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Closing Argument

As Good as it Gets?

Dana H. Allin and Erik Jones

I

'I don't oppose all wars,' the Illinois state senator told those assembled in Chicago on 2 October 2002 for an anti-Iraq War rally. 'What I am opposed to is a dumb war.'¹ Elected president of the United States six years and one month later, Barack Obama was soon provided with ample opportunities to parse the distinction. The man who ordered the immediate ramping up of drone strikes in a fierce policy of targeted killing against the al-Qaeda and Taliban cadres seeking refuge in Pakistan was certainly no pacifist. And although the new president did make good on his commitment to withdraw the majority of American combat troops from Iraq, he also approved a substantial escalation of the war in Afghanistan, against the pointed advice of some in his administration and amidst growing unease among the general public. The next test was going to be Iran. Israel's panic regarding a nuclear-capable Iran and Washington's promise not to accept such an outcome strained against the administration's palpable reluctance to become involved in a third war in the Muslim world.

Then, the contingency of events took over. A Tunisian fruit vendor, humiliated one too many times – this time, by the slap of a policewoman – set himself on fire. The human tumult set off by that act of self-immolation convulsed the Arab world. Decades-old regimes fell in Tunisia itself and in Egypt, until the Libyan dictatorship in between, having mowed its own protestors like bloody grass, bore down on Benghazi and threatened to

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hunt down its rebels from house to house, 'like rats'.² Within days of that statement, mere weeks after the Libyan protests and repression started, the UN Security Council authorised member states to use 'all necessary means' to keep Muammar Gadhafi's forces from the hunt.³ In the history of a putative international community organising itself to stop atrocities, this was the speed of light and, as Bruce Jones explains elsewhere in this issue, only the fourth time in its history that the Security Council 'fully' authorised 'force against a member state'.⁴

Did Obama, in league with France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Britain's David Cameron, thereby stumble into his own dumb war? The indictment of strategic incoherence includes a number of damning counts. The most important is that while the administration spoke of humanitarian intervention, the situation on the ground looked more like civil war. Much of the east of Libya clearly rejected the Gadhafi regime, but a large part of the west of the country offered active support. Moreover, as Saskia van Genugten points out elsewhere in this issue, no one knew much about the rebels, and what was eventually learned did not instil confidence in an effective fighting force.⁵ The operating theory was that an air campaign, sanctions, and the certainty of permanent isolation would set loose a steady landslide of regime defections, until such time as the regime crumbled or, at least, Gadhafi and sons started looking for a way out. Yet almost no world leader has as much experience surviving sanctions as Gadhafi, and very few show such willingness to impose the ruthless discipline required to hold potential defectors in check. With vast stockpiles of cash at his disposal, an equally vast pool of mercenaries, and a near limitless capacity for self-delusion, it is not hard to imagine that Gadhafi can hold out for quite some time.⁶

Such counts are damning but not irrefutable. Few real-world scenarios combine the need for humanitarian intervention with the absence of civil war, or at least a potential for civil conflict. Even the most brutal dictator has domestic supporters. (Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania was the exception and not the rule.) The experience of Bosnia and Kosovo showed that humanitarian intervention cannot be neutral without creating contradictions; it only becomes coherent once it accepts to take sides.

From this perspective, it could be argued that the Obama administration did not have much of a choice. It could hardly side with Gadhafi and his forces as they fought to reassert their own view of 'political order', and it could not stand aside as Gadhafi's troops went house to house in Benghazi either. As Obama phrased it in his 28 March speech to the American people, 'It was not in our national interest to let that happen'.⁷ This was not some post hoc rationalisation. The roots of this argument are clearly laid out in Obama's 2009 Nobel acceptance speech:

More and more, we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region.

I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That's why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace.⁸

The situation unfolding in Libya fits clearly within the 'just war' scenario that Obama sketched for the Peace Prize audience. Any suggestion that Gadhafi would be less than brutal in his repression of dissent is inconsistent with the history of his rule, or with practice elsewhere in the region. Gadhafi is not uniquely oppressive; he is just extremely so.⁹

The fact that other countries also accepted the logic of intervention is significant as well. In the three sentences that follow the above citation from Obama's Nobel speech, the president goes on to point out that 'America's commitment to global security will never waver. But in a world in which threats are more diffuse, and missions more complex, America cannot act alone. America alone cannot secure the peace.'

