

Editorial: Libya strikes -- broad coalition was worth the wait

However, Obama should keep the mission's purpose clear.

TWO VIEWS

"Regardless of what happens, it's Obama's war. He can try to distance himself from it as much as he wants, but at the end of the day, if he doesn't do enough and if you have a failed outcome, he will be blamed. If you have a victory, he will reap some rewards."

MICHAEL N. BARNETT, professor of international affairs and political science, George Washington University

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"As a general proposition, I think the U.S. should not be involved in regime change, because I think the costs of regime change extend well beyond the actual military operation itself. There is a moral component."

CHRISTOPHER A. PREBLE, director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute

Star Tribune Editorial

Multiple critics have assailed the Obama administration's deliberative decisionmaking process on military intervention in Libya.

The allied attack on the country that began last weekend to protect civilians from the vengeance of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi is too little, too late, they argue.

Earlier action -- weeks ago, when Gadhafi had lost control of much of the country -- would have had swifter, more decisive impact, the critics insist, likely persuading the Libyan military to defy orders to kill its own citizens and perhaps leading to a military coup to rid Libya and the world of a terrorist regime.

What such critics neglect to note, however, is that earlier action would almost surely have required America to go it alone once again, or to lead a small coalition into battle.

Afterward, if recent history is a guide, America would have been held solely responsible for transitioning Libya to some form of democracy.

That could have proven to be a tall order, considering that Libya is a tribal society that has been ruthlessly ruled by an authoritarian regime for over 40 years.

Instead, presidential patience has yielded an intervention, Operation Odyssey Dawn, that is willed by the United Nations, not just the United States. It even received the rare endorsement of the Arab League.

And -- based on independent reports, as well as rhetoric from the White House -- Obama was able to get an agreement that U.S. military involvement would be concentrated in the early stages of the allied action and that the United States soon will yield the leading role to French and British forces.

By crafting an international consensus and allied effort, Obama has a decent chance of preventing Libya from becoming a third war-torn Arab country for which the United States has responsibility.

America already owns the outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan. That's enough.

Even the world's sole superpower faces limitations, in terms of military capacity, national resolve, money and, most important, a willingness to put lives in harm's way.

But if he is to make the most of the coalition he has built, Obama needs to hew more closely to its stated strategy. The U.N. mandate is to protect Libyan civilians.

While the ultimate protection would no doubt be the removal of Gadhafi, the Security Council resolution does not specifically call for that.

Ideally, regime change would be accomplished by the Libyans themselves, giving the next government legitimacy as a creation of the Libyan people, not of outside interests.

Accordingly, Obama and other top administration officials need to be more careful in their rhetoric, lest it send mixed messages about the mission's objectives.

More discretion and even ambiguity would also be helpful about which military options we are, or aren't, willing to deploy, depending on circumstances.

Just as some fault Obama's slowness to act, others complain that America is rushing headlong into another quagmire, with no exit strategy.

This is a more valid, and therefore an unsettling, line of criticism. It should get a full hearing in Congress, which needs to assert its proper constitutional role in matters of war.

As with all warfare, little in Libya will go exactly according to plan. Acting to protect civilians, allied forces are likely to inadvertently harm and kill some.

Allies will peel off -- the Arab League already is reconsidering its support. Here in America there will be protests. And as always, critics have a right to be heard.

But while engaging in a robust debate, Americans should unite in heartily supporting the troops now going in harm's way, and in hoping for an early end to the conflict.

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