

NORTH KOREA

Bush takes a hard line

HARUN UR RASHID *in Canberra*

DURING talks in Washington on March 7, President Bush made it clear to South Korea's President that he was not interested in continuing the Clinton administration's policy of cautious détente with the communist regime of North Korea. The President was reported to have said that he had no plans to resume discussing development and exporting missile programmes with North Koreans.

Prior to any dialogue, it was reported that President Bush wanted to make sure that North Korea stops first its ability to develop and spread missiles to other developing countries (it is alleged that the countries include Pakistan, Iraq and Iran). Secondly he was not certain whether North Korea is keeping all terms of the 1994 US-North Korea Nuclear Freeze agreement. The statements mark a sharp change of the Clinton administration's policy of engagement with North Korea.

The Clinton policy towards North Korea:

The sticky issues with North Korea appear to be a) freezing North Korea's nuclear weapons programmes and b) abandonment of its programme of developing and exporting ballistic missiles.

The US signed an agreement in 1994 under which North Korea froze its nuclear programmes in

return for fuel oil and promises of advanced nuclear reactor from the US. The implementation of the agreement has not been smooth and both parties seem to accuse each other in breaching the agreement.

With regard to North Korea's development and exporting missiles the Clinton administration was reported to have been close to a deal that would require the North Koreans to give up their missile exports and development in exchange for economic benefits to help them to cope with dire economic situation in the country.

The former US Secretary of State Albright visited North Korea in November and North Korea's number two man Vice-Marshall Cho-Myong-rok met former President Clinton in Washington last year. The US-North Korean relations were improved to the extent that former President Clinton hoped to make a visit to North Korea. He reportedly said recently that he would almost certainly have made this landmark visit had it not been for the 36-day dispute over the outcome of the presidential election in the US.

Why did President Bush reverse the Clinton policy?

The Bush administration is keen to develop the US missile defence system to protect the US against the "rogue states", such as North Korea and Iraq who might wish to

launch a nuclear, chemical or biological attack via a missile. The aim of the US missile defence system is to knock down the enemies' missile in the sky before it reaches the territory of the US.

Many, however, argue that there are weaknesses to the argument of developing missile defence system. First, it is somewhat far-fetched to assume that America's 'rogue enemies' would be capable to deliver weapons of mass destruction via a missile. Second, the cost of developing the defence system is enormous (about \$ 60 billion) and appears to be out of proportion to the threat posed by the 'rogue states'. Third, Russia claims that it will go against the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Treaty between US-Russia and will introduce a new element in the nuclear balance of power. Finally, it will spark a nuclear arms race globally at a time when the international community is pressing progressive nuclear disarmament.

It appears that the above arguments against the development of missile defence system do not cut any ice with the new US Republican administration. The Republicans are traditionally hawkish and they seem to be determined to develop missile defence system, irrespective of its opposition and hostility generated in Russia and China. Furthermore some of the US allies in Europe, such as Britain and Germany see the folly of the US

proposal.

One of the justifications for developing defence shield programme is that the US faces a "threat" from North Korea. If there is a process of reconciliation with North Korea, much of the force of the arguments for the defence shield programme may fall through. It is argued that the reason of hard stance on North Korea by the Bush administration is to facilitate the development of missile defence programme.

Some defence experts also believe that this hard line stance may convey indirectly a message to China that the US is not afraid to confront any power when US's interests collide. China is emerging as a military power in Asia Pacific region and is being perceived a "threat" to the strategic interests of the US.

Some argue that Secretary of State General Powell has been side lined in the shaping of the Bush administration's policy on North Korea. General Powell indicated initially that Washington would continue to engage with North Korea to resolve problems. Later when Powell emerged from the Bush-Kim talks, he reversed his conciliatory tone and called North Korea a "threat" whose intentions nobody should be naive about.

Media reports indicate that other foreign and defence experts did not support General Powell's initial

views on North Korea. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Dr. Condoleezza Rice uphold a tough policy. Vice President Dick Cheney was reportedly to have agreed with them. Some argue that the hard line view got upper hand in the White House and influenced the President.

Possible implications of hard line policy:

The hard line policy of the Bush administration is likely to increase tensions in Far East. The border of North-South Korea has been one of the most dangerous and fortified places in the world as thousands of well-armed soldiers guard South and North Korea's border at 38th parallel since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The fact that 37,000 US soldiers are stationed in South Korea suggests that the Korean peninsula remains volatile. The two Koreas continue to be technically in war as they did not sign a peace treaty after Korean war (1950-53).

