

Dealing with US anxieties

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AS the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan drew to a close towards the end of the 1980s, President George Bush Sr who was seeking re-election for a second term made a prophetic statement the full implications of which could not but have been farthest from his own mind.

He said: "Long after the last Soviet soldier leaves Afghanistan, the US-Pakistan partnership will endure as an important bilateral and regional association. The US and Pakistan have an historic relationship which I will preserve and further strengthen if I am elected."

This thought was to assume reality during the tenure of his son and almost draw Pakistan into an unprecedented role. The younger George Bush in 2002 decided to declare a war against what he called international terrorism, following the events of 9/11. US secretary of state Colin Powell, recalled in a statement the other day: "I called President Musharraf two days after 9/11 and he agreed that it was time for him to make a strategic choice and he made that choice: Mr Powell also recalled: "We have transformed our relationship with India and forged a new partnership with Pakistan."

While in the earlier phase of its relationship with Pakistan, during the cold war crisis, the US mainly concerned itself with providing Pakistan with arms and military equipment, its main con-

cern was asking Pakistan to do a little more about fighting against terrorism. During his meeting with the Pakistan prime minister while on a two-day visit to Pakistan earlier this month, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder lauded Pakistan's anti-terror efforts but also called for "greater cooperation among the international community to win the war against terrorists."

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz endorsed Schroeder's views, describing terrorism as a challenge for the world.

However, the same day the Pakistan foreign office spokesman, without directly referring to the German Chancellor's observation, said that Pakistan has taken exception to unending assertion by visiting foreign leaders that Pakistan should do more to combat terrorism. In a somewhat angry tone he said: "Telling us to do more hurts our sensibilities because no country has done more than us in this war..... Pakistan has waged a war on terrorism in the supreme national interest and not appease the West."

Gen Pervez Musharraf was himself apparently not too happy at the reported remark of visiting United States' assistant secretary of state Ms Christina Rocca to the effect that Pakistan should be doing more (for the US-sponsored war against terrorism). She was on one of her periodic visits to monitor the progress on the extent to which Pakistan feels involved in the war.

President Musharraf expected Ms Rocca to remember that Pakistan was one of the first countries in the region to

respond positively to President Bush's expressed concern about the security of the world community in the aftermath of the 9/11 event. The President could not have been more explicit, particularly as he knew that a considerable section of the Pakistanis was bound not to be quite sympathetic to President Bush's perception.

Since the decision to align with the US policy, Pakistan has experienced a backlash of bomb blasts, random attacks on the gatherings in mosques, imambargahs, and other public places for which religious fanatics have been held responsible. The acts of violence are apparently an expression of anger against Pakistan joining forces with the Americans and against the US-led military operation in Afghanistan and Iraq. US secretary of state Colin Powell's subsequent statement praised Pakistan's "strategic choice" in deciding to work in close partnership with the US.

In fact, Mr Powell went rather overboard, perhaps in his excitement to ensure that Ms Rocca's faux pas has not caused any lasting damage. He made the rather enigmatic statement that "now we are working in close partnership with President Musharraf as we help him to move his country forward at a pace that Pakistani people can absorb."

Ms Rocca and her colleagues must understand that as it is Pakistan has to tread the path very carefully because a pro-US tilt in its policy is not easy for it to sustain and with the overwhelming pro-Iraq and even pro-Saddam sentiment/dominating the minds of the vast majority of the Pakistani people it is not possible for Pakistan to opt for being drawn into the Iraq war.

It is possible that because of his known admiration for Turkey, Gen Pervez Musharraf might be perceived in the West as a modern day Ataturk who could detach himself from Islam and the popular sentiments of the Muslim people.

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cern in the recent months has been to secure partners for its war against terrorism, the main battle grounds of which have been Afghanistan and Iran.

In the earlier phase it had its watchdogs stationed in Pakistan to ensure that the target (the Soviet Union) was not lost sight of; at present its envoys visit Pakistan every now and then to ensure that Pakistan's focus stays on what the US regards as international terrorism. While earlier Pakistan made no secret of its response to America's strategic objectives, in the present phase it cannot afford to be too overt in its response to President Bush's expectations.

While stemming the tide of terrorism is in Pakistan's own interest, and President Musharraf is only too conscious of that, the overwhelming sentiment of Pakistan's Muslim population has no sympathy for President Bush's war against terrorism. Pakistani critics of President Musharraf are fully exploiting the anti-war and anti-Bush sentiment of the people. President Bush's harsh and hamhanded handling of the situation first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq has given them ammunition for consolidating their position against the US.

Incredible as it may seem Saddam Hussein's popularity with the Pakistanis grew to an unprecedented level as the US-led coalition's noose tightened around his neck.

It may sound unbelievable but while before the invasion of Iraq, Pakistanis hardly ever looked upon him as a Muslim, today he is virtually idolized as a 'ghazi' by the orthodox elements.

President Musharraf has no choice but to be circumspect in his support for the US-led war against terrorism and the average Pakistani is not inclined to accept as credible the charge of terrorism against the Taliban or the Iraqis.

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