

A long-haul effort to rebrand Pakistan

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AS all Pakistanis living in Europe know only too well, good news stories about the country are not the norm in European newspapers. When and if Pakistan does get a mention in the press, the focus tends to be on ethnic violence, terrorism or nuclear proliferation.

But times may be changing. Belgium's leading dailies all this week have been full of reports about Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's successful encounter with Belgian officials and business leaders — and Pakistan's changing economic fortunes.

Mr Aziz's first trip to Europe as prime minister may not have resulted in sudden breakthroughs on Islamabad's long-running quest to get relief from European Union anti-dumping duties or gain access to the EU GSP-Plus scheme for duty-free imports. But it does appear to have succeeded in setting the country on the path to achieving another longer-term objective: giving Pakistan a new image in Europe.

Rebranding Pakistan certainly seems to have been the key goal during the prime minister's three-day blitz of meetings with EU, Belgian and Nato officials. Pakistan's foreign policy is viewed as too US-centric by most EU officials. As such, Islamabad's diplomatic effort — albeit a belated one — to break with tradition and look beyond Washington by making friends and allies in Europe is appreciated.

Interestingly for future relations with Europe, the focus in Pakistan appears to be shifting from a view

LETTER FROM EUROPE

By Shadaba Islam

tary elections held in October 2002 had been seriously flawed. That in turn led the European parliament to suspend plans to ratify a new EU-Pakistan agreement signed by the two sides after Sept. 11, 2001. Relations between the two sides remained tricky until the new agreement was finally ratified and then entered into force last September.

Significantly, EU's view of Pakistan has also been shaped by the opinion of its neighbours, including Iran, Afghanistan and India. As a result, while recognizing the country's strategic importance, most EU diplomats have in the past commented to

The prime minister's assurances on Pakistan's interest in having a strong, stable and economically vibrant Afghanistan appear to have convinced most EU officials who recognize that Islamabad did facilitate the organization of last year's presidential elections in the country.

The EU is also especially anxious to encourage closer relations between India and Pakistan, while remaining careful not to take sides on the Kashmir conflict. Mr Aziz's promise to continue with confidence-building measures with India and especially his offer to build an "energy corridor" from Iran to India, through Pakistan, are just the kind of initiatives that the EU — itself built on cooperation between former adversaries — likes and supports.

Unlike the US, Europe is also open to arguments that fighting terrorism requires action to address the root causes of extremism — a point made on

several occasions by Mr Aziz. Part of the EU's "soft diplomacy" is based on aid and trade measures to reduce poverty and deprivation.

Much to Islamabad's regret, however, the Commission has so far failed to translate this strategy into real action — especially as regards Pakistan's long-running battle to become eligible once again for the duty-free market access scheme known as GSP-Plus.

Pakistan's argument is that as a country which is working to fight extremism and terrorism, it must be given the tools to create more jobs, fight poverty and ensure stability. The EU agrees that this is necessary. But EU officials

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to be shifting from a view of the EU as a mere collection of 25 states to an understanding that the Union has a life and significance of its own. While Pakistan has long-standing bilateral relations with many EU member countries — especially Britain, France and Germany — foreign policy experts in Islamabad have taken too long to realize that the EU is more than a simple sum of its parts.

As such, closer links with the European Commission, the EU council of ministers and the European parliament must be developed in parallel with bilateral ties with EU member governments.

The EU Commission's importance is not just evident in global trade — where it negotiates on behalf of member states — but also increasingly in foreign and security policy where it takes an active part in decisions and debates. On a host of issues, including immigration, energy and research and development, the Commission is gaining an increasingly strong voice. Europe's emergence as an international player to be reckoned with is being recognized by none other than China which has been particularly successful in cementing its ties with the EU. Part of Beijing's strategy clearly has to do with keeping Washington on its toes but China is also reaping important rewards for being a good friend of the EU. Europeans are leading investors in China, have stepped up their trade with that country and are delivering important technology and expertise to Beijing in a range of areas.

