



Libya: A European War?

The Libyan chapter of the 2011 “Arab Spring”, the attempt by the peoples of many countries to overturn dictatorships across North Africa and the Middle East, has involved international intervention via NATO and has also descended into a civil war. The civil war is being fought between the armed forces of the existing regime led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and his close family, and the loosely affiliated “rebel” fighters trying to depose him. The indigenous attempts to depose Gaddafi began on February 15, 2011 with a series of peaceful public protests in Tripoli, which were mirrored across Libyan cities (much as had occurred in Egypt and Tunisia before them). Having seen both the Egyptian and Tunisian leaderships overthrown by such movements, Gaddafi opted to meet these protests with a violent crackdown.

Gaddafi was successful in containing the uprising in the capital Tripoli, but not in the outlying areas. While this contagion of protest spread quickly throughout Libya, with groups declaring independence and liberation from Gaddafi’s rule, equally quickly this liberation became restricted to and pinned down in the city of Benghazi. It is in Benghazi that the rebels formed their National Transitional Council (assuming legitimacy on March 5, 2011), a government-in-waiting that pledged widespread reform, including the introduction of western style democracy to Libya.¹ This council has been recognized by the French (March 10) and Italian (April 4) governments as the legitimate authority in Libya, and the British government has sent experts in bureaucracy and organization to help the NTC structure itself and organize for government. Controversy arose over the role that British, French, Italian, and Jordanian military advisers (who might also be intelligence officers or special forces) have played in helping the rebels, and there is some limited evidence (in the form of photographs) of these people standing on the rebel frontline, although it is not clear if they have participated in the fighting themselves. This brief explores the state of the conflict at the time of writing, the political cost of the intervention, the importance of post-conflict planning, and the future prospects for transatlantic military interventions.

The Contemporary Context

Following intense diplomatic efforts, led by the French and British governments and with the US administration “leading from behind”, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973 (on March 17, 2011), which authorized all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack in Libya, and imposed a no-fly zone over the country.² This intervention was timely, as Gaddafi’s armed forces (notably bolstered by a large number of mercenary fighters drawn from the rest of Africa) seemed on the verge of defeating the rebels and capturing their last stronghold in Benghazi. Given the history of

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

the Gaddafi regime, it seemed unlikely that it would broker peaceful surrenders from the rebels, and in all likelihood it would have killed the rebel units wholesale. It should be noted, however, that despite the very poor relations between Gaddafi and the West during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, he had successfully brokered a re-entry into normal diplomatic relations following his abandonment of a fledgling nuclear capability in 2003. At the point of the UN Resolution and the beginning of the air campaign on March 19th, Gaddafi's forces had made great gains against the rebel fighters, clearing them from the vast majority of the west of the country and besieging the strategically important port city, Misrata.

At the time of writing, and after three months of allied aerial activity, Gaddafi's armed forces have yet to defeat the rebels, nor to push them out of cities like Benghazi and Misrata. While Misrata still suffers from artillery fire from government forces, it is considerably less besieged than it was in March, and there is now some evidence that the rebels are making good progress on recapturing land towards Tripoli. The rebel forces have also succeeded in clearing a land route to Tunisia (the previous failure to do so caused deep unease in Tunisia, due to fears of being dragged into a Libyan civil war because of a fight over contested space, and also fears that the conflict would not be contained to Libya). The rapid military defeat of the protesters by Gaddafi does seem to have been avoided, certainly in the short-term, but Gaddafi has clearly decided that his best prospects for victory lie in a conflict of attrition. He has correctly assessed that there is insufficient political will in Europe, certainly amongst populations feeling the first real wave of government austerity measures, to maintain a long-term commitment to a war in Libya,³ and that a mounting refugee crisis (heading towards Europe, and Italy in particular) will put pressure on European governments engaged in this action. Thus, the Gaddafi forces have taken to embedding themselves within local populations, and using 4x4 vehicles rather than light armor knowing that – under the rules of engagement operated by the coalition – this makes it far harder for them to be successfully attacked. While the rebels seem to be able to make relatively slow progress towards Tripoli, it is unlikely that they would be able to take Tripoli without causing substantial casualties amongst the ordinary population at large. The coalition is also conflicted over the issue of targeting Gaddafi and his family. At various points since March, direct targeting of the Gaddafi family both has and has not been the policy of the coalition forces – a confusion that has not helped the coalition deliver its UN backed objectives. The reality is, of course, that a Gaddafi who survives this military campaign will, history tells us, be bent on revenge in western cities. Gaddafi funded and armed terrorists who attacked mainland Britain during the 1980s, for example. The same is likely to occur again if he escapes from this military action. Thus, it is not in the interest of any of the 17 states now engaged in military action – and Italy would be particularly exposed – to let Gaddafi resume control of the country.

