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Libya: Costs Outweigh Benefits

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Months after the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi and a day after his death, fighting continues in Libya. Even Tripoli recently saw a brief but unexpected gun battle. A majority of Americans now are critical of President Obama's decision to go to war—which, of course, he claimed was not a war. Libya exemplifies an aimless foreign policy supported by a purposeless alliance—yet another war of choice after thousands of lives and more than a trillion dollars were expended in two other unnecessary wars over the last decade.

Even if the Libyan war counts as an American victory, the benefits pale compared to the costs. Libya gave the lie to the dubious doctrine of Responsibility to Protect. This was no humanitarian operation. Yes, the Qaddafi regime was brutal, but its forces had massacred no civilians before the campaign to “save” the Libyan people. Like other civil wars in Third World countries, this one generated most of its killing through the fighting itself.

Yet after pushing through a United Nations resolution authorizing military action to protect civilians, NATO launched a slow-motion campaign designed to achieve regime change at minimal allied cost. Total Libyan deaths are uncertain but likely run into the tens of thousands. Most of them died after the conflict was lengthened by minimal, half-hearted Western action. The last pretense of humanitarianism disappeared when the alliance continued bombing the remnants of Qaddafi's forces after his regime collapsed. NATO airstrikes persist even today, though Qaddafi's forces are largely defeated and threaten no civilians.

Not that the allies imagined regime change would take so much effort. Western governments thought a few days of bombing would topple Qaddafi. Last week, eight months after the uprising began, Lt. Gen. Ralph Jodice II, commander of NATO's air campaign, conceded^[3] that “We're all surprised by the tenacity of the pro-Qaddafi forces.” Alliance spokesman Col. Roland Lavoie was even more befuddled^[4]: “It just does not make sense to see what these few remaining forces are doing.” Moreover, by relying on nonexistent atrocities to justify their operation, the allies risk reaping

the usual consequences of crying wolf.

The Obama administration's Libyan adventure also means future Western operations, even with better justifications, are less likely to receive United Nations backing. China and Russia expressed chagrin when the allies used a resolution authorizing "humanitarian" action in Libya to promote regime change. They aren't likely to be fooled again. They certainly will demand a higher price for any future acquiescence.

Worse, the Libya action will discourage other pariah regimes from coming in from the cold. Muammar Qaddafi both sponsored state terrorism and developed nuclear weapons before making a deal with the West. He then became the allies' new best friend, a model for cooperation with the West; Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joseph Lieberman even flew to Tripoli to discuss providing him with military aid.

Then, after Qaddafi abandoned any means of retaliating against militarily superior foes, the allies took advantage of his weakness to oust him. Other governments took note. The North Korean Foreign Ministry opined: "Libya's nuclear dismantlement, much touted by the U.S. in the past, turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as 'guarantee of security' and 'improvement of relations' to disarm and then swallowed it up by force." The allied agreement was "an invasion tactic to disarm the country." What state, finding itself in Washington's gunsights, is likely to voluntarily disarm?

More mundane but of greater immediate danger is the potential spread of conventional arms from Qaddafi's multiple arsenals. Warned Peter Bouckaert ^[5] of Human Rights Watch: "Weapon proliferation out of Libya is potentially one of the largest we have every documented—2003 Iraq pales in comparison—and so the risks are equally much more significant." The Qaddafi regime is thought to have accumulated 20,000 portable surface-to-air missiles, many now missing. Richard Clarke, former White House terrorism adviser, worried ^[6] that "the probability of al-Qaeda being able to smuggle some of the stinger-like missiles out of Libya is probably pretty high." On my recent trip to Afghanistan, military officers said they were watching for any anti-aircraft missiles which might fall into the Taliban's hands. The war's impact on terrorism remains another worry. Only hatred of Qaddafi held together the disparate rebel forces. Some insurgents fought against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. A former Guantanamo Bay detainee holds a top position in the opposition leadership. Warned Walid Phares ^[7], "The Islamist militias within the rebels are the most organized, widest network." Moreover, Islamic extremists rounded up by Qaddafi during his pro-Western phase have been released.

