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# Business Line

## Libya: A difficult road ahead

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*The international community is divided over how to proceed to put the fractured Libyan state together. India, on its part, should have links with all the key parties in the conflict.*

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The UN Security Council Resolution 1973 saved the anti-Gaddafi movement from an impending rout at the hands of the loyalist forces and averted reprisals and killings of civilians in rebel-held areas. The US, France, the UK and others were quick to launch air-strikes and establish the no-fly zone over Libya, and to stop the loyalist forces from advancing into Eastern Libya.

The US, after having taken the lead, has now ceded leadership of the military action to NATO, which continues to enforce the no-fly zone. The immediate objectives of the UNSC Resolution having been met, the international community is divided over how to proceed further to put the fractured Libyan state together again. Most of the foreign civilians, including Indians, have now been evacuated from the war-torn country.

### Rebel strength

Control over the country is divided along East-West lines, with continuing battles for control over the critical oil export assets around Ras Lanuf and Brega. Gaddafi's forces have adapted their tactics to loss of control over airspace, have pushed back the anti-Gaddafi forces and are laying siege to Misrata.

Qatar, which has no love lost for the Gaddafi regime, had agreed to market oil exports from the rebel-held zone. This is clearly a means of strengthening the resources in rebel hands. High-level defections from the pro-Gaddafi establishment, including the Foreign Minister and others, have given rise to hopes that the team around Gaddafi may be disintegrating. However, the rebel forces are poorly trained, lack equipment and organised command and control structures and have not been able to inflict a decisive defeat on the pro-Gaddafi forces so far.

The US and European states do not wish to send in an intervention force on the ground, which would give rise to international and domestic adverse reactions, even though Libya offers quite favourable conditions for a military operation on the ground.

Libya is located close to European air force bases. Most of the Libyan towns and oil assets are on the coast, within easy reach of warships. The terrain of Libya permits excellent satellite-based surveillance and targeting of any hostile activity. The population is small, only six million, and concentrated along the coastline. A military operation to destroy Gaddafi's forces would be relatively easy, given control of the airspace and the sea, and sufficient political will. Given the vast military and logistics advantage it enjoys, NATO's pusillanimity is surprising; perhaps due to the bitter experience of Iraq and Afghanistan.

### Rebel strategy

France and Italy, having shared control of Libya in colonial times, may be hesitant about a military operation involving ground forces. With air power alone, the prospects are for a prolonged conflict between pro- and anti-Gaddafi forces, especially for control of the vital oil assets. Over a period of several months, the rebel forces could, with foreign support, improve their fighting capacity with training, equipment and organisation to a level where they could defeat Gaddafi.

At the same time, tightening the noose around Gaddafi could erode his strength to a point where a negotiated surrender or a defeat becomes inevitable. Therefore, the move on the part of some countries to provide covert support to the rebel forces is a sound strategy. It would enable the rebel armed forces to be built up, while political structures gain strength, and increasing international recognition and support.

There are some disquieting developments. Islamic extremist elements have seen this as an opportunity to enhance their role and prestige. The hesitation on the part of the US military to support the rebel forces is perhaps due to these concerns.

### Pressure on Gaddafi

Another problem is the response of neighbouring states in a prolonged conflict. Egypt and Tunisia are in the throes of a major transition to democracy and have little interest in intervention at present, but this could change. Algeria is facing popular demands for democratic reform. The role of Niger and Sudan is relatively less as the borders are small or remote in the desert areas.

The extended neighbourhood includes Italy and France, former colonial powers, and Greece, whose socialist-led government has links with Gaddafi. Syria had reportedly promised arms supplies to Gaddafi, but is now experiencing internal dissent. Gaddafi's isolation is bound to grow and pressures on his inner circle to break from him will too.

India must remain constructively engaged with the situation in Libya, an important economic partner. India's abstention on the UNSC Resolution 1973 was wise, considering the presence of Indians in Libya and the wide and loose mandate given in the text.

But as the conflict situation is likely to be prolonged, it is important to have independent links and communication channels with all the key parties in the Libyan conflict which *de facto* is likely to be the government in Eastern Libya and in control of oil assets.

India should set up informal links (a special representative for Libya) with the Libyan National Council, without prejudice to the question of diplomatic recognition.

Coordination with countries such as Germany, Russia, China and Brazil should continue, while engaging with the US, Italy, France, the UK, and key Arab and African states. Unfortunately, India was absent from the London Conference on Libya on March 29, while Germany was a full participant. It is also time to consider sending humanitarian assistance, particularly medical assistance to Eastern Libya, as a sign of our support for the Libyan people.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece.)

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