

UNSTABLE GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD: India Joins NATO, Gulf Cooperation Council Against Syria

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

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The UN resolution sponsored by NATO is in its essence a surrender document. Given the fate of Muammar Kaddafi, it is no wonder that this has been rejected by the Assad government. In Libya, after the NATO-assisted takeover of the country by armed groups by mid-2011, several thousand former officials have been killed or jailed.

Indeed, both Russia and China have shown themselves to be far more reliable partners than the NATO powers, who welcomed Hosni Mubarak getting toppled and going to prison, despite the fact that the Egyptian strongman had been pursuing NATO-friendly policies from the start of his rule.

Altogether, the region seems headed for great instability. Hopefully, bloodshed can be avoided, although the odds are that a conflict may break out, between Syria and Turkey and between Iran and Israel. Rather than adopt a neutral position, the Government of India has shown by the Syria vote that it intends to go along with NATO.

Just as it did in the case of Libya, the Arab League (AL) has made it clear that it favours a change in the regime in Damascus. This is hardly surprising, as the Baath Party which rules Syria has the same ideology as the party headed by Saddam Hussein did in Iraq, that of ultimately overthrowing the Royal Houses which rule in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Indeed, although both Iraq and Syria subsequently evolved into personalised governments led by a single individual (Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad), the Baath ideology was at its root motivated by the secular Arab nationalism exemplified by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. He made no secret of his distaste for the sheikhs and monarchs who ruled over several countries, all of whom had close geopolitical links with the countries that today lead the NATO military alliance. As a reaction, the Royal Houses began to patronize the religious groups opposed to Nasserism, support that reached elevated levels during the 1980s, when Zbigniew Brezezinski and later Robert Casey implemented the strategy of using religious groups to battle the foes of the US.

Indeed, from the early years of the 20th century, an alliance between religious groups in the Arabian peninsula and the UK had developed. During the 1950s, the purpose of this alliance was to weaken the secular Arab nationalists, by calling them less than faithful to the tenets of the great faith that they were born into, Islam.

During the 1980s, the target was the USSR, specifically in Afghanistan.

Later on, 9/11 led to a temporary breakdown of the alliance between the US and the UK and religious groups. For a few years, there was a backlash against Wahabbism, the austere creed that was so helpful a century ago in weakening the hold of the Turkish caliphate in the Arab world. Efforts were made to reform school curricula, and to weed out religious extremists from the key slots into which they had been placed in the past. However, all this got reversed once the 2003 attack on Iraq took place. Once again, the secular - albeit authoritarian - elements such as Saddam Hussein became the principal enemy, to fight whom the NATO powers once again turned to the very religious establishments that they had put under suspicion after 9/11. With the coming of the Arab Spring and the opportunity this unrest provided to make an end of secular authoritarians such as Muammar Kaddafi and next Bashar Assad, once again a 1980s-style alliance has formed between Wahabbi zealots and NATO.

As in the past, this alliance has been of immense benefit to the Wahabbis, who have become key - often dominant - components of the governments that have been formed across the region in the wake of the Arab Spring. In Libya, it was Nicholas Sarkozy who joined with David Cameron to ensure the fall of the secular Gaddafi and his replacement by a large number of armed fighter groups, most of whom owe allegiance to Wahabbism.

Ironically, while in France Sarkozy has banned the face veil (thereby hitting at personal freedom in a democracy), those whom he helped to power in Benghazi have imposed their version of Sharia Law there.

All across Syria, efforts are on to bring in local versions of Sharia Law, replacing the secular and pan-Libyan codes that had been in place during the four decades when Muammar Kaddafi ruled Libya.

In Tunisia as well, secular lifestyles and regulations are facing an unprecedented challenge, as is the case in Egypt. Even Turkey has changed. The people of that ancient and noble country know that they will never be accepted into the European Union. The fact that an overwhelming majority of the Turkish population is Muslim scares several European countries, especially France, Germany and Austria, although of course they never admit to this in public. As a consequence, the population of Turkey has joined its government in becoming less European and more conservative.

The rejection by Europe has also made Turkey turn once again to the Arab world. These days, Ankara is even more influential than Teheran in the region, as is being shown in Syria, where Turkey has come down on the side of those demanding the ouster of Bashar Assad. In this, Ankara is on the same side as the Arab League, which too wants Bashar to quit and a government to be formed that would be dominated by the majority Sunni population of the country, rather than by the minority Shia. Alawites is the community into which the Assads were born.

