

The cautious thawing of SA-Soviet relations

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LONDON — A friend recently remarked of the present state of East-West relations that it is rather as though in a long tug-of-war the other side has suddenly let go of the rope. The home team naturally falls over backwards in disarray and needs a bit of time to collect itself.

Certainly there is a good deal of falling about the place in response to the rabbits which keep coming out of the Moscow hat.

I confess to being a bit off balance myself, and was correctly described in the British press as finding recent first-hand experience of Soviet academic thinking about South and southern Africa "absolutely extraordinary", even though I had for some time been aware of significant changes.

Overstated

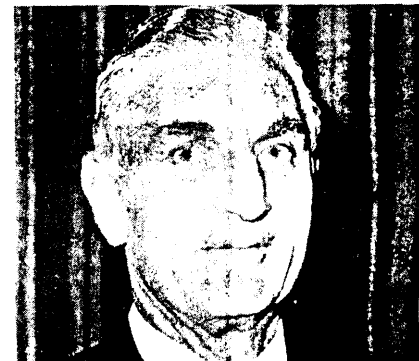
They are, none the less, important for having been grossly overstated by some of the media.

It is remarkable enough that Soviet and South African academics should be in direct contact and speaking their minds freely on both sides. This can only serve to further one of the unexceptionable aims voiced by Mr Gorbachev in his December speech to the United Nations — the abandonment of stereotypes and outdated views.

There was an evident Soviet awareness that there is more to South Africa's internal problem than a straight transfer of power to the African National Congress.

Beyond that I detected a realistic recognition of the role South Africa could and should play in resolving the problems of the region.

There seemed to me to be, a genuine interest in working relations with South Africa, particularly in the economic field, based on common interest in gold,



BY SIR JOHN KILICK, former British ambassador to the Soviet Union. Sir John, who lived for a while in South Africa, was recently instrumental in bringing about a meeting of senior Soviet and South African academics.

diamonds and minerals. Even a hope perhaps of the ultimate establishment of diplomatic relations.

But — and there are some very big buts — this all presupposes a "post-apartheid" South Africa, and although there is recognition of the changes away from apartheid that have been made, Moscow still awaits the ending of "political" apartheid.

The difficulties are acknowledged, evolutionary change is to be encouraged, but the precondition is firm. It requires the abandonment of outmoded ideas by Pretoria.

However, there is no question of withdrawing support from the ANC, even though compromise and non-violence are to be the order of the day, and others (like Mangosuthu Buthelezi, presumably) must be invited to the "round table", which should discuss the country's future.

Moscow disclaims any wish to dictate solutions, but would simply like to facilitate the internal process.

It would be a mistake for South Africans or others to rush to premature conclusions.

Moscow seems to have played a constructive role over Angola/Namibia, but basically because it is judged to be in the Soviet interest to extricate the country from an expensive no-win situation. The same was true of Afghanistan.

It remains to be seen whether there can or will be full co-operation in establishing peace and stability in these regional situations.

The Middle East will be the real test. I judge the minimum Soviet objective to be to retain all that can be rescued of a regional political role in order to give effect to Mr Andrei Gromyko's old assertion that no problem of importance in the world can be solved without the participation of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet "super-power" is trying to gather its tattered garment about its person with as much dignity as it can! Ideology

might be taking a back seat, but Soviet interest will remain a powerful factor.

It would be no less mistaken to assume that nothing has really changed and that, for South Africa, "god-deloze Marxisme" is still the root of all evil. As Dr Philip Nel, of the Stellenbosch Institute for Soviet Studies, recently commented, it is high time for white South Africans to revise their own stereotypes of the USSR, just as one Soviet writer has urged his Moscow readers to do of South Africa.

The right response, for South Africa as indeed for Western Europe, the United States and others, is to take up the positive elements in Mr Gorbachev's "new thinking" and build on them — sensibly, cautiously, and even warily.

Scepticism

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and to swallow it too avidly will only cause indigestion, but let us at least taste it.

Behind the propaganda which is still a feature of Moscow's performance, the Soviet attitude will be no less wary. Towards South Africa, there will be continued scepticism and even distrust.

Any attempt to play one superpower off against the other will be resisted. But sensible diplomacy — possible from a platform of sensible domestic policies — offers the prospect of useful results.

The meeting of British, South African and Soviet academics, which I recently chaired near London, was not some kind of Kissingerian exercise in political negotiation. It was a modest beginning. I hope it will be followed by further meetings. What has anybody to lose? All concerned will be keeping their hands firmly on their wallets.