Two key parts of the campaign, from Gaddafi's perspective, are maintaining a tight grip on political dissent in those parts of Libya he still holds, and similarly retaining control of Libyan mineral wealth. While dissent was never a well developed part of Libyan political life, the regime has increased the measures it takes to suppress opposition in Libyan

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

society, including a far more intensive system of domestic intelligence and counterintelligence activity, some of which is being conducted by mercenary forces. Where BBC World Service journalists have managed to mingle with ordinary Libyans without their government minders, they have found a population willing to speak against the Gaddafi regime, but who acknowledges that it is too dangerous to repeat the protests of February 2011. The retention of the Libyan oil wealth in the east of the country – regardless of the seizure of Gaddafi’s internationally held assets – should allow him the capital and influence to maintain his defense forces, although there is now good evidence that production in both halves of the country has stopped for various security and transit reasons, and thus fuel has run short for the general population. If Gaddafi were to run out of fuel for his armed forces, in all likelihood he would be quickly defeated.⁴

The Political Cost of the Conflict

The UN Resolution that mandates the coalition military action did not authorize regime change – in fact the coalition force has to conclude when “the violence has stopped”.⁵ The resolution is an embodiment of the UN’s general “responsibility to protect” (R2P), and was put in place to prevent a massacre, rather than to shift the political future of Libya. Public statements by the French and British governments have complicated the situation. The governments have made contradictory declarations about whether their military forces are targeting Gaddafi and his family personally, and have also said that they think the terms of the UN Resolution can only be met by the overthrow of Gaddafi, and that anything short of that overthrow would place the Libyan people at risk. The French government have technically breached the terms of the resolution by supplying the rebels with military equipment, while other members of the coalition have been more circumspect about the ambition to install a new government in Libya.

The circumspect approach of the majority of the coalition has left them unexposed to the political dangers of Gaddafi remaining in power. For British Prime Minister Cameron and French President Sarkozy, these dangers are now quite acute. In addition, they have placed pressures upon their militaries, which arguably did not need to be there. This is particularly true for the British military, which is already suffering serious overstretch in Afghanistan, and for whom the political pressure to reallocate some of these resources from Afghanistan to Libya may become very pressing as Gaddafi resists the attempts to unseat him. The specter of repeating Suez⁶ is as real for the British and French governments as Vietnam is for any US administration. Despite this political pressure for demonstrable success, there have been no serious suggestions for the coalition to deploy ground troops to Libya. Deployment of ground troops could end the conflict quickly, or ensnare the coalition further, with further reputational losses.

Early in the campaign Gaddafi offered a ceasefire to the allies, although it was couched in the terms of him being left in control of western Libya and Tripoli. This was obviously aimed at trying to fracture the cohesion of the rebels and the international community. Such an offer, if indeed it was intended seriously, never gained traction anywhere in the international community except for South Africa (which has adopted a highly

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

idiosyncratic stance to the crisis). Talks of reconciliation also stumbled after the International Criminal Court's decision to issue arrest warrants for Gaddafi, his family and his intelligence chiefs on June 27, 2011. These warrants have all but removed the prospects of the regime going into some sort of voluntary or negotiated exile. Coupled with the restrictions (some actual and some policy choices) that the coalition military effort faces, then this looks like an intractable policy problem.

The French government has attempted to break some of the deadlock faced in the Libyan conflict by supplying arms to the rebel forces (and it is unclear whether they will face sanction for this). While there is no appetite amongst the coalition to introduce ground troops to conclusively resolve the conflict in the favor of the rebels, it is clear that an exclusively airborne campaign has distinct limitations – the main one being that Gaddafi's military has an unfettered ability to move around the country and to conduct its own restrictive operations against the Libyan people. While NATO's rules of engagement have been carefully drawn and implemented (as shown by the news stories about British bombing runs being aborted because of the danger of collateral damage), the longer the conflict continues, the higher the chance of collateral damage. In addition, the Gaddafi regime may escalate its attempts to level accusations of war crimes against the allies.

