

Musharraf Looks for Options in Moscow

by Ramtanu Maitra

On the face of it, Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf's Feb. 4-6 visit to Moscow was an exercise in futility. India shouted from the rooftop that the trip was a failure, and so did a number of Russian commentators who did not see anything of significance emerging from the trip. In the long run, however, those hasty assessments may prove to be decidedly wrong.

During the trip, Russia and Pakistan signed three agreements—on security, cultural, and diplomatic cooperation. The agreement on cooperation between the two Interior Ministries is understood to be a typical deal, identical to Russia's agreements with other nations. The cultural agreement includes a draft on bilateral cultural exchanges during 2003-06. The third pact establishes exchanges of trainee diplomats.

True, none of the agreements are of much significance. Moreover, soon after President Musharraf's return, New Delhi ousted five Pakistani embassy officials, including the Pakistani chargé d'affaires. Pakistan retaliated immediately, removing five Indian officials from Islamabad. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that Russia, a close friend of India, "did not succeed" in closing the vast gap that separates Pakistan and India at the diplomatic level. However, it would be nothing short of a miracle if Russian President Vladimir Putin, during a meeting with President Musharraf, had reduced the hostility that engulfs India-Pakistan relations.

Central Asia to the Fore

According to some analysts, Pakistan was also looking to ink a memorandum of understanding in Moscow to allow the Russian natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, to join a planned project to build a \$3.2 billion gas pipeline from Iran to India. The agreement envisaged Russian assistance for converting Pakistani diesel vehicles to the compressed natural gas mode. However, in recent months, the deal has failed to translate into any concrete action.

Even if Pakistan had failed to clinch business and economic deals during the trip, it is important to note that Pakistan and Russia need each other to maintain stability in a highly volatile region. Moreover, Pakistan, although not a major economic power, has close ties with both China and the United States. Pakistan is also in the middle of what is labelled the "war against terrorism." In reality, Pakistan perhaps harbors



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf meet in the Kremlin. Musharraf's announced desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization may open up new possibilities for regional cooperation in Central Asia.

more anti-American terrorists than any other country, and yet, the United States has no option but to maintain close ties with that nation. It seems that after sitting on the fence for decades, Moscow has come to realize the necessity of bringing Pakistan into the circle of nations with which it must open a dialogue for restoring regional security.

For Russia, it is important that it has an open line with Pakistan. Now that the Americans are ready to pack up and leave Afghanistan, abandoning the promised reconstruction, it is only to be expected that Pakistan, with a large Pashtoon population of its own, will again pick up the pieces to serve its own geopolitical interests. It did the same once before when, in 1989—following the departure of the defeated Soviet army and the Americans losing interest in Afghan affairs—Pakistan backed various Afghan mujahideen leaders and eventually gained control of the Taliban militia. Pakistani regulars armed, trained, and fought alongside these militia, and helped the Taliban to conquer almost 95% of Afghanistan by 1999. Subsequently, Pakistan also harbored and trained some of the anti-Russian secessionists from Chechnya and some of the Central Asian states. Moscow, lacking any leverage on Islamabad, watched helplessly.

There is no question that a similar situation is developing again in Afghanistan. It is only a matter of time before the current Afghan government goes into exile, and the Americans and their allies leave Afghanistan. Russia, situated in the region, does not have the option to quit. If it wants to remain a great power, Russia must ensure that its own territory, and that of neighboring countries, is secure. And it seems that Russia, once bitten, is working to achieve that end.

Trade Initiative

Moscow is working in close coordination with two of its major allies in the region, Iran and India, to bring the benefits of expanding Indo-Iranian trade to Central Asia. In January, when Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was in New

Delhi as the chief guest on India's Republic Day, India and Iran signed an agreement to develop the Iranian port of Chah Bahar and build 200 kilometers of railroads from Chah Bahar to the Garland Road in western and northern Afghanistan. This road would link India and Iran to Central Asian trade. On Jan. 6, at another meeting at Tehran, India, Iran, and Afghanistan agreed to give Indian goods heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan preferential treatment and tariff reductions at Chah Bahar. India also agreed to finance the upgrade of the road between the port and the Afghan border.

To ensure the smooth conduct of trade and transportation, it seems Russia is shoring up its assets within Afghanistan. *Jane's Defence Weekly* recently reported that a helicopter deal worth \$40 million was reached between Russia and Jamaat-e-Islami, the faction within the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan headed by Afghan Defense Minister Gen. Mohammad Qassim Fahimi. The contract calls for Russia to provide transport helicopters, gunships, and spare parts directly to Fahimi's ministry rather than to the Afghan National Army, which is now under construction under the watchful eyes of the United States and its allies.

Iran, on the other hand, has provided military aid to the private militia of the governor of Herat, Ismail Khan. Reports of similar military hardware support provided by India to the Northern Alliance have also surfaced. In other words, President Putin wanted President Musharraf to know that Russia is aware of developments and is preparing for the eventuality of the Americans' departure. President Putin, of course, does not like the rise of the Taliban under the wings of the Pakistani regulars. It is likely that he has conveyed to President Musharraf, in so many words, that this time around, neither Russia, nor Iran, nor India will be caught napping, leaving the plains of Afghanistan to Pakistan and to the religious fundamentalists such as the Taliban.

While aware of Islamabad's political and religious compulsions, Moscow would not like to keep Islamabad out of its ambit of dialogue. Pakistan's closeness to China is a factor that Russia cannot ignore. It should be noted that China welcomed Musharraf's visit to Moscow, and expressed hope that the visit would further peace and development in the region. When asked to comment on the visit, a Chinese government spokesman said that Pakistan and Russia are both neighboring and friendly countries of China.

But, President Musharraf did not go to Moscow only to listen to Russian initiatives. He added a bit of a surprise from his side: Islamabad suddenly came up with a bold idea to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional grouping dominated by China and Russia. Pakistan intends to join and expects Russian backing, Musharraf told RIA and the ITAR-Tass news agencies on the eve of his trip. Russian leaders refrained from any clear-cut reaction, and the idea was not mentioned during the talks in the Kremlin. Nonetheless, it is evident that Russia will dutifully weigh what Pakistan has offered. What price Islamabad will have to pay to join the SCO, however, will not be decided entirely in Moscow.