

## "Leading from behind" one-off deal for Libya

by Xinhua writer Yi Aijun

WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 (Xinhua) -- When Libya's long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed in October under the cover of NATO air raids, the mission was touted as a success of the Obama administration's strategy of "leading from behind."

For all it is, the approach is seen as a one-off deal not expected to be repeated in other places.

### **"MUDDIED THE WATERS"**

For U.S. President Barack Obama, facing an uphill struggle for re-election in 2012 and two costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq he inherited from a Republican administration, a third full-fledged war in Libya went against his stomach.

His then Defense Secretary Robert Gates made public as well his opposition to intervention in another Arab country.

For days starting on March 19, however, Obama ordered a series of air strikes against Gaddafi's forces to establish a no-fly zone, throwing his weight behind a UN Security Council resolution that made the military action possible.

There were voices within the administration calling for U.S. intervention on humanitarian grounds, as well as pressure from the European countries to intervene.

"The Obama administration could have chosen to resist that pressure, instead they chose to intervene," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Washington-base think tank Cato Institute.

"I think they allow themselves to be drawn into this conflict," he told Xinhua.

"The truth is there are always people pressuring the United States or the U.S. administration to intervene in places all the time, and the question is what criteria the president uses to differentiate when he will choose to intervene and when he will choose not to," he said.

"And I don't think those criterion are clear at all. I think the Obama administration by its actions has, as we say, muddied the waters, has not clarified what the appropriate criterions are," he added.

## **"BURDEN SHARING"**

After initially taking the lead in the military campaign, Obama handed over command to NATO on March 31 and took a back seat, offering instead support like refueling, intelligence, surveillance and even missiles to cash-strapped partners who were carrying out bombing missions up front.

This is the first time since the Cold War that the United States neither exercised leadership nor fully shared risks in a war in which it was otherwise participating.

The U.S. declining power and popularity in the world, as a result of a confluence of factors from invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the economic crisis, has made the Obama administration turn to multilateral and regional organizations as well as allies and partners to address global challenges.

"The NATO alliance worked like it was designed to do: burden sharing," U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said in October as the Libyan conflict was drawing to a close.

At a moment of fiscal obsession, the conflict cost the United States less than 2 billion U.S. dollars, or the equivalent of a few days of involvement in Afghanistan, less than those spent by Britain and France, who spearheaded the NATO-led mission.

What's more, no single life was lost on the part of the coalition, though the U.S. refusal to contribute more firepower was blamed for a protracted conflict that had led to more deaths on the Libyan side.

Biden hailed the Libyan mission as a model of success, saying "This is more the prescription for how to deal with the world as we go forward than it has been in the past. This is an example of how the world is beginning to work together a little bit better."

NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen also called the operation "a successful chapter in NATO's history."

## **PRECEDENT DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN**

However, analysts say they do not expect the approach in Libya to be used in Syria, Iran or other hot spots in the years ahead.

"I don't think so, and I certainly hope not," said Preble.

Michael O'Hanlon, director of research and senior fellow on foreign policy at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, echoed with a definite "no."

"It doesn't work so well for bigger, messier, more important problems ... when the burden is greater," O'Hanlon told Xinhua.

Preble said "leading from behind" is misleading, as a number of European countries, quite concerned about what was happening in Libya, desperately wanted the United States to solve the problem for them, since they had been led to believe the American giant would intervene quite regularly around the world.

He said those European countries with a clear national interest at stake, and some Arab nations bent on Gaddafi's ouster for various reasons should have conducted the actual operations by themselves.

The appropriate response of the Obama administration should have been diplomatic support, some military assistance and intelligence sharing, he said.

"The administration was a little bit too quick to use the military instrument even in a quite constrained way," the analyst said.

He argued that whether the mission in Libya is a success or not remains to be seen. "While at a minimum I think it's too soon to say," he said.

In his view, the situation in Libya is still quite unsettled, with uncertainties about its new leaders and the authority they will command.

Some Western governments had anticipated a quick success in Libya, but saw the mission last for seven long months in the end, which caused some trouble for the White House as well.

Obama was challenged by Congress Republicans to provide justification for a war which they said needed congressional approval under the War Powers Act.

In addition, Libya's decreasing oil exports prompted the president to tap into the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve for 30 million barrels to help control gas prices.

Brookings Institution analysts Clara O'Donnell and Justin Vaisse said the Libya mission made U.S. officials believe that on current trends, NATO will not be able to replicate a mission like that in Libya in a few years from now, as it laid bare division among the Europeans and brought to the fore once more the significant shortcomings within European armed forces.

Critics of the Libyan operation, such as Russia, China and the African Union, have argued that NATO misused the limited UN resolution imposing a no-fly zone and authorizing the protection of civilians as a pretext to promote regime change.

"I think there is a legitimate concern that the Obama administration may have made a precedent that in the future will be difficult to sustain," Preble said.