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Can the US really take a supporting role in Libya operation?

President Obama has emphasized a supporting role as NATO takes command of the Libya mission. But it remains to be seen just how secondary the US will be in the coming days.



A protester (c.) holds a banner beneath a Kingdom of Libya flag during an anti-Qaddafi demonstration in Benghazi, Libya on March 31. NATO said it 'seamlessly' assumed full command of military operations over Libya on Thursday, and warned combatants on the ground against attacking civilians.

(Youssef Boudlal/Reuters)

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Washington

The United States may have officially transferred command of the international Libya operation to NATO on Thursday. But it is unclear if that means the US has indeed retreated to the limited "supporting role" that President Obama says it has.

With US forces plying the waters off the Libyan coast, Central Intelligence Agency operatives on Libyan soil, many NATO countries sitting out the operation, and the staying power of the US unmatched by the French, British, or anyone else in the international coalition, it remains to be seen just how secondary the US role will be in the coming days.

"It's too early to say that" the US has indeed moved down to second fiddle, says Christopher Preble, director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington. An initial indicator to watch, he adds, will be "the numbers for the next 48 hours" – what airstrikes or other operations are reported and who carries them out.

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The US may indeed step back from the lead role, others say, but that doesn't mean it will be limited to merely supportive roles, like intelligence providing and radio-signal jamming, as the Obama administration has suggested.

"The idea that we're never going to drop another bomb and withdraw ... I don't believe it for one minute," says Geoffrey Kemp, director of

regional strategic programs at the Center for the National Interest in Washington. “If we’re not dropping bombs, we’ll be shooting.”

The CIA operatives that Mr. Obama has authorized to enter Libya are ostensibly there to evaluate the Libyan rebels and their capacities, and eventually to assess where supplies might be directed if the US and other foreign powers decide to supply arms to the Libyan forces fighting to oust Muammar Qaddafi.

But the CIA operatives are also providing information to guide airstrikes aimed at Mr. Qaddafi’s forces and other assets, administration officials have said.

Obama has characterized the coalition taking over command from the US as very broad-based – encompassing not only NATO but also having the participation of countries from the Arab League. But not only are some NATO countries sitting on the sidelines of the operation – Germany is a prime example – but so far, only three Arab countries have actively joined the coalition, some military analysts point out.

President Bush, some Republican foreign-policy analysts note, was ridiculed for claiming to have assembled an international coalition to invade Iraq when it was largely a US operation. They point out that the Iraq war at one point included military contributions from more than three dozen countries, considerably higher than the Libya operation so far.

But what’s clear, some say, is that Obama’s intention is to put the US in the role of something like best supporting actor. That being a new role for the US, they add, it may take some time to see how this works.

“I think [Obama’s] objective is indeed to draw the US away from the cutting edge of this operation,” says Stefan Halper, a senior fellow at the University of Cambridge’s Centre of International Studies in England. “He wants to save money, and he doesn’t want the US leading a military intervention in a Muslim country for a third time.”

But the fact remains that there are some things that only the US can do. No one should be surprised that the CIA is in Libya, Dr. Halper says, since perhaps the only other intelligence organization that could approach the CIA’s capacities would be the British SAS.

Others say Obama’s intentions may in the end be thwarted, if the Libya operation drags on and outlives the capacities of other militaries involved in the mission. “Neither [the French nor the British] has the ability to sustain operations for any length of time,” says Charles Boyd, a retired US Air Force general now at the Center for the National Interest.

The reality, Mr. Boyd says, is that the “smell” of an international operation eventually seen to go bad would stick to the US. But others suggest that may not matter.

Obama is likely to remain unscathed even if his assertions about an American retreat to a “supporting role” in Libya don’t match reality, some observers say.

Mr. Kemp of the Center for the National Interest speaks of a high “capacity of the American public and Congress to live with ambiguity and nuance – as long,” he adds, “as there are no American casualties.”

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