President Kim maintained that if West and East Germany and North and South Yemen could be united the two Koreas could be united as well at a time convenient to both countries. With this end in view, he launched "sunshine policy" to make reconciliatory efforts with North Korea. President Kim visited North Korea in June last year and was warmly received by the reclusive North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

The visit ushered in a new era of relations between the two Koreas. President Kim received the Nobel Peace Prize last year for his commitment to democracy and rapprochement effort. The US position does not appear to bring comfort to President Kim because his "sunshine" policy may face difficulties with North Korea. North Korea always suspects that South Korea's policy towards North Korea is influenced by the US. Given the hard line attitude of Bush administration, North Korea may retreat to its isolationist position a may not readily reciprocate reconciliatory moves from South Korea. Furthermore North Korea may retaliate by resuming its nuclear programmes.

The hard line position may create confusion among the US allies who have opened embassies in recent months in North Korea to pursue reconciliatory efforts with North Koreans. An impression may be drawn that the US acts only in its own interests and is only willing to work with other nations if it suits its interests. After all the US is the only superpower and it acts alone if no one else agrees with Washington. President Bush during election campaign said that the US were not an "arrogant" nation. Do the signals of the new administration maintain such claims?

The policy on North Korea may have an impact on China, North Korea's neighbour and ally. China

supported reconciliatory policy of two Koreas and watched with keen interest the US-North Korean relations. Although China does not appear to be supportive of unification of two Koreas because Communist North Korea acts as a buffer zone between China and capitalist South Korea, it wants to see peace in the Korean peninsula as it is likely to be sucked in if there is an armed conflict in the area. China's top priority at present is to become an economic power and it needs a peaceful environment to achieve it.

Furthermore, China may perceive the reversal of the Clinton policy on North Korea as a sign of aggressive US position in Far East. China's fundamental strategic fear appears to be of gradual encirclement, with Japan as the northern claw and Australia as the southern claw of a US pincer strategy. This apprehension may find support in the Bush administration's foreign policy positions.

China's Finance Minister in recent days unveiled plans for China's biggest increase in military spending in real terms for 20 years and its budget for defence spending was increased by 17.7 per cent. China may increase more defence spending to maintain military balance in the region.

Another unintended consequences may emerge in South Asia. India's Foreign Minister has

plans to meet his counter-part in the US. India is perceived as a counterweight to China's growing power in the region by the Bush administration. It is likely that India's defence spending may match China's. If India does, Pakistan may be compelled to do so to keep strategic balance in South Asia. Experts believe that the Bush administration's positions may erupt another arms race not only in South Asia but globally.

President Bush's father, former President Bush, Sr. talked about the new international order after the end of the Cold War following the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. The new order would embrace peace in global terms and economic progress and development world wide. After ten years there are signs that tensions of Cold War may dangerously reappear unless the new US Republican administration pauses, ponders and re-considers its foreign policy positions and seize the opportunity of being a force for peace.

Rashid, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

RUSS

Challenges before Putin

DR MAQBOOL AHMAD BHATTY

THE recent visit of President Putin to Vietnam served to underline the efforts of the Russian president to ensure a major role for his country after nearly a decade of decline since the end of the cold war. Interestingly, President Clinton had been the first US president to visit the same country late last year in a bid to cement relations with a power that had inflicted the only defeat on the US in the second half of the 20th century.

The US wanted to take advantage of the historical antipathy that has existed between China and Vietnam, in a preliminary move to contain China. President Putin also became the first Russian president to court Hanoi as it emerges as a significant player after becoming a member of ASEAN. Russia was a strategic partner of Vietnam during the cold war, and had backed it with military hardware as well as political support as the US sought to follow up its successful military intervention in Korea with a similar move in Indochina.

The then Soviet Union had followed up this success in the cold war with a move to encourage Vietnam to extend its control over Cambodia through a military takeover in 1978. This was followed by the establishment of a pro-Communist regime in Laos. These developments were not only regarded as setbacks for the US but were also seen by China as directed against itself in the rift that had developed between Moscow and Beijing after 1959.

The communist system was unsuccessful in matching the economic and social progress achieved by the western market economy system, though the major cause of this failure was the diversion of excessive resources to the ruinous arms race with the West.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, realized the need to effect political and economic reforms, but his approach of carrying out both at the same time led to the unravelling of the very system of communist control. Beijing's approach, based on economic reform while retaining firm

political control, tuned out to be the right one that has propelled China to the status of a real great power. Afghanistan proved to be the final blow that undermined faith in the communist system, and encouraged trends that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After playing second fiddle to the West for a brief period, Russia, which emerged as the largest state after the Soviet Union disintegrated into its constituent republics, chose to reassert its identity as a great power. With the Russian economy going down in a free fall after 1991, owing to poor management and massive corruption, Moscow's credibility as a major power suffered. The erratic behaviour of President Yeltsin contributed to the process of Russian decline. Since the succession of President Putin, who was handpicked by Yeltsin in January 2000 in a move to revive Russian fortunes, the conduct of Moscow's foreign policy has undergone a transformation.