India, meanwhile, has been identified as a key strategic partner by the EU and both sides are working to upgrade their hitherto lacklustre ties.

In contrast, relations between the EU and Pakistan have been marked by far too much volatility and unpredictability. It is hardly a coincidence that no Pakistani premier has visited Brussels since Nawaz Sharif's trip to EU headquarters in 1998.

Ties with the EU improved dramatically after Islamabad joined the US-led war against terror and helped remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. Relations hit bad times rapidly afterwards, however, after an EU parliamentary team said Pakistani parliamen-

this correspondent on Pakistan's role as "regional troublemaker."

The country's unstable democratic record has also worked against its reputation in Europe. In addition, the EU has voiced concern at Pakistan's nuclear programme and alleged involvement in sales of nuclear technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran. Changing such European perceptions of Pakistan will take time — and enormous efforts. But a very necessary process of an EU reassessment of Pakistan appears to have started.

Mr Aziz's message in Brussels was that Pakistan is now a different country, with changed policies, new priorities — and a strong economy. EU policymakers and Belgian business leaders listened with interest, remarking on the prime minister's convincing presentation of what he described as Pakistan's new realities.

In talks with this correspondent, EU diplomats said they had been impressed by the prime minister's detailed explanations about Pakistan's economic situation and need for stronger trade relations with Europe. Most importantly, in contrast to their past scepticism about Pakistan, few seem to dispute Mr Aziz's central argument that Pakistan was now a modern and moderate Islamic nation which wants global peace and good relations with its neighbours.

Discussions between Mr. Aziz and Javier Solana, the EU's foreign and security policy chief, appear to have been especially interesting. Solana — who is set to become the EU's first foreign minister when a new constitution comes into force in 2007 — is an increasingly important figure in Brussels and a crucial craftsman of EU foreign policy. Significantly, he was interested in talking to Pakistan about the West's difficult relationship with Iran and seeking Islamabad's help in bridging gaps in the EU's understanding of Tehran.

Repeatedly also, Mr. Aziz was queried about Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and India. EU policymakers are clearly encouraged by Islamabad's change of stance towards both countries. Given Europe's heavy financial involvement in Afghanistan, the EU is eager to ensure that Islamabad plays a stabilizing role in the country.

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insist that they cannot change the current GSP rules for one country alone. "Pakistan talks of fighting terrorism, but for other countries it's about drugs, Aids or malaria," said one EU official.

Brussels is also arguing that to become eligible for GSP-Plus benefits, countries must sign a raft of international conventions on labour standards, environmental protection and the like.

Relations with the EU are further complicated by the 13 per cent anti-dumping duty currently imposed on Pakistani bed linen. Attempts to remove the duty failed last week just ahead of Mr Aziz's visit but the long and difficult process of trying to overturn the initial decision will continue.

EU demands that Pakistan sign a readmission agreement to take back illegal immigrants from Europe is another long-running source of acrimony between the two sides. The EU argues that such a pact will help it look more favourably at Pakistan's demands for easier access to Schengen visas. EU officials also say that signing of such an agreement will help create a "more indulgent climate" for ties between the two sides, facilitating relations in other areas.

Islamabad says, however, that it is wary of taking on responsibility for third country nationals and stateless people. But discussions with the EU on the issue will now be raised to the level of government secretaries.

While the focus in Brussels was clearly on trade, economics and Pakistan's international role, Islamabad would be unwise to believe that EU policymakers are no longer interested in issues relating to democracy in the country. Questions relating to Pakistan's political situation remain important for the European parliament in particular.

"We are keen to work with Pakistan — but that does not mean we will ignore questions of human rights and democracy," an EU lawmaker told this correspondent after Mr. Aziz met the parliament's chief Josep Borrell. EU parliamentarians are regularly lobbied by their constituencies on questions of human rights, gender and minorities in Pakistan, the lawmaker said, adding that such concerns would therefore also have to be addressed by Pakistan.