

Central Asian nations look for help

by Ramtanu Maitra

On Nov. 28-29, Pakistan hosted the extraordinary session of the council of ministers belonging to the Economic Cooperation Organization, consisting of five Central Asian nations, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and the host. The two-day session was the third of its kind since 1964, when ECO's earlier version, the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), had been formed with Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan as its member nations.

Leading the optimism at the conference in Islamabad, was the host nation, Pakistan. Now deeply in debt and in the grip of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, Pakistan has suffered with the collapse of the Cold War. The American largesse flowing into Pakistan since 1979 to build the barricade against the Soviet Union has practically stopped. The unwise use of the largesse and the perpetuation of a feudal society where a handful pocket the bounty, has given rise to various distortions in Pakistani society, all of which show up in the state of the nation's economy. It is only natural under the present circumstances that Pakistan will be eager to build new bridges with the countries which have large reservoirs of natural resources but little capability to exploit them successfully.

The theme that ran throughout the two-day seminar, was the necessity for the grouping. Pakistan is more than eager to forge a tie with the Islamic nations which will provide them some independence from western control. Iran and Turkey,

looking at the Central Asian mosaic where they hope to emerge as the power brokers within the Islamic nations, are interested in using the forum for diplomatic purposes.

Pakistan's view was expressed by its President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who emphasized the potential of the group to emerge as a strong, dynamic, and vibrant organization capable of transforming the quality of life of some 300 million people in a short span of time. He also pointed out the necessity of a better transnational infrastructure in the area of communication and transportation to make the region economically more productive and a highly profitable trade zone.

The director general of Pakistan's Institute of Strategic Studies, Lt. Gen. Syed Zakir Ali Zaidi, in his welcoming address, pointed out that Pakistan has always been moved by a vision of a larger Muslim nationalism. Such nationalism is not a negation of national identities and state sovereignties. Yet no nation can be sufficient unto itself, he argued, and in contemporary times the Muslim nations need one another more than ever before. Concrete progress can be made toward unity through such associations as the ECO, Zaidi stressed.

A four-day seminar, organized by the Rawalpindi-based Foundation for Research and National Development and Security (Friends), a brainchild of former Chief of Army Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, on regional cooperation, and attended by representatives from all the ECO member countries, had addressed this theme extensively. The Friends seminar directly preceded the ECO summit.

The speakers discussed the strategic importance of the area and its role for the future. The mood of the seminar, according to media coverage, was that the emergence of these Central Asian nations has coincided with the resurgence of Islamic movements throughout the Muslim world. It was pointed out that the emergence of 50 million well-educated Muslims has reinvigorated Islamists all over. There were even some who predicted that with the emergence of the

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was established in 1964 as the Regional Cooperation and Development (RCD) after the meetings of heads of state of Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan. After four summit meetings in 12 years, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan decided to revive their regional cooperation under the name of the Economic Cooperation Organization in 1985. In 1992, the first ECO summit was held in Teheran. On this occasion, five members—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan—were admitted into the grouping. Afghanistan was admitted as a full member during the extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers in Islamabad last November.

Among the aims identified by the grouping are:

- Reduction in trade barriers.
- Industrial collaboration through the establishment

of joint ventures based on the regional market, and through inter-industry cooperation and specialization in production of components.

- Establishment of an ECO Investment and Development Bank.
- Promotion of intra-ECO tourism.
- Expansion of air travel and air cargo.
- Establishment of facilities for training technical personnel.
- Establishment of an ECO Science Foundation, with headquarters in Islamabad, with a view to building up a pool of highly skilled scientific manpower.
- Promotion of cultural exchanges and establishment of youth organizations.
- Establishment of close cooperation between media agencies of member countries.

French military cuts fit Anglophile agenda

In raw figures, the new French military budget of 200 billion francs (\$36.7 billion) represents an increase of 1.38% in current francs—that is, an across-the-board cut of 1.5% in constant francs, taking inflation into account. This fits right into the law programming in “austerity” for 1992-94, which anticipated a decrease in the budget, from 3.37% of the Gross National Product in 1991 to 3.1% over this period.

