

9 August 2012

## India's 'Catch-22' Situation in Syria

India was initially reluctant to condemn the Syrian regime's crackdown on internal political unrest. Its recent change of heart, argues Rupak Borah, reflects an evolving realization on New Delhi's part — it cannot avoid making tough political decisions if it hopes to have a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

By Rupakjyoti Borah for ISN

When protests erupted against the Syrian regime last year, India initially refused to reprimand President Bashar al-Assad's heavy-handed approach to dealing with the opposition movement. Indeed, there was no reason for New Delhi to annoy a country that had previously offered support to India over the Kashmir issue and its quest for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India was also wary of what kind of regime may eventually replace the Assad dynasty. An Islamist grouping assuming power may, for example, overturn Assad's pro-Indian policies. Russia's support for the Syrian regime also proved influential upon India's reluctance to condemn Assad. Ties between New Delhi and Moscow remain close, with Russia remaining a major supplier of defense equipment to India's armed forces.

Commercial reasons also played a role in India's initially ambivalent stance over political unrest in Syria. In January 2004, an agreement was signed between India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and IPR International for exploration rights for oil and natural gas reserves in northern Syria. Moreover, in a rare sign of bonhomie, in 2005 ONGC and CNPC China Al Furat Petroleum Company won a [joint bid](#) to acquire 37% of Petro-Canada's stake in the Syrian al-Furat oil and gas fields oilfields for \$573 million. In addition, India has [extended a credit line](#) of \$100 million (which is the first tranche of \$240 million credit) to partially finance the expansion of Syria's Tishreen Power Plant. During the November 2010 visit of the former Indian President Pratibha Patil to Syria, India also [pledged to double trade levels](#) between the two countries within three years.

### India makes the change

Yet, on February 4 this year India gave its support to the proposed [UN resolution](#) on Syria, calling on Damascus to implement the League of Arab States' Action Plan for a successful resolution of the political crisis. New Delhi's support was conditional upon no reference being made to either regime change or the threat of military intervention by the resolution. Despite China's and Russia's decision to veto the resolution, India's support for the ostensibly Western-backed initiative marked a clear change in New Delhi's policies towards Syria.

Alongside economic considerations, India's previous reluctance to sanction the Assad regime was

based on its oft-stated policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. When the likes of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, for example, were engulfed in political unrest, India simply refused to take sides. However, this resulted in New Delhi receiving a fair degree of criticism on both the domestic and international stage. For a country that covets a permanent seat on the UNSC, India's reluctance to take a less than firm stance did not win New Delhi new friends, particularly among the new regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Consequently, India has decided to take a more proactive stance regarding the Syrian crisis. On July 19, [India voted in favour](#) of a resolution that sought to place new sanctions on the al-Assad regime if it continued to deploy its forces and heavy weapons in towns and cities across Syria. However, this resolution was also vetoed by China and Russia.

### **Reasons for India's changed position**

There are many factors which help to explain India's change of course over Syria. Firstly, India continues to covet a permanent seat on the UNSC and does not want to be seen as obstructive within this forum as Russia and China. Both Moscow and Beijing have been on the receiving end of international opprobrium for vetoing UN resolutions. . In addition, India would not like to go against the US on Syria, since relations between the two countries have already been affected by India's reluctance to scale down Iranian oil imports(although India is targeting an [overall reduction](#) of 11 per cent in Iranian oil imports in this fiscal year in the face of consistent US pressure). New Delhi has also seen a big improvement in its relations with Saudi Arabia, particularly after the recent extradition of the wanted terrorist [Abu Jundal](#) to India. Saudi Arabia has long been at the forefront of the movement to oust the Assad regime in Syria.

Accordingly, India can afford to be seen taking a few risks over Syria. Unlike many other countries in the Gulf region, India does not buy crude oil from Syria, nor are there many Indian nationals working in the country. Nevertheless, New Delhi's diplomatic ties with Tehran present a challenge to its current stance regarding the Assad regime. As [recent declarations](#) suggest, Iran remains a key ally to Syria, with Tehran declaring that its alliance with Damascus will not be broken by the on-going political disturbances. This in turn suggests that had India not backed the resolution, it ran the risk of being seen as too close to the so-called 'axis of resistance', a move which could damage New Delhi's blossoming ties - not to mention defense-industrial relations - with Israel.

Yet India walks a fine line between condemning the Assad regime and further complicating its relations with Iran. Despite coming under pressure from the United States, India continues to rely upon Iranian petroleum exports for its growing population of infrastructural demands. Indeed, after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, India may need the help of Iran in order to contain a resurgent Taliban, as happened in the past when Russia, Iran and India lent support to the Northern Alliance. Crucially, Iran provides India with a gateway to Afghanistan. This is because Pakistan does not allow India transportation rights over its territory, meaning that Indian goods to Afghanistan therefore have to go via the Iranian port of Chabahar.

### **The road ahead**

As the rebels in Syria make more gains across the country, it is becoming clearer that the days of the Assad regime are numbered. A [bomb attack](#) in Damascus on July 18, for example, killed President Assad's brother-in-law and Deputy Defense Minister, Assef Shawkat, and several other leading figures of the regime. With fighting continuing between government and opposition forces in the city of Aleppo, it seems that the rebels have the upper hand and it is only a matter of time until the Assad regime falls. However, even if Damascus falls to the rebels, the Assad regime could retreat into the Allawite-majority regions of northwest Syria, from where it could launch a counter-attack.

Accordingly, India now needs to strengthen its channels of communication with the Syrian National

Council and the Free Syrian Army to ensure that it is not caught on the wrong side of history. New Delhi also needs to be prepared for a post-Assad regime that may tilt more towards the Sunni-states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, instead of Iran. On the other hand, by maintaining its current stance against the Assad regime, India can hope to retain a degree of influence in a post-Assad Syria. As a result, India's delicate balancing act over Syria is likely to continue until the dust has settled on the political turmoil that continues to grip the country.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Thwarting UN Resolutions against Syria - The Battle over Interventionism](#)

[Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response](#)

[India, Libya and the Principle of Non-Intervention](#)

[India in the UN Security Council](#)

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## **Publisher**

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