

# IMPARTIAL AND STUCK: NATO'S PREDICAMENT IN LIBYA

The military operation in Libya is supported by a remarkably broad UN mandate and has gained wide international backing. With a no-fly zone quickly established, it has succeeded in protecting large numbers of civilians. However, as Gaddafi has changed tactics, the allies are struggling to identify new military targets. Yet NATO's biggest challenge is the lack of agreement concerning the political outcome of the mission. If the Alliance sticks with its declared impartiality, it faces a potentially long engagement without a clear exit strategy. If it considers extending stronger support to the rebels, it risks a major internal rupture.



Anti-Gaddafi demonstrations in Benghazi, 31 March 2011.

REUTERS/Youssef Boudlal

The international military operation in Libya is notable for two reasons. First, it is supported by an exceptionally broad UN mandate. The last time the Security Council authorised similarly comprehensive enforcement measures as those included in Resolution 1973 on Libya on 17 March 2011 was in the run-up to the Gulf War of 1991. In addition to the arms embargo and the asset freeze that were imposed at an earlier stage, this resolution not only authorises the establishment of a no-fly zone, but also "all necessary measures" to protect the civilian population. Only a "foreign occupation force" on Libyan territory is explicitly excluded.

In authorising military strikes even against ground troops, the resolution takes into account the experience gained in the no-fly zones over Southern Iraq and Bosnia, which failed to protect civilians

adequately. At the same time, the resolution must be seen in the context of the "responsibility to protect"-principle as taken up by the UN General Assembly in 2005, which calls for international intervention in cases where national governments are unable or unwilling to protect their citizens from mass atrocities. It is for the first time that the Security Council has mandated military force pursuant to this principle – although it remains controversial how the responsibility to protect relates to the traditional sovereignty norm of the UN Charter.

Second, it is surprising how quickly the Western partners managed to agree on military action in Libya after the conflict escalated near Benghazi. In view of the widespread war-weariness brought on by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the financial constraints that many armed

forces are facing, it was anything but obvious that sufficient political will could be mustered to intervene yet again – and in a Muslim country. To be sure, Germany's abstention in the vote on the Libya resolution and the initially critical stance of Turkey indicates that not all NATO countries were convinced of the usefulness of going into Libya. However, these differences cannot be compared with the discord that the alliance has repeatedly experienced in connection with military operations in the Middle East since the Suez Crisis in 1956. The US retaliatory raids against Libya in 1986, for instance, triggered much transatlantic controversy, with France, Italy, and Spain refusing overflight permission for US combat aircraft.

The broad support for the current military operation is only partially due to humanitarian concerns and legitimisation by the UN. The role of France as a driving force behind the intervention is also due to domestic political considerations, for example. Perhaps the key reason for the intervention, however, is the desire of many Western countries to readjust their policies vis-à-vis North Africa, since their previous focus on close security cooperation with the authoritarian regimes has been all but discredited by the upheavals in various Arab countries.

In the case of Western policies towards Libya, the military operation marks the third volte-face since Muammar Gaddafi's ascent to power in 1969. After the forced closure of US and British military bases and the partial nationalisation of

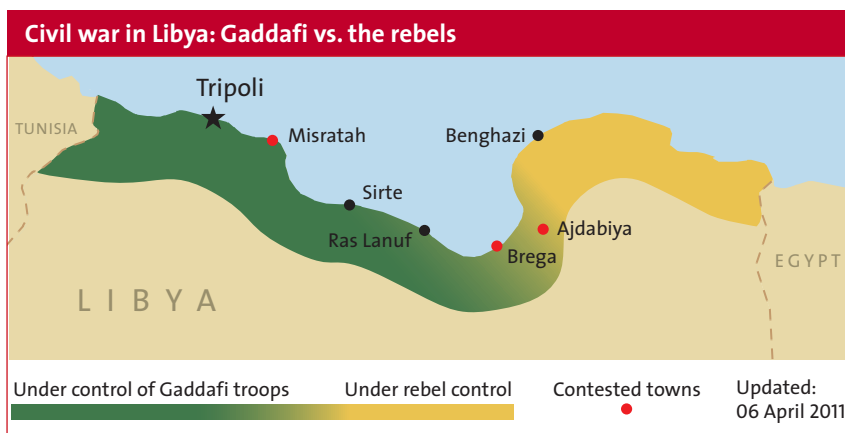
oil installations, political relations with Libya had been tense since the early 1970s. However, the first break only occurred in the wake of several terrorist attacks attributed to the Gaddafi regime in the late 1980s, which resulted in UN sanctions and Libya's international isolation. Gaddafi's acknowledgement of partial responsibility for the terrorist attacks and the relinquishment of Libya's WMD programmes marked the second caesura, which brought a rapprochement with the US and Europe from 2003 on. Since then, Washington has been mainly striving for close cooperation in counterterrorism, and has even provided military aid to this end in recent years. The Europeans, for their part, were mainly focused on enhanced economic and energy relations and cooperation with Tripoli on matters of migration policy.