Burden Sharing Across the Atlantic

As the outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates pointedly noted, “the mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country. Yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more, to make up the difference.”⁷ Despite the history and bad blood between Colonel Gaddafi and the previous US administrations, there was little initial appetite in Obama's administration to get involved in the efforts to bring harsh measures on Gaddafi. The US State Department only joined the diplomatic efforts to bring the UN to a resolution at a late stage in March 2011, and Obama has faced criticism at home for his decision to involve the US military, even in a relatively low key way. Military realists have argued that America either needs to fully commit or not commit at all, whereas Obama's approach has been to try and create an environment in which America's partners can provide the mainstay of the military campaign. The ongoing military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq are considered to be far more important, particularly in straightened economic times. The American disquiet over Libya, which was a French and British initiative after all, was not helped by the reality that since 1991 the collective European contribution to NATO costs has declined from 34% to 21%, a substantial shift of the security burden in a time of relative peace.

There are 18 countries participating in the military campaign, with 15 of these actively involved in policing the no-fly zone and attacking Gaddafi's forces when they are engaged in offensive activities against the Libyan people or coalition forces.⁸ Interestingly, the coalition has not managed to generate the same level of attacks as they did in similar operations in 1999 against Serbia, which will raise some doubts – once the

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

operations are over – about the state of European military capabilities, particularly when the Libyans have not managed to muster much challenge to the no-fly zone.

In line with its reluctance to engage with the diplomatic process, the US withdrew its high-end manned fast-jet combat missions on April 4, but has provided electronic intelligence and unmanned aerial vehicle support. Although the US did not provide aircraft operating the highly potent Predator platform, as these aircraft are tied up in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor was the US prepared to provide Apache ground attack helicopters, which were similarly deployed elsewhere. This sort of capability has been improvised across the rest of the Alliance.

On June 1, NATO extended its mission by another 90 days, and Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen extended a positive note:

The figures speak for themselves. Since NATO first took action to protect Libya's people, we have kept up a high operational tempo with over 10,000 sorties. We have damaged or destroyed almost 1,800 legitimate military targets. That includes around 100 command-and-control sites which Qadhafi used to organize attacks on civilians. It includes over 700 ammunition stores which are used to supply his attacks. And almost 500 tanks, armored personnel carriers and rocket launchers, which he used indiscriminately against his own people.⁹

The Importance of Post-Conflict Planning

With the rebels finally making advances against Gaddafi's forces and heading towards Tripoli (albeit slowly), post-conflict planning should come to the fore, which it failed to do in the Iraq campaign. Managing the end of the conflict, and preventing its spread into Tunisia (which conducted a mostly bloodless revolution against its dictatorial leadership) and further into the Middle East, will be important in limiting the exposure of the Alliance to even more challenging disruptions to international security. Importantly, the rebels have learned from the Iraq experience, and they have pledged to leave middle-ranking government and security officials in place, rather than to prosecute a “de-B'athification” process, as happened in Iraq, which led to a critical power vacuum and the opportunity for the insurgency to take hold in 2004.

To assist the rebels in forming what is anticipated to be a replacement government, advisers on governance have been sent by the British and French governments. Other advisers have also been sent in a military capacity, and there has been conflicting evidence that they have taken frontline roles rather than just trying to educate the rebels in improved tactics and command structures. The combination of this advice and training (which will produce results more slowly, based on the experience of Afghanistan) and the coalition air campaign is now yielding some results on the ground. The rebels are clearly more organized and effective, and Gaddafi's fighters are under increased pressure as a result. It is noticeable, however, that the Alliance had very little knowledge at the outset of this campaign of what political views or preferences the rebels held, and a disturbing number of jihadists from the Libyan population at large had emerged in the Iraq theatre.¹⁰

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

The coalition will have to maintain the pressure on the rebels to keep true to the democratic and law-based freedoms they have been keen to expound thus far. After 2003, the Gaddafi regime had been keen to create normal trading relations with European nations, and had been widely seen to have “come out of the cold”. There is some talk, on the margins, that a Gaddafi prepared to entertain proper levels of democracy, transparency and security might be worth negotiating with, but it is difficult to see how that would work in the context of the rhetoric and military action taken against him.

