

US war drive rattles Indian elite

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The US drive to attack Syria is intensifying the crisis of India's government and elite. Already battered by an economic storm that has seen economic growth halved and the value of the rupee plummet, New Delhi fears a war will send oil prices soaring. This would further fuel inflation and exacerbate what is already the world's third largest current account deficit.

Even more fundamentally, the sharpening of great power conflict and the threat of a wider war—involving much of the region, including Israel and Iran, and potentially drawing in Russia—is cutting the feet from India's geo-political strategy.

During the past decade, India has sought to straddle the growing fissures in world geo-politics. New Delhi has forged a “global strategic partnership” with Washington, even while maintaining its historically close relations with Russia, pursuing improved ties with China, and insisting that India will continue to assert its “strategic autonomy” in world affairs.

India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government has responded to the current war crisis with much handwringing and equivocation. It recognizes that the US, in pursuit of its predatory interests, is recklessly unleashing the whirlwinds of war. But it has mumbled only meek opposition to the US's plans to unilaterally attack Syria in flagrant violation of international law.

During the dinner on the first day of last week's meeting of the G20 heads of government, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reportedly declared that India would oppose any action taken against Syria without UN authorization. Subsequently, India declined to sign the “joint statement” drafted by the US and its closest allies—including Britain, France, Canada, Japan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia—on the sidelines of the G-20 summit. Without providing a shred of proof, the statement proclaimed the Syrian regime guilty of using chemical weapons, dismissed the “failed processes” of

the UN, and endorsed US efforts to hold the Syrian regime “accountable”—i.e. to attack Syria.

Earlier, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid had given credence to the US's attempt to use last month's alleged chemical weapons attack to justify international action against Syria, saying “if it's true that there has been use of chemical weapons, it is important that must be prevented,” but he went on to argue such action needed UN sanction. Said Khurshid, “When the UN acts we are willing to take positions which are adverse to our friends... We will support the UN (on Syria) but (it is) difficult to say if we can go beyond that.”

India's suggestion that it would be ready to support action against Syria, if taken under the cover of the UN—an instrument of the great powers that has sanctioned numerous dirty wars—takes on added significance in light of recent developments. The US and France are scheming to exploit the Russian proposal that the Syrian regime place its chemical weapons under international supervision to their advantage, by enshrining it in Security Council resolution that attaches all manner of additional conditions and endorses US military action in the event it deems Damascus insufficiently compliant.

The Indian elite views its strategic alliance with Washington as vital to realizing its great power ambitions. And over the past decade it has enthusiastically expanded its political and military ties with Washington even though it knows full well that the US aims to make India a pivot in its strategy to contain and if need be militarily confront China.

Its calculation has been that it could finesse the deepening divide between the US, Russia, and China and that, by pursuing close relations with all three as well as other powers, such as the European Union and Japan, it could maintain “strategic autonomy,” i.e. the ability to maneuver outside any power bloc.

But repeatedly, India has come under heavy pressure from Washington to adhere more closely to its predatory agenda and has repeatedly done so.

Most significantly, New Delhi has lined up with the US in key votes at the International Atomic Energy Agency lending support to the US campaign to bully and threaten Iran over its nuclear program. The current US drive to overthrow the Assad regime, through organizing and arming Islamacist rebels, and now by preparing an outright attack, is itself very much part of Washington's ongoing campaign to re-impose neo-colonial rule over Iran.

In 2011, India, which was then sitting on the UN Security Council, abstained on the key resolutions that sanctioned US-NATO intervention in Libya. It subsequently maintained a complicit silence as the US and its NATO allies transformed an ostensible operation to protect civilians into a war for regime change, which killed tens of thousands and uprooted hundreds of thousands more.

In the case of Syria, India now finds Washington and Moscow, a close ally for decades and until recently far and away its most import military supplier, at loggerheads.

Fearful of antagonizing either, New Delhi, when unable to remain silent, issues desperate appeals for a "political solution," that is a power-sharing deal between the Assad regime and the "opposition," who since the beginning of the two-year war have been acting as imperialist proxies

While the Indian elite fears that a US attack on Syria could and would lead to a further polarization of world geo-politics, thereby making its own position even more untenable, this is not the only factor in its opposition, albeit muted and equivocal, to the US war drive.

The Indian government views the al-Qaeda aligned and other Islamacist elements that dominate the US-backed "rebels" as its adversaries, since such forces have served as proxies of its arch-enemy Pakistan in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

As was mentioned above, a US war on Syria would deal a further blow to the Indian economy. Indeed, it is a measure of how severe India's current accounts crisis is that New Delhi is preparing to dramatically increase Iranian oil imports—for which it can pay in rupees—although it knows this will spike Washington's

ire.

The Indian elite is also acutely aware that after the wars on Iraq and Libya there is mass opposition among the Indian people to another US war targeting a Middle Eastern country.

The main opposition Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), obviously with an eye on next year's national elections, has sought to appeal to this sentiment, although it itself led the push for an Indo-US strategic partnership.

Speaking in the parliament on September 4, former External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh called upon the government to speak out louder against "global policing and western hegemony". "The West," he added, "has no authority to take action against any other country, having caused so much damage to our neighbourhood."



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