

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Rajiv's new diplomatic initiative

Foreign Secretary Bhandari's five-nation regional tour makes the government's foreign-policy priorities clear.

When Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari set out on his five-nation tour in late March, his directive from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was simple and direct: India is actively pursuing improved relations and seeks to reopen direct communication at the highest level on bilateral, regional, and international matters of concern to its neighbors.

India's diplomatic thrust precedes Mr. Gandhi's state visits to both Moscow and Washington in May and June, respectively. While the United States has sought to have India fall in behind its view of the region's geopolitical imperatives, the Soviet Union's leverage rests on its ability to keep India's relations with its neighbors sour if not overtly hostile. The strident efforts of the pro-Soviet lobby in India to bring about a collision with Pakistan are exemplary.

The only alternative for India is to take the situation in hand on its own account, establishing alliances with its neighbors for a cooperative approach to the region's development. Pakistan is the key in such a strategy.

At Rajiv Gandhi's direction, the focus of past Indo-Pakistani rapprochement efforts, the signing of a "no-war pact" or "friendship treaty," which stalled because of Pakistan's principled refusal to commit itself on the issue of foreign bases, has been put aside for the moment. Instead, the two sides will work to expand ties and build confidence.

For a start, the Indo-Pakistan joint commission will resume work broken

off in July 1984 following the hijacking of an Indian airliner to Pakistan by Sikh separatists and other indications of Pakistani collusion in the Punjab disturbances.

During his visit to Pakistan, Mr. Bhandari met with President Zia ul-Haq, Foreign Minister Shahab Zada Yaqub Khan, and Senate chairman Mr. Ghulam Ishaq Khan, as well as his counterpart, Niaz Niak. Under discussion was the regional situation, the Iran-Iraq war, and, in particular, Afghanistan.

Opon his return to New Delhi, Bhandari told the press that Pakistan views friendship with India as "an absolute necessity." The two foreign secretaries will meet again in May. In the meantime, the Pakistani foreign minister is visiting New Delhi for meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement, in which context it is expected that talks will be furthered.

Following the trip to Islamabad, Mr. Bhandari proceeded to Kabul with a comprehensive brief from Prime Minister Gandhi on all aspects of the Afghanistan problem. Breaking protocol, Foreign Minister Shah Mohammad Dos conducted the meeting with Mr. Bhandari. The Indian Foreign Secretary also had talks with President Babrak Karmal and Prime Minister Sultan Ali Kishhtmand.

A new offer of direct talks with Pakistan without preconditions was put forward by Dos during the discussions. "We have an open mind on this crucial question," he later told the press, "and we assured the Indian side

that if all overt and covert foreign interventions stop, a phased withdrawal of Soviet troops could begin."

Mr. Bhandari apprised the Afghan officials of the thinking in Islamabad. According to some reports here, the Pakistanis had evinced an interest for the first time in India mediating over the Afghan problem.

While there is little thought here that India can, by itself, get the Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, India could help Kabul and Islamabad find a formula that would compel Moscow to review its position. In the joint statement issued in Kabul after the Bhandari visit, India and Afghanistan expressed their shared conviction that no military solution was possible, in addition to their concern over the "deteriorating security environment" due to "the introduction of sophisticated arms into Pakistan"—the latter concern voiced from Kabul and clearly meant for Moscow's ear.

Earlier in Sri Lanka, the first stop on Bhandari's tour, high-level political contact was reestablished to create a political climate conducive to the resumption of negotiations between the Tamils and the government. New crises are erupting in Sri Lanka—from charges that Sri Lankan President Jayawardene had asked Margaret Thatcher for British troops, to new violence between Sri Lankan Muslims and the Indian Tamil minority. But it has also been mooted that Jayawardene is preparing a package of concessions discussed during the Bhandari visit to get an all-party conference going again.

In Bangladesh, the last stop, Mr. Bhandari carried a special message from Rajiv Gandhi to Gen. H. M. Ershad, announcing that the two sides had decided to reopen negotiations on the sharing of Ganges water, one of the issues that has vexed relations in recent years.