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# Libya should be Europe's problem – not America's

European powers can no longer act as casual bystanders expecting the US to resolve strategic challenges in Libya and the Middle East. Washington should tell Europe to put its own money – and troops, if necessary – where its own strategic interests lie.

By Leon T. Hadar

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Washington

During his second year in office, French President Nicolas Sarkozy initiated the formation of a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as part of a strategy to promote stability and prosperity in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

Under Mr. Sarkozy's proposed UfM, European, Middle Eastern, and North African countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea would form a loose economic community. It would promote political and economic liberalization and also address immigration, energy, and security issues. Sarkozy's initiative reflects the concerns that France, Italy, and the rest of the European Union (EU) have in securing their interests in a region that is in their geographical neighborhood – and is the source of 40 percent of EU oil imports.

The recent upheavals in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya demonstrate the impact of political instability in that region on the EU's Mediterranean flank – and why Europe should take the lead in any international resolution to the problem. It is well past time for the European powers, whether through the EU, the UfM, or some other entity, to be more than casual bystanders that expect Washington to resolve strategic challenges in the Middle East.

**Libya uprising: 5 steps the world is taking**

## Big impact, weak response

More than 7,000 North Africans have already fled to the Italian island of Lampedusa since the Tunisian uprising began. The continuing fighting in Libya, a country that supplies a tenth of Italy's gas and a third of its oil, threatens the country's energy supplies. Italy's foreign minister has warned of a possible influx of 300,000 North African refugees into Italy because of the unrest in the region, further exacerbating the demographic tension in Europe from a growing Muslim population.

Europe's response to a crisis so close to its shores has been anemic: bombastic rhetoric with little show in terms of diplomatic engagement or substantive measures to support it. While the EU did join the US and other governments in adopting sanctions against the Libyan regime, it failed to take a leadership role.

Sarkozy has called on Europe to adopt "a common strategy in the face of the Libyan crisis, the consequences of which could be very significant for the stability of the entire region." Yet there is no sign that he is planning to utilize the UfM as part of an effort to place the EU at a center of a vigorous international strategy in dealing with Libya (or the rest of North Africa).

## US can't afford another Middle East involvement

Leading US lawmakers and pundits insist that it is the United States that should be drawing-up the strategy and amassing the financial resources and military power to bring about regime change in Libya. That is a case of misplaced priorities. The continual American pre-occupation with the Middle East risks more than enormous monetary costs to the United States – at a time when our military is overstretched and our budget deficits are stratospheric. One also has to consider the strategic opportunity costs.

**Can the US military help Libyan rebels oust Muammar Qaddafi? Four options.**

By concentrating on the Middle East, Washington is unable to shift its strategic priorities in the direction of the Pacific Rim, where the economic and military challenges posed by the rise of economic giants like China and India and other important players, such as Korea, Japan, and the nations of Southeast Asia, will directly impact core US national interests in the coming decades. China, in particular, is emerging as a key factor expected to challenge US status as a military power in the Pacific and elsewhere. Moreover, the ability of the US to maintain its global competitive edge will depend to the large extent on having access to the markets of the Pacific Rim. On balance, these challenges are greater than those in the Middle East.

## Time for Europe to step up

As the United States continues to waste limited resources in the Middle East, Europe free-rides on American policy in the region. The Europeans benefit from the US political-military role without contributing much in return, monetarily or militarily. As a debt-laden American economy teeters on a cliff, many governments in Europe enjoy the benefits of low defense budgets and massive welfare states.

Instead of finding ways to “do something” whenever a crisis ignites anywhere in the world, US leaders should make it clear to Europe and other regional actors that they need to do the heavy lifting to deal with problems in their neighborhood. Instability in North Africa and the Middle East ought to be a far greater priority for Europe than for the US.

The United States should tell the Europeans to put their money – and their troops, if necessary – where their strategic interests lie.

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