The greatest reductions are in the nuclear programs, which, after the fall of communism, decreased by 11.5%. The land army will see a decrease in its active forces from 280,000 to 225,000. In contrast, there is an increase of 13% in the areas of space and intelligence, such as intelligence-gathering satellites, as well as 6% in research.

Given the severity of the cuts, several voices have been raised, including from Socialist elected officials, denouncing the threat of unemployment in defense production regions. However, there remains, as has been the case since the Berlin Wall came down, a total failure to

define new objectives for the national defense.

There are two questions to be addressed in defense outlays: What should be defended? Against whom? French strategists are avoiding the first question entirely, while for the second, most lean dangerously toward Anglo-American doctrines that say the new threat comes from the underdeveloped South, where nations are “proliferating” everything from nuclear weapons to population.

Both left and right tend increasingly to advocate coming back into the NATO fold. At an International Colloquium organized by Defense Minister Pierre Joxe in October on the new defense priorities, both he and the defense expert for the RPR (neo-Gaullist) party proposed that France become closer to NATO, while rejecting complete reintegration for the moment.

There is a blind spot on the issue of military technologies, paralleling the cuts in the civilian nuclear energy program. Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy proclaimed his refusal “to adhere to a project for an anti-missile space shield,” saying that “it represents the unacceptable risk of relaunching the arms race and militarizing space, thereby countering disarmament efforts.” By turning its back on these new technologies, France is mortgaging its military, scientific, and economic future, to the Anglo-Americans.—Christine Bierre

Central Asian nations, the focus of Islam will shift from Arabia to Asia. As a result, the non-Arab Muslim states will now soon be in a position to shift the pro-Arab agenda of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) to one which will reflect the broad spectrum of concerns of the Muslim world.

Turkey's role resented

Turkey, whose Foreign Minister Cetin promoted the free market and private sector for the Central Asian nations at the ECO meet, came under heavy attack at the seminar. Some participants noted that Turkey's pro-western secularist ideology would counter the influence of Pakistan and Iran in the grouping. Others pointed out that Turkey, facing consistent rejection by the European Community, will be left with little choice but to act responsibly and effectively in the grouping.

But the major problem is the difficulties facing all the nations involved. Member countries like Afghanistan and Tajikistan remain in chaos with little hope of peace returning soon. Others are in a state of semi-paralysis because of the political transitions that are expected to take place shortly.

In addition, while the Central Asian nations may be ready to allow investments, their own economies are still closely tied to Moscow's and the other republics of the former Soviet Union. Nor is there any anchor nation to form the core economic power of the grouping providing capital and skill.

While Turkey and Pakistan have vigorously encouraged

free trade, the free market, and private capital, the Central Asian nations have concentrated on public ownership of the means of production and central planning. Such a policy has left these nations with little wealth of private entrepreneurship, but in social and economic development, they have not done much worse and sometimes better than the others. A comparison of the economies of Tajikistan, the poorest of the Central Asian nations, and Pakistan shows that Tajikistan's per capita income and per capita electricity consumption is significantly higher than that of Pakistan's. And whereas Tajikistan has one doctor per 12,400 people, Pakistan has one for 51,883. While Pakistan is dogged by high poverty and a weak social base despite a reasonable rate of growth, the Central Asian nations, though middle-income countries, are suddenly facing a drastic drop in production due to sudden political and economic dislocation, aided by a complete institutional vacuum.

These difficulties in the economic sphere will be hard to overcome. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that the Central Asian nations will continue to rely more on the established network of republics of the former Soviet Union and take Russia's help to open up strong economic channels with Europe. At this point, therefore, while it does not seem that the ECO will be a viable economic grouping in the short term, the military and strategic side of this alliance could emerge as a factor in the region very soon.