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RAJIV GANDHI'S VIEWS ON KASHMIR AND THE INDIAN POLITICAL SCENE

SUMMARY

1. GANDHI CRITICAL OF THE GOI'S HANDLING OF KASHMIR BUT THINKS RISK OF WAR RECEDING. BELIEVES V P SINGH FACES SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES WITH HIS OWN PARTY AND THE GOVERNMENT'S FUTURE UNCERTAIN. CONGRESS (I) NEEDS SIX TO TEN MONTHS TO BE READY TO FACE A GENERAL ELECTION: APPEARS CONFIDENT OF RETURNING TO POWER THEREAFTER. PLANS TO VISIT BRITAIN, PROBABLY IN NOVEMBER.

DETAIL

2. I CALLED ON MR RAJIV GANDHI ON 4 JUNE TO GET HIS VIEWS ON KASHMIR AND THE CURRENT POLITICAL SCENE IN INDIA. I FOUND HIM RELAXED AND CONFIDENT THAT CONGRESS (I) WAS ON COURSE TO BENEFIT FROM THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT DIFFICULTIES.
3. ON KASHMIR, MR GANDHI THOUGHT THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S MISHANDLING OF THE ARREST AND SUBSEQUENT RELEASE OF THE BBC STRINGER, JAMEEL (MY TELNO 756) WOULD FURTHER ERODE THEIR CREDIBILITY AMONG KASHMIRIS. THE NEW GOVERNOR, SAXENA, WOULD HAVE A QUOTE SOFTER UNQUOTE APPROACH THAN HIS PREDECESSOR, JAGMOHAN, BUT WOULD BE HANDICAPPED BY HIS CAREER BACKGROUND AS AS POLICEMAN AND INTELLIGENCE OFFICER. AT THE SAME TIME, MR GANDHI THOUGHT THE RISK OF WAR WITH PAKISTAN OVER KASHMIR HAD DEFINITELY RECEDED. THE MILITARY CONFRONTATION LOOKED LESS THREATENING AND THE MOMENTUM OF THE CRISIS WAS QUOTE ON THE WAY DOWN UNQUOTE. THE GOI'S PROPOSED PACKAGE OF CBMS, ALTHOUGH LITTLE MORE THAN A REHASH OF MEASURES WHICH HE HAD HIMSELF

PROPOSED TO THE GOP WHEN HE WAS PRIME MINISTER, WAS A SENSIBLE MOVE: HE HOPED THERE WOULD BE A CONSTRUCTIVE PAKISTANI RESPONSE.

4. MR GANDHI AGREED THAT IT WAS DIFFICULT TO BE SURE TO WHAT EXTENT SUPPORT FOR THE MILITANTS FROM WITHIN PAKISTAN WAS BEING ORGANISED OR CONNIVED AT BY THE GOP. HIS OWN PERSONAL HUNCH WAS THAT IT DID NOT HAVE MS BHUTTO'S ENDORSEMENT. HE WAS LESS SURE ABOUT ISID, PRESIDENT ISHAK KHAN OR GENERAL BEG; AND NAWAZ SHARIF, WHO WAS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN BEHIND PAKISTANI SUPPORT FOR SIKH EXTREMISTS IN PUNJAB, COULD WELL BE PLAYING THE SAME GAME IN KASHMIR.

5. MR GANDHI THOUGHT THAT MR V P SINGH'S DIFFICULTIES WITH HIS OWN SUPPORTERS WOULD INTENSIFY OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS. ARUN NEHRU AND HIS FOLLOWERS WERE INCREASINGLY DISILLUSIONED WITH THE PRIME MINISTER'S POOR PERFORMANCE AND THE FACTIONS HEADED BY DEVI LAL AND GEORGE FERNANDES WERE ALSO JOCKEYING FOR POSITION. JHOTI BASU'S STOCK WAS RISING: BUT HE DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH PARLIAMENTARY SUPPORT TO DISPLACE V P SINGH AS PRIME MINISTER. MR GANDHI DISMISSED THE IDEA OF A DEAL BETWEEN CONGRESS (I) AND THE CPM. AS FOR THE BJP, HE WOULD NOT TOUCH THEM WITH A BARGEPOLE.

6. MR GANDHI SAID HE DID NOT EXPECT THE GOVERNMENT TO FALL YET, BUT THERE WOULD BE SOME EXTENSIVE RE-SHUFFLING OF MINISTERS. THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF WOULD STAGGER ON. CONGRESS (I) HAD NO INTENTION OF TRYING TO BRING THE GOVERNMENT DOWN IN THE SHORT TERM: HE NEEDED FROM SIX TO TEN MONTHS TO PUT THE PARTY'S MEMBERSHIP LISTS IN ORDER FOR PARTY ELECTIONS, WHICH HE PLANNED TO HOLD IN NOVEMBER OR DECEMBER. HE WAS NOT INTERESTED IN RETURNING TO POWER ON THE BASIS OF FACTIONAL RE-ALIGNMENTS AND PARTY MANOEUVRING (ALTHOUGH SOME CONGRESSMEN FAVOURED THIS): THERE MUST BE ANOTHER GENERAL ELECTION FIRST. CONGRESS (I) SHOULD BE READY TO FACE A GENERAL ELECTION SOON AFTER THE TURN OF THE YEAR. ORIGINALLY HE HAD EXPECTED MR V P SINGH TO CALL A SNAP ELECTION AROUND FEBRUARY 1991, ON THE BASIS OF AN QUOTE ADEQUATE UNQUOTE PERFORMANCE BY HIS GOVERNMENT: NOW THE GOVERNMENT LOOKED AS IF IT MIGHT INSTEAD FALL VICTIM TO ITS OWN WEAKNESSES AND FAILURES.

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7. MR GANDHI SAID HE HAD TWO INVITATIONS TO VISIT BRITAIN IN THE AUTUMN. LORD ROMSEY HAD INVITED HIM TO GIVE THE NEHRU MEMORIAL LECTURE IN LONDON IN OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER, AND THE CAMBRIDGE UNION HAD ASKED HIM TO BE GUEST OF HONOUR AT ITS 175TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS IN NOVEMBER. HE WOULD LIKE TO ACCEPT BOTH INVITATIONS AND WAS EXPLORING WAYS OF COMBINING THE TWO OCCASIONS. IF HE CAME TO LONDON HE WOULD WELCOME AN OPPORTUNITY OF MEETING MINISTERS AND OTHERS. THE CONSTRAINING FACTOR WAS UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION IN INDIA BY THEN. HE WOULD LET ME KNOW AS SOON AS HIS PLANS WERE FIRM.

COMMENT

8. THERE IS A STRONG ELEMENT OF WISHFUL THINKING IN MR GANDHI'S NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE V P SINGH GOVERNMENT'S PROSPECTS. BUT THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES ARE INCREASING, AND MR GANDHI SPOKE WITH CLARITY AND APPARENT CONFIDENCE ABOUT HIS OWN STRATEGY AND TIMETABLE FOR REVIVIFYING THE CONGRESS (I) AND GETTING IT READY TO WIN AN EARLY GENERAL ELECTION. HE CLEARLY DID NOT (NOT) EXPECT A WAR WITH PAKISTAN.

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MISS SPENCER

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KASHMIR

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