

NAWAZ SHARIF'S VISIT TO MOSCOW

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Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's announced visit to Moscow from April 19 to 21,1999, would be the first by a Pakistani Prime Minister to Moscow since the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Moscow in 1976.

Pakistan's aligning itself with the US and other Western powers in assisting the Afghan Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet and the Afghan Government's troops during the 1980s caused a set-back to the efforts initiated by Z.A.Bhutto in 1976 to correct the imbalances in Pakistan's relations with the US on the one side and the erstwhile USSR on the other.

The role played by Pakistan after 1988 in ensuring that the withdrawing Soviet troops were not harassed by the Afghan Mujahideen and in facilitating contacts between the authorities of Moscow and the Mujahideen groups for negotiating the release of some Russian Air Force personnel and others held prisoner by the Mujahideen led to some improvement in the relations, but after the formation of the Russian Federation following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 there was a fresh spell of cooling-off in the relations due to the following reasons:

- The primacy given by the Russian Government under President Boris Yeltsin to its strategic partnership and military supply relationship with India. The invoking of the Pressler Amendment by the US Bush Administration in 1990 led to a ban not only on the supply of new military equipment to Pakistan, but also spare parts and maintenance, repair and upgradation facilities for the US equipment sold or supplied to Pakistan before 1990. Apart from the purchase of the Agosta class submarines and re-conditioned old Mirage 5 fighters from France, Pakistan could not succeed in finding alternate sources of supply in the West partly due to the cash crunch and partly due to the fact that even equipment, particularly for the Air Force, manufactured by other Western countries such as Sweden had components such as the engines etc sourced from the US and their sale to Pakistan by those countries also attracted the ban under the Pressler Amendment. In its anxiety not to dilute the primacy of its relationship with India, Russia not only spurned Pakistani approaches for the

the purchase of Russian equipment, but also tried to create difficulties in the way of other former components of the USSR like Ukraine selling items such as 300 tanks to Pakistan.

- While the primacy given by Moscow to its relationship with India was an important factor in its rejection of Pakistani indications of interest in the purchase of Russian equipment, there were other factors too such as Pakistan's payment difficulties and serious doubts in the Russian mind about the sincerity of Pakistan's interest. Russian officials suspected that the Pakistani military, particularly the Air Force, continued to covet US equipment and that Pakistan's repeated expressions of interest in Russian equipment were really meant to cause concern in the US that if it did not dilute, if not remove the Pressler Amendment, it might drive Pakistan into the hands of the Russian military industry and lose whatever influence it still had in the Pakistani armed forces.
- The role of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan in the creation of the Taliban and in assisting it in capturing power in Kabul and in subsequently extending its control to over 90 per cent of the Afghan territory and the equally active role of ISI-supported religious extremist organisations such as the Markaz Dawa Al Irshad and the Lashkar-e-Toiba, its militant wing, the Harkat- Ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and the Tablighi Jamaat in assisting anti-establishment and Anti-Moscow religious extremist elements in their violent activities in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Chechnya. Moscow has repeatedly expressed strongly its concerns over the lionisation of extremist leaders from Chechnya in Pakistan and over their training in camps in Pakistani and Taliban-controlled Afghan territories. In the early 1990s, during the second tenure of Benazir Bhutto as the Prime Minister, the ISI and these religious extremist organisations had clandestinely trained Bosnian Muslim groups, with the knowledge of the US, for fighting against the Serbs. The present Nawaz Sharif Government has extended similar clandestine assistance to the Muslims of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in their fight against Belgrade. Russian officials suspect that despite Pakistan's unhappiness at Washington over the invoking of the Pressler Amendment, it is letting itself be used by the US as its cat's paw to bring about the disintegration of Yugoslavia and fear that the US is similarly using Pakistan to create disaffection against Moscow in the Muslim population of Chechnya and other places in Russia. The alarm created in the Central Asian Republics over the future plans of the Taliban is also shared by Moscow.
- Moscow's unhappiness over the ineffectiveness of Pakistan's narcotics control authorities in preventing the increasing smuggling of narcotics to Russia from Pakistan through the Central Asian Republics.