The significance of the renewed Western about-face for transatlantic security policy as well as for the region depends largely on the outcome of the military operation and further political developments in Libya. On both accounts, things look rather murky at the moment. While important military objectives were achieved immediately after the beginning of the air strikes on 19 March 2011, the lack of consensus over the political targets of the mission and thus also over the scope and interpretation of the military mandate have since caused considerable headaches for military leaders. Meanwhile, the political future of Libya appears more uncertain than ever. For NATO, assuming command of the mission in such a context is fraught with considerable risks.

**Initial successes**

Rarely has a multilateral coalition mobilised as much firepower in as short a timeframe as after the adoption of the Libya resolution. Due to the rapid military action, the intervening forces initially succeeded in preventing even greater bloodshed in Libya. Two crucial objectives of the first operation phase were rapidly achieved. First, the recapture of Benghazi by Gaddafi's troops was prevented, and his threatened massacre of the urban population was averted. These initial French-led air strikes had not only humanitarian, but also political significance, as they prevented a collapse of the rebel movement.

In a second step, the coalition of the willing enforced the no-fly zone. Tomahawk cruise missiles launched by US and Brit-



ish warships and submarines as well as intense air strikes disabled the Libyan air defence system and crippled Gaddafi's air force. The allies were aided by the fact that some of Libya's military equipment is obsolete and in bad repair, and that many troop formations are badly trained. The majority of the country's 180 warplanes and more than 100 helicopters were not serviceable. Accordingly, Gaddafi's troops put up only minimal resistance to the no-fly zone.

In order to protect the civilian population effectively, the intervening forces early on also attacked core command-and-control infrastructures as well as numerous mobile ground targets of Libya's military forces. This meant that Benghazi as well as other cities in the east of Libya were able to liberate themselves temporarily from Gaddafi's forces. According to coalition sources, these bombardments largely managed to avoid civilian casualties. However, since these initial successes, the basic parameters for the coalition forces have worsened successively, due to developments at the political-strategic as well as at the tactical-operational level.

**Political polyphony**

At the political-strategic level, no consensus has been achieved so far concerning the intended political end state of the military operation. The Libya resolution does not explicitly address this question, but primarily defines the humanitarian protection mission. While the three leading powers of the operation – the US, France, and the UK – have all advocated ousting Gaddafi, their hopes that the Libyan leader would soon become isolated domestically and lose the support of his troops have not been fulfilled. Ever since, the allies have been struggling to formulate a joint position concerning the role of the military operation in the Libya civil war.

Unlike France, for instance, the US has explicitly stated that overthrowing the strongman in Tripoli cannot be part of the military mission, but must be achieved by non-military means. The US is also to some extent reticent with regard to the rebels and argues that their composition and aims are still not sufficiently clear. France and Italy (as well as Qatar), on the other hand, have recognised the National Transitional Council in Benghazi as the legitimate representative of the Libyan state. Other countries such as Germany, conversely, are in favour of a ceasefire and a politically negotiated solution, with the possibility of an exile solution for Gaddafi also under consideration. Behind closed doors, governments are also discussing whether a partition of Libya might be an acceptable outcome of the military operation.

**Military confusion**

At the tactical-operational level, the lack of consistent political guidance caused confusion at an early stage already as to how the military operation should continue after the establishment of the no-fly zone. Thus, there has been controversy over whether attacks could legitimately target only those elements of Gaddafi's forces that were immediately engaged in offensive operations against civilians, or the Libyan armed forces in general. For instance, while the US tended towards the former interpretation, its military forces have also attacked targets such as a brigade headquarters or troops in the vicinity of Gaddafi's native city of Sirte that posed no immediate threat to civilians.

The military relations with the rebel forces have been similarly ambivalent since the latter left the cities and switched over to offensive operations after the initial air strikes on Gaddafi's troops. While the allies claim not to have proactively supported

the rebel offensives, they have intervened occasionally when the rebels were in retreat even when the safety of civilians was not immediately at stake. However, US military officers in particular have constantly emphasised that there was no operative communication or coordination with the rebels. The fact that the US State Department and France at the same time floated the idea of supplying the rebels with arms has illustrated the difficulty of the intervening powers to find a consistent position between adopting an impartial stance in the Libyan civil war and actively supporting the opposition.



