

Primakov comes calling, offers new vistas in Indo-Russian relations

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The March 30-31 visit to India by recently appointed Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov has been described in New Delhi by close observers as of long-term significance for both nations. However, the timing of the trip, particularly since Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao was in the middle of intense party squabbles in the run-up to the late-April and early-May nationwide parliamentary elections, was less than auspicious. The poor timing was no doubt responsible for the failure to firm up a common policy on a number of strategic issues.

It is nonetheless evident from the way the talks were conducted, that Primakov's visit has import and lasting significance. During the talks between the Russian foreign minister and his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee, both sides took a common stance against the Pakistani involvement in pushing the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. A statement from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said that both foreign ministers concluded that the Taliban militia "should not be allowed to take an upper hand in Afghanistan." The "intensive discussion"—as it was described in New Delhi—between the two went beyond the Taliban issue, to other broader issues concerning the area.

The statement did not go unnoticed in Islamabad. Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto responded promptly during a policy speech at a banquet given to the "formation commanders" of the Pakistan Army held at her official residence in Islamabad on April 1. Bhutto told the top Army officers present there that India was presently "exploiting the weakness" of the Afghan regime in Kabul, which, in her view, "lacked legitimacy." She described India's present moves as "an Indian intrusion into the affairs of the Afghan people." Bhutto did not cite the Russian involvement, though.

Also noted during the talks between Primakov and Mukherjee, is the concern expressed by both about the rapidly deteriorating Central Asian situation, particularly the growing instability in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan caused by the Afghan civil war spilling across its southern borders. Both Primakov and Mukherjee were in Uzbekistan recently. New Delhi noted that the United States has plans to have a military exercise with the Uzbek Army at the end of this year, making

Uzbekistan the first Central Asian nation to have U.S. forces on its soil. The obvious concern here, and perhaps as well in Moscow, is whether such an exercise is a prelude to the expansion of NATO's operational theater.

From what else has been made public so far, it appears that the visit helped to set up a hot line between the Indian prime minister's residence-cum-office and the Kremlin, and also to draft an agreement between the Indian National Science Academy, an organization rendered stagnant by lack of vision and dynamism, and the Russian Academy of Sciences. During his two days in Delhi, Primakov met with the Indian President, vice president, prime minister, external affairs minister, and leader of the opposition in Parliament, Atal Behari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Top billing

The visit of Primakov was billed by the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi as a "major event," for a number of reasons. Primakov is the first Russian foreign minister to visit India following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. President Boris Yeltsin's recent signing of a decree enabling his foreign minister to play a coordinating role in the country's policy formulations in the future, did not go unnoticed in New Delhi. Local press also reported that Primakov's visit was hailed by the communist Speaker of the Russian Duma, Gennady Seleznyov. Seleznyov's statement that "friendly ties with India" were "Russia's spiritual wealth," and his criticism of the Russian Foreign Ministry for not having been "up to the mark" in fortifying relations with India, were also considered significant.

Secondly, the visit was put in place through the efforts of the Indian ambassador to Moscow, Ronen Sen. Sen was close to the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and was once chosen to carry a personal message from Gandhi to Benazir Bhutto, then prime minister of Pakistan, with the ostensible purpose of resolving some of the intractable problems between India and Pakistan. The day Primakov arrived, it was revealed that Ronen Sen has been appointed India's next envoy to Beijing.

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sor Andrei Kozyrev, is an orientalist and shares some common views with India vis-à-vis the Arab world. His close connection to the seat of power in Moscow in the dying days of the Soviet Union, and his ability to weather the transition from Bolshevism to the free market, makes him a significant figure. Primakov's decision to bring along his deputy Albert S. Chernyshev, who is expected to be the next Russian envoy to Delhi, was no doubt a clever move. In addition, the imposing presence of Primakov and his past links to powerful institutions in the Soviet Union, make him an important individual in the present Russian context. He was director of the Institute of Oriental Studies for eight years. During Mikhail Gorbachov's Presidency, Primakov was chairman of the Supreme Soviet and an alternate member of the powerful Politburo. He was then known to be in Gorbachov's inner circle. Though the Soviet Union disintegrated and Gorbachov was deposed and forgotten, Primakov stayed close to power, even in such an unstable situation. He was appointed director of the Foreign Intelligence Services (FIS) by President Yeltsin, and later as foreign minister. He now enjoys membership in President Yeltsin's inner circle.

Relations turning around

The Primakov visit to India took place at a time when India-Russia relations, political as well as commercial, were

recovering steadily, after going downhill for three years after 1991. Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, finance minister to the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and commerce minister in the Rao cabinet till last year, has played a major role in changing the trend in Indo-Russian relations. On the Russian side, Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Yarov, among a few others, was instrumental in the process of improvement of relations between the two countries. The outcome is not difficult to notice. After hitting an all-time low of \$1.3 billion in 1993, Indo-Russian trade rose to \$2 billion last year and is expected to cross the \$3 billion mark during this fiscal year. In its traditional role as arms supplier to India, Russia has again emerged as a major player. According to the Rosvoorazheniye arms exporting company, last year the two sides signed defense deals worth \$1.5 billion, and are currently negotiating new weapons contracts to the tune of another \$3.5 billion.

Non-geopolitical friendship

It was obvious that Primakov's objective was to establish what he said at a press conference in New Delhi: that "India is a priority partner. . . . [Friendship with] India is a strategic goal of Russian policy. It is the kind of relationship which will define the world order of the 21st century."

Both Primakov and Mukherjee also prioritized building close ties with China. Despite Mukherjee's statement at the press conference that "Our partnership is not against any country," the U.S.-baiters among Indian opinion-makers are busy trying to project Primakov's visit as the beginning of an Entente Cordiale among China, Russia, and India. According to this view, India, Russia, and China are trying to expand their own space in global politics, and are maneuvering to undermine American global dominance.

Such an analysis, however, is as far-fetched as one could possibly imagine. Primakov's visit to India took place at a time when India and the United States were engaged in the largest-ever naval exercise, code-named "Malabar 96," off the southwestern Kerala coast. According to reliable sources, the Indian Navy has provided a destroyer, Tupolev long-range maritime survey planes, helicopters, and even Kilo-class submarines for the exercise—all Russian hardware displayed to the U.S. Navy to familiarize them with its capabilities. In addition, New Delhi has few differences with the United States in relevant strategic matters. In economic and foreign policy issues, the Rao government is in perfect harmony with Washington (whether Indians like the policy direction or not, will be clear in the upcoming general elections). The major difference between New Delhi and Washington center around the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). But, Primakov made it clear at a press conference on March 30 in Delhi, that Moscow's views on the issues are identical to those of Washington. Beijing has already said the same thing many times over.