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Gandhi, Due in Soviet, Goes as Friend

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NEW DELHI, May 20 — Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who initially struck many diplomats as potentially pro-Western in outlook, has embarked on a new campaign to strengthen ties with the Soviet Union and reassure the public of his devotion to socialism.

Mr. Gandhi's efforts culminate this week in a five-day visit to the Soviet Union, including a meeting in Moscow with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. Political commentators here say the Prime Minister deliberately chose Moscow for his first major trip overseas since taking office last November.

In June, the 40-year-old Prime Minister is to visit the United States to meet with President Reagan and open the Festival of India. That trip has been hailed by many as likely to contribute to a new era of cooperation between New Delhi and Washington.

A succession of senior American officials have stopped by India recently, each one praising Mr. Gandhi for his steps to ease Government control of the economy. Others have noted with satisfaction that Mr. Gandhi seems to have stepped up the attempt to diversify the purchases of military weapons so that India no longer relies exclusively on the Soviet Union.

Disappointment Is Predicted

Yet for all these moves, many experts here caution against any feeling in the West that Mr. Gandhi will reorient basic Indian policies away from support of Moscow on many issues.

"This euphoria in the West is absolutely dangerous," said Bhabani Sen Gupta, a specialist on the Soviet Union at the Center for Policy Research. "It is bound to lead to disappointment. Rajiv Gandhi will build upon Indo-Soviet relations as the first foundation of his foreign policy."

There were certainly expressions of friendship on the eve of Mr. Gandhi's departure for Moscow on Tuesday. Mr. Gorbachev told the Press Trust of India news agency that the coming visit was "a big event in the life of our two states."

Mr. Gandhi, meanwhile, told Tass: "The economic and commercial relations between our two countries have registered spectacular growth in recent years. India attaches great importance to them."

Government officials here said also that during the visit Moscow would grant a "substantial" amount of new commercial credits to build power generators and factories in India. Romesh Bhandari, the Indian Foreign Secre-

tary, said that Soviet-Indian trade this year was expected to be \$3.7 billion, a 20 percent increase over last year, and that it would continue to grow.

American experts say also that Indian-American trade is likely to increase from its level of \$4 billion this year.

But Moscow has granted many concessions and incentives. The major Soviet-Indian economic accords, for instance, permit India to pay in rupees. In the military area, India has been given billions of dollars in other concessions, enabling it to buy MIG fighter-bombers and reconnaissance planes, tanks, helicopters, transport planes, artillery, frigates and missiles.

Only in the last few years has India looked to France, West Germany, Italy and other countries in the West for weapons.

Experts agree, however, that Soviet-Indian friendship is based on far more than trade and military assistance. It is rooted, even Western diplomats acknowledge, in a shared vision of what should be the proper strategic balance in South Asia. Mr. Reagan is therefore deemed able to disturb that vision.

Pakistani Aid Seen as Threat

The main point of the Indian-American disagreements has been Pakistan, India's chief rival in the region and, for the last five years, America's chief friend there.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence in 1947. The last time, in 1971, when the United States was "tilting" to Pakistan, the Soviet Union backed India with votes and vetoes at the United Nations.

Today, the \$1.6 billion American military aid package for Pakistan is regarded by Indian officials as a major threat. American officials defend the aid as an attempt to bolster Pakistan as a counterweight to the presence of more than 100,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan. But Indian officials note that Pakistan has fewer troops on its border with Afghanistan than on its border with India.

To the annoyance of American diplomats, Prime Minister Gandhi has kept up the practice of his mother, Indira Gandhi, of vehemently criticizing the American aid to Pakistan.

Help for Rebels Criticized

He has gone even further, denouncing American covert assistance to the rebels in Afghanistan as creating instability in the region. Aides to the Prime Minister argue that helping the Afghan insurgents only stiffens the resolve of the Russians and even raises the threat of their retaliation against Pakistan.

"If the Government of Pakistan falls as a result, who knows what mess will be left in our lap?" a senior Indian official said.

American diplomats acknowledge that they have been frustrated and sometimes even infuriated by the Indian refusal to denounce the Soviet sweep into Afghanistan in the last week of 1979, as almost all members of the United Nations did.

But few think India is likely to change its view, no matter how much it purchases weapons for the West or eases up on socialism at home.

There are those, in fact, who see Mr. Gandhi's trip to Moscow as an attempt to assure Mr. Gorbachev that India intends to stand by its longtime friend despite news reports of Mr. Gandhi's supposedly pro-Western orientation. "I'm sure the Prime Minister will try his best to reassure them," Mr. Sen Gupta said.

Taxes Are Reduced

As for the economic situation at home, political analysts wonder how much further Mr. Gandhi will be able to keep up his revisions that have introduced free market theories into the Indian economy. The Prime Minister has acted not only to cut Government regulations but also cut taxes as an incentive for increased saving and investment.

Commentators have been fascinated by the Prime Minister's steps and by his talk of making industry more efficient and tapping more private investment from overseas.

But the talk also produced criticism within the ranks of the Congress (I) Party, the latter-day version of the Congress Party founded by Mr. Gandhi's forebears, many of them British-trained socialists determined to develop India on that model.

This month the Congress Party held a centenary celebration and used the occasion to mollify critics by reaffirming its commitment to socialism, a commitment Mr. Gandhi backed fully. Also reaffirmed was the commitment to use the Government as the engine to achieve economic growth, higher employment and the introduction of new technologies.

In the Soviet Union this week, Mr. Gandhi plans to take part in many other gestures and ceremonies of friendship reflecting longtime Soviet-Indian ties. Besides signing various documents formalizing the economic assistance, he plans to lay a wreath at Lenin's tomb and take part in the naming of a square in Moscow after Mrs. Gandhi, who was assassinated last Oct. 31.