

# BEAR HUG

## Nuclear India can't depend on Russia

By HARI VASUDEVAN

FOLLOWING the events at Pokhran on 11 May, Russia has consistently refused to frame sanctions against India for her "breach of nuclear ethics". Although Boris Yeltsin has expressed his displeasure concerning the Indian action and he has firmly stood by the terms of the NPT and the CTBT, he has never gone beyond this. True, it is evident in Moscow, as it should be in India, that Mr Vajpayee has followed an unfortunate and dangerous course in making this country nuclear. But anomalies of the world's nuclear regime and India's respect for the ground rules of international conduct are also evident. Hence, Mr Yeltsin's criticisms have been muted, and the significance of his posture has been reinforced by laudatory remarks by senior Russian military officials concerning the Indian action and congratulations by parliamentary leaders Gennadi Zuyganov from the Communists and Zhirinovskii from the Liberal Democrats.

Here, Yeltsin's failure to support U S policy on the India may be put down to domestic compulsions to appear self-assertive in the face of Communist criticism concerning "tailism", in dealings with the West; while the lip service to Euro-American condemnation of the blast is a necessity as a signatory to the international non-proliferation regime. The President's position on India, though, also follows from other reasons. Like France, the USSR, the Russian Federation's nuclear predecessor, was never, in spirit, in accord with NATO definitions of non-proliferation. It avoided a non-proliferation treaty for almost two decades after the explosion of the atom bomb.

### SALT TALKS

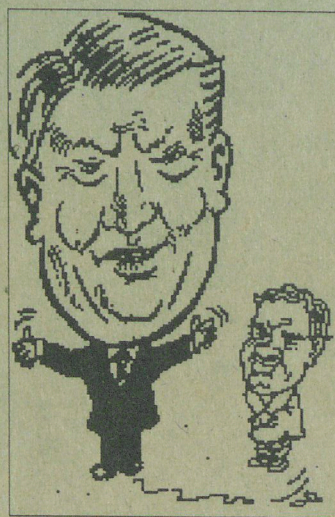
And during SALT talks, it was singularly secretive about all aspects of its Strategic Rocket Programme and the related research, which constituted the hub of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal. Arkady Shevchenko, a leading figure in Soviet peace planning, when Andrei Gromyko was External Affairs' Minister, firmly asserts in his memoirs that the USSR was seldom serious in its arms limitation dealings. This spirit has carried on to the Russian military establishment which is powerful in Yeltsin's entourage.

Since 1995, moreover, after a period of "tailing" the USA on almost all international issues, Russia has charted an independent foreign policy course under External Affairs' Minister Yevgenii Primakov. This change has partly been the upshot of Russia's inheritance of the Soviet nuclear stockpile, and her annoyance with US restrictions on her capacity to use her formidable nuclear expertise to help resolve her economic problems. Not only the great dinosaur of the Russian military-goods establishment — Rossvozuzhenie — but also a number of plants stung out from St Petersburg to Novosibirsk wish to sell nuclear-related technology; and they constitute a lobby for going soft on minor transgressions of the international non-proliferation regime. For them, the G8 declaration and the confusion among Euro-American commercial interests over India investments is useful: it keeps open avenues for business. Until now, China has been a good customer, and Europe has not been far behind. India appears promising.

All this is comfort for the Prime Minister in Delhi and the nuclear lobby in India. And it is comfort reinforced by U S alarmism about an impending arms race in South Asia, where Russia supports India and China supports Pakistan: alarmism which clearly indicates that the USA has a sense that Russia, may underwrite the Indian nuclear programme indirectly. A string of military experts (the most prominent being Jasjit Singh of IDSA) have an impression of future cooperation between Russia and India in areas of peripheral nuclear technology, if not in matters directly relating to the bomb. Certainly, the close relations between New Delhi and Moscow could be a lifeline for India in any future regime of international sanctions.

Mr Vajpayee, though, would do

well not to rely too heavily on his "Russia card" for support in nuclear dealings in the future. And this, like many other problems, makes it evident that India has opened a can of worms in joining the nuclear club. For reliable "friendship" and good will are crucial to any nuclear power from the developing world; and the lack of stable friends will be troublesome. True, "nukes" are cheap ("bang for buck") in comparison with conventional arms; hence, in any arms' buildup, they are attractive to a poor nation. They pose problems of safe-



guards, though, which our scientific infrastructure, for all its vaunted sophistication, cannot cope with. And Russia, in the case of such precautions, will be a poor helpmate, just as she will be an uncertain ally as India sorts out her nuclear status.

Hence, while developing India's nuclear capacity, Mr Vajpayee and his comrades must take stock of Russia's sad limitations in the nuclear field. A vast nuclear establishment for arms and energy notwithstanding, Russia's investment in the technology of precautions has been poor. Years ago, a little after the Chernobyl accident, Valerii Legasov, a distinguished Soviet atomic physicist wrote of the poor planning in Russian institutions for dealing with precautions in developing atomic energy. Despite attention to this area of Legasov himself and the more renowned V A Siderenko, Soviet planners gave this aspect of nuclear activity little attention. They focused on R&D for power, construction etc; but precautionary technology was neglected. Standards stagnated, Euro-American know-how was ignored, and cadres were trained in backward technology. Since 1992, the situation has become worse.

