

PUTIN'S VISIT

A Return To Influence In The Area

By HARI VASUDEVAN

Vladimir Putin's visit to India ran its course with no surprises. Despite goodwill, bonhomie, an address to Parliament and accords galore, the Russian President's tour was not accompanied by the deafening fanfare which surrounded the US President's visit in March. The business interest was negligible in comparison. There were fewer gala public occasions. The press presented a pale imitation of the range of build-up articles which followed the Clintons.

Partly, this was because the US presidential visit was the crowning point of newly-found Indo-US amity and India's "liberalisation". But there are other reasons. The Russian political elite is a stodgy commodity which is not advertiser-friendly (unlike the US equivalent). If Gorbachov and Yeltsin were exceptions that proved the rule, Putin runs to the standard type.

Important also is the nature of Russia's importance to India. The Federation is a supplier for arms and an ally in geopolitical strategy. These subjects hardly make lively public discussion at the best of times. Indian and Russian reciprocal interests in Central Asia will be of little concern to most Indians who dismiss Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to the domain of specialist geography.

MAFIA STYLE

In the past decade, there has been a steep decline in Russian language specialists in this country, once state support and Soviet assistance fell away. The collapse of Moscow's funding to propagation of Russian culture has intensified ignorance of what happens in the Federation in regions such as India.

Following from this, two points must be made after the Russian President's visit. First, it should be clear that pious intentions to improve economic and commercial cooperation will remain on paper unless the Government of India makes a more determined effort. Similar schemes and plans were to be found in official files at the time of the Burbulis visit (1992), the Yeltsin visit (1993) and the Primakov visit (1998). In the current stage of the Federation's "transition" to a market economy, a thriving relationship, dependent on business deals between Russians and Indians, with blessings from Moscow and New Delhi, has eluded India.

India appears to be in no state to provide cover and stimulus to businessmen operating in Russia like the overt support given by US agencies to US business in Russia under the terms of the Freedom Support Act. Given the turbulence of market culture in Russia (and its "mafia" style), such support is essential for survival. Although funds are available under the rupee-rouble debt for Indian initiatives, Delhi is normally lacking in imagination and grit in this matter. In Russia, confusion or disinterest is the rule.

The oligarchs of the "Big Seven" banks (Potanin, Khodorkovskii, Berezovskii etc.) do not find Indian business seri-

ously lucrative. Indian businessmen who venture into the "Wild East" of Central Eurasia (the Khemkas, Mittals and Chamarias) do so at their own risk, and the stout initiatives of Ambassadors Sen and Lamba in Moscow have helped them marginally.

The record of Indian operations in Russia cannot compare with the activities of Europeans, Americans, Japanese or Chinese. Market conditions may change following Putin's centralisation drive — which has benefited from the weaken-



ing of Russian oligarchs during the crash of August 1998. Given the lack of clarity of corporate arrangements and business law in Russia, it is unlikely, though, that this will make a difference to Indian penetration of the Russian market.

During the Putin visit, certain areas have been highlighted for Indo-Russian cooperation. But it is doubtful whether they will seriously make a difference to the existing scenario without serious thought and initiative. In the case of collaboration over oil and natural gas exploration in the Russian Far East, more is rumoured than stated.

Intensive build-up of nuclear energy installations in India with Russian cooperation seems imminent, with a focus on the Kudamkulam project. The deepest caution has been expressed in India, though, concerning the safety of Russian technology and reliance on nuclear energy.

FIRM ALLY

Memories of Chernobyl, and academic Legasov's warnings (before his suicide in 1988) concerning the Russian nuclear energy industry are a warning to many that serious investment in this technology is not advisable, whatever the cost of petrol. There is every likelihood that US and NATO controls over Russia will ultimately limit the development of this area, whatever the rugged determination Putin chooses to show.

Indo-Russian collaboration in the import and production of tanks and various forms of aircraft promises to be lucrative. In the conditions of India's current defence build-up, the Russian product will affect India's finances the least.

India's capacity to develop this technology, moreover, cannot be underestimated: for the extent of technology transfer from the Russians in the past has been considerable. For Russia such a collaboration would be as useful as its cooperation with the Europeans (especially the French) and the Chinese. India's superiority in information technology would assist superior production.

Whereas European and

Chinese technological collaboration might turn sour (because of quarrels over the Balkans and over Siberian and Far Eastern borders), there is little likelihood of such a turn in the India case. However, the problems of restricting India's defence options to the Russian type is unwarranted, as defence commentators have pointed out.

Russia as a firm ally in geopolitical strategy and global diplomacy cannot be doubted. For the country's interests and notions coincide wholly with India in the Central Asian and South West Asian regions.

Fears have been expressed about a possible pro-Pakistan turn in Moscow, following Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan. This would be the response of Russia as loser in the politics of the region, desperate to ensure damage control concerning its interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

These are baseless fears. True, following Soviet disintegration, Foreign Affairs Minister Andrei Kozyrev attempted a departure in Russian foreign policy of this nature. Pakistani diplomats in Moscow played to this tune, lobbying actively during the early and mid 90s (to 1998). The line has had few takers in Russia, however, and even Kozyrev's early mentor, Lukin, a major figure in Russian politics, stood against the idea.

LODESTONE

Questionable, though, is whether Russia will count in a serious sense, as a strategic partner, as Nato influence in the Caspian area increases (with possible military bases in Georgia). Are there chances that there will be a repeat performance here of the Yugoslav debacle? South Block seems to think so: and the record of Summer 2000 seems to point to Russia's "return" to influence in the area after Putin became President.

This was evident in Russia's prestige at the Dushambe summit of "Shanghai Pact" powers in July, and the snub to Nato representative Robertson in Central Asian capitals during his visit in the same month. Much depends on the performance of Russia's economy, however, and Putin's "centralisation" schemes in the Federation: his initiatives to rein in provincialists and financial oligarchs.

Only if such schemes work will Russia's standing as a strategic ally be solid and serious. To speak of multipolarity effectively will be meaningful only if Russia is an effective power. The continuous overtures of Mr Jaswant Singh and South Block to the forces within the Beltway of the District of Columbia indicate an acceptance of this uncertainty, and qualifies any trust they place in India's northern friend. In the circumstances, a degree of scepticism must temper any response to official enthusiasm during the Putin visit. To date, for both Moscow and New Delhi, their lodestone still lies in Washington, given Russia's weakness and India's bankruptcy. As one Moscow commentator said, in many ways, we are all "made in the USA" today. It is merely rhetoric to argue that the world will change overnight.

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