Distinguishing between combatants and civilians on the side of the rebels has been a major challenge for the coalition forces from the start. However, the situation has become even less straightforward since Gaddafi's forces have changed tactics. As they now also operate in civilian garb and use civilian transport in order to deceive the rebels and the allies, identifying viable targets for air strikes has become very difficult for the allies. While the number of strike sorties has remained high since the start of the operation, more and more fighter jets return with full ammunition, being unable to actually strike. Protecting civilians in urban battlefields such as Misratah and Brega is particularly difficult. Though the allies have so far largely refrained from air strikes against urban targets, they may in the future increasingly deploy ground attack aircraft that are specially designed to carry out precision strikes against ground troops. Such an approach would however significantly increase the risk of the international military operation causing a growing number of civilian casualties.

**NATO trapped**

The main effect of the military operation so far has been that Gaddafi's forces have not managed to win the civil war. At the same time, it has become clear that the rebels are not sufficiently equipped and trained to achieve a decisive military victory in Libya without Western support. Even though former military officers who changed sides are now making efforts to provide training to the rebels, a military stalemate is becoming more and more apparent.

Against this background, NATO's decision to take command of the entire military operation (maritime arms embargo, no-fly zone, protection mission) on 31 March

2011 came at a difficult juncture. The fact that there was a change of command was mainly due to Washington's insistence. To be sure, the US had agreed to take on military leadership of the coalition of the willing and carried the main military burden of the intervention in the framework of its Operation Odyssey Dawn. It conducted half of the total air strikes, contributed three quarters of precision-guided munitions, and did most of the work in terms of electronic warfare, aerial refuelling, and (UAV) reconnaissance. However, President Barack Obama and especially Defense Secretary Robert Gates, faced with sharp domestic criticism for getting involved in military action in Libya, pressed for the US role to be rapidly reduced to supporting functions from the start.

<b>Military operation in Libya: National contributions</b>		
<b>NATO member states</b>		
Belgium	6	1
Canada	11	1
Denmark	6	0
France	38	6
Greece*	0	1
Italy	24	13
Netherlands*	7	1
Norway	6	0
Spain*	6	2
Turkey*	0	6
United Kingdom	30	3
USA**	107	10
<b>Others</b>		
Jordan*	6	0
Qatar*	6	0
Sweden*	9	0
UAE*	12	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>44</b>




\* Does not participate in strike sorties  
 \*\* Participation in strike sorties suspended  
 Updated: 06 April 2011  
 Sources: NATO; IISS; press agencies

With its integrated command structure, NATO is the only actor besides the US that has the capability to lead a complex multinational operation. Further arguments in favour of NATO are its partnership agreements with ten Arab states (including Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan as participants in the military operation) within its Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. It is also conceivable that the political leadership of the operation will become more consistent with

the North Atlantic Council now in charge – though the role of the political Contact Group created at the London conference in late March remains unclear.

And yet, the risks NATO faces with its Operation Unified Protector are formidable. Immediately after it assumed command, NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared the Alliance to be impartial in the Libyan civil war. If NATO sticks with this position, the future course of its first African operation depends largely on domestic developments in Libya and in particular on Gaddafi's ability to retain power. Should his regime fail to disintegrate any time soon and no political compromise emerge, a protracted engagement of NATO without an exit perspective may ensue, which will likely result in growing domestic criticism in participating states. Alternatively, it is conceivable that some of the allies will push increasingly hard to support the rebels, whether indirectly with arms and training, or more immediately through overt or covert measures against Gaddafi. Should NATO go down that road, it would not only face criticism by the Arab League and by countries such as China or Russia, but would also likely suffer internal political ruptures. This would likely be the case even if individual member states only rather than NATO as such chose such a course.

Considering that the outcome of the conflict remains highly unpredictable at this point and that the allies are at a loss as to the next steps, even France, which initially rejected a leading role for NATO, was probably relieved to be able to pass the hot potato to the alliance in the end. Even with NATO in charge, however, neither France nor Britain will be able to evade their share of responsibility in seeing through a mission that they themselves had initiated. As the US is cutting back its military contribution and does not participate in strike sorties for the time being, it will be increasingly up to the Europeans to carry the burden in Libya.

-  Author: Daniel Möckli [moeckli@sipo.gess.ethz.ch](mailto:moeckli@sipo.gess.ethz.ch)
-  Translated from German: Christopher Findlay
-  Other CSS Analyses / Mailinglist: [www.sta.ethz.ch](http://www.sta.ethz.ch)
-  German and French versions: [www.ssn.ethz.ch](http://www.ssn.ethz.ch)