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But Where Are the Americans?

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The U.S. budget is in crisis because of so-called entitlements. That is, social welfare benefits to which people believe they are entitled. The prevailing attitude is: So what if Uncle Sam is heading towards bankruptcy? I paid for my Social Security, Medicare, and everything else!

Defense guarantees—and even war—increasingly are seen as an entitlement by America's allies, friends, and even new acquaintances. That sense of entitlement has grown especially fast among the latter, peoples with no relationship to the U.S. and who have in no way paid for their protection. These days, Libyan rebels express not gratitude for NATO assistance, but anger at insufficient allied aid.

This sense of defense entitlement goes back years. It is most obvious with Washington's Cold War allies in Europe and Asia.

The Soviet Union disintegrated, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and Moscow's power and ambition

diminished. The European Union then expanded, and now possesses a larger economy and population than America. Yet Europeans expect the U.S. to keep troops on station, guaranteeing stability and guarding against unseen threats. Most insistent are the Eastern Europeans who—now freed from communist tyranny—believe the American people are obligated to protect nations that only a couple decades ago were Soviet satellites or even part of the Soviet Union.

Perhaps most extreme is Georgia, which believed that it could start a war and count on the U.S. to protect it from nuclear-armed Russia. As Moscow's forces routed Georgian troops in August 2008, fleeing soldiers and civilians alike asked: "where are the Americans?" They apparently imagined the 101st Airborne dropping from the skies to defeat the Russian hordes.

The Georgian government obviously thought it had paid for the assistance. The Saakashvili regime spent nearly a \$1 million on lobbyists and sent Georgian troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq. Although surprised when no U.S. troops showed up to contest Russia's advance, President Mikheil Saakashvili told his countrymen that "we will see U.S. military ships entering Georgian ports" and the U.S. military would take control of Georgia's airports and ports, protecting them from the Russians.

After the war he insisted that the U.S. rearm his nation. And he still hopes to squeeze Tbilisi into NATO, which would win Georgia the same legal defense obligation from America as possessed by the other dependent alliance members.

A similar sense of entitlement is evident in East Asia. U.S. troops have occupied Japan since World War II ended in 1945. The majority of Japanese take for granted the obligation of America to shield them from every international unpleasantness. It would be so unfair to expect a nation that until last year possessed the world's second largest economy defend itself! Even many pacifists, who want to shrink or eliminate the massive American military presence on the island of Okinawa, assume that Washington should continue to defend their nation.

The Republic of Korea is worse. Today that country enjoys a vast economic, population, and technological edge over its northern enemy. While defended by American troops, the ROK even sent money and food to the North, which last year sank a South Korean warship and shelled a South Korean island.

Yet South Koreans react with shock at the suggestion that they take over responsibility for their own defense.

This dependent mentality has spread to the Middle East. Various Israeli officials have demanded that the U.S. bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, even though Israel is a regional military superpower and possesses upwards of two hundred nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, Bahrain's King Khalifa, and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Zayed have made similar requests.

The Saudis and their fellow royal dictators also believe they deserve American protection against internal enemies. The Obama administration's decision to back away from the Mubarak dictatorship created a major rift with Riyadh, which expected the U.S. to do more to support the Egyptian autocrat who was tossed overboard by his own military. The Khalifa government, with Saudi support, ignored feeble Obama administration protests to suppress democracy demonstrations by Bahrain's Shia majority.

Most dramatic are the Libyan rebels. Originally many of them dismissed the prospect of allied intervention. Some even threatened to fight any Westerners who meddled in the Libyan conflict.

When seemingly poised for victory, opposition activists worried most about their independence.

That changed once Qaddafi rebounded. Then the rebels started clamoring for Western assistance—first airpower and now ground forces.

No surprise: many years before American revolutionaries lobbied for French military aid. But these earlier rebels recognized that Paris owed them nothing and responded to their pleas out of self-interest. The French king was not against monarchy; he was against the British Empire. Americans were happy to take advantage of the circumstances.

In contrast, the Libyan rebels appear to believe that the U.S. and fellow NATO members owe them a defense. The former aren't grateful for what they have received. They are angry about what the allies have not done.

