



NATO in Libya: A Success that Raises Difficult Questions

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As Libyans – and the international community – celebrate the fall of Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, a host of pundits and politicians are hailing the success of NATO in Libya as clear evidence not simply of a successfully accomplished mission but also of NATO's persisting relevance and strength in the 21st century. Few could blame NATO and allied officials for portraying the Libyan mission as an expression of the Alliance's commitment to be an effective security provider even in 'out-of-area' missions when necessary. And it is indisputable that Libyan rebels could not have come as far as they have without the Alliance's support. NATO's air power has been crucial in eroding Colonel Qaddafi's military machine, thus limiting the regime's ability to use its significant military power against the (initially, at least) poorly organized and ill-equipped rebels. The Alliance's success is even more significant given the fact that the mission had to be improvised very quickly, and that it was carried out against the background of serious international concerns (expressed by countries such as Russia and China) and domestic constraints within allied states that were determined to avoid 'another Afghanistan'.

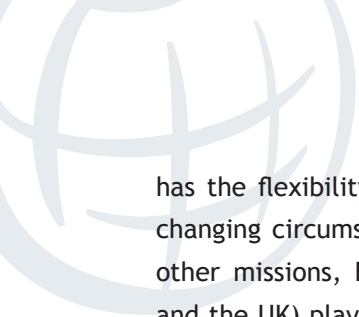
In Libya, NATO defied critics—including some within allied states—who had predicted an

At a glance...

- *The success of NATO's mission in Libya seems to show excellent promise for the Alliance's strength and capacity in future 'out-of-area' missions.*
- *However, Libya was in many ways an easy case; and even here NATO members displayed fractured solidarity and wide disparities in defense capabilities.*
- *Hence the Libya operation also reveals the Alliance's vulnerabilities and raises questions about its ability to respond effectively to future crises.*

intractable stalemate or even a spectacular failure. To appreciate fully the value of this success, imagine what could have happened if Qaddafi had been allowed to continue his violent crackdown of this spring's uprising. In light of his track record and his explicit promise to 'have no mercy and pity' on residents of Benghazi, it was no exaggeration to argue, as U.S. Secretary of State Clinton did, that "left unchecked, Qaddafi will commit unspeakable atrocities."

The way in which the mission was carried out also seemed to provide strong evidence in support of the Alliance's claim that it



has the flexibility and expertise needed to adapt to changing circumstances. For instance, in contrast to other missions, European states (specifically France and the UK) played a leading role in this case, which made it easier to avoid the oft-repeated criticism that NATO is no more than a hegemonic tool of the U.S.. In addition, the Alliance demonstrated its ability to learn from past mistakes: NATO took special care to hit only military targets, largely avoiding the kinds of tragic errors that had marred the Kosovo campaign in 1999.


All these are significant accomplishments. Nevertheless, a closer look at the dynamics of the Libya mission suggests that all is not as rosy as it may seem at a first glance. First of all, this mission was far from being an expression of unambiguous solidarity among NATO members. Out of 28 member states, only 14 committed military assets and just 9 were prepared to attack ground targets. Politically, Germany marked a significant low when it refused to back UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and subsequently withdrew all practical support for NATO's mission. Meanwhile, the only predominantly Muslim NATO member, Turkey—which could have played a key role in Libya—first expressed ambivalence about the mission and then prohibited its aircraft from flying any attack missions.

What is particularly worrisome in this context is that Libya represents, in some ways at least, an easy case for NATO, both for normative and for instrumental reasons. From a normative perspective, Qaddafi was a textbook villain who was very clear about his intentions to carry out massive atrocities against Libyan civilians. In addition, NATO enjoyed not only the support of—and in some cases explicit request for assistance from—Libyan rebels, but also the support (albeit not always highly publicised) of several Arab states. Furthermore, the NATO mission was conducted against the background of a Security Council Resolution that condemned the violence and

authorized the use of all necessary means to enforce the no-fly zone and protect the civilian population. Pragmatically, the European allies in particular had a strong interest in this mission: given Libya's proximity to Europe, regional instability and a massive wave of refugees would have directly affected them if the revolution had failed.

In short, if there was so much ambivalence and even opposition to the mission on the part of several allies in this case, it is reasonable to suspect that NATO would find it difficult to maintain the level of solidarity required to engage in other, less clear-cut 'out of area' missions. This reality is particularly problematic given that NATO's own strategic concept states that the changing international environment may well necessitate 'out of area' missions in the future.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the mission revealed yet again the huge gap between the U.S. and its allies in terms of defence capabilities. True, it was a couple of European allies, France and the UK, which determinedly took the lead on this occasion. But as several security experts have noted, the Europeans relied heavily on American military help to keep the mission alive; suffice it to say that the U.S. provided about three-quarters of the aerial tankers that enabled the strike fighters to reach their targets. Given the growing political and economic constraints in the U.S., Washington may well look to its allies to play more prominent roles in future NATO missions. Yet one of the lessons learned in this conflict is that the Europeans are not entirely ready to play such roles. The Europeans' often divergent views of solutions to crises, coupled with their—arguably understandable—reluctance to invest in defence budgets in tough economic times, mean that it is not at all clear that this will change in the foreseeable future. Should this situation persist, it's not at all clear how the Alliance will manage to function in future crises.

As we celebrate NATO's success in Libya, then, we should not lose sight of the fact that this operation also reveals the Alliance's vulnerabilities, and raises difficult questions about its ability to respond effectively to future crises. 

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