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# Near East and South Asia Review



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## India: Rajiv Gandhi Adjusting Foreign Policy Tactics [redacted]

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Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is frustrated by the lack of progress in implementing his foreign policy goals—particularly vis-a-vis Pakistan and Sri Lanka, but also the United States and the Soviet Union. He has had only limited success in attracting advanced technology from the United States, the Soviet Union did not make firm public pledges of support for India in its recent confrontations with Pakistan and China, he has been unable to improve relations significantly with Pakistan, and his Sri Lankan mediation effort appears stalled. Gandhi's frustration has led to some angry outbursts during recent crises and abrupt firings of senior foreign policy officials [redacted]

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Because he has few attractive alternatives, Gandhi remains personally committed, in our judgment, to strengthening relations with the United States while maintaining close ties to the USSR. He also is dedicated to securing New Delhi's preeminence in the region by using diplomacy to reduce tensions with India's neighbors. The growing influence of Gandhi's personal advisers and military and intelligence officials over foreign policy matters—combined with his impatience to get things accomplished—probably presages a period of more hardline tactics with India's neighbors. The United States should be prepared for a period of high-risk Indian brinkmanship in April and May over the China-India border dispute if military and intelligence officials call the shots. Indo-Pakistani relations have improved somewhat following the recent border crisis, but India will be looking for concrete steps from Pakistan to improve relations and help control the Sikh problem. India may also become less understanding concerning delays in the provision of advanced US technology. A harder line toward Pakistan and difficulties with the United States may not, however, translate into Soviet gains, since New Delhi is also likely to be looking for firm evidence of Soviet support, particularly if Sino-Indian relations deteriorate this spring. [redacted]

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Gandhi shows signs of being worn down by the responsibilities of leading India both in foreign affairs and in solving domestic problems:

- He appears frustrated by his inability to improve relations with Pakistan and to get Islamabad to curtail its support for Sikh separatists, slow its nuclear weapons program, and reduce its requests for sophisticated US military equipment. His harsh public claims in January that Pakistani military deployments threatened India suggest he is inclined to think the worst of Pakistan.
- His recent abrupt firings and public criticism of senior politicians and government officials involved in foreign policy reflect his growing exasperation with their failure to advance his goals.
- Domestically, Gandhi is under growing criticism for his failure to solve the Sikh problem and faces criticism for mismanaging the recent border crisis with Pakistan.
- On the personal level, his predilection for fast driving and a recent experiment with parasailing to escape his bodyguards suggest he is frustrated with his job as well as with the security restrictions required after his mother's assassination and the attempt on his own life last October. [redacted]

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### Feeling the Pressure

Gandhi's intemperate reactions over the past six months to three incidents involving Pakistan—the Indo-Pakistani war scare in January 1987, the attempt on his life in October 1986, and the hijacking of a Pan Am airliner in Karachi in August 1986—demonstrate his frustration with his inability to improve bilateral relations. Gandhi's visceral response to the alarms of Indian intelligence that Pakistan intended to invade India, disregarded the safety of Indian passengers caught in the hijacking, and backed

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Rajiv Gandhi  India Today

foreign minister, one foreign secretary, and fired G. Parthasarthy, his mother's principal foreign policy confidant.

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Gandhi also appears to be turning to high-risk physical activities—probably to escape his tight security and the frustrations he feels in his job as a result of failures in foreign and domestic policy. He has told the press that he misses his privacy and time with his family and resents the intrusion of security officers and procedures. Press reports say he enjoys driving at excessive speeds to outrun his bodyguards, and, in early January, on the spur of the moment and over the objections of his security officers, he tried parasailing at a local airfield. He seems to savor, if only for the moment, being free of restraints.

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**Gandhi's Staff and Decisionmaking Style**

From the beginning Gandhi has been an impulsive decisionmaker on foreign policy who prefers to act promptly on reading a briefing paper or after hearing a presentation.

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the assassin in New Delhi was to lash out against Pakistani President Zia or to give the green light to military commanders eager to counter Pakistani troop movements with more deployments of their own. Gandhi's initial reactions during each crisis have been softened and glossed over by a resumption of conciliatory comments, but they suggest that he is prone to erupt angrily at the onset of crises.

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As a consequence of his growing impatience with the Ministry of External Affairs and other members of the foreign policy establishment, Gandhi is consulting only a handful of people on his personal staff and in the military and intelligence organizations for advice on key foreign policy questions and appointments,

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The growing impatience of Gandhi with the performance of Cabinet and senior government officials in foreign policy has resulted in several abrupt firings and resignations in recent weeks, lessening the influence of longtime professional diplomats in the Ministry of External Affairs. He has drastically reduced his contacts with the Indian foreign policy establishment.

