

July 15, 1989

Excerpts from the Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Rajiv Gandhi

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Summary:

Gorbachev and Gandhi discuss the Tiananmen Square Incident in China and the ongoing turmoil within the Chinese Communist Party, including the fate of Zhao Ziyang.

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Contents:

- English Translation

M.S. Gorbachev: [...] Now about China. You know that we have normalized relations with China. But then the well-known internal political events in this country interfered, they complicated the situation. I was literally stalked by the foreign press with questions about our appraisal of the events in China, wishing to frame the Soviet position in some way. This was the first question that was put to me at the meeting with the French intellectuals in Sorbonne. But in the end they met [me] with applause. We tried to give balanced appraisals. This is understandable. Politicians have to be careful in these matters. Especially when we are talking about a country like China. About a country with a population higher than one billion people. This is a whole civilization! And half-baked appraisals would only cause harm. This would be interference in the internal affairs of a country. Though now some people are saying that Gorbachev was trying to justify what was happening in China. We do not justify anything but at the same time we must show care with appraisals. By the way, we never did learn how many people died there. There is no reliable information and, probably, there never will be.

E.A. Shevardnaze: Maybe the next generation will learn about it.

M.S. Gorbachev: As for the USSR and India, I think that China, as a result of the recent events, will not distance itself from us and you. They were grateful for our balanced reaction, and, perhaps, will now value more good relations with us and with you. [...]

R. Gandhi: [...] Let me touch on the situation in China. I think that many things which happened in China, and, especially the heating of tensions, which preceded the explosion, appeared as a result of the leadership of China being unprepared to perceive the changes in the attitude of their people, which itself developed as a consequence of social and economic changes in the entire world. And suddenly the Chinese leadership realized that the situation is getting out of control, that old formulations no longer work. They allowed procrastination and, as a result, a worsening of the situation has occurred.

Here, I want to draw a certain parallel. The USA lives in the yesterday but the rest of the world, especially Europe, are changing. People, nations of different countries are beginning to think in new ways. And in this changing world, the Americans can end up in ever greater isolation from the rest.

Of course, this is a long process, it does not happen in a moment, suddenly. But I am sure that the external pressure on the US administration in connection with how it is behaving will become greater and greater. And if approaches of the American administration do not undergo changes, on one beautiful day it will find itself in isolation.

[...] To return to China, I hope that the problem of the border settlement will be solved between us and them within one-two years. Recently we had another contact with the Chinese—when the General Secretary of the INC(I) stopped over there on his way from the DPRK. Although he was just transferring through China, the Chinese tried to make a big deal out of this visit. He was the first general secretary of a foreign party who was received by the new General Secretary of CC CCP Jiang Zemin. They had an extensive conversation; Jiang Zemin was happy with it. [...]

Gorbachev: [...] During the visit to China, I had a most lively and frank conversation with Zhao Ziyang. But one thing surprised me. At the very start of the conversation, even before press representatives left, he announced in some sort of forced fashion that at the relevant time at one of the closed CC CCP Plenums a decision was made that the supreme leader of China is Deng Xiaoping and that all decisions are made by him. Zhao Ziyang made this statement when the situation was heating up. I got the impression that with his statement he sort of wanted to face Deng with the situation: allegedly, he makes all the decisions. This was strange, but this is how it was. For poorly-informed people his statement looked like praise on the part of the General Secretary addressed to Deng Xiaoping who formally does not hold the highest positions. But I thought that there was some deep meaning behind this.

Zhao Ziyang's subsequent steps are well-known. He addressed the student masses but he was no

longer heeded. Probably, there were such deep processes, which had as their result strong tremors within the society, and, as a result, difficult events began to unfold, a split in the leadership with all the attendant consequences.

What can we say when even the workers of the ideology department of CC CCP, which was headed by Hu Qili, now purged, joined the student demonstrations. To make it to the talks with the Chinese leaders, we had to follow the trickiest routes. At one of the moments of the main conversation—with Deng Xiaoping—a group of students nearly got through into the building. There were slogans like: “Gorbachev, you are talking to the wrong man,” “58-85”—a hint about my age, and Deng Xiaoping’s age. We tried to conduct ourselves with restraint and balance. Although I, frankly speaking, thought that we should leave as soon as possible. I should say that the students, the demonstrators, behaved themselves in an organized manner, expressed warm feeling towards us.

I am confident that now the Chinese leaders have extinguished just the external manifestations of conflict but the conflict itself is not over, it is not finished. And one will need measures of anything but military character to settle it. I think that on our part one needs a very balanced approach to the Chinese leadership. They need time in order to orient themselves. But we note that they positively appraised your, and our, positions with respect to the events which took place in China.

R. Gandhi: I had to face accusations in connection with our official reaction to the events in China. But I tell the West: violence is a bad thing, we don’t like it but nevertheless it should not lead to the interference in the internal affairs of China...

Gorbachev: Students sent me a very warm letter. One can sympathize with them as a human being, one can regret about what happened. This is of course a tragedy. But we should also analyze the deep reasons of the situation.

R. Gandhi: It would be very important for the situation in China to stabilize so that China moves forward on the basis of some firm principles. The Chinese leaders, if all of their organizations worked well and they received correct information, should have recognized that the students enjoyed support of the population and that they had a high level of organization. Mr. [M.L.] Fotedar, [Minister of Steel and Mining,] in the course of his visit—he was in China for two weeks—visited different regions of the country and saw for himself that there was unrest across entire China. Perhaps, not on the same scale as in Beijing, but still.

M.S. Gorbachev: When we arrived in Shanghai, there were also massive demonstrations there. All of this is a big lesson, and not only for China.

R. Gandhi: I hope the Americans will also draw lessons for themselves after these events.

M.S. Gorbachev: At first they censured the actions of the Chinese leadership, and then what? They are at a loss.

R. Gandhi: The Americans are completely confused. They don’t understand the character of the Chinese events. They have the habit to simplify everything. The biggest weakness of the Americans is that they look at everything in a vulgar-materialistic manner. For example, they are convinced that they can buy everything for promises of developmental aid. They are overly pragmatic and do not understand that the main thing is the heart, and not the brain.

M.S. Gorbachev: They had their own view of Zhao Ziyang: he, allegedly, was the strongest proponent of liberalization. But the Chinese leadership decided that he is unduly keen about liberalization and came to the conclusion that he betrayed the ideological principles. I cannot judge with complete certainty what is happening there—I do not have enough reliable information for this. In any case, we note that all that is being undertaken now by the Chinese leadership is being presented by them as defense of socialist principles. But one thing is clear, that the process of

economic reform did not find its timely support in the political reform.

We must do many things in the sphere of the economic reform so that it corresponds to the pace of the political reform. Such country as the Soviet Union can and must put hope only in itself. No matter how difficult, we must take such road that the people count mainly on themselves. Otherwise, unavoidable, a psychology of reliance, of dependence emerges. But we are not so weak after all.

The Americans want for everything to go badly here, or even worse than that. So we need to put hope mainly in ourselves. [...]

Yesterday we spoke to the minister of science and technology of the PRC. We talked about cooperation. He is well-disposed. Remember, how we talked with you about the “triangle”—trilateral cooperation [between the Soviet Union, India, and China]?

R. Gandhi: Yes, I remember.

The Chinese, for example, are very much interested in the creation of a large airplane. Here is an object of cooperation for you. So, you and I made a good forecast. Perhaps, now is the exact moment when they are truly interested in ties with you and with us. [...]