



Indias Relations With China During Prime Ministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

India's military defeat in the Sino-Indian armed conflict of 1962 had a significant impact on the world view and strategic thinking of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, who was India's prime minister from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. Mrs. Gandhi was regarded by many as a pragmatist and shrewd person. She realized that India could deal with only from a position of strength. Her priorities were two; first to stabilize her position in the Party and the Government, and the second, to make the country militarily and economically strong. She was firm that India should avoid all military alliances even with small countries and should adhere strictly to the policy of non-alignment. She was also convinced that the best defense for the Asian countries against possible upheavals was ensuring economic development and social cohesion.

KEYWORDS :

When Mrs. Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in January 1966 following the sudden demise of Lal Bahadur Shastri, apart from serious domestic problems, she had to contend with the growing China-Pakistan axis, the increased military power of China, the Chinese nuclear tests, the continued border clashes between the Chinese and the Indian troops and the Chinese open and covert support to the anti-national elements of India, like the Nagas, Mizos, Naxalites, etcetera all of which combined to intensify further strains and tensions between India and China and the burden of stabilizing India's relations with China fell on the shoulders of Mrs. Gandhi¹.

India's military defeat in the Sino-Indian armed conflict of 1962 had a significant impact on the world view and strategic thinking of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, who was India's prime minister from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. While sharing Nehru's assumptions about the greatness of India and remaining committed to non-alignment, Indira Gandhi rejected her father's "softness" and sought "tangible" power to cope with the threats facing India. In other words, she downplayed the role of moral force in India's national security strategy and believed that safeguarding security interests of India "primarily depended on India becoming self-reliant and strong"².

Mrs. Gandhi was regarded by many as a pragmatist and shrewd person. She realized that India could deal with only from a position of strength. Her priorities were two; first to stabilize her position in the Party and the Government, and the second, to make the country militarily and economically strong. She was firm that India should avoid all military alliances even with small countries and should adhere strictly to the policy of non-alignment. She was also convinced that the best defense for the Asian countries against possible upheavals was ensuring economic development and social cohesion.

The prospect for quickening the normalization process looked fairly bright, when Mao Tse-tung, and Chou En-lai died in 1976 and the moderates, headed by Deng Xiaoping, took over the reigns of power in China. The moderates stood for modernization of China by gradually opening up their economy. There were some momentous developments in India too. Mrs. Indira Gandhi was voted out of power in 1977, and the Janata Party formed the government at the centre, with Morarji Desai as Prime Minister.

The defeat of Mrs. Gandhi and her party in the elections removed a strong leader from the Indian political arena. She was a tough customer and the Chinese never felt comfortable with her. India, in fact, moved closer to the USSR during her Prime Ministership. The Chinese who had greatly resented that development, expected the new government to distance itself from the Soviet Union and move closer to Washington and Peking. The Janata Government's talk of "genuine non-alignment" boosted their hopes. But the promised change did

not materialize. It had to adhere to the pro-Moscow policy of its predecessor. The new economic agreements signed between India and the USSR left China sorely disappointed. Nonetheless, steps were taken by both countries to carry forward the process of normalization. Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then Minister for External Affairs, visited Beijing on 12 February 1979. But the visit had to be cut short in view of the Chinese attack on Vietnam, a close friend of India. The developments in Vietnam cast a shadow on the relations between India and China. The efforts at normalizing their relations, however, continued in a subdued manner.

In 1980, Mrs. Gandhi bounced back to power in the wake of the fall of the Janata Government. Though the development was unpalatable, the Chinese soon got reconciled to it and sought to carry on the dialogue with her Government. The thread was picked up when Mrs. Gandhi met the Chinese Prime Minister, Hua Guofeng, at Belgrade in May 1980. This was the first meeting at the Prime Ministerial level between the two countries since Chou En-lai visit to India in 1961.

Another major step in the normalization process was the visit of the Chinese Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister, Huang Hua to India on 26 June 1981. Just before he set out to New Delhi the new Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang went on a tour of India's neighborhood covering Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. The whirlwind tour was perhaps intended to assure these countries that the improvement of China's relations with India would not be at the cost of its friendship with them.

However, not much was achieved by the visit of the Chinese Vice-Premier. It only helped in reiterating their respective positions on the outstanding issues. China adopted the position that the border problem should be left alone while the two countries promoted good relations on other fronts-economic, trade, cultural, social and governmental. The frontier issue was sought to be frozen as it was rather complex and intractable. The move was not wholly acceptable to India. Nor was India greatly enthused by Deng Xiaoping's package deal that gave contractual, legal sanction to the status quo.

Between 1980 and 1984, there were quite a few minor setbacks to the Sino Indian relations. For instance, China made a hue and cry when P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Foreign Minister, announced in the Rajya Sabha on 5 December 1980 that China was in occupation of 14,500 square miles of Indian territory. China blamed the Indian Government for raking up the issue.

In 1981 the Chinese objected to the inclusion of the Speaker of the Arunachal Pradesh Assembly, T.K.Raj Kumar, in an Indian delegation to a population conference held at Peking and its was only the threat of cancellation of the entire delegation by India that made the Chinese relent and issue visa to Raj Kumar. Again the Chinese took ex-

ception to the presence of a troupe from Arunachal Pradesh at the closing ceremony of the Asiad in New Delhi on 4 December 1982, re-stating their claim to the territory that formed part of the State.

Such minor hiccups luckily did not snowball into major crises, thanks largely to the restraint maintained by both countries. They continued their search for viable solutions to the vexatious bilateral issues. Five rounds of talks were held between the officials of the two sides. Of course, these marathon talks failed to produce any tangible results as neither country was willing to make substantial concessions. Therefore, no breakthrough could be achieved in the talks. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated causing a set-back to the Sino-Indian rapprochement process³.

All through her long and chequered career, she never allowed herself to be overawed by the high and mighty. Nor was she unduly perturbed by the nuclear muscles of other countries including China. China's intimidating tactics did not baffle her. She was so courageous that many were of the view that she would have achieved a fair deal for India without mortgaging its honor, had she survived. However, it is true that the Sino-Indian rapprochement-process did not make much headway during her regime. But then, such complex problems usually defy easy and quick solutions. The very fact that the two countries, after years of hostility, had begun to talk to each other was a testimony to her finesse and statesmanship. Surely, it was no mean achievement. India had lost a leader but not the will to mend its fences with China. The tragedy of her death notwithstanding, the new Government headed by her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, picked up the strings and moved forward, unmindful of the gloom that pervaded all over.

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