

India, Libya and the Principle of Non-Intervention

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Abstract

Delhi's decision to abstain on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1973, authorising the use of force in the Libyan civil war was not about expressing India's non-aligned or non-Western identity. Delhi's own mixed record on international interventions suggests there was no question of high principle involved in its UNSC vote on Libya. Delhi's response can be explained in terms of India's strategic culture that is very risk-averse and rather prudent when it comes to the use of force. It has also been shaped in part by a long-standing domestic political tradition of expressing wariness towards Western intervention in the Middle East. India's policy on Libya appears to be driven by a cold calculus of national interest and a healthy scepticism about the use of force by third parties towards an internal conflict.

Introduction

Delhi's decision to abstain on the voting on the UNSC 1973, authorising use of force in Libya on 17 March 2011, has disappointed many Western friends of India. They wonder if India is ready to take its place among the ranks of major powers and contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security. The decision has come amidst Delhi's intensified campaign for a permanent seat in the UNSC and in the very first months of its current tenure as a non-permanent member has added to the frustration of those in the West who support India's claim.² The fact that India has found itself agreeing with China, Russia

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² Sumit Ganguly, 'A Pointless Abstention', *The Diplomat* (23 March 2011), <http://the-diplomat.com/indian-decade/2011/03/23/a-pointless-abstention/>. Accessed on 2 April 2011; Dan Twining, 'What we learned from

and Brazil in reservations against an international intervention in Libya seems to suggest India's continuing preference for traditional anti-Western positions in multilateral organisations. Within India, there has been no real criticism of the Indian action. On the other hand, there were demands within parliament for a resolution that would condemn the Western intervention in Libya. Although the Government held off the pressures, its political leadership had to compensate by raising its rhetoric against the Western intervention in Libya.³ This is a good moment, then, to scrutinise India's attitudes to the question of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations. The analysis below reviews India's record on the question of intervention, questions the proposition that India's decision to vote along with China, Russia and Brazil marks the emergence of a new East-West divide and assesses the factors that went into the making of Indian policy on Libya.

The Myth of Non-Intervention

The belief that 'non-intervention' is a high principle of Indian foreign policy is widespread. Some would want to trace it back to one of the presumed Nehruvian foundations of modern India's world view – *Panchsheel* or the five principles of peaceful co-existence. Contrary to the mythology of the Indian discourse, it was not Nehru but the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai who invented the concept of *Panchsheel*. During his visit to India in 1954, Zhou Enlai insisted on putting the *Panchsheel* into the preamble of the 1954 agreement on trade and intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India. Nehru went along. Zhou Enlai had good reason to insist on non-intervention. He wanted India to keep its hands off Tibet and cede the many special privileges Delhi had inherited from the Raj. Those who see *Panchsheel* as part of the complex evolution of Sino-Indian relations have no reason to eulogise it.⁴ Over the decades, however, the notion of *Panchsheel* was abstracted out of its specific historical context and acquired an ideological weight of its own in the Indian world view.⁵ Tragic as it has been, India and China have conformed to *Panchsheel* more in breach than in observance of its principles. While Beijing saw India playing the Tibet card in the 1960s and the 1970s, Delhi was deeply riled up by China's support to various insurgencies in India during the same time. While matters have improved considerably since then, the mutual concerns about issues relating to territorial sovereignty have not gone away. Delhi is anxious about Beijing's

the Security Council Debate over Libya' (18 March 2011), <http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/blog/3313>. Accessed on 2 April 2011; for a counterinterview, see Kanti Bajpai, 'The Logic Behind the Libya Decision', *Times of India* (2 April 2011), p.22.

³ 'LS (Lok Sabha) demands resolution condemning Libya airstrikes', *Indian Express*, (22 March 2011), www.indianexpress.com/news/ls-demands-resolution-condemning-libya-airstrikes/765834/0. Accessed on 31 March 2011; 'One on Libya, House says can't impose regime change', *Indian Express*, (23 March 2011), www.indianexpress.com/news/one-on-libya-house-says-cant-impose-regime-change/766009/0. Accessed on 31 March 2011.

⁴ See Claude Arpi, *Born in Sin: The Panchsheel Agreement, the Sacrifice of Tibet* (New Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 2004).

