

Red sails on the horizon



Philip Nel, Director of the Institute for Soviet Studies at Stellenbosch, suggests that there could be diplomatic ties between Moscow and Pretoria in the not too distant future.

For the first time in 33 years, Pretoria and its presumed arch enemy, the USSR, are on the verge of establishing official channels of communication which in the not too distant future may lead to diplomatic ties between the two.

Since Eric Louw closed the Soviet consulate in SA in 1956 — because it “meddled in the political affairs of the Union” and had transgressed the Liquor Act by inviting blacks to diplomatic get-togethers — official contact between the two countries was restricted to the exchange of often acrimonious diplomatic notes at the UN. This has changed dramatically since 1987 when, on the initiative of the Soviet Union, official exchanges between the two countries, even on ministerial level, have become fairly frequent.

While the Soviet Union still publicly denounces apartheid and expresses its continued solidarity with the ANC, Soviet diplomats are courting a diverse range of interest groups in SA, including the government. Even more surprising is Pretoria's willingness to play along, despite the fact that the communist onslaught is still held responsible for most of the country's problems.

What lies behind this volte-face on both sides of the divide? On the part of the USSR two considerations circumvent the more traditional ideological approach towards SA. On one hand Moscow desperately wants to prevent a racial war in SA lest this puts the skids on the sound relationship it has been cultivating with the US. While arms negotiations and trade relations with the West are steadily improving, neither side would like to see an explosion in this part of the world which will involve the two superpowers on opposing sides.

Thus, Moscow has come around to the American position that a negotiated solution

in SA should be promoted — or at least that a deterioration of the status quo should be prevented. To achieve this, Moscow now realises that it is not only necessary to nudge the ANC closer to the negotiating table, but that the excessive fears of the SA government concerning the dangers of communism should be put to rest. From its own experience, Moscow knows that a government which believes itself to be threatened and isolated is prone to irresponsible and destabilising behaviour. By establishing channels of communication with Pretoria, the Gorbachev team is hoping to modify SA fears and behaviour.

Secondly: given the diminishing returns of past Soviet strategic investments in Southern Africa (especially military aid to beleaguered allies), Moscow hopes to breathe new life into its diplomacy in the region. Again the US sets the example. As the recent round of negotiations on the region has proved, it is dogged diplomacy and a willingness to talk to all sides which eventually ensures a lasting presence for a superpower. In accordance with Messrs Gorbachev and Shevardnadze's desire to revitalise Soviet global diplomacy, attempts are being made to improve the Soviet position as potential mediator in this part of the world. To achieve this, some kind of access to the SA government is indispensable.

In view of both considerations, it came as no surprise when a senior Soviet journalist and confidante of successive Soviet leaders, Alexandar Bovin, recently suggested that the USSR should consider establishing diplomatic ties with SA in order to improve Soviet leverage in the region. After all, similar arguments have been used to justify the re-establishment of low-level diplomatic ties between the Soviet Union and Israel in 1988. The important question is, of course, what the likely SA reaction will be.

While it is uncertain whether all governmental decisionmakers are equally keen on this score, the professional diplomats in Pretoria have wisely identified the opportunities a modified Soviet approach offers (and their voice these days seem to carry some weight in Tuynhuys). Quite sensibly, they are trying to broaden the ambit of SA foreign policy to encompass more than just the traditional

contacts with the West, and is thus steering SA towards a more non-aligned posture. In addition, serious thought is being given towards exploiting the definite, though limited, trade opportunities which exist in Eastern Europe.

There is, however, a third course of action possible which, while the government is giving no indication that it is considering it, is worth pursuing. It is surely premature to talk about the immediate prospects for a fully negotiated settlement inside SA. It is, however, never too easy to start the arduous task of preparing the ground for eventual negotiations which must surely include the ANC. Third parties can play a crucial role in narrowing the difference between the opponents by cultivating a sense that more is to be gained from talking than from shooting, and by supplying guarantees for the eventual bargaining process.

The conservative governments in the UK and US are ideally placed to effect this as far as the SA government is concerned — if they have the wisdom to know when to encourage and when to pressurise. The Angola-Namibia negotiations have proved that the SA government is not impervious to the foreign stick as long as the carrot is also palatable enough. What is desperately needed, though, is actors who can deliver the ANC to the negotiating table, extract the right kind of concessions from them, and can supply guarantees that these concessions are honoured.

None is better placed to effect this than the current team of Soviet diplomats. And they are keen to play this constructive role if only they will be allowed to do so. In this respect the continued influence of the USSR in the ANC, via the SA Communist Party, should be viewed as a bonus and not as something to be lamented.

Of course, the Soviets still have some distance to go before they have convinced everyone that their motives are pure or that everyone of importance in the Soviet establishment has really taken leave of the ambition to export revolution. Fortunately, as in the case of Pretoria, the diplomats seem to be carrying the day. Whether this will continue to be the case depends as much on the vision of the SA government as it depends on the power struggle in the Kremlin.