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On Libya, Nuanced Silence is Effective

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India's position on the Libyan unrest, or non-position as some might call, has come under scrutiny and criticism. The official reluctance to make its position explicit has been criticized as missed opportunity. For many the Libyan crisis provided an important opportunity to display India's willingness to shoulder responsibilities and thereby strengthen its claims for great power status and recognition. Despite such temptations, the Government of India chose to keep its counsel and has been restrained in its reactions. When the Middle East is in turmoil, a rhetorical policy is the last thing India needs.

In early February, taking clue from the Tunisian and Egyptian examples, the Libyans took to the streets and rose against Muammar Qaddafi. When the four decades of Qaddafi rule was shaken by wide spread public protests, three broad calculations influenced India's position.

First and foremost, India had to consider the presence of over 18,000 Indians in Libya including 3,000 in the rebel-controlled Benghazi. Ensuring their safe repatriation home became its primary concern. Any reckless statements or actions would have created a hostage situation. While some chose to stay back, by early March over 15,000 nationals were brought home by air and through ships. The completion of the evacuation considerably reduced the rationale for its diplomatic presence in the war zone and by late March it shut down its embassy in Tripoli and Indian Ambassador Manimekali moved to Djerba in neighbouring Tunisia.

Second, India could not ignore reports of large-scale violence against civilians in Libya. This became more acute when the Arab League and African Union began questioning the legitimacy of the Qaddafi rule. It was in this context that in February India voted for the UN Security Council Resolution 1970 which imposed sanctions against Qaddafi and key members of his

regime. The resolution also imposed travel restrictions, freezing of assets and referred the issue of human rights violations to The Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC). Despite its refusal to join the ICC, India voted for the referral because the majority was in favour of such a move. Key players in the Libyan crisis such as the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC, now renamed as Organization of Islamic Cooperation) were in favour of the referral to the ICC.

Third, while expressing its opposition to violence against the civilian population, India refused to be a fig-leaf of defence for a great game in Libya. The issue of no-fly-zone, the key component of the second resolution on Libya adopted on 17 March was complicated. This demand enjoyed the support and backing of the Arab League but at the same time India was weary of the past experiences in Iraq. What was supposed to be a humanitarian measure to prevent Iraqi attacks against the civilians, eventually ended up as the fig-leaf for regime change. Hence, even while endorsing the need for the protection of the civilian population, it abstained when the UNSC called for the enforcement of a No-Fly Zone in Libya.

India's refusal to endorse UNSC Resolution 1973 adopted on 17 March was vindicated by subsequent developments. It rested its position on two crucial issues: absence of first hand assessment of the situation and lack of clarity over "details of enforcement measures, including who and with what assets will participants and how these measures will be exactly carried out." The US-led NATO forces used the UNSC Resolution merely as a cover for regime change in Libya. The attacks against presidential palace and targeting of the members of the Qaddafi family were not part of the UN mandate and goes against the letter and spirit of the UN.

Some of the principal members of the Security Council also had reservations over the no-fly-zone resolution. Only ten members voted for it and besides India, four others, namely, Brazil, China, Germany and Russia chose to abstain than vote with the US.

The Libyan campaign did not go according to script. The Libyan leader was not ready to throw in the towel and was determined to fight back. Unlike the Egyptian leader, he still enjoyed considerable popularity. Even if this was not overwhelming, it was sufficient to continue the fight. Above all, besides lacking clear political goals and military expertise, the rebel camp is also divided. Hence, contrary to initial euphoria the Libyan war proved to be protracted, complicated and indecisive. Despite the air campaign and close air support for rebel forces the NATO has been unable to speed up the process. Slow progress of the war forced NATO to indefinitely extend the 90-day timeframe it had set initially.

There were suggestions that India should join the western air campaign to gain 'combat experience.' Similar arguments were made in 2003 when many egged on the BJP-led government to join Bush's campaign for democracy promotion. Subsequent events, especially

sectarian divide and prolonged civil war, exposed the wisdom and utility of India joining the 2003 Iraq war.

The Libyan situation is even more complicated. The ongoing violence has rekindled internal debates over the Libyan identity and opened the wounds of 1969 when Col. Qaddafi overthrew King Idris and proclaimed the republic. It is not by accident that the rebels rally around the flag of the pre-Qaddafi era.

In recent years India has revived its interests in Libya. The Lockerbie-related sanctions froze India out of the lucrative Libyan energy market. Lifting of the US-led sanctions in 2006 paved the way for improvements in Indo-Libyan trade. The bilateral trade picked up only since 2007 when India began importing Libyan crude in large quantities. Currently, the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Limited (OIL) are active in Libya.

In recent weeks, a few western countries have formally recognized the opposition National Transition Council (NTC) as the legitimate authority and have begun negotiations. India is not one of them. But it is essential to remember that as the events were unfolding in Libya, in February Ali El-Essawi resigned as the Libyan ambassador to India and subsequently joined the NTC. It is extremely likely that New Delhi has been in touch with forces opposed to Qaddafi. Its presence in the Paris conference in late August is an indication that India would be a player in the post-Qaddafi political order in Libya.

India has interests in Libya but they are neither substantial nor critical. But there is no need for any hasty measures or statements. Let the dust settle down in the Libyan dessert and a clearer picture emerge. Meanwhile, nuanced silence is the sensible option.

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