⁵ Mahavir Singh, *Panchsheel: Retrospect and Prospect* (New Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2005).

position on India's dispute with Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir, while China has concerns about the 'Tibetan Government in Exile' in India.⁶

India's smaller neighbours in the subcontinent would certainly scoff at the notion that non-intervention is a central principle of India's foreign policy since they have been at the receiving end of Delhi's many interventions, militarily and politically. Sending troops into East Pakistan to liberate Bangladesh in 1971 and keep peace in Sri Lanka during 1987-90 were among the most notable of India's regional interventions. The Pakistanis will surely come up with a longer list of Indian interventions and some Nepalese might argue India's political intervention is a permanent part of their national life. When it comes to the subcontinent, India says it has special responsibility to maintain peace and order in the region and insists that other powers should not intervene in the region.⁷ This is not very different from the notion of a sphere of influence often claimed by many major powers.

Looking beyond the subcontinent, even a cursory look suggests that India has neither claimed nor sought to impose a measure of consistency on how it responds to military interventions by other powers. Since independence, India has taken all possible positions. On some issues, it was active in promoting intervention. In the 1940s, India took the lead in pressing the international community to sanction and punish the apartheid regime in South Africa. In the 1980s, it was Rajiv Gandhi who renewed the international campaign against apartheid.

While India opposed some interventions, it has supported or acquiesced in others. During the Cold War, India tended to criticise Western interventions around the world, but was somewhat ambivalent about Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe. This ambivalence came into sharp focus in the manner in which India dealt with the Anglo-French intervention of the Suez and the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956.⁸

Domestic political factors have also influenced Indian responses to military interventions. There has been a particular sensitivity in Delhi to Western interventions in the Middle East. Political parties are reluctant to offend the sentiments of the large Muslim population at

⁶ Pranab Dhal Samanta, 'India equates Jammu & Kashmir with Tibet?', *Indian Express* (15 November 2010), www.indianexpress.com/news/india-equates-jammu-&-kashmir-with-tibet/711151/. Accessed on 30 March 2011; Edward Wong, 'Uneasy engagement: China and India dispute enclave at the edge of Tibet', *New York Times* (3 September 2009), www.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/world/asia/04chinaindia.html. Accessed on 2 April 2011; Press Trust of India, 'Prudently handle Tibet Issue: China Tells India', *Times of India* (24 August 2011), p.16.

⁷ Mohammed Ayoob, 'India in South Asia: The Quest for Regional Predominance', *World Policy Journal*, Vol.7, No.1 (Winter 1989-90), pp.107-33; also, see Subrata K. Mitra, 'The Reluctant Hegemon: India's Self Perception and South Asian Strategic Environment', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.12, No.3 (September 2003), pp.399-417.

⁸ For a recent reconstruction of the events in 1956 see, Inder Malhotra, 'East of Suez', *Indian Express* (24 January 2011), www.indianexpress.com/news/east-of-suez/741344/. Accessed on 30 March 2011; see also Inder Malhotra, 'The art of intervention', *Indian Express* (14 February 2011), www.indianexpress.com/news/the-art-of-intervention/749698/. Accessed on 30 March 2011.

home, whatever the merits of the issue might be.⁹ Take for example Saddam Hussein's 1990 occupation of its neighbour and member of the non-aligned movement, Kuwait. The United Front government of the day was tongue-tied. Foreign Minister Inder Kumar Gujral went to Baghdad and hugged Saddam Hussein; it did not matter that the sovereignty of Kuwait, a fellow Third World country, was at stake. But there was near unanimous opposition in Delhi to the massive United States (US) intervention to rescue Kuwaiti sovereignty from Saddam Hussein.¹⁰ The Muslim factor is important not just to the Congress party and other regional formations like the Samajwadi Party. It also influenced the actions of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As part of its effort to improve relations with the US, the Vajpayee government gave careful consideration to Washington's request to contribute troops to the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 – in the end domestic political considerations tilted the Government against the move.¹¹

When overriding national interests were involved, India was prepared to acquiesce in the intervention by major powers, including those in the Muslim world. In the 1980s, India had difficulty publicly opposing the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. After all, Moscow was India's main strategic partner throughout the Cold War. It was the major source of arms and prevented Anglo-American initiatives on Kashmir in the UNSC.¹² There have also been occasions when India lent strong support to interventions by its friends. Recall the Indian move at the turn of the 1980s to back Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia even at the risk of losing ground political ground in Southeast Asia and alienating the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is indeed true that lending support to Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia to oust the genocidal regime of Pol Pot was for a good cause, but also involved some realpolitik – helping Vietnam stand up against China.¹³ The ambivalence of the Indian worldview towards intervention has endured and is evident during the current crisis in Libya and the Middle East. While the discomfort of the Indian political classes on the Western intervention in Libya was quite evident, there was notice, let alone criticism of the Saudi Arabia's intervention into Bahrain to protect the minority Sunni regime against the demands for democratisation from the Shia majority of the tiny island nation in the Gulf. At the end of March 2011, India received the Foreign Minister of Bahrain and the National Security Adviser of Saudi Arabia, and seemed silent if not supportive of both governments.¹⁴

⁹ Prithvi Ram Mudiam, *India and the Middle East* (London: IB Taurus, 1994).

