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NATO's Operation in Libya

Not a Model for Military Interventions

Marco Overhaus

NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya has fostered the illusions of politicians and military planners that it is possible for outside powers to support regime change without the need to embark on counterinsurgency or externally driven state-building, which have consumed foreign troops and civilian aid agencies for many years. Yet it would be premature, and even dangerous, to consider Libya as a model for future military interventions. Developments in this country are unique in some important ways and they do not refute the central lesson that the international community has had to learn previously: Outside powers that engage in regime change in the first place need to be prepared to deal with a potentially very messy post-war phase. The operation in Libya has demonstrated how limited NATO member states' willingness and ability to actually prepare (and pay) for such a contingency has become.

Developments in Libya have confirmed the arguments of those who early on promoted a military intervention in the country: The coalition led by France and the United Kingdom has prevented atrocities against the citizens of Benghazi in March 2011; by using air power and without committing ground forces, NATO has decisively contributed to the old regime's demise; and there is ground for optimism that regime change will not be followed by new instability and large-scale violence in the country.

It is thus tempting to consider Libya as an alternative model for military interventions to those experienced in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

recently stated that Europeans need to better prepare for missions such as the one in Libya, and some in the research community are already talking about a "Libya Doctrine." In a September article for *Foreign Policy* magazine, Susan Glasser noted that "America's foreign policy elite is falling in love all over again with a new model of war, one that supposedly beckons with modest investment, no boots on the ground, and a convenient narrative of freedom toppling dictatorships." According to Ivo Daalder, US Ambassador to NATO, and Admiral James Stavridis, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Libya showed that "the use of limited force – precisely applied – can affect real, positive political change." (*New York Times*, October 30, 2011).

This thinking can be found on both sides of the Atlantic.

Lessons from Libya

The North Atlantic Alliance played a more assertive role in Libya than had been authorized by United Nations Security Council resolution 1973. Rather than just enforcing an arms embargo, establishing a no-fly zone, and protecting civilians, NATO effectively became the Libyan rebels' "air force" while individual allies also provided technical advice and weapons to the rebels on the ground. Doubts about the legitimacy and legality of NATO's military actions in Libya were eventually sidelined by the support they enjoyed in the Arab world and because the actions turned out to be effective. This does not change the fact that Operation Unified Protector has inflicted collateral damage on the authority of the UN Security Council, because its mandate was effectively ignored.

NATO's operation was effective because Gaddafi's power base was more narrow and fragile than his 42-year dictatorial rule would suggest. With outside military support, the Transitional National Council (TNC) and other opposition forces in the Western part of Libya were able to unite their efforts, improve their operational effectiveness, and conquer Tripoli and other cities previously held by Gaddafi forces. Crucially, the TNC has emerged as a legitimate actor – at least externally – to represent the Libyan people. It has also been able to draw a plan for rebuilding the country after the old regime's fall. Libya's future now depends on whether the interim government in Libya will overcome internal power struggles and actually implement this plan in an inclusive way.

The circumstances in Libya are quite different from other conflict areas where the international community has intervened in recent years. In Afghanistan, for instance, the United States initially relied on its collaboration with the Northern Alliance to bring down the Taliban regime

in 2001. Given the Pashtun majority's objections, it would have been impossible to simply rely on the Northern Alliance to rebuild Afghanistan. In Bosnia, NATO supported Muslims and Croats in their fight against the Serbs without committing ground troops. It is unlikely, though, that the country would be a relatively peaceful place today if the international community had not deployed a 60,000-strong peace-keeping force and de facto imposed a new constitution.

The limits of Western resolve

Libya has shown the emergence of new domestic and international constraints on NATO member states' willingness and ability to engage in military interventions. To begin with, Operation Unified Protector revealed a lack of military commitment from a majority of member states. Only six allies – other than the United States – offered to directly participate in combat operations (Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Norway, and Italy). The German government not only refused to participate militarily but also did not support resolution 1973 in the Security Council. While this asymmetric burden-sharing is not unusual for the Alliance per se, the overall military resolve was clearly very limited this time. As a consequence, leaders within NATO and the United States called upon member states to contribute more to the campaign in order to avoid military overstretch.

Moreover, it was the first combat operation where the United States has not clearly taken the political and military lead. President Barack Obama had been keen from the very beginning to limit US involvement. Notwithstanding this intention, US forces provided the bulk of military assets and firepower as well as overall command and control during the first phase of the intervention. When NATO took over the military command, Washington reduced its role to supporting tasks such as aerial refueling and surveillance. US contributions were

still essential, however, to enable the other allies and partners to fully participate in the operation.

Washington's "leadership from behind" and the reluctance of many European allies to commit military resources in Libya reflect a more fundamental trend in Western foreign and security policy. NATO countries are all struggling with the longer-term consequences of the most recent economic problems. The current sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone, the budget deficits on both sides of the Atlantic and sluggish prospects for future economic growth are all absorbing the bulk of political attention. European Allies have announced significant reductions in their defense budgets. Along with a general public weariness of international military adventures, these developments point to a more inward-looking perspective for the foreseeable future. In a speech on Afghanistan in June 2011, President Obama stressed that his country should now "focus on nation-building at home." The American Congress has become more hostile to foreign engagements as well. The economic and debt-related troubles at home have very much exacerbated the conflict potential of transatlantic burden-sharing.

Implications for NATO's future missions

Operation Unified Protector might well turn out to be a success from a military standpoint, yet this would be a success under very specific circumstances: the regime which the international community wanted to get rid of became increasingly isolated; there was broad non-Western support for regime change in the international community; prospects for an alternative domestic coalition that is powerful and legitimate enough to create security and build a new political system turned out to be brighter than initially thought.

After all, the Libya operation should not let us forget the central lesson that previous conflicts have taught us, namely

that fighting the war is the easier part, whereas building the peace is where the real problems begin. If developments in Libya were still to go wrong, NATO and the international community could not simply stand by and watch. The problem is that external powers are increasingly unwilling and unable to cope with the potential consequences of such a scenario, be it in Libya or elsewhere.

These domestic and international restrictions are no short-term phenomenon. 2012 and 2013 will be election years in the United States, France, and Germany. More inward-looking political agendas are likely to dominate at least the following legislative periods. The European Commission estimates that the era of budgetary austerity in the European Union may well last for two decades. All of this means that rather than signaling a new – and potentially easier – model type of international interventions to support regime change, the Libya operation indicates that future NATO missions are likely to be less ambitious and more limited in their mandates. This could include patrolling waters to fight piracy, support for training and security-sector reform in third countries, or detecting and deterring terrorist activity. Reaching a political consensus on and mobilizing resources for comprehensive state-building or counterinsurgency will be much harder than in the past. We should not allow success in Libya to foster any illusions that we can get around this truth.

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