

NATO Lessons From Libya Mission One Year On

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NATO's intervention in Libya one year ago helped to avert a humanitarian catastrophe and created the conditions for Libya's citizens to end Moammar Gadhafi's dictatorship.

The military operation highlighted important improvements in European leadership since the Bosnian debacle in the 1990s, but the conditions underlying the Libya mission's success cannot be counted upon to exist again in the future. Indeed, NATO's accomplishments in the Libya operation risk obscuring persistent weaknesses in Europe's military capabilities.

Europe's unity of purpose in Libya contrasts sharply with its divisions and indecisiveness as Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 1990s. The United States had to coax many Western European countries into helping to stop the slaughter of innocents in Bosnia. Although the trans-Atlantic alliance was more unified and responsive during the subsequent Kosovo crisis, the United States was still firmly in the driver's seat. In Libya, the roles were reversed: Western Europeans had to push the United States to take action.

The manner in which U.S. President Barack Obama brought the United States into the effort to protect Libyan civilians mollified European concerns about American hubris that had grown out of the Iraq war.

It also made possible a broad coalition of countries, as well as the first-ever call for intervention from the Arab League. Obama's decision that the United States should play a supporting role with other NATO partners — particularly France and Britain — taking the lead, reinforced the global perception of the mission's legitimacy.

Today, the growing debate about a Syrian intervention raises legitimate questions concerning whether Libya was a unique situation. Libya's proximity to Europe both lowered barriers to participation and stimulated Europe's sense of responsibility, while Gadhafi was a reviled figure with few friends.

Moreover, many European countries have direct interests in Libya and thus had a clear stake in the outcome. Libyans' opposition to Gadhafi was relatively well organized, was recognized by the international community and had explicitly called for outside intervention.

While the conditions in Libya were certainly optimal, the situation in Syria is better described as uniquely complicated for any intervention. For starters, Syria's location in the eastern Mediterranean is not as advantageous as is Libya's position in North Africa.

In addition, Syria's borders with Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel present unique challenges to regional security, given the potential not only for international conflict, but also for destabilizing cross-border flows of refugees. Syria also has allies — above all, Russia with its veto-wielding seat on the United Nations Security Council.

The significant obstacles to intervention and the genuine risk of making an already terrible situation worse makes direct military intervention in Syria a remote possibility at this time. That is tragic in many ways, but it does not mean that the positive post-Libya momentum toward the protection of civilians is entirely lost. Even though it ended in failure, the Arab League agreement with the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad to allow observers into Syria to facilitate an end to the conflict was brokered, as Oman's foreign minister said, "to save the Arab world from Western intervention."

The Arab League's mission did not stop the killing, but it represented an escalation of pressure to end the slaughter — and it was based on leverage gained in Libya.

For NATO, that leverage depends upon its members' ability to marshal the will and resources to intervene if necessary. In Libya, Europe finally had the will to lead, but it largely lacked the means and thus relied heavily on the United States.

In addition to its air-strike deficiencies, Europe demonstrated serious shortfalls across all of the areas required to sustain any air campaign. As General Mark Welsh, commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, told top officers and industry executives at a gathering last summer, "We need more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability, and we need it now."

Unfortunately, the ongoing economic crisis is exerting downward pressure on defense budgets across NATO, exposing the need for greater cooperation among the alliance's

European members.

The harm caused by budget cuts is likely to multiply if all European governments slash spending in the same areas. German Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Aarne Kreuzinger-Janik warns that this would create "even bigger gaps and shortfalls." European governments must now work to ensure that they invest their limited resources in the right areas.

The trans-Atlantic alliance has reached a fork in the road. Down the path less traveled lies greater coordination on both strategic objectives and development of military capacity — particularly within Europe, where governments must better allocate resources among themselves to overcome the key deficiencies revealed by the Libya mission. The more familiar road leads to wasteful overlap and lower investment in key technologies, leaving wider gaps than ever in Europe's defense capability.

If Europe is to build on its success in Libya, it needs to take the road less traveled. It will make all the difference.

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