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Libya Gives Kremlin Chance to Be World Leader

By Adrian Pabst

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The Libyan crisis is quickly becoming a serious test for Russia's foreign policy. So far President Dmitry Medvedev has supported international efforts to isolate the regime of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, but he has stopped short of backing any direct intervention. By agreeing to a no-fly zone and assistance for the anti-Gadhafi rebels, he can make good on his promise to promote democracy and modernization not just at home but also abroad.

As the foreign ministers of the Group of Eight met in Paris on Tuesday to discuss action on Libya, the counter-offensive of forces loyal to Gadhafi continued. After the fall of Ras Lanuf, the battle now rages over the oil towns of Brega and Ajdabiya — the last city before the rebel base in Benghazi. Failure to support the provisional authorities with intelligence, arms and protection from aerial attacks will lead to their military defeat.

That will almost certainly be followed by a bloody suppression on a much larger scale than Saddam Hussein's persecution of Iraqi Shias following their uprising in 1991. If, as now seems

highly probable, Libya returns to its international pariah status, then a much larger confrontation beckons in future. Gadhafi might have given up his program of weapons of mass destruction in 2003, but there can be little doubt about his intentions if he stays in power.

Crucially, the world's dithering on a no-fly zone and other forms of assistance to the democratic revolutions sends a devastating signal to the people of North Africa and the Middle East. When they rise up against autocrats or dictators and request support beyond lofty rhetoric, the world blinks and backs down in the face of a tyrant it has backed for far too long.

None of this is in Russia's economic or wider strategic interests. But the dominant impression in the West and elsewhere is that Moscow remains opposed to a no-fly zone and other forms of interventions — for fear that it sets another precedent for undermining national sovereignty and promoting foreign interference in domestic affairs.

But that ignores Medvedev's more nuanced stance. On Feb. 26, Russia voted in favor of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970, condemning the use of lethal force by the Gadhafi regime and imposing a raft of sanctions. On March 10, Medvedev signed a presidential decree banning Gadhafi and his family from Russia and from carrying out any financial transactions in the country. At the very least, Russia won't provide a safe haven for Libya's dictator or for his wealth that belongs to the Libyan people. These are first yet decisive steps in severing Moscow's ties with the Gadhafi regime.

Taken to its political conclusion, Medvedev's decisions imply that the Kremlin no longer views Gadhafi as Libya's legitimate leader. In turn, that opens the door for backing the anti-Gadhafi rebels who command the overwhelming support of the people in whom sovereignty ultimately resides.

So what explains Moscow's continued opposition to a no-fly zone? Understandably, Russia is wary of licensing another Western round of regime change by military force as in the case of Iraq in 2003 or being dragged into another Afghanistan-style quagmire. But in public, Medvedev has so far been careful not to rule out Russia's agreement to a new UN resolution.

Unlike Iraq or Afghanistan, the case of Libya is not about waging a pre-emptive attack aimed at regime change, followed by invasion and occupation. Intervening in Libya is primarily about helping the struggle of the rebels and the people for freedom and self-determination against a dictatorship. Medvedev, like U.S. President Barack Obama, has a choice between assisting homegrown democracy or ultimately aiding and abetting tyranny.

Britain and France seem increasingly determined to intervene in some form. At present, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Gulf Cooperation Council and now the Arab League have all called on the UN Security Council to authorize a no-fly zone.

As such, military intervention need not be exclusively Western. Nor would it have to involve NATO bombings, which would fuel the flames of anti-Western sentiments that dominate the streets of North Africa and the Middle East. Thus, Russian opposition to military intervention in Libya is based on the misguided and disingenuous concern that it will be a repeat of Western unilateral action in Kosovo.

Instead, the alternative course of action for the West — in cooperation with Arab states and possibly Russia — is to assist the provisional authorities in Benghazi. In fact, the Libyan National Council has repeatedly requested military help to stem the regime's counter-offensive and ultimately defeat it.

Russia could follow France's lead and recognize the Libyan National Council as the legitimate government of Libya. Together with its partners in the UN Security Council, Moscow could also provide much-needed intelligence and arms to the rebels to help them continue their increasingly difficult fight against Gadhafi's henchmen and foreign mercenaries. The argument that international diplomacy is about recognizing foreign states and not groups within states is irrelevant, as Gadhafi's clan has no divine right over Libya's people.

The Kremlin's backing for British- and French-led action is in Russia's wider interest for at least four reasons. First, it would demonstrate Medvedev's commitment to democracy and modernization as the cornerstones of the Kremlin's foreign policy goals.

Second, it could help bring onboard German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Obama, who are so far reluctant to sanction any direct intervention. Here, Medvedev's security trialogue with Germany and France could translate into concrete policies. Likewise, the reset in U.S.-Russian relations can be carried forward through joint action in Libya.

Third, Russia's support for intervention could mark the beginning of direct security and defense cooperation not just with France but also with Britain. That, in turn, would be a game-changer at the level of the European Union and NATO. As Washington shifts its strategic focus from Europe to Asia, such cooperation could over time constitute the basis for a pan-European security community.

Fourth, it would allow Moscow to help shape policy in North Africa rather than being a spectator from the sideline. Under Medvedev, Russia has sought to play a constructive role in the wider Europe and the greater Middle East, seeking closer links with NATO and key powers such as Turkey or Syria. Libya offers the Kremlin the chance to act as a balancing force between the West and the Arab-Muslim world.

Like the West, Russia would do well to learn the lessons of failed interventions since the end of the Cold War. The fight in Libya is about homegrown democracy against a dictator who has enjoyed foreign support for far too long. Let's hope Russia takes the initiative, adopts the correct and prudent policies on Libya and ends up on the right side of history.

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