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Pakistan seeks solace in the Kremlin

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The Kremlin has announced a three-day "official visit" by Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari to Russia beginning next Wednesday at the invitation of President Dmitry Medvedev.

Such visits are scheduled in advance while formal announcements are kept until a later date. Nonetheless, Zardari's talks within inscrutable Kremlin walls will attract huge attention regionally and internationally as they will be taking place within a fortnight of the *la affaire* Abbottabad, which has prompted speculation regarding the United States-Pakistan relationship following the killing on Monday of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in that Pakistani town.

Also, the Russians (and Pakistanis) have chosen to schedule the trip ahead of Zardari's visit to Washington, which has already been postponed once and now seems quite unlikely to take place in the near future.

At the very least, Moscow is indicating that the imperatives of the Kremlin constructively engaging Russia with regard to regional security (which has been evident for the past two to three years) remain very much in place and the sensational killing of Bin Laden doesn't come into that matrix.

In world perceptions (especially in America), Pakistan is blithely called nowadays the "epicenter" of international terrorism, but Moscow doesn't seem perturbed on that score. Indeed, the Russian approach is implicitly that the proper way of addressing the challenge lies in

engaging Pakistan rather than branding it as a "state sponsoring terrorism" and ostracizing it, as some influential sections in the US Congress have lately demanded.

Interestingly, Russian media coverage of the killing of Bin Laden has been factual and balanced and has been devoid of any sensationalism or undue flights of over-interpretations - the overall impression being that there are many ambiguities in the American version (or versions) of what really took place and the final version is yet to appear and, therefore, it is premature to conclude anything beyond the domain of speculation.

Russian official media prominently reported observations by former Cuban leader Fidel Castro on Thursday in his weekly column that there was likely to be a backlash in the Muslim world to the manner in which the US went about "assassinating" Bin Laden - an "abhorrent act" - and then hastily burying him at sea and that even in American opinion, criticism may mount once the initial fervor dies down and cool stocktaking begins. (Castro also appeared sympathetic toward Pakistan).

"Whatever the actions attributed to Bin Laden, the assassination of an unarmed human being surrounded by his family constitutes an abhorrent act ... The fact that he was killed and buried at sea indicates fear and insecurity, and turns him into an even more dangerous person," the 84-year-old Cuban revolutionary wrote in an opinion piece.

The Novosti agency highlighted Castro's remark that the US raid on Abbottabad "offended Pakistan's national dignity, violated its laws and desecrated the traditions of this Muslim country".

Be that as it may, what does Moscow look for in Zardari's visit? Three things come to mind.

One, Moscow would like to get as close as possible to the inner track of the ongoing US-Pakistan discourse regarding the end game in Afghanistan. Russia will factor in that Bin Laden's killing will hasten the Afghan peace process and give US President Barack Obama a somewhat free hand with regard to the drawdown of US troops in Afghanistan commencing in July.

Evidently, Russia is concerned about security implications for the Central Asian region. Reuters quoted "security sources and analysts" to the effect that Russia was in talks with Tajikistan to send up to 3,000 Russian border guards to the Tajik-Afghan border region:

Russia fears the planned withdrawal of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] troops from Afghanistan by 2014 will create a power vacuum allowing Islamist militants fighting US forces there to move into Central Asia. Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow sees Central Asia as part of its sphere of interest and worries that an upsurge in Islamist violence or heroin trafficking could upset the predominantly Muslim, oil- and gas-producing region.

However, Russian concerns are also geopolitical. Moscow is watching with unease the strong American diplomatic and political pressure on Afghan President Hamid Karzai to agree to a Status of Forces agreement that legitimizes a long-term US military presence in the region. A spate of Russian commentaries has appeared in the recent period about the imperative need of revamping and strengthening the capabilities - political as well as military - of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization as a counter-alliance to NATO.

Moscow is also not ruling out that as an adjunct to the new security paradigm emerging in Afghanistan in the end game underway, there could be renewed attempts by Washington to expand US and NATO influence into Central Asia. Moscow circles have openly speculated that Washington may deliberately contrive an atmosphere of the Arab Spring to appear on the Central Asian steppes sometime in the near future. It would thereupon seize on social and political convulsions to manipulate "regime changes" in the region favorable to American geopolitical strategies in the Great Game. One website close to security circles in Moscow even predicted an American thrust in this direction as early as the coming autumn.

Indeed, according to a White House statement, Obama made a telephone call to his counterpart in Astana, Nursultan Nazarbayev (who was recently "re-elected" with a 95% majority) stressing the need for democratic reforms in Kazakhstan (which borders China). American commentators have also lately focused on the potential of a Middle East-like upheaval in Central Asia that could blow away existing authoritarian regimes.

