

Giscard and Gandhi: a new alliance in world politics

by Daniel Snider

On January 30, 1980, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stood before the Indian parliament to deliver her first major policy speech since assuming the Premiership on Jan. 7 following her smashing victory in national elections. Mrs. Gandhi told the assembly that “the world has moved closer to thermo-nuclear confrontation among the big powers” in the recent period, and India has an important role to play.

“We must . . . in our own humble way try to defuse the crisis,” she said. “We are anxious that the present drift towards a hot war should be stopped by the combined effort of all the right thinking people in the world.”

Mrs. Gandhi’s warning coincided with two visits to her capital—one by French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, the first such visit by a French President to India, and the other by the special envoy of President Carter, former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford. It is clear that Mrs. Gandhi has chosen the path offered to her by the former, not the latter. The openly warm and friendly talks conducted by the two heads of state, resulting in what French Foreign Minister Francois-Poncet called an “identity of views,” were centered on the strategic situation in South Asia and globally in the wake of the events in Iran and Afghanistan.

The French approach to India shows a healthy understanding of the Indian viewpoint and an appreciation of the powerful role that India can play in world affairs. France and India have formed what amounts to a new alliance based on mutual desire to prevent the outbreak of war and have worked out an effective division of labor between the two countries to apply their influence to that end. This alliance has been described in some circles as a “Third Force,” independent of both of the two superpowers.

The American approach toward India is singularly lacking any such understanding of the Indian role—as Mrs. Gandhi put it in an interview with this press service the day before her swearing in as Prime Minister, “the

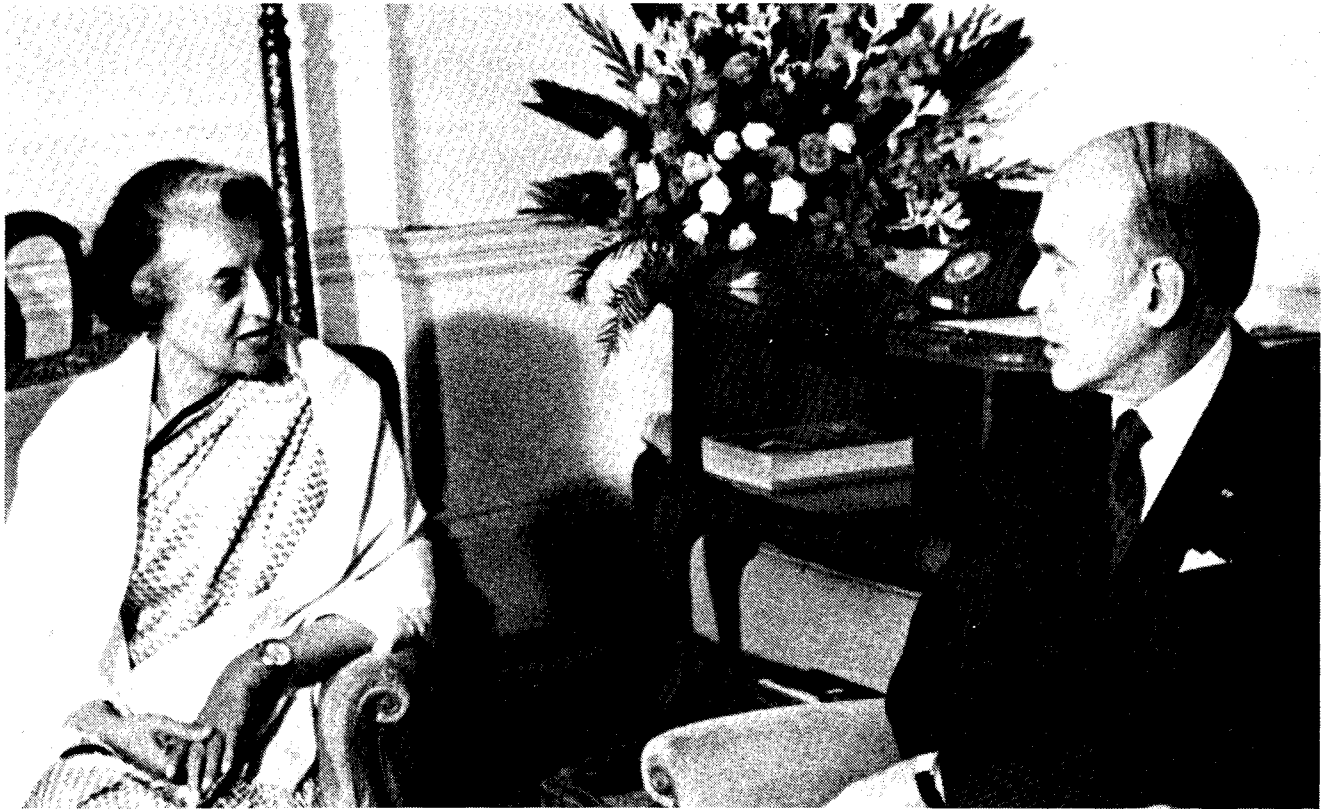


Photo: Baldev/Sygma

(U.S.) administration has a global strategy in which India seems to be irrelevant. That is the real problem with the relationship.”

