1991 and took to the greener pastures of Euro-Atlanticism, still seems to attribute Russia's resurgence to the happenstance of petrodollars. It seems unaware of the little detail that the first signs of Russia's resurgence were visible by the mid-1990s when Boris Yeltsin brought in Yevgeniy Primakov to the leadership hierarchy in the Kremlin and Moscow demonstratively reached out to Beijing. At least, China and the West took note.

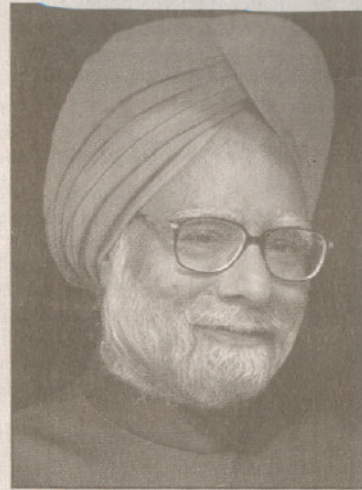
That was a long time ago when a barrel of oil was still going for less than \$20.

Why did our strategic community willingly suspend its disbelief about the permanence of post-Soviet Russia's disarray? After all, very few countries can claim to possess such insights as India to fathom the Russian genius and its infinite capacity for regeneration. But our movers and shakers eagerly lapped up the US triumphalist narrative about the death of communism and the end of history. Sadly enough, they went on to advance Russia's disarray as one compelling justification for the so-called "adjustments" or "course correction" in foreign policy, which incrementally added up to be the extraordinary "strategic partnership" we have in hand today with the US.

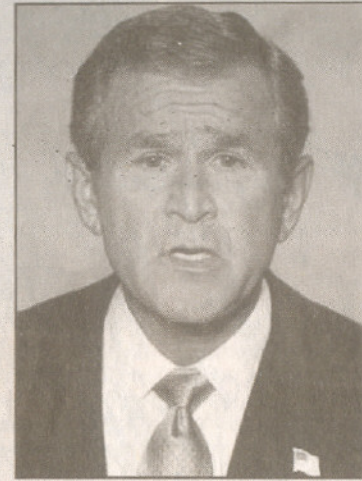
The fact remains that we drifted, as if inebriated, towards habitation within the US' post-Cold War hegemonic model whose principal purpose was to maintain a power structure for the New American Century by absorbing some emerging powers.

It was this model that Russia turned on its head on August 7-8. Of course, this was a long time coming and when it came, to borrow WB Yeats' words, a "terrible beauty" was born in the world order. What are the ground realities? One, it is very obvious that Russia has drawn a red line on NATO's further expansion into the Transcaucasus — Russia's soft underbelly and gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East. Two, Russia did not blink when NATO and US warships gathered in the Black Sea for muscle-flexing in front of the Sevastopol naval base. Three, Russia recognised the newly independent South Ossetia and Abkhazia, ignoring protestations by the US, EU and NATO. It is about to set up military bases in the two countries to offset the US bases in the Black Sea on the eastern shores of Romania.

But then, there are bigger realities too. First, Russia has signalled its determination to assert its legitimate interests. Second, it will no longer accept



Manmohan Singh



George W Bush



Dmitry Medvedev

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the sort of fait accompli the West presented it with in the Balkans in the 1990s or in Kosovo in February. Instead, it insists on being an active protagonist first in its region and in the world at large. Third, the US must get used to negotiating with Russia on an equal footing and to mutual benefit. Fourth, Russia has hardly any economic vulnerability open to manipulation by the West. Nor is it beholden to the West in any particular way. It would seem comical if the West were to flaunt a G8 or WTO membership

card to frighten Russia.

Fifth, post-Soviet Russia is not bogged down in futile ideological baggage, nor does it face isolation in its rejection of the "unipolar" world. In its championing of multilateralism and a democratic world order, it is echoing the spirit of our times and the majority world opinion. Sixth, Russia is convinced of the continued validity of its non-confrontational, "multi-vector" foreign policy for the optimal pursuit of its national interests as a Eurasian power.

As far as India is concerned, it is the Middle East that sails into view. Not only is that region adjacent to ours but also the Middle East theatre has always been crucial to the shaping up of the world of tomorrow. Moscow is determined that the Cold War history of isolation should not repeat in the Middle East

All in all, therefore, as a prominent Chinese scholar, Fu Mengzi, Assistant President of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, wrote in the government newspaper China Daily, "the fact that Russia stood up to the West on this issue signifies that the end of the days in the post-Cold War era when Russia had to let the western powers do whatever they wanted, is finally over. As a major power on the rise again, Russia has found its inner energy ... and the will to be the rising power it

# Tomorrow

really is." Fu noted that Russia's pursuit of "joining the West-dominated world order" is over and this has come about because of the "western powers' deep-rooted misgivings about and guardedness against other rising powers."

Interestingly, Fu concluded that what is important is not that Russia may try to change the international system so much as "the era when one superpower or the western alliance dominates the system is changing". True, countries in far-flung regions are keenly watching how the world of tomorrow shapes up. Hardly had the guns fallen silent in the Transcaucasus, when Moscow began receiving important visitors from Russia's outlying regions — Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega are on their way to Moscow. Russian Foreign Ministry has voiced indignation at the US attempts to overthrow Evo Morales of Bolivia, a staunch ally of Mr Chavez.

Russian strategic bombers have reappeared on the Caribbean skies; Russia will be sharing space communication systems with Cuba; a Russian naval flotilla including the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Pyotr Velikiy is heading for exercises with Venezuela in November.

But, as far as India is concerned, it is the Middle East that sails into view. Not only is that region adjacent to ours but also the Middle East theatre has always been crucial to the shaping up of the world of tomorrow. Moscow is determined that the Cold War history of isolation should not repeat in the Middle East. Talks are under way for the reopening of the Soviet naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. The Russian Foreign Ministry publicised that at the closed-door meeting of the "Iran Six" (the US, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia) in New York on Friday. "We (Russia) spoke out against

extra measures by the UN Security Council (against Tehran) at the current stage. The Russian side stressed the need to continue efforts to get Tehran engaged in a constructive dialogue aimed at starting a process of negotiations."

Russian officials have also spoken of Moscow helping Iran to strengthen its air defence systems in addition to the 29 Russian-made Tor-M1 air defence missile systems under a \$700-million contract it already supplied. Most significantly, Russia has sought formal coordination with the OPEC.

Alarm bells are ringing in the West. Despite being the most ferocious critic of the Kremlin in the western world in the recent weeks, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has invited Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to an energy summit in London in December. Much to Washington's discomfiture, the EU has indicated that it would like to resume negotiations over a new partnership agreement with Moscow. Recently Henry Kissinger characterised as a "political and economic earthquake" the largest transfer of wealth in human history, which the tripling of the price of oil in the space of 7 years represents for the Middle East. If Russia bonds with the OPEC, that makes it a devastating earthquake measuring 10 on the Richter scale, giving them what Kissinger called "a disproportionate political influence on world affairs".

"Yet, the victims stand by impotently. This state of affairs is intolerable in the long-run," he wrote, underscoring how profoundly the world has changed since Mr Bush received Dr Singh in the Oval Office in July 2005. A US-India strategic partnership that was raring to go, focussing on what our strategic analysts call the "larger overlapping interests" of the two countries in "jointly promoting" regional security in the Hindu Kush, the Malacca Straits and the Persian Gulf seems to have outlived its utility. COURTESY THE HINDU

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