

# WOOLING THE WEST

## India Smiles At Atlantic Community

WITH the withdrawal of "infiltrators" from the LoC, the Kashmir question appears to have returned to *status quo ante* Kargil. This is not true of Indian foreign policy, however. For the recent confrontation with Pakistan has accentuated a crucial change in South Block's attitudes towards the United States and Nato: a search for goodwill and trust, a disassociation from confrontationism. This was evident during the Kargil conflict, and it has been evident thereafter in the course of the Atlantic affair and the debate over India's nuclear doctrine.

The change has been growing over time, and it has been apparent in the actions and statements of Mr Jaswant Singh for over a year. The tenor of his overtures to Europe and Washington speaks of that change, and it reflects his bonhomie towards Ms Madeline Albright and Mr Strobe Talbott in negotiations over CTBT and NPT earlier. Mr Singh's demeanour broke with an old Indian habit — cocking a snook at the Atlantic community.

True, the gestures must be seen in a broader context. In New Delhi, clear signs of hostility to the Europe-US axis have been evident in recent times. They were seen in expressions of outrage over the Kosovo bombings, and the condemnation of unilateral Nato intervention in Balkan affairs. They were to be seen also in intimations of sympathy for the India-China-Russia link-up in international affairs that was suggested by former Russian PM Mr Primakov prior to his dismissal: a link-up clearly directed against Nato. Again, signs of India's addiction to old options and her "fix" on Indo-Russian friendship as a back-up for independent initiatives abroad was the India-Russia pact signed at the Asean meet last month.

### KID GLOVES

But all this does not reduce the significance of Mr Singh's repeated resort to kid gloves for treatment of Washington. It is the logical continuation of the "pragmatism" in foreign policy initiated by Narasimha Rao in the post-Cold War period: a firm recognition that the world's sole superpower needs to be kept happy even in a multi-polar world. South Block may wish to prepare India for great power status, through nuclearity and the rhetoric of independence. But in doing so, they do not wish, like the leaders of "rogue states", to fly in the face of Euro-American opinion. Rather, they seek in the US an ally in their plans for the future.

Such a direction in policy does not come purely from reflections on South Asia's post-Cold War condition. It has been dictated by the harsh realities of geopolitics, and will continue to be guided by them. The timing of Mr Singh's smiles for Washington coincides with the intensified disintegration of Russian authority in Central Asia and the emergence of Nato as a force in the region.

The dimensions of this development, are still vague, but its significance is beyond question. It may be traced to the formation of multilateral pacts in the Central Asian

By HARI VASUDEVAN

and Caucasus region after the disintegration of the Soviet Union: the pact between "Black Sea states" and "Caspian states" and the agreement for economic cooperation between the states of Central and South-west Asia. Here, Russia often ceased to be a key player in local matters, and Georgia and Uzbekistan, for instance, interacted freely with Turkey and Iran. True, these "pacts" and "agreements" were unspecific and they seldom came to have military or security signifi-



cance. However, they laid the foundations for networks and interactions outside Moscow's ambit. The meaning of what happened stopped there, hampered by Turkish poverty and tensions over Islamic fundamentalism between former Soviet Communists and their South-west Asian brethren. Yet the turn constituted a phase in the erosion of Russian presence in the area.

Trends in economic development in the old Soviet south, after the disintegration of the USSR, further removed the region from Moscow's grip. Oil was the commodity on which the five Central Asian states, and two Caucasus nations had to stake their future: and it was the solid investment of BP, Agip, Shell, Chevron and Japanese consortia that was to assist them. Moscow considered that ground realities (the position of pipelines and technology infrastructure) would keep any oil exploration and development in Russia's hands. But slow work on the part of the most powerful Russian private MNC, Lukoil, and Moscow's impotent attempts to further inter-government cooperation, threw the Soviet south into the hands of other friends.

### INHERITED

This was the direct consequence of the greed of the major business empires who have "inherited" the Russian Federation: the Onexim, Alfabank, Menatep and Berezovskii groups and sundry magnates who control "corporations" such as Gazprom. Concerned with their limited ends, and harassed by inflation, these key figures in Moscow, with their media connections and their links in the presidential household have undermined all attempts to create on "economic space" (based on free trade, common laws or mere cooperation) among CIS countries.

Such developments, combined with disagreements between Moscow and Tashkent and Moscow and Tblisi on the geopolitical future of the area have led to a gradual collapse of the internal accord which existed in the CIS (and which centred on Moscow) regarding security arrangements in the region. Centrifugal tendencies, away from Moscow, initially based on economic factors, and the independent initiatives of the newly

independent states, have begun to take a different turn. A loose "alliance" of states, operating with Nato blessing, have begun to work with a will in the region. This is the so-called Guuam (Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova) grouping. The pact's incorporation of Uzbekistan in April this year coincided with the decision of Georgia, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan to pull out of the CIS security pact that has existed from 1994, and which was scheduled for renewal in May this year. (The Ukraine and Moldova are not

members of the CIS pact).

This turn in the politics of Central Eurasia has sent alarm bells ringing in Moscow. The "extension" in Guuam must also have drawn the attention of South Block, for it signalled the arrival of a neo-Nato presence on the northern reaches of Afghanistan in a novel form. The presence of the Euro-US axis in the area — hitherto confined to cultural initiatives, diplomatic statements and money — had clearly undergone a subtle metamorphosis. It was a development which New Delhi could not and cannot ignore.

For Guuam (initially formed without Uzbekistan at a meeting of European heads of state in Strasbourg in 1997), while it focused initially on economic cooperation (the construction of pipelines and transport conduits outside Russian territory), now focuses on joint military exercises (conducted earlier this year), and border peace-keeping. Its godparents are not in doubt: the extension of the pact took place at the Nato jubilee earlier this year, and the accord itself has been properly registered with Nato. At least two of the members (Georgia and Azerbaijan) have expressed their willingness to see Nato bases on their territory, and both supported Nato action over Kosovo.

### EURASIA

In India, the run up to this situation, which has not escaped our diplomats, places unusual choices before South Block. Hitherto New Delhi has seen in the USSR and Russia the prime bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism in the Eurasia region. It must now come to terms with an alternative claimant for that role: the Atlantic community operating with its regional satraps. Given Russia's problems, this cannot be ignored; even while Russia's authority, represented by her minorities in the region, her military power and her close links with Tadjikistan, cannot be wished away.

The upshot has been seen in the past months of diplomacy, when India has spoken in many voices. In dealing with the tightrope of this *fin de siecle* Great Game in Central Eurasia, New Delhi attempts, deftly, to keep various options in balance. Because of the Nato involvement, and because of Nato's broader terms of reference, though, this is not a game to be played only at the regional level. Broader questions of the CTBT and the NPT face Mr Singh as he presents his Cheshire-cat smile in Washington and Bonn for regional gains. As Washington's disapproval over India's nuclear policies have demonstrated, moreover, Mr Singh's audience, unlike Alice, will not be content with the smile alone.

The author is Professor, Department of History, Calcutta University.