Indeed, the Arab League has been highly influential in getting India to join hands with them

and with NATO in the UN Security Council. The resolution brought forward by the Arab League would, if implemented, make it impossible for not just Bashar Assad but the whole of the present Syrian government to continue to rule, which is why it is being opposed by Damascus.

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Those who run Syria now know that this will be their fate as well, no matter what the promises that are being made to them now are. Hence they are likely to battle to the last, unlike Kaddafi, who foolishly believed in his sons when they told him that a partnership with NATO was possible. The son most responsible for Kaddafi's humiliation and death, Seif, is now in a cage in Misurata, not sure each morning if he will be allowed to survive the night. It was Seif who took seriously the sweet words that he heard from European intermediaries, and who ensured that his father surrendered to the US and the UK his WMD, his nuclear materials, and his defense secrets. Today, these two powers are unconcerned at his fate. After all, his use is over. Now what does it matter if Seif is alive or dead? "Human rights" is only a doctrine intended for selective application.

While Muammar Kaddafi went down without a fight, will the same happen in the case of Bashar Assad? The Syrian leader knows that the fate intended for him - including by most Arab rulers - is the same as that which befell the Libyan dictator.

His best chance of escape is to create enough trouble elsewhere that the attention of his enemies gets diverted to internal issues. Should the Shia situation go out of control in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, should the Kurds once again get restive in Turkey, and the Palestinians in Jordan, then certainly attention will shift from Daraa and Homs in Syria. The question is: does the Syrian regime any longer have the capacity to create such disturbances? Or has it become exhausted, which is what Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are hoping. The three are the regional powers most eager to see the Shia-dominated regime in Damascus replaced by one where the Sunnis - especially the Wahabbis - call the shots.

However, within each there are strong groups unhappy with their governments. Egyptians in particular have become a revolutionary force in the GCC, mixing with local populations and calling for Tahrir Square to be repeated in other Arab capitals.

India has joined hands with the NATO powers and the Arab League in calling for regime change in Syria. While this decision has been justified on the grounds that there are large expatriate populations in the GCC, and consequently India needs to adopt the GCC line on regional issues, the reality is that a buyer of petroleum as large as India can never be cold-shouldered by the GCC.

Indeed, it is precisely because China is an even bigger purchaser of petropoducts than India that Beijing knows that there will not be significant diplomatic damage as a consequence of standing by Bashar Assad. Indeed, both Russia and China have shown themselves to be far more reliable partners than the NATO powers, who welcomed Hosni Mubarak getting toppled and going to prison, despite the fact that the Egyptian strongman had been pursuing NATO-friendly policies from the start of his rule.

It's clear that the NATO powers are fair-weather friends, and China and Russia want to show the Arab world that they are not. That they stand by their allies in bad times as well as good. Given the complexity of the situation in the region, the Manmohan Singh government would have been best advised to abstain from voting, rather than go along with NATO.

However, UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi usually adopts pro-NATO positions, and hence perhaps the PM had no choice. Once Bashar Assad falls - if he does - the attack will move on to Iran and the Khamenei-Ahmedinejad duo.

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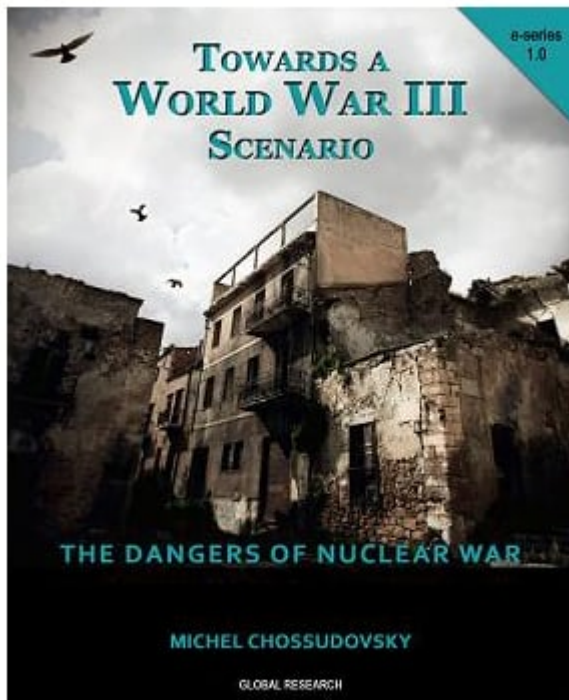
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