The evolution of the new Libyan government also remains uncertain. The National Transitional Council has only limited control over the armed factions now effectively ruling most of Libya. The NTC forces—an amalgam of violent jihadists, tribal opponents and liberal democrats—imposed vigilante justice, including more than a few murders, along their way to victory.

Amnesty International estimates that the NTC is holding more than 2,500 people without charges—detainees who, NTC officials admit, often are beaten in order to extract confessions. Black Africans have been arrested en masse on the assumption that they were Qaddafi supporters. Russia's UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin emerged from a briefing by the head of the UN Support Mission to Libya citing "violations of human rights and international humanitarian law." The NTC may eventually create a liberal democracy, but the outcomes in Kosovo and Iraq suggest otherwise. There are plenty of historical examples when good guys who helped oust dictators ultimately lost to bad guys with guns; Iran and Nicaragua come to mind.

NATO now owns the result, whatever it proves to be. Not that the alliance can claim to be surprised; during the extended fight for control in Libya, NATO occasionally threatened to bomb the rebels if they harmed civilians. One wag suggested the possibility of using the same NATO planes to bomb both combatants to save fuel. Nor is Western involvement in Libya likely to end anytime soon. Gen. Jodice said the continuing resistance of Qaddafi's supporters demonstrated the need for NATO's ongoing military involvement. And Max Boot and Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations call for an outright Western occupation.

Finally, Libya demonstrated that the United States gains little but loses much by remaining part of NATO, initially created to contain Soviet communism. Then European survival was seen as a shared vital interest. Now the alliance is a transmission belt of unnecessary wars. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Europe and America no longer face a common existential threat, or even many shared security concerns. The alliance survived on inertia. American officials enjoyed having allies to "lead," even though the latter were well able to defend themselves. The allies like being defended by a superpower willing to do the heavy lifting in any conflict. As a result, the George W. Bush administration pressed the Europeans to join its counterproductive invasion of Iraq. Severe divisions within the alliance prevented any collective NATO response, but several individual members sent troops. The allies responded more positively in Afghanistan, in part to show solidarity after 9/11 and also because many European states consoled themselves that they were engaged in nation building rather than a traditional military operation. Two-thirds of NATO's twenty-eight members have joined other nations to back U.S. counterinsurgency operations. Particularly notable is the participation of NATO wannabes, such as Georgia and Macedonia. Hoping to win the perceived benefits of membership—international status, financial aid, military guarantees—these small countries have joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The NATO complement performs a useful role, but Washington would do better if it withdrew its forces from

Europe and eschewed assistance from countries that joined because they believed doing so would obligate Washington to come to their aid in a conflict not involving America.

Libya reversed this process, with Britain and France avid for war and the United States more reluctant. The Obama administration gave in while attempting to limit Washington's involvement. As it was, only eight of NATO's twenty-eight members contributed militarily.

Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen nevertheless argued that the conflict was a "positive story" and that the other states contributed "through our command structure and the funding of certain activities," as if that were the equivalent of military action. In fact, complained Michael Clarke [8] of the Royal United Services Institute: "It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that NATO emerges from this successful operation weaker than [when] it went into it."

The war highlighted the Europeans' limited ability to carry on combat operations against even the weakest of international opponents, in this case a fading despot facing a popular revolt. And that is before the large budget cuts planned by virtually every European government. Fogh Rasmussen conceded that Washington provided "unique and essential assets," an obvious understatement. However, he continued, "that is actually the essence about being an alliance, that we help each other."

Precisely how are the European countries helping America by forcing it to provide everyone with everything they lack? No amount of "smart investment," NATO's new mantra, can make up for Europe's military weakness. All told, the Libya war was quite an achievement for NATO—in an almost completely negative sense. Anne-Marie Slaughter, a well-known advocate of "humanitarian intervention," wondered whether anything would be "worse than Col. Gaddafi staying on by increasingly brutal means for many more years." The many thousands who died in the war might answer yes. So too might the hundreds of thousands killed in the violence unleashed by Washington's invasion of Iraq. As well as the millions murdered in other revolutions gone awry. Ms. Slaughter and other ivory-tower fans of war as a progressive tool should rediscover the virtue of humility.

No one should mourn Colonel Qaddafi's passing. But Washington is likely to pay a far higher price than commonly assumed for conducting regime change under the guise of humanitarian rescue.

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