The U.S., Britain and France began with a flurry of bombings on Qaddafi's air defenses and heavy ground units. But attacks soon diminished as the number of easy targets fell, America reduced its participation, an intra-alliance resistance to the operation rose. NBC news reported from the rebel stronghold of Benghazi that "rebel forces say NATO is letting them down." One Libyan complained to the network that "We haven't seen a thing from NATO. They're weak." Others asked: "Where is NATO?"

In early April an American graduate student named Ryan Calder traveled to eastern Libya and reported: "Officially, spokespeople for the Transitional National Council continue to thank NATO and its member states for their support. But on the street, people contrast the coalition's aggressive attacks on Qaddafi forces during late March—under French, British, and American leadership—to the sporadic air strikes and friendly fire incidents that occurred since NATO took leadership of coalition operations. Today, a bus driver in Benghazi told me: 'We just don't have confidence in NATO anymore'."

These sentiments appear to be widespread. A 25-year-old fighter told McClatchy newspapers: "NATO is cheating us. NATO is not with us." One of the rebel force's unit leaders declared that "the problem is NATO."

Operations were easier with the initial allied air support. However, "now the situation is very bad. We can't do anything."

Chris McGreal wrote in the *Guardian*: "NATO's failure to use its air power to reverse days of military setbacks for the rebels prompted a collapse in confidence in the West's intentions among Qaddafi's foes. Conspiracy theories flew. The West wants a divided Libya so it can control the oil, said some; Turkey, a NATO member is vetoing air strikes because it supports Qaddafi, said others."

Indeed, the level of mistrust was such that some rebel supporters doubted that NATO's attack on an opposition column of tanks and armored vehicles was a mistake. They imagined a secret conspiracy against the rebellion.

When another rebel tank contingent was bombed, members of the opposition blamed the West—no matter what. Explained one of the top opposition commanders, Gen. Abdul Fattah Younis: "If the bombardment was carried out by NATO, then it's definitely a mistake, and if the air strike was carried out by Qaddafi troops, then it is an even bigger mistake." Some rebels were quoted in the *Washington Times* arguing that NATO members should suspend their operations until they "do the job properly."

As fighting continued in the east, a doctor in the city of Ajdabiya told *Associated Press*: “We have not seen any protection of civilians. NATO air strikes are not enough, and the proof is that there are civilians killed every day here.” A rebel spokesman in Benghazi argued: “There’s no more room for hesitation or for not standing with determination against what is happening in Misrata and other Libyan cities.”

Misrata, located in the Qaddafi-dominated west, is under siege. The urban combat is not well suited for air strikes, but that has not deterred criticism of the West by the rebels. One opposition fighter told the *Washington Post*: “We wish NATO would bomb the buildings.” The city council spokesman, who publicly only used the name Muhammad, said “We are officially let down and disappointed by NATO.” The alliance is supposed to protect civilians, he added, “but civilians are dying in Misrata.”

Indeed, the more ambitious rebels aren’t interested in air support. In mid-April the Misrata Judicial Committee formally requested that the allies mount an invasion. Explained Committee member Nouri Abdullah Abdulati, “We need a force from NATO or the United Nations on the ground now.”

Similarly, argued spokesman Muhammad: “It is now or never. Either they intervene immediately and bring in ground troops to protect the port, or we will all regret this.”

These complaints reflect the thinking of the top rebel leadership. In early April Gen. Younis said: “NATO is moving very slowly, allowing Qaddafi forces to advance. NATO has become our problem.” Later he complained that NATO was “not doing anything.” The alliance was slow “in responding to our instructions” on targeting and was failing to “give us what we need.”

It is natural for the Libyan rebels to want the West to give them victory. But defeating Qaddafi is their job, not that of America (or Europe).

Most everyone on earth would like to borrow the U.S. armed forces. Doing so is the quickest route to victory in any conflict. However, Washington should deploy the American military only where and when the U.S. has a vital interest at stake, which is rarely the case—and certainly not in Libya.

Military intervention should not become America’s newest entitlement program.

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