Elsewhere, interest factors make reliance on Russia unwarranted. Russian policy makers tilt firmly to the Iran in their predilections. In this case, despite the Shia-Sunni antagonisms that divide Iran from Pakistan, and the their disagreements over Afghan affairs, Iran is not wholly hostile to Pakistani interests. She sees in a Pakistani nuclearity, and an "Islamic bomb", the future of her own acquisition of nuclear hardware; and she will do her best to maintain good relations with Islamabad.

### CENTRAL ASIA

Meanwhile, in the last two years, Yevgenii Primakov has been clear that Iran is crucial to Russia's interests in Central Asia and the Caspian neighbourhood. President Karimov of Uzbekistan has proved an unreliable safeguard for these interests, and Mr Primakov has looked to friendship with Iran as a source of assistance in the scrimmage over the oil and gas of the Caspian shelf. The USA, here, motivated by a range of oil interests, has refused to accept Russia's dominance in the area, even though they accepted Russia's rights to police Central Asian borders in 1997. Iran's coincidence of interests with Russia, meanwhile, have been self-evident. Russia provides Iran's expanding ports on the Caspian (e.g. Engeli) with a vast traffic, especially from Astrakhan. Russia also provides great business for Iran's fleet in the area. In return, in defiance of U S arguments, Russia has agreed on transfer on nuclear know-how to Iran. In the circumstances, Mr Primakov will be reluctant to irritate his West Asian

ally, who is unlikely to favour actions fundamentally hostile to Pakistan.

Mr Vajpayee must also recognise that Mr Primakov is firmly playing the China card today, and that the Russian Federation will be unhappy to alienate China, who has made no bones about her alarm at India's nuclear status. China trade supplies Russia with an increasing trade surplus and an excellent market for arms — submarines, C-300 solid fuel anti-aircraft missiles, millile guidance systems and SU-27 fighters. After the USA and Europe, China is a favoured market in Russia currently.

Most important, South Block must understand that the social politics of the Russian ruling elite does not direct government towards a rapprochement with India to the detriment of other sources of investment and aid in the West, and especially the U S. This was revealed in the crisis which brought Prime Minister Kirenko to power in early May, which demonstrated the authority of the Westernisers. The crisis was deliberately brought on to ensure that in the event of Boris Yeltsin's death, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who is closely associated with the old managerial elite of the Soviet state, would not succeed to the Presidency. The conspirators here — the representatives of the new "privatisation" elite, with poor connections in the old nomenklatura — were Anatolii Chubais and Boris Nemtsov, who are Mr Kirenko's masters. The former is the lead figure behind privatisation and the darling of the West, while the latter is the former Nizhni governor who gained great status as a supporter of privatisation. Both understood that Chernomyrdin's authority lay in his links with the genus of state corporation-conglomerates that have emerged from the Russian reforms ("holding companies", "concerns", "financial-investment groups" etc).

### PRIVATE AGENCY

These are agencies which are privatised but which have close links to government, and are rarely dependent on Western aid. They are not "Communist" in political learning, but they have no great affection for Washington.

In the circumstances, Chernomyrdin's Presidency would have been a victory against the full-fledged privateers those who depend on foreign investments, quick money and speculative trading. It had to be avoided, and the capacity of the Chubais group to prevent it shows their authority in Russian affairs. This may be the consequence of support from U S funds, which are publicly despised, and the work of millionaires and media moghuls such as Berezovskii Gusevskii who are singularly unpopular. But the power of "Westernisers" has a decisive quality. Gubernatorial mandarins from Sakha to Kaliningrad are rarely the creatures of such privateers, but they depend on them for crucial services with private banks and foreign investors. Agricultural associations and trades unions can exercise no restraint on the privatees — especially with the unions heavily divided between wildcat organisations, the "conciliationist" Sotsprof and the divided FNPR. Boris Yeltsin's "court" (as well as his electoral campaigns), meanwhile, have been wholly dependent upon them.

It is unlikely, in the circumstances, that Yevgenii Primakov will attempt to take on Moscow's Westernisers for the sake of India; and while this is so, Mr Vajpayee's standing in Moscow over nuclear affairs will always be in jeopardy. To correct this situation requires a subtle strengthening of India's relationship with Iran, and a gamble on the political vitality of anti-Chinese sentiment in the Russian Far East, with rewards in Moscow whose value is far from clear. It is unlikely that South Block is either capable of playing this game, or that it would regard that the profits are worthwhile. The upshot is that Russia will be an uncertain friend in the slush that India has got herself into. To Mr Vajpayee and those who support him, the Federation can only offer dubious comfort as they negotiate India's nuclear future.