

Editorial

A diplomatic turning point?

The visit of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to the United States is a welcome event. The very fact of the visit—the first by an Indian Prime Minister since 1971—is encouraging.

There is a clear desire on both sides to make the eight-day visit a success—particularly to establish a relationship of understanding and friendship between the President and Mrs. Gandhi. There is a belated recognition in the White House that India, a stable, functioning democracy of 700 million, is of importance to American interests in the world. There is a recognition that Prime Minister Gandhi is one of the leading statesmen in the world today, and that her words, as the leader of India, carry great weight, particularly among the two-thirds of humanity in the so-called South.

Yet a “friendly” visit which ends in mere generalities and expressions of good will can prove to be illusory. There are hard issues to be dealt with. The U.S. decision to massively arm the military dictatorship in Pakistan, on the pretext of responding to the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, is a principal source of tensions. The Indians contend that those arms will only be used against them, and that the Afghanistan crisis cannot be resolved through inviting superpower confrontation in the South Asian region. India has already made efforts to facilitate political negotiations toward removing Soviet forces from Afghanistan; in Washington, Mrs. Gandhi will seek some understanding of this approach.

Issues also include the U.S. cutoff of nuclear fuel supplies to the U.S.-built power reactor at Tarapur. While the Reagan administration has talked about being a “reliable supplier of nuclear fuel,” in practice, they have not carried out contractual obligations to India. A broader question is future U.S. support for economic development in India and throughout the developing sector: on “free-market” grounds, the United States has blocked even multilateral aid loans to India.

Mrs. Gandhi however is not coming to the United States to ask for “aid” or even to dwell on bilateral problems. She is coming with more global concerns. For the past two years she has been speaking strongly

all over the world about the danger of global war, a danger triggered by instability and confrontation in Third World arenas.

The events in Lebanon, in the Arabian Gulf, in Latin America are of great concern to India, as a nation and as a leader of the Non-Aligned nations. Mrs. Gandhi will be traveling to Moscow in September, and she is ready to do what she can to promote a relaxation of East-West tensions and their extension into the Third World.

For India and for Mrs. Gandhi, therefore, the North-South issue, in its broadest sense of the link between economic development, the creation of a new world economic order, and ensuring peace, is what is really on the agenda. The administration must be prepared to deal forthrightly with these issues.

In this context it is worth recalling two previous visits by Mrs. Gandhi, in 1966 and 1971. In 1966 President Johnson assured her that he was seeking a way out of the Vietnam war—she called him “a man of peace.” There was talk of improved Indo-U.S. relations. What followed was an expanded war and U.S. backing for the imposition of a World Bank-IMF austerity policy in India, including a forced devaluation of the rupee, which brought about an economic and political destabilization of India and a wave of anti-American sentiment.

In 1971 Mrs. Gandhi came seeking President Nixon's support in ending the Pakistani military's bloodbath in then East Pakistan, a bloodbath that sent millions of refugees streaming across the border into India and threatened to spread chaos in the entire region. The press proclaimed a “meeting of the minds” between the two leaders. What followed was Kissinger's “Pakistan tilt,” the creation of a Pakistan-China-U.S. military alliance against India and the fledgling Bangladesh liberation movement, and the wrecking of Indo-U.S. relations to the point where Kissinger deployed the 7th Fleet into the Bay of Bengal threatening to intervene against India and its Bangladeshi allies.

The signs now are relatively good that progress can be made. But we warn against illusions and sabotage of good intentions.