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Xinhua 'analysis': "How far will US go in Libya?"

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[Xinhua "Analysis" by Matthew Rusling: "How Far Will US Go in Libya?"]

WASHINGTON, March 22 (Xinhua) - While the United States continues to pound Libya with missile strikes in a bid to establish a no-fly zone over the embattled North African nation, it remains unclear where and when the US mission stops.

While US President Barack Obama said he would hand over command of the operation to allies within days or weeks, media reports indicate that infighting among allies could delay that transition.

A number of other questions go unanswered: What happens if Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's government crumbles and leaves an ungoverned space? What will allies do if he digs in his heels and the bombing fails to prevent him from attacking rebels?

Those and other questions put Washington in the predicament of not knowing what role it will play as the mission continues, or how long its commitment will last.

"The bottom line is that in war, it is inherently unpredictable to know where this could go," said Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, in a recent interview with Xinhua.

In spite of those concerns, however, US involvement will likely be limited, although there is always the possibility that the United States could end up tangled up in something unexpected, he said.

Realistically, Washington cannot afford another full scale ground war, since the United States maintains a large troop presence in Afghanistan and nearly 50,000 forces remain in Iraq. Another expensive war in Libya would also pose a political difficulty for the White House at a time when many Americans are calling for a reduction of the mounting US debt.

One possible best case scenario would be if Gaddafi would agree to a power sharing arrangement and step down after a certain period of time. In the meantime, peacekeeping forces would stand between Gaddafi's forces and rebel factions.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The mission is aimed at enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which calls for imposing a no-fly zone over Libya in order to protect the Libyan civilians from threat of attacks in the North African country.

Depending on the outcome, however, any number of scenarios could emerge, such as if rebels are overrun or Libya becomes ungoverned and extremists infiltrate the borders. In such cases, US and allied forces would have to consider more muscular peace operations, which could last for some time, O'Hanlon said.

But carrying out an international effort to rebuild the Libyan state would not be easy in a weak state made up of a concoction of tribes under the patronage of Gaddafi, he said.

Nevertheless, the country is not as big as Iraq, and such an operation would require fewer resources and manpower. That would contain the risks, although it would not whittle them down to zero, he said.

Benjamin H. Friedman, research fellow at the Cato Institute, said the United States is unlikely to go beyond air power, as discomfort in Congress is palpable and the White House does not seem that enthusiastic about the operation.

If any nation building were to occur, the chances of US troops being deployed would be remote, as that could land the Obama administration in the political hot seat, he said.

VOTER OPINION

According to a Rasmussen poll released on Tuesday, US voters are more supportive of an American role in the Libyan crisis but also are more critical of President Obama's handling of the situation.

Thirty-four per cent of likely US voters now believe the United States should get more directly involved in the Libyan crisis, up 12 points from two weeks ago.

Forty-eight per cent said the United States should leave the situation alone, down from 63 per cent in the previous survey. Eighteen per cent are not sure which course is best, according to the poll.

A Gallup poll released on Tuesday found that Americans are more likely to approve (47 per cent) than disapprove (37 per cent) of US military action against Libya. That level of support is low compared with the strong initial backing Americans have given to many other recent US military actions, Gallup said.

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