Significantly, amid all this, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi arrived in Moscow on Thursday on an official visit and was scheduled to meet Medvedev on Friday.

Sino-Russian political consultations come close on the heels of a two-day China-Pakistan "strategic dialogue" in Beijing at the end of April. It is pertinent to note that the Chinese stance on the Abbottabad episode is unequivocally sympathetic toward Pakistan. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson extravagantly praised Pakistan's record in the struggle against international terrorism and expressed Beijing's solidarity with Islamabad in these difficult times.

Commentaries by the state-run Xinhua news agency have brought out that the US-Pakistan relationship is currently under great stress. Conceivably, Yang will share his perceptions with the Kremlin leadership and that will form valuable input for Moscow in structuring its talks with Zardari.

Moscow (or Beijing) has little to complain about Pakistan's interest in counter-terrorism cooperation. Besides, the genuineness of the Pakistani interest in forging a strategic partnership with Russia is also not in doubt. Moscow will most certainly have taken note that Pakistan shares the apprehensions of other regional powers regarding the prospect of a long-term American military presence in Afghanistan.

Most important, Moscow has of late distinctly mellowed its traditional antipathy toward the Taliban. In other words, an Afghan settlement that provides for the reconciliation and reintegration of the Taliban is, in principle, something that Moscow could learn to live with if certain aspects of the "al-Qaeda factor" could be properly addressed.

Russian leaders will certainly like to hear from Zardari how Russian concerns in this regard could be addressed with the help and understanding of Pakistani security agencies.

The timing of Zardari's visit underscores that Moscow recognizes the central role that Pakistan

plays in the Afghan situation. Both Moscow and Islamabad also share the view that any Afghan peace process should be "Afghan-led".

However, at this point, any Russian-Pakistani consultations are destined to be broad-ranging, bringing in, in particular, the uncertainties of the security situation in the Persian Gulf region where again Pakistan may figure as a "provider" of security for some regimes there.

Finally, the Russian-Pakistani talks are taking place at a rather delicate moment in the US-Russia "reset". The crisis in Libya has alerted Russia to the stunning reality that the more things seemed to change in the US approach to world politics under Obama, the more they came to resemble the George W Bush era in terms of the ideology of "unilateralist interventions", the use of military power in the settlement of disputes and the marginalization of the United Nations.

With all the talk of the US adopting a culture of "smart power", the evidence points toward the preponderance of "hard power" as the principal instrument of global strategies.

If anything, in Russian perceptions, Abbottabad will stick out like a sore thumb - meaning, in the ultimate analysis, the US has only one way, its own unilateralist way, to handle issues, namely, the John Wayne way.

Significantly, Russia's envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, said on Thursday following a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in Brussels that the US was already deploying its missile defense system in Europe without bothering to reach an agreement with Russia. He referred to US deployments in Romania.

While it is too early to say that the "fizz" has gone out of the US-Russia reset, Moscow has been compelled into a reality check. If (or when) Western ground troops appear on the bleak Libyan landscape (where after 40 days of NATO operations Muammar Gaddafi is still looking good), the "reset" may take a serious beating. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a lengthy television interview in Moscow last week that Moscow would not accept such an escalation of Western military intervention without the specific, unambiguous mandate of the United Nations Security Council.

As for the "reset" with the US, Lavrov, in typical Russian humor, added that Moscow continued to figure out whether the reset was indeed a reset (*perezagruzka*) or a *peregruzka* (overcharge). The difference might seem marginal - the mere absence of a consonant and a vowel - but appearances can be deceptively simple.

Lavrov made a fair judgment: "I think the reset is working, after all. We, though, do not seek to call it the reset, as we had always been ready for equal partnership and mutually beneficial projects, but the US Republican administration had tried to act a little differently. So when Barack Obama and [Vice President] Joe Biden announced the reset, we welcomed it. They have reset the American attitude toward the Russian Federation, and we are trying, of course, to reciprocate."

On his part, Zardari will use the opportunity of his visit to Moscow to probe what there is in this

nebulous business of the so-called US-Russia reset, for Pakistan. Indeed, there could be a lot - especially if the Americans allow the current adrenalin flow to assume a torrential nature and conclude it could take Pakistan for granted in any Afghan settlement.

But that isn't all. The Kremlin knows that the alchemy of the US-Pakistan relationship has changed following Abbottabad. Pakistan faces grave insecurities in the period ahead and is looking for regional support systems. Russia can offer a lot - membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to begin with, at the alliance's summit meeting in June in Astana.