The Clifford visit seems to have done nothing to change that impression. According to published reports Clifford offered India a “collective security” pact in South Asia, another version of an India-Pakistan deal in which India would receive some form of assurances that U.S. arms to Pakistan would not be used against India, as they have several times before. Mrs. Gandhi is reported to have listened to Clifford’s offer and then went into an uncharacteristic 30-minute monologue in which she referenced with emphasis the Indo-French joint communique. Mrs. Gandhi later, at a banquet for visiting Austrian Prime Minister Bruno Kreisky, stated that India was “not amenable to manipulation” and attacked those who were demanding that countries line up on different sides in the current crisis.

The reality of India today

The usual American description of India since Mrs. Gandhi’s victory is that India is now under a “pro-Soviet” government. Aside from being wrong and an insult to the intelligence of the Indian leadership, this assessment ignores the strategic role that India will play. The first indication: While Giscard went back to France for a summit meeting with West German Chancellor

Schmidt, the Indians have dispatched their Foreign Secretary Sathé to Pakistan. In addition, by the middle of this month, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko will arrive in New Delhi as well for talks with Mrs. Gandhi and other government leaders.

According to informed sources, the objective of the Sathé visit is to convince the Pakistanis that their integrity, independence and security can be secured only if they avoid the axis offered them last week by the British, the Americans and the Chinese. What may be left unsaid by the Indians, but is being said clearly enough by the Soviets, is that if Pakistan continues to provide bases and arms to Afghan rebels their future may be full of surprises. The provocative antics of National Security Advisor Brzezinski on his visit to Pakistan will certainly lead in that direction.

On the other side, sources report that the French asked the Indians to use their influence with the Soviets to urge restraint in any further escalation of the situation. The Indians essentially will be taking the lead for the entire nonaligned and developing sector in trying to block efforts to make the Third World a trigger point for thermonuclear conflict. French sources add that the Giscard-Schmidt summit gained the agreement of Germany to this role for India in alliance with the continental European powers.

Beyond the immediate necessity of the present situation, the Indo-French relationship and the implied role

of India has a larger strategic meaning. The crucial factor is the existence since the January elections of a strong government in India itself and the presence of Mrs. Gandhi, one of the premier statesmen of the world today, at the head of that government. Provided Mrs. Gandhi can move India forward economically (the subject of other aspects of this report) India will increasingly play a dominant role in southern Asia and beyond.

The reality of the Indian nation is largely lost to most policymakers in the West. Despite the drag of a backward agricultural sector, India remains the most industrialized nation in the developing sector; in fact, in absolute terms, the ninth largest industrial nation in the world. With a scientific engineering and technical manpower ranked third in the world and significant indigenous high-technology capability in a wide range of areas, India has a further existing capacity to absorb new technology and capital more rapidly than any other so-called Third world country.

With the mobilization of the Indian population behind effective political leadership, which Mrs. Gandhi is certainly prepared to provide, India's potentialities are likely to be realized much faster than imagined. It is this larger view of India which brought Giscard to India, and it is this understanding which is increasingly shaping a view that can be summarized as: "The India Card not the China Card."

While India is nobody's "card," this means that India will be the Asian power which is most prepared and most able to provide the determining force and guarantee the kind of stability in Asia which the Europeans and others know is essential to preventing war.

American policy since the late 1960s, if not earlier, has been increasingly premised on assigning China the role at the center of American policy, seeking a strategic alliance (a word actually used recently by Defense Secretary Brown in describing U.S. ties to China) with Peking and effectively subordinating American interests in Asia, particularly East Asia, but also South Asia, to those of the Peking regime.

The spread of Indian influence, including its increasing economic role, includes the entirety of the Indian Ocean littoral from the east coast of Africa to the archipelagos of Southeast Asia. In Southwest Asia, India retains strong ties particularly with Malaysia, which has a significant Indian minority, and with Indonesia, a country with longstanding historical and cultural ties to the Indian subcontinent. In addition, there are close political ties between Vietnam and India, ties which are strengthened by a common experience of the expansionist designs of China. Those ties are likely to be aided by an impending Indian recognition of the Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea. In East Africa, there is of

course a significant Indian minority; there is a longstanding Indian interest in the southern African situation.

India, particularly under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership, also has strong ties into the Middle East. With a Muslim population larger than any Arab country (larger in fact than all but Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh); with a past record of support for the Arab cause, India is well positioned to expand those ties. The key will be the interest of the Arabs, particularly countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, in expanded investment of surplus petrodollars in India.

If the Chinese choose to risk a new adventure in Southeast Asia against Vietnam, and the Soviets respond, as they are ready to do, to such an attack, then the Indian role will be even more important in preserving peace throughout the region. The China Card has proven itself not only dangerous but even fruitless for all that have tried to play it—India offers a far better opportunity for those powers and interests who are looking for a future for Asia.

A political resolution on international tensions

The following is part of the text of the joint declaration signed by French President Giscard and Indian Prime Minister Gandhi on Jan. 26.

—Conscious of the special responsibilities which devolve on France and India because of their respective policies of detente and nonalignment....

[We] solemnly declare that:

(i) Any situation arising out of the use of force in international relations and intervention or interference in internal affairs of sovereign states is inadmissible.

(ii) In order to stop further escalation, all States should refrain from any action which could intensify great power rivalry and bring back the cold war, especially through dangerous arms build-up liable to threaten peace and stability in sensitive regions.

... The President and the Prime Minister appeal to all States, particularly the most powerful ones, to recognize the gravity of the danger to bend all their efforts to avert it.