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A FURTHER PERSPECTIVE

Libya's Lesson for Europe

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After the Arab League urged creation of a no-fly zone over Libya, Mustafa Gheriani, a spokesman for the Libyan Transitional National Council, said, "We hope the Europeans will deliver now." But with divided opinions and shrinking militaries, the Europeans can't deliver.

The Libyan crisis again demonstrates that the emperor has no clothes, at least in Europe. For years a transnational European elite hoped to turn the continent into a third Weltmacht to compete with America and China. While the Common Market and then European Union created an economic colossus, leading European politicians wanted more.

The Euroelite frustration was palpable. For years the EU talked about forging a united foreign policy separate from that of America. Plans were advanced for European military planning and multinational units.

These efforts came to naught. No one thinks of Europe in confronting geopolitical problems. Charles Grant, director of the Centre for European Reform, complained: "On many of the world's big security problems, the EU is close to irrelevant. Talk to Russian, Chinese or Indian policy-makers about the EU, and they are often withering. They view it as a trade bloc that had pretensions to power but has failed to realize them because it is divided and badly organized."

The answer, the Eurocrats said, was the Lisbon Treaty, which came into force at the end of 2009. The agreement consolidated power in Brussels, expanded EU authority at the expense of national parliaments, and created a de facto president and foreign minister. French President Nicolas Sarkozy argued that the treaty -- ratified only by overriding normal democratic processes

-- was necessary because "Europe cannot be a dwarf in terms of defense and a giant in economic matters."

Libya, on Europe's southern doorstep and sporting extensive ties to several European nations, offers Europe an obvious opportunity to act. Yet the EU again has demonstrated why it remains essentially irrelevant to "the world's big security problems."

The Europeans remain badly divided over the popular explosion in the Arab world. Many European countries, especially colonial powers Britain, France, and Italy, enjoyed profitable ties with the discredited autocrats. In Paris Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie resigned because of her ties with the ousted Tunisian dictator, to whom the French government initially offered security assistance. Italy embraced Egypt's Hosni Mubarak before his fall. British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in the region with a gaggle of British defense contractors on a sales trip as protests erupted.

While EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso grandiloquently announced that "It is our duty to say to the Arab people that we are on their side," many member governments worried more about oil, trade, and terrorism. Even after Barroso spoke, Finnish Foreign minister Alex Stubb stated that the EU's main concern about Libya was to "control immigration" to the continent.

Largely AWOL were the two officials created by the Lisbon Treaty, European Council President Herman van Rompuy and High Representative for Foreign Affairs Baroness Catherine Ashton. The latter is nominally in charge of EU foreign policy and even oversees the "European External Action Service," or EU diplomatic corps. However, she has been little more than a bit player in this crisis, calling for sanctions to "put as much pressure as possible" on Gaddafi while refusing to opine on much else.

Other officials' political pirouettes have been breathtaking. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi turned on one-time friend Moammar Gaddafi. Prime Minister Cameron tossed aside his predecessor's friendly relationship with Tripoli. Malta and the Czech Republic endorsed stability in Libya as Gaddafi tottered. Malta and Cyprus, worried about increased refugee flows, opposed economic sanctions. Noted Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College, "A month ago, though no less dictatorial or repressive, Khadafy was the poster child for how to bring rogues in from the cold -- an eccentric despot who nonetheless gave up his WMD program and renounced support for terrorism in return for an end to his international isolation."

The Europeans have become born again democratizers. EU governments are demanding Gaddafi's departure and imposing sanctions. With Gaddafi still determined to fight, President Sarkozy announced French recognition of the National Transitional Council as Libya's legitimate government. The French president also advocated creation of a no-fly zone, which has become the military option du jour. The European Parliament endorsed creating such an area.

Sarkozy went even further, proposing "targeted strikes" on Gaddafi's forces. Here he left behind what little continental consensus had formed, however. The result has been a confused cacophony.