¹⁰ J Mohan Malik, 'India's Response to the Gulf Crisis: Implications for Foreign Policy', *Asian Survey*, Vol.31, No.9 (September 1991), pp.847-61.

¹¹ For a review, see J. Mohan Malik, 'High Hopes: India's Response to U.S. Security Policies', *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 30, No.2 (Summer 2003), pp.104-12.

¹² Robert C. Horn, 'Afghanistan and the Soviet-Indian Influence Relationship', *Asian Survey*, Vol.23, No.3 (March 1983), pp.244-60.

¹³ John W. Garver, 'Chinese-Indian Rivalry in Indo-China', *Asian Survey*, Vol.27, No.11 (November 1987), pp.1205-19.

¹⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, 'Visit of Secretary General of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia', *Government of India* (29 March 2011), www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530217476. Accessed on 3 April 2011; see also Ministry of External Affairs, 'Visit of Foreign Minister of Bahrain to India', *Government of India* (30 March 2011), www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530217486. Accessed on 3 April 2011.

The Myth of an East-West Divide

India is not the only major power that has double standards when it comes to intervention in the affairs of other nations or the use of force. Few great powers have had consistent policies on this issue and their policies on intervention have been shaped by national interest and domestic politics. On the use of force, Western hypocrisy has had a longer and more consequential record. For decades, Western powers resisted international sanctions against 'White South Africa' and protected the apartheid regime well into the 1980s. The West opposed India's humanitarian intervention in East Pakistan in 1971 and rallied behind Pol Pot's genocidal clique after Vietnam intervened to oust it in December 1978. Western powers used intervention as a major tool of statecraft throughout the Cold War period, but at the same time acted to counter the military interventions by the Soviet Union and its allies. Since the end of the Cold War, as an intra-state conflict dominated the global landscape, the West came up with such concepts as 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'responsibility to protect'. But it has not been possible at all to adopt a consistent practice on when, where and how the international community should interject itself into civil wars.¹⁵

As the US, France and Britain launched their intervention in Libya, it has been quite easy for some in India to mistake the current intervention in North Africa as the return of US military adventurism in the Muslim world, despite the sobering experiences from occupying Afghanistan and Iraq. It has been equally tempting to interpret India's decision to dissociate itself from the UNSC's authorisation of a 'no-fly zone' as a rediscovery of the forgotten principles of non-alignment. If the West is seen as justifying its decision in terms of a moral 'responsibility to protect' the people of Libya against its dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the Indian decision is seen as a return to its traditional emphasis on non-intervention. This convenient antinomy, however, does not survive a close scrutiny. The decision by Germany (a leading light of the West) to join China, Russia, India and Brazil in abstaining from UNSC Resolution 1973 does not allow an ideological framing of the current Libyan context. Many developing countries currently on the UNSC as non-permanent members – including Arab, African and South American – voted the resolution. These countries are South Africa, Nigeria, Lebanon, Gabon and Colombia. If Germany broke ranks with the West, the list of developing countries that went with the Franco-British initiative is an impressive one. The resolution of the 22-member Arab League to request a no-fly zone against Libya in mid-March was critical for the creation of an international consensus in favour of the no-fly zone.¹⁶ Although the Arab League's resolution was riddled with contradictions, it underlined the fact that the Libyan ruler Gaddafi had few friends in the Arab world, who were ready to raise the banner of Arab sovereignty. The Arab League has provided much of the needed

¹⁵ For a review, see Alex Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009); see also, Alan J. Kuperman and Timothy W. Crawford, eds., *Gambling on Humanitarian Intervention: Moral Hazard, Rebellion and Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁶ Ethan Bronner and David Sanger, 'Arab League Endorses No-Flight Zone Over Libya', *New York Times* (12 March 2011), www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13libya.html. Accessed on 3 April 2011.

political cover to the Western intervention in Libya, it also allowed Russia, China, India, Brazil and Germany to abstain rather than reject the resolution.

