

India's Gandhi meets with Deng Xiaoping

by Susan Maitra

"A good beginning," one reliable insider here in New Delhi concluded, on Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Dec. 19-23 official visit to the People's Republic of China. Three signed agreements and a commitment to resolve the border issue were the formal intendment for two days of talks between Gandhi and his high-powered delegation and the potentates of Beijing, including Prime Minister Li Peng, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, and Deng Xiaoping.

It is the first visit of an Indian prime minister in 34 years, when Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhao En-lai announced the Panchsheel, the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence that later became a platform of the Non-Aligned Movement—an effort at Indo-Chinese friendship that was derailed with the 1962 war. With general elections less than a year away, Indian opposition politicians have charged that another glamorous foreign tour and "accord" with China was just a poll gambit. "Sellout" to Beijing was also thrown by opposition leader V.P. Singh, on the strength of the London *Economist's* disinformation.

The border dispute was removed from the position of a "precondition" for relations. Gandhi's effort to get a "time-bound approach" to the dispute evoked no response from the Chinese, but the final communiqué announced that "steps will be taken, such as establishing a joint working group on the boundary question." India also reiterated its position that Tibet is an "autonomous region of China," and that Tibetan anti-China political activity is not allowed in India. Indian officials had met the Dalai Lama prior to the visit.

In the meantime, agreements on cooperation in science and technology, civil air transport, and culture were signed. Already, exchanges have multiplied greatly in the past year. However, economic ties between the two countries are not likely to take off quickly. China-India trade, presently governed by an annual protocol, stands at a paltry \$95 million, with India exporting \$10 million and importing \$85 million. Since both remain essentially raw materials suppliers, with highly imbalanced economies, the commercial aspect of the relationship is bound to be weak.

'The missing link'

The most important aspect of the trip, as Gandhi told the press upon his return, was establishing direct relationships with China's leaders. Senior foreign office officials see this as greatly enhancing India's "diplomatic maneuverability," since the prime minister has fashioned a personal equation

with both Mikhail Gorbachov and George Bush; they say, "China was the missing link."

The meeting with Deng Xiaoping—which India considered critical to the trip's success—was the high point. Deng talked with Gandhi for 90 minutes, going out of his way to reassure him of China's intentions and motivations. "By the middle of the next century, China will be a middle-level power only," Deng reportedly told Gandhi. "The old alliances are changing and we must change with them. Unless we encourage that change and work together, we will both be left out in the cold. We must employ pragmatism and not rhetoric."

The joint communiqué following the visit emphasized the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence, as the basis for Sino-Indian relations and as "the basic guidelines for the establishment of a new international political order and the new international economic order."

The communiqué appears in counterpoint to the "Delhi Declaration" of November 1986, in which Gorbachov and Gandhi outlined the Indo-Soviet program for the new world order with much fanfare. Reports of the Beijing trip indicate that Indian officials took pains to keep mention of the Soviet Union or Gorbachov out of the proceedings. Indian press musings on the great potentials for Sino-Soviet-India cooperation had met with a thundering silence in the pre-visit press conferences in Beijing.

Gandhi stressed before he left for Beijing that India's relationship with China is independent of all other ties. Moreover, he said, "we started working to normalize relations with China long before the Sino-Soviet thaw came about." "Protocol-wise," as the former diplomat and adviser to Indira Gandhi, A.K. Damodaran, put it, the visit was long overdue.

In a public forum on Sino-Indian relations, Damodaran pointed out that despite the 1962 war, Sino-Indian relations were never as bad as portrayed. As early as 1968, he said, Mrs. Gandhi had taken the first step when she put a halt to the stream of official "white papers" reviling China that had become ritual fare in the wake of 1962.

Three years later, when Henry Kissinger tried to invoke the "China card" during the Bangladesh crisis, Beijing did not exactly rise to the occasion. China demanded only that India remove some bunkers from Nathu La (in Sikkim) and complained that 400 sheep had been lifted from Chinese territory.

In 1976, several years before the establishment of annual joint border talks in 1980, Mrs. Gandhi sent back the Indian ambassador to Beijing. Although eight rounds of border talks gave no hint of an early settlement, India revealed recently that Mrs. Gandhi was preparing the ground for a settlement at the time she was assassinated. Her emissary, R.N. Kao, the former head of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)—India's foreign intelligence arm—was in fact secretly in Beijing presenting a comprehensive proposal to Chinese leaders on Oct. 31, 1984, the day Indira Gandhi was slain.