The high price of oil and gas during the period Putin has held power has been a major factor in reviving the Russian economy that had been close to collapse in Yeltsin's final years. Yeltsin's period had seen the focus of Moscow's active diplomacy restricted largely to reviving Russia's influence in the former republics of the Soviet Union that were described as the "near abroad." Putin has extended the range of Russia's interaction with the world to an extent that has effectively contributed to the former superpower's self-image as a global actor. His travels over the past 14 months have taken him to far-off corners, ranging from Cuba and Canada in the western hemisphere to key countries in Asia and Europe.

As was to be expected, Putin has continued the policy of rebuilding Moscow's ties with the traditional client states of the Soviet era, including some of the so-called "rogue" states accused of supporting terrorism, such as Iraq and Cuba. However, he was not shy of cultivating states in the old Soviet bloc that have embraced the democratic system and market economies. Behaving as a "foreign policy businessman", as the New York Times noted, Putin has been searching for

opportunities both for Russia's beleaguered national industries, and for a more self-assured profile for Russian foreign policy. This policy has been more constructive on issues of war and peace, but also more assertive when Russia's security and trade interests are in the balance.

Andre Kozyrev, who was foreign minister in the early years of Yeltsin's presidency, also believes that Putin is showing skill in satisfying a broad array of domestic constituencies by coddling old dictators on the one hand, and moving closer to the West on the other. "Keeping this balance is an absolute prerequisite to keeping the market reform effort going", Kozyrev says admiringly. However, he concedes that this may have contributed to the lack of a coherent Russian view to the world, with Russia seen as being self-assertive without an overall strategy, as a reflection of "our national inferiority complex."

Kozyrev may not be totally correct about Russia lacking a broad strategy. Putin has been consistent in his goal of seeking a broad consensus against the US strategy of NMD, which clearly seeks to terminate the understanding behind the ABM treaty concluded in the 1970s. He got an endorsement of this stand from countries as diverse as Cuba, Canada, and South Korea, which he visited before Vietnam. The Europeans, with the exception of Britain, also have reservations. Vice-premier Tariq Aziz of Iraq, who visited Moscow recently, applauded Moscow's renewal of ties with old friends, among which he named Iraq, the Arab world, India and China.

Another strand in Russia's post-cold war strategy is its fear of Islamic fundamentalism, which centres on concerns to hold on to parts of the

Russian Federation, where large Muslim populations seek greater autonomy. However, this has not prevented Moscow from building close relations with Iran. Memories of its setback in Afghanistan and of the part played by Pakistan have a considerable role in its approach to South Asia where the policy of retaining traditional links with India is also seen as important to Russia's role as a "Eurasian" power. However, Russia would not like to antagonize Pakistan, which is not only a nuclear power but also has a potential to influence developments in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Moscow might even sell arms to Pakistan if we could find the money for them, because the armaments industry is a major contributor to exports.

In its recent analysis of Russia's foreign policy initiatives towards the end of 2000, the New York Times concluded by quoting Michael McFaul of the Carnegie Moscow Centre. Mr Putin, in his view "has changed the dynamic of US-Russian relations." During the years under Yeltsin "we would always come to him with the list of things we wanted to do" to get him to cooperate. Putin has "changed this dynamic. Suddenly we are responding to him."

Will this continue after the advent of the Bush administration? It is a moot point. Putin indicated during his visit to Cuba that Russia attaches high importance to relations with the US. While he has been drumming up support for his opposition to NMD, and to safeguard the ABM Treaty, he has avoided a confrontation with Washington, and shown readiness to join in devising a missile system designed to contain "rogue" states. Clinton had allowed strategic space to Russia by allowing it a free hand in Central Asia, and

by joining it in efforts to contain international terrorism. Assigning high importance to Russia's economic revival, Putin would not court an open confrontation with the US over the NMD issue and has acted skillfully to exploit concerns in most countries over the new US priority. In this context the strategic partnership with China is being assigned high importance.

During visits to various countries, such as India and even South Korea, references have been made

to evolving "strategic partnerships" on the basis of shared visions of international security and peace. However, Russia is unlikely to jeopardise the vital economic relationships with the West that are critical to its economic revival. The effort to play the role of a global actor is designed primarily to retain the "Great Power" image, as Russia is hardly in a position to really challenge the US, where the new administration is set to maintain a decisive military superiority to preserve

Washington's global clout. Since Secretary of State Colin Powell described China as a "strategic competitor", the Sino-Russian strategic convergence is set to acquire added importance.

Putin's renewed diplomatic activity is based on recognition of the need to safeguard Russian national interests in a period of uncertainty, from a position of economic and political weakness. This has led Russia to adopt a more flexible attitude in its international

diplomacy. The recent visit to Pakistan by some senior Russian diplomats has to be seen against this background.

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