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Kremlin's Libya About-Face

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After several days of airstrikes against Libya in accordance with United Nations Resolution 1973, the situation has changed completely. The United States and the European Union, which for the last few weeks were persuaded into intervening to stop Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, are now being branded as imperialist crusaders driven by a "white man's burden" that are attempting to impose their own political order on the rest of the world. What's more, the number of countries that have now decided to openly criticize the intervention after either supporting it or taken a neutral position has grown to include Arab League states, Russia and China.

The decision to carry out airstrikes against Gadhafi's military bases is not only morally justified, but it is irreproachable in terms of its strict adherence to international law. During the past few weeks of Gadhafi's counterattack alone — not to mention his history of supporting global terrorism and killing thousands of his own citizens during his 40-year reign — he has violated numerous international laws. These include the 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, the 1984 Convention against Torture, the 1966 International Convention on the Elimination of All

Forms of Racial Discrimination, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as The Hague conventions and declarations.

At the same time, UN Resolution 1973 authorized coalition forces "to take all necessary measures to protect civilians" in Libya with the exception of ground operations. Never before have we seen such a strong legal basis for international humanitarian intervention. This basis was lacking, for example, when India intervened in Eastern Bangladesh in 1971, when Tanzania liberated Uganda from President Idi Amin's reign in 1978 or when Russia forced peace in South Ossetia in 2008 by invading these foreign territories in the Russia-Georgia war.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the resolution "historic." He is correct because Resolution 1973 was the first time military intervention was approved for a purely domestic humanitarian operation. Unlike the UN resolution approving the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which was part of a global war on terrorism, Libya's case is strictly internal. Strictly speaking, the country's humanitarian crisis does not pose a threat to global security.

Before Libya, the UN had always failed to act in similar internal humanitarian crises, such as the 2005 Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan, the deadly conflict in Darfur in 2003-09 or the ethnic cleansing in Kyrgyzstan a year ago. Even more tragic were the humanitarian crises in Rwanda and the Congo. UN support for Operation Odyssey Dawn is proof that the international community has finally learned its lesson from the shameful failures to intervene in the past.

By abstaining in the Security Council vote, Russia took a neutral position, but this neutrality did not last long. A day after the bombing began and three days after the resolution passed, the Foreign Ministry immediately expressed regret over the military strikes and called the resolution "hastily adopted."

In addition, the ministr for some reason was surprised that airstrikes from coalition bombers, jet fighters and warships were used against Libyan targets. But how did it expect to enforce the resolution, including establishing a no-fly zone, without targeting Libya's air-defense, aircraft and ground forces from the sea and air? In a naive, childish manner, the Foreign Ministry was suggesting that the coalition forces had somehow "tricked" Russia into neutrality on the resolution.

Russia's attempt to dissociate itself from Resolution 1973 is puzzling, especially considering that top officials, including the president, are not disputing its legality.

The abstention will also send a signal to the other dictators of the world that enjoy the warm support of the Kremlin — when it comes down to a Security Council vote, we may hide behind an abstention instead of saving you with an outright veto.

On Monday, President Dmitry Medvedev, in response to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's sharp criticism of Operation Odyssey Dawn, once again defended the country's abstention vote. It seems that Medvedev was sending a message to his tandem partner: Perhaps abstaining is a good policy not only in the UN Security Council.

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