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The Secretariat staff members most frequently mentioned as being close to Gandhi include G. K. Arora, recently named "Special Secretary," according to US Embassy reports; Satish Sharma, a crony from airline days; and Mani Shankar Aiyer, his public relations specialist. Junior Cabinet officials Natwar Singh, P. Chidambaram, and Raiesh Pilot are also identified  as enjoying Gandhi's confidence. Officials in military and intelligence circles, who also have Gandhi's ear, have tended, in

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apparently deciding that few in these circles have vision or can be trusted to represent his views. Gandhi has on short notice dismissed one

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our judgment, to take a hard line on India's relations with its neighbors, believing that the projection of military power and covert action can advance Gandhi's goals of reducing tension in the region and asserting India's preeminence. [redacted]

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[redacted] former Foreign Secretary Venkateswaran lost his job when he refused to defer to Arora. According to the Indian press, Venkateswaran complained about the growing influence of the Prime Minister's staff and the Research and Analysis Wing, India's external intelligence service, in foreign policy matters. Gandhi's staff convinced the Prime Minister that Venkateswaran's angry confrontation with Defense Ministry officials, who excluded the Ministry of External Affairs entirely from the initial briefing on Indo-Pakistani border deployments, merited his dismissal [redacted].

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#### **Gandhi's Foreign Policy Goals Unchanged**

Despite his foreign policy problems, Gandhi shows no signs of abandoning his basic goals—strengthening relations with the United States while maintaining longstanding ties to the Soviet Union and securing India's preeminence in the region. Gandhi probably sees no attractive policy alternatives, given what New Delhi views as encouraging but limited success in attracting technology from the United States. He also values Moscow's promises of continuing support for New Delhi but is concerned about Soviet overtures to Islamabad and Beijing. [redacted]

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We believe that Gandhi may begin using new tactics to achieve these foreign policy goals. His impatience with traditional channels of communication on foreign policy matters suggests he may turn more frequently to hardliners in the Research and Analysis Wing and the military to help get things done, particularly when dealing with neighboring states. At the same time, we believe he will stick with his preferred personal style of nonconfrontational diplomacy. Gandhi's appeals to senior US officials to use their influence with Islamabad one week before the Indo-Pakistani mobilization and his invitation to Pakistani President Zia to attend a cricket match in February indicate that he prefers personal diplomacy conducted in a nonconfrontational manner. [redacted]

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#### **Outlook**

Gandhi's frustrations are unlikely to cause dramatic changes in Indo-US relations, but we believe India may become more impatient with what it regards as US delays in supplying advanced technology, particularly in regard to US participation in India's Light Combat Aircraft project. New Delhi is signaling the United States either to make concrete offers or back out of the project. At the same time, Gandhi probably is buoyed by US offers to advance the launch date for India's INSAT 1-D communications satellite and by progress in the sale of a US-made supercomputer. [redacted]

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Relations between India and Pakistan have improved as a result of the recent disengagement agreement, but India will be looking for Pakistan to take additional steps to improve relations. Gandhi would be especially encouraged by progress in implementing the agreements on trade and antinarcotics measures that he and President Zia discussed during their meeting in late February or in measures to control Sikh infiltration. If there is no improvement in relations over the coming months, we believe Gandhi will become increasingly susceptible to those advisers who favor supporting dissidents in Pakistan. [redacted]

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We should be prepared for a period of high-risk brinkmanship over the Sino-Indian border this April and May, given Gandhi's behavior and the rising influence of the military and the external intelligence service at the expense of professional diplomats. We expect that Indian military officers will advise taking an aggressive stand against the Chinese along the contested border. The new Foreign Secretary, K. Menon—most recently Ambassador in Beijing—probably will have few fresh proposals to break the negotiating deadlock. If the situation gets too hot, Gandhi may ask the United States to provide both sides with detailed satellite maps of the contested border to defuse the crisis. [redacted]

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Difficulties in India's relations with the United States, Pakistan, or China will not necessarily translate into gains for the Soviets. [redacted] New Delhi is disappointed with what

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it views as inadequate Soviet diplomatic support during recent tension with Pakistan and China. If the Sino-Indian border heats up this spring, the Indians are likely to look to Moscow for strong public support that the Soviets may not be willing to provide. [redacted]

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Gandhi's frustrations are increasingly likely to color diplomatic exchanges with the United States—and others—during crises or periods of uncertainty. We can anticipate impulsive, angry outbursts from Gandhi in a future crisis as doomsayers in the military and intelligence services outline worst case scenarios or bring him reports that outsiders—including the United States—wish him ill. Gandhi's impatience with Ministry of External Affairs bureaucrats suggests that the United States probably will have to continue to depend heavily on contacts at the highest level of Gandhi's administration to maintain and strengthen ties. Institutionalizing improved relations will be a slow process as long as Gandhi continues to fire and shuffle top foreign policy officials. [redacted]

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