Contrary to the image in India of a trigger-happy US embarking on a third war in the Middle East, Washington was deeply divided on defining its response to the Libyan crisis and there was much reluctance within the Obama Administration to be drawn into yet another quagmire in the Muslim world. As Paris and London pressed Washington to support military intervention, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was at the forefront of the resistance. Gates, who has had served many Presidents in Washington, focused on the costs of enforcing a no-fly zone and the possible folly of embarking on yet another intervention in the Middle East. As liberal interventionists in the administration and the neo-conservatives in Republican foreign policy establishments continually pressed for US military leadership in Libya, President Barack Obama agreed to back the no-fly zone.¹⁷ While Obama was under pressure to be seen as ‘doing something’, he conditioned his support towards a quick transfer of the military command to be put under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), limiting the role of the military mission to protecting the civilians and affirming that there will be no involvement of the US ground troops under any conditions. In agreeing to intervene in Libya, Obama also sought to differentiate his administration’s policy from that of former US President George W. Bush, by insisting on a number of conditions for US intervention. These included support of the UN, a sufficient moral and national security justification, and the readiness for others to share the burden of the intervention. While this was described as the ‘Obama Doctrine’ on interventions, it was more clearly a response to specific circumstances rather than a definition of high principles. It reflected the caution that had emerged in Washington in the wake of the misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq and overwhelming political need to limit the US role and thus conserving its energy.¹⁸ Just as in the US, in Europe, there have been considerable apprehensions about where the mission to protect the civilians of Libya might end up. There was also some sense that French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron were seeing the Libyan mission as a way of shoring up their domestic political standing.

¹⁷ For a brief assessment on how the right and left in Washington’s political spectrum often combine to support US interventions, see Stephen Walt, ‘What intervention in Libya tells us about the neo-con liberal alliance’, http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/21/what_intervention_in_libya_tells_us_about_the_neocon_liberal_alliance. Accessed on 3 April 2011.

¹⁸ For a review, see Howard LaFranchi, ‘Obama on Libya: The Dawn of a Foreign Policy Doctrine?’, *Christian Science Monitor* (4 April 2011), www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2011/0404/Obama-on-Libya-The-dawn-of-a-foreign-policy-doctrine. Accessed on April 4, 2011; For a wider range of views see, ‘Is There an Obama Doctrine?: Room for Debate’, *New York Times Online* (30 March 2011), www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/03/29/is-there-really-an-obama-doctrine/the-risks-of-the-obama-doctrine. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

India's Search for a Balance

India's abstention and its common position with China, Russia and Brazil does not reflect a new East-West divide, but genuine differences on the merits of the Libyan venture. India's position is no different from many strong reservations expressed openly in the North American and European debates over the use of force to secure humanitarian objectives, in general and the Libyan intervention, in particular. The Indian decision was not taken as a way of expressing its non-aligned or non-Western identity. It can be explained in terms of India's strategic culture that is very risk-averse and rather prudent when it comes to the use of force. It can also be understood in terms of India's domestic politics with its post-colonial tradition of opposing Western interventions in the Middle East. India also is reluctant to concede political space in the developing world to China, by appearing to align uncritically with the West. Within the Indian establishment, there are always concerns about the 'precedent-setting' quality of Western interventions and the consequences for India's strategy to prevent the internationalisation of its own domestic problems and regional disputes.

In the specific case of Libya, one of the main differences between Delhi, on one hand, and Paris, London and Washington, on the other, is the timeline of the military intervention. Sarkozy and Cameron appeared to have bet that use of air power over the Libyan skies can produce the desired political results quickly. India was not so sure that the intervention could be kept limited in such a time and scope. There are many scenarios for failure and that an extended air campaign operations will divide and weaken the international, regional and local coalitions against Gaddafi are not far-fetched propositions.¹⁹ A failure to oust Gaddafi quickly, India believes, could make matters worse in Libya by prolonging a civil war. Many in the West also suggest that a mission creep is built into the Libyan intervention – from the proclaimed goal of protecting people to promoting regime change. Paris and London assert that doing nothing in Libya would have meant helplessly watching Gaddafi massacre the people in Benghazi, which has been under the control of the opposition since the protests against Gaddafi started in February 2011. Some in the West question the credibility of this widely accepted moral imperative.²⁰ Delhi's argument, on the other hand, is that the use of force could lead to greater bloodshed. Paris, London and Washington say they have no desire to introduce land armies into Libya. None of them, it would seem, could afford it. If the use of air power does not sufficiently change the balance of power on the ground, between Gaddafi and his opponents and produce a framework for democratic transition, the introduction of an international ground force would become inevitable. On the other hand, abandoning Libya to its fate after a failed intervention might produce a Somalia like situation

¹⁹ For a discussion see, Bruce Crumley, 'How Libya might go wrong: the French Version', *Time* (30 March 2011), www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2062272,00.html. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

