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International Relations & Diplomacy

THE KOOTNEETI

An Indian Perspective to the World Diplomacy

#KOREANPEACETALK

Hailing a “New era of Peace”, North Korea leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, sealed their talks in April with a joint declaration, and a bear hug, reaffirming their commitment to complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

TRUMP STRIKES

SYRIA

MODI'S INFORMAL

MEET WITH XI-PUTIN



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WHERE INDIA STANDS

US launched a precision military strike on Syria in coordination with UK and France on early morning of 14th April 2018 in response to chemical attacks on Duma claiming seventy lives. The strike targeted three chemical weapon facilities including a scientific research facility near Damascus, chemical weapons storage facility near Homs and a command post in the vicinity. The strikes did not lead to any casualty and were carried with help of B1 bombers, naval vessels and 100 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Responses poured in from all concerned quarters including India which had till now maintained a silent stand on Syrian crisis. The US, UK and France led strikes incited India to take a vocal stand for the first time, since the crisis began in Syria.

As Donald Trump announced the precision strikes while addressing from white house and claimed the mission to have been accomplished, responses started pouring in from all quarters. By Saturday afternoon most countries had reacted while India could come up with a cautious but delayed response by evening i.e. more than fifteen hours after the attacks took place. MEA official spokesperson Raveesh kumar responded to queries regarding the recent strikes in Syria and said that India has taken note of the recent strikes in Syria and is closely following the situation. The statement counters the allegations that India has a muted stand on Syrian crisis and reinforces the fact that India is indeed monitoring the region and will respond when needed.

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India mentioned that the alleged use of chemical weapons, if true, is deplorable. Phrases “alleged” and “if true” symbolize that the response was framed following high level diplomatic thinking at Ministry of External Affairs. It shows the disbelief of India about use of chemical weapons in Syria which is more in line with response of Russia and implicitly favors the regime of Bashar al Assad. Russia called for immediate UNSC meet to address the concern and believed that US had staged the chemical attack to intervene in Syria. A day before the strikes, President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a telephonic conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi regarding exclusive strategic partnerships in wake of intensifying Syrian crisis. India implicitly supports the Syrian regime, as Syria under Baath party was one of the few Arab countries to stand with India on Kashmir issue.

India is not convinced of the US allegation of use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and the statement issued by MEA conveys it loud and clear. India called for an impartial and objective investigation by the OPCW to establish the facts. It urged all parties to show restraint and avoid any further escalation in the situation. Last year, when US struck a Syrian air base with 50 Tomahawk missiles from its naval warships on April 7 in response to a chemical attack on rebel held region of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib, India did not react immediately. However, it endorsed the joint statement issued at the meeting of BRICS west Asian envoys at Vishakhapatnam, ascertaining that any military intervention unauthorized by UNSC is incompatible with UN charter and is unacceptable.

Two days before US strike on Syria, in weekly media briefing, MEA official spokesperson Shri Raveesh Kumar, mentioned that “any use of chemical weapons, anywhere, any time by anybody under any circumstances is in complete disregard of humanity and is reprehensible. He said that “use of chemical weapons is contrary to the provisions of Chemical Weapons Conventions as well as accepted international norms. The perpetrators of such abhorrent acts must be held accountable.” India’s stand resonated in the joint statement agreed upon by India and UK during the Modi visit that took place four days after the strike, in wake of nerve agent attack in Salisbury.

India believes that the matter should be resolved through dialogue and negotiations on the basis of principles of UN charter and in accordance to international law. India has taken this stand since the beginning of Syrian crisis and it is in accordance with objective of Geneva and Astana talks that aim to bring peace in Syria. Syrian ambassador Riad Kamel Abbas appreciated India’s position on the Syrian crisis in adherence to the UN charter of non-interference for a political dialogue and looking at the aspiration of Syrian people. Syria has looked up to India and urged it to act as a mediator since the beginning of the crisis. High level Syrian delegations visited India and called it to engage pro-actively. Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mekdad, Political and Media Advisor Dr. Bouthaina Shabaan and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Mr. Walid Al Moullem visited India after the crisis began in Syria. India hopes that the long drawn suffering of people of Syria comes to an end soon.

India has been an advocate of noninterference in affairs of other countries and its response to US strikes in Syria reflects its defensive military policy. As far as Syrian crisis is concerned, India had two options: proactive engagement so as to strengthen its case for UNSC permanent membership or neutral stand with minimum reaction while abiding by basic tenets of its foreign policy. India adhered to the later, as currently it is not conducive for India to invest economic resources in Syria.

India’s response to Syrian crisis is in tandem with its stakes in the region and its engagement with the other countries. Unlike Gulf countries India does not has its expat population in Syria. A decade ago there were around 500 Indians in Syria who were advised to leave the country in wake of the crisis. On energy front India does not relies on Syria, as much as it is dependent on Gulf countries. Nevertheless, investment in reconstruction activities of Syria seems to be a prospective engagement for India in near future. As China has shown interest in investing in reconstruction activities in Syria, India needs to upstage its stakes in Syria. It needs to keeps its hands off Syria without alienating it and position itself in a manner that allows it to remain within reach.

Gulf countries, with whom India has higher stakes in terms of remittances of expatriate workers as well as energy dependence emphasize on ouster of Basahar al Assad. On the contrary, Iran with whom India has strategic stakes (Chabahar port) along with trade relations, supports the Syrian regime and labelled the strikes on Syria as a crime. Similarly, India has to maintain relations with Israel while not alienating the Arab countries. Israel, was not directly engaged in Syria till it conducted a strike on Iranian bases on 9th May in response to Iranian rocket fired at Golan Heights.

India treads cautiously in this volatile region. Its measured response is well taken and lives up to the mature and dignified image of Indian foreign policy. Realists may advocate for more proactive approach, however, India’s response to Syrian crisis in general and to US strike in Syria in particular, suits India’s interests in the region while maintaining its stature in international arena.