While European leaders agreed to look at "all necessary options," few seem inclined to go to war. Belgian Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere said the bombing proposal "didn't win a consensus;

quite the opposite. It won reserved, even negative, reactions."

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said, "We don't want to get sucked into a war in North Africa," and complained that Sarkozy appeared have acted "on a whim." German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted that "we must be very careful not to start something we can't finish." Despite British support for a no-fly zone, even a top London official responded to Sarkozy's bombing proposal with talk of going "step by step."

At a meeting of defense ministers NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that the French ideas "were not discussed at all." Czech Defense Minister Alexander Vondra said the proposal might have been "something for media consumption."

BUT THE EUROPEANS FACE an even more fundamental problem than disunity. They don't have the military assets necessary to do anything more substantial.

European governments long have emphasized quantity over quality in their militaries. During the 78-day war against Serbia, military analysts estimated that the Europeans possessed barely 15 percent of America's effective combat capabilities. Only U.S. participation, despite the lack of any serious American geopolitical interests, made that operation possible.

Even during the Cold War, facing the Soviet Union, European governments underfunded defense. The European members of NATO routinely promised to up military outlays and just as routinely violated their promises. But they knew Washington would defend them in any case.

The pattern has repeated itself with the rise of the European Union. In the midst of routine chatter about creating the European Security and Defense Policy, now part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Europeans regularly reduced the size of their militaries. While strengthening the EU structure in order to establish a common international approach, member governments cut back on the military forces necessary to implement such an approach. The Europeans seem to believe the continent can be a military power without possessing military power.

The ongoing fiscal crisis has caused the Europeans to reduce defense outlays even more deeply. Virtually every country, including Italy, Germany, Great Britain, and France, is making substantial cuts.

European governments are shrinking their militaries because they perceive few security threats. The likelihood of a Russian attack on major Western states is about the same as that of a Martian invasion, *à la* a modern *War of the Worlds*. The Central and Eastern Europeans worry more about Moscow, but are doing little more to maintain effective militaries. Virtually all European peoples prefer to preserve welfare benefits than guard against security threats.

NATO's Rasmussen worried: "If the cuts are too deep, we won't be able to defend the security on which our democratic societies and prosperous economies depend." Those deep cuts, however, seem inevitable. Stated Ian Brzezinski and Damon Wilson of the Atlantic Council: "All allies are cutting or flat-lining defense spending."

U.S. officials grumble about the negative impact on Europe's military capabilities, which they worry will force greater reliance on American forces in a crisis. But the Europeans have every

right to tailor their militaries to perceived dangers. Washington should stop hoping the Europeans will convert to neoconservatism. Instead, the U.S. should stop taking on Europe's problems as America's own.

In Libya the Obama administration should not let the Europeans dictate U.S. decision-making. Officials say they hope to achieve consensus within NATO. But there will be no consensus on military forces within NATO. Any action would be America and a couple others.

Rather than worry about whether the Europeans reach agreement on Libya, the Obama administration leave the issue to the Europeans. Libya was an Italian colony and long has had closer relations with Europe than with America. Protracted conflict or civil war in North Africa would have far greater consequences on Europe than on the U.S. There is no geopolitical reason to drag Americans into the Libyan imbroglio.

The unnecessary debacle in Iraq illustrates what happens when Washington leads badly. The point is not that a failed Libyan state would have no consequences for the U.S., but that the consequences likely would be far less costly than getting involved. Being a superpower means being able to ignore foreign chaos and war. Doing so wouldn't lessen the humanitarian tragedy, but military intervention is not charity. Even those supposedly being helped pay a high price: Perhaps 200,000 Iraqi civilians have died, and many more have been wounded. Washington should not repeat this disaster.

European politicians desperately want to make a difference internationally. But they lack the continental unity necessary to act as a world power. They also lack the military means to back their decisions. Washington should impart a simple message regarding Libya and beyond: the U.S. government will not treat Europe like a great power until the latter starts acting like one.

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