²⁰ Steve Chapman, 'Did Obama Avert a Bloodbath in Libya?: Panicking over a Dubious Threat', *Chicago Tribune* (3 April 2011), www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/ct-oped-0403-chapman-20110403,0,4286197.column. Accessed on April 4, 2011.

that would leave the region in a far worse condition than before the launch of an international intervention.²¹

Some in the West argue that Delhi's abstention from the UNSC resolution means that India is not ready to play the part of a great power and contribute to the management of the world order. That argument, however, is flawed. An Indian endorsement of the use of force in Libya would not have given Delhi a say in either conducting the military operations or defining the terms of the final political settlement. The current operations against Libya are not being run by an international command established by the UNSC; what the UNSC has done is simply open the door for France, Britain and the US to launch a military campaign. India cannot be simply expected to automatically back all Western decisions to use force. Nor would anyone in Delhi buy the proposition that India must prove itself worthy of a permanent seat in the UNSC.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who believe India is ready to march back to the sterile posturing of the past. They hail or lament India's decision to sit on the fence as a return to non-alignment and suggesting the possibilities for a new non-Western coalition.²² These propositions involve a profound misreading of India's position. India's policy in Libya can indeed be interpreted as being driven by a cold calculus of national interest and a healthy scepticism about the use of force by third parties in an internal conflict. To be sure, some of its leaders in the government and opposition were tempted by the traditional rhetoric on sovereignty and non-intervention.²³ The foreign policy establishment's reactions, however, were clinical and entirely non-ideological. The apolitical articulation of India's Libya policy has its down side as well. The bureaucratic explanation of the UNSC vote in New York is not a substitute for the much needed Indian leadership's public reflection on the developments of the Middle East.²⁴ An emphasis on Indian interests in the region cannot and should not prevent Delhi from offering genuine empathy and support to the Libyan people, who have shown such great courage in standing up against a violent and brutalising dictatorship. Indian foreign policy will have a lot more credibility if India is seen as carefully balancing its

²¹ The summary of Indian views here are based on the author's conversations with senior Indian officials during March 2011.

²² Jorge G. Castenada, 'The Trouble with the BRICs', *Foreign Policy* (14 March 2011), www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/14/the_trouble_with_the_brics. Accessed on 30 March 2011; Ben Zala, 'Where are the BRICs?', *Eurasia Review*, (22 March 2011), www.eurasiareview.com/libya-where-are-the-brics-analysis-22032011/. Accessed on 30 March 2011; Michael Cecire, 'BRICs Fall Flat on UNSC Libya Vote', *World Politics Review*, (28 March 2011), www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8319/brics-fall-flat-on-unscl-libya-vote. Accessed on 30 March 2011.

²³ For example see, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee's statement in parliament in response to opposition demands for a resolution condemning Western intervention in Libya. 'External forces can't decide on Libyan regime change: India', *Indo Asian News Service* (22 March 2011), <http://in.news.yahoo.com/external-forces-cant-decide-libyan-regime-change-india-20110322-081319-920.html>. Accessed on 3 April 2011.

²⁴ For the official Indian position, see 'India's Explanation of Vote on the Libyan Resolution in the UN Security Council' (17 March 2011), delivered in New York by Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri, Deputy Permanent Representative, www.un.int/india/2011/ind1838.pdf. Accessed on 30 March 2011.

interests and values. Over the long-term, the Indian strategic community needs to debate on when, where and how India might use or support the use of force by the international community. As India's weight in the international system increases and its military capabilities become consequential, Delhi will be called upon to contribute more to the maintenance of international peace and security. This debate is long overdue and can only be kick-started by the political leadership at the highest levels.

In the near-term what happens in the UNSC and how India votes there is only one part of the story. What Delhi does in and around Libya is probably far more important. Delhi needs to add some important correctives to its current policy on Libya that appears too tilted in favour of the status quo. Whatever the merits of the Franco-British intervention and the prospects for its success, new facts will soon be established in Libya. In responding to this dynamic situation, Delhi could take a number of steps. One is to contribute to the humanitarian relief operations in Libya. Delhi must equip and prepare its military to provide relief to various regions in Libya that are accessible. India must open contact and consultation with the Libyan opposition leaders who have formed a government of their own and have won recognition from some European governments. That it did not back the intervention gives Delhi an opportunity to engage the Gaddafi regime or its successors. Finally, India must be prepared to render all assistance to a possible transition towards political reconciliation and democratic institution-building in Libya. An activist approach and a willingness to take the lead in resolving the conflict, might in fact, lend credibility to India's claim for a seat at the international high table.

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