Despite these inhibiting factors, tentative steps to improve the bilateral relations were initiated even under Benazir Bhutto in the form of a liaison relationship between the ISI and the Russian intelligence to share counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics intelligence and to reassure Moscow of Pakistan's goodwill. After Nawaz Sharif returned to power in February, 1997, this process has been continued with periodic consultations between the Afghan experts of the two Foreign Offices to exchange notes on the situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan has also been closely promoting the association of Moscow in the search for a political solution in Afghanistan.

After the visit of Gohar Ayub Khan, the then Foreign Minister, to Moscow in July, 1997, there has been an attempt to promote bilateral trade too, the total value of which is presently limited to a meagre US \$ 50 million. Pakistan has also been

trying to sort out the difficulties which have delayed by over two years the launch of Badr II, the meteorological satellite of Pakistan's Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO), by a Russian rocket.

Since the middle of last year, there has been a debate in the Foreign Offices of the two countries over the advisability of closer co-operation between the two countries despite the above-mentioned inhibiting factors. The debate in Pakistan has been intensified by the failure of Nawaz Sharif's visit to the US in December, 1998, to persuade the Clinton Administration to remove the ban on the sale of new military equipment and spare parts to Pakistan.

It would appear that in the Russian Foreign Office too a section of officials has been saying that while Russia should not allow the primacy of its relationship with India to be diluted, at the same time, it should not allow this to come in the way of its improving its relations with Pakistan. They reportedly feel that while Russia need not sell military equipment to Pakistan, it should not come in the way of former constituent units of the USSR such as Ukraine and Belarus selling equipment to Pakistan. Apparently under the influence of these officials, Moscow has quietly allowed Ukraine to go ahead with the implementation of its contract for the sale of tanks to Pakistan and Belarus offered to sell tanks and aircraft to Pakistan during the visit to Pakistan in November, 1998, by Vasily Borisovich Dolgoliyov, the Deputy Prime minister of Belarus.

An indication of the new Russian thinking was given by Andrei Mikhailovich Gulyaev, the Russian Ambassador to Pakistan, in an interview to the Pakistani daily "The News", on December 18, 1998. He said:

"The process of laying a solid groundwork for future interaction between Russia and Pakistan needs consistent efforts and, if this is maintained, it should culminate in a Russian-Pakistani summit, at which, a historic document, the first ever political treaty on co-operation and the principles of relations between the two countries will be signed.

"Several meetings have suggested that the two countries are interested in making our relations more dynamic and full-fledged.

"Russia attaches considerable significance to Pakistan playing its independent role in the general structure of international relations, specially in South and South-West Asia. With the world moving towards multi-polarity, the importance of Pakistan in regional co-operation for peace and stability is valued by Russia and we share many stances in the UN.

"Our relations with India are very dynamic. India, unlike Pakistan, was never a party to any anti-Soviet military pact. Foreign spy planes did not fly from Indian territory. But we are also for strong relations with Pakistan.

"Pakistan had never made an official request for planes from Russia nor had Moscow shown any reluctance to sell planes in the face of threats from India.

"Our military co-operation does not depend on any country, but it is a delicate matter because it is linked with foreign relations.... We are guided only by our own national interests and international obligations.

"The current turnover in bilateral trade is unsatisfactory and there are several serious proposals to reopen the Pakistani market to Russian machinery and engineering products, utilise the accumulated experience in upgrading the Karachi steel mill and power plant projects and, currently, both sides are negotiating a deal for Kamaz trucks. The draft of a new trade and economic co-operation agreement and several other important documents are being finalised. Our collaboration can be quite wide in major spheres of the economy such as metallurgy, power generation, oil and gas, transport, irrigation and peaceful

research of outer space."

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