Providing capacity to a new civil service (even with old bureaucrats still in place) and new security forces will take time, as the experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq clearly demonstrate. But this task is important, not just to the cohesion and security of Libya, but also to the wider region. Getting it wrong, may see the need for a wider international intervention in the whole of the Maghreb.

Conclusion – A Fight for NATO’s Future?

The real questions for the Alliance coming out of the Libyan campaign lie in the prospects for its own future and how far it is able to go in the defense of the values it holds dear. The campaign has shown a new way for the alliance to operate, with the US “leading from the rear” – facilitating and supporting a coalition response. The Libyan campaign has demonstrated the need for a Europe that is militarily and politically capable to intervene in strategically important parts of the world to protect citizens from despotic regimes. It has also shown Europe to be on the very brink of no longer being able to be militarily capable to deliver such interventions. Indeed, if the current rate of decline in European militaries continues, they would not be able to repeat this operation in ten years, and that is assuming this campaign is successful. Such issues are largely a question of policy choice: major European countries do clearly still have the appetite to commit to wars of choice and in defense of democratic values, but shifting defense priorities onto homeland security and critical spending choices have degraded Europe’s military capability and its ability to choose to intervene in scenarios where military options exercised abroad will be curtailed. There will be some scenarios in which it is impossible to face threats exclusively via homeland security tools.

The Transatlantic Alliance has been a key element in supplying peace in the post-Second World War international environment. The recent trip by President Obama to Europe underlined the extent of the “essential relationship” between the US and Europe, but the austerity measures may serve to sever the quality of the NATO security blanket if it is unable to defeat very minor and ultra-repressive military powers like Libya on the battlefield. Without a fully functioning Transatlantic Alliance supplying peace to the wider world, this role will likely be taken up by competing powers like China, India and to a lesser extent Russia, who all have key interests in creating and maintaining allies in unstable parts of the globe. The policy choice for the Transatlantic Alliance will partly be based on a straight cost-benefit analysis of the heavy price of intervening, but it will also take into account the costs of allowing competitors to spread their political and cultural influence, and the commensurate loss of trading opportunities. The financial costs are not

easy to assess, so such decisions may be made more by feel than by rational choice. However, the policy choice does currently exist, and the situation in Libya sends a strong signal: unless Europe's dwindling military capabilities are addressed, the choice may not exist in the medium term, and the opportunity to assist people who hold the same values of democracy, openness and freedom dear might no longer exist.

¹ Official website: <http://www.ntclibya.com/Default.aspx?SID=1&ParentID=0&LangID=1>

² As President Obama put it on March 28, 2011, to create "the conditions and coalitions for others to step up . . . ; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and humanity are upheld by all."

³ The US Administration has assessed the cost of the conflict in March 2011 alone at \$550 million, with an additional cost of \$40 million a month thereafter. "Libyan War Cost \$550 Million So Far, Lawmaker Says", <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/30/us-libya-usa-costidUSTRE72T6XZ20110330>

⁴ The Second World War German commander Ernst Rommel ran out of fuel for his tank divisions in North Africa (and Libya particularly) in the Second World War, which substantially aided his opponent, Bernard Montgomery and the famous Desert Rats victory.

⁵ Please see: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>

⁶ Which is shorthand for the 1956 Suez crisis, which followed the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egypt and the resultant British, French and Israeli attack on Egypt that did not carry US support, and subsequently embarrassingly faltered.

⁷ The Economist (June 18, 2011), Charlemagne: On Target.

⁸ The most notable of these nations are: the US, UK, France, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Italy, Norway, and the UAE. Jordan, the Netherlands, Qatar, Spain, Sweden and Turkey have limited themselves to support missions and Bulgaria, Greece and Romania have sent maritime assets only.

⁹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_75067.htm

¹⁰ For further analysis see: Saskia van Genugten (July 2011), Libya after Gadhafi, Survival, Vol.53, No.3, pp.63-75.