The Libya crisis may not be the perfect occasion for humanitarian intervention, but there is unlikely to be a better one. The emergency was real and impending. The response was authorised by the UN Security Council, with five abstentions but no vetoes or negative votes. Through the Arab League, regional states supported it. European powers France and Britain

argued for it and were willing (how able they are is another question) to take on the main burden of conducting it. If one believes in the developing international norm of a 'responsibility to protect' – and according to its vote of 14 September 2009, the UN General Assembly does so believe – then this particular exercise of that responsibility is probably as good as it gets.

II

One alleged problem that cannot be taken seriously as a real problem is inconsistency: the accusation that intervening in Libya is somehow illegitimate because the United States, France and Britain are not also intervening against repression in Bahrain, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where there have in fact been EU-flagged troops), in Syria or even in Saudi Arabia. The fact is, that inconsistency is baked into the cake for as long as the American superpower lacks supernatural powers.

Firstly, the set of problems amenable to outside military solutions is a small one. The urgent problem in Libya was not to create a democracy, which is not practical at gunpoint, but to prevent a massacre. That task was accomplished – at least as of the moment when *Survival* went to press – and although it cannot be proven that, in the absence of intervention, a massacre would have taken place, the evidence, as suggested above, is strong.

Secondly, any intervention is an act of choice, and choice is an expression of priority. Even the United States has limited resources. Nowhere are those limits more evident than when the military is involved. American men and women are not only engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan and ongoing stabilisation efforts in Iraq, but they are also helping to stabilise relations between North and South Korea; are patrolling the waters of the North Atlantic and South Pacific; and are delivering aid and sustenance to disaster victims in Japan. (Indeed, they may already have completed that mission and moved on to provide assistance elsewhere by the time this issue appears.) Moreover, these examples constitute only a small fraction of what the US military is asked to accomplish on a regular basis. Any additional foreign intervention only adds to the list.

The financial constraints on American power are telling as well. Apart from the potential human cost of any combat operations, cruise missiles and precision-guided munitions deployed from existing stockpiles all have to be replaced. The accuracy such weapons offer comes at a frightening cost at a time when Democrats and Republicans are threatening to shut down the government over a difference of a few billion dollars. By 30 March, the administration had set the price tag for the Libyan intervention to that point at \$550 million and estimated it would cost another \$40m per month from there.¹⁰ Of course, these estimates depend on whether America's NATO allies can shoulder the burden for routine operations and so leave the United States to attend only to its unique capabilities. Given that the European allies were already running out of precision-guided munitions by mid-April, the 'uniqueness' of American military assets looks set to broaden and the cost of US involvement to consequently increase.¹¹ On 21 April, for example, the United States began deploying *Predator* drones to make targeted strikes in urban areas beyond the reach of European NATO assets.¹²

The importance of such fiscal considerations should not, however, be exaggerated. They may explain why the Obama administration does not intervene everywhere all the time, but they are no excuse for avoiding selective engagement. Although it is true that the United States is currently borrowing excessively, the reason does not trace back to one-off measures such as the Libyan intervention. Even the huge stimulus package passed at the start of the Obama administration is of relatively marginal concern. Instead, the real forces driving US indebtedness can be found in the rising cost of health care for the elderly, including the prescription-drug benefits created under the previous George W. Bush administration, and the Bush tax cuts.¹³ Both Republican and Democratic proposals for fiscal consolidation admit that the combination of high costs and low revenues is a structural problem.¹⁴ But just as the Libyan intervention was an act of choice, it also constitutes discretionary expenditure.

We now know, of course, that while the Obama administration was debating whether to join a Libya intervention, it was also in the late stages of planning for a mission to kill Osama bin Laden. The concurrence of

these operations serves to remind us that no single doctrine or tradition can really convey what America is up to or about. In Walter Russell Mead's categories, a 'Wilsonian' liberalism made it difficult for America to stand aloof from Libya's ordeal, while 'Jacksonian' nationalism made it unlikely that bin Laden, for all his success in evading capture, would end his days peacefully in bed.¹⁵ The question that arises is whether the organised violence that is driven by either of these American impulses can be put to good strategic purpose.

Since the law of unintended consequences almost inevitably applies, we must be cautious about asserting that the answer is 'yes'. But in the case of bin Laden, it can't hurt to have underscored the lesson, expressed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Islamist militants in South Asia, that 'You cannot wait us out, you cannot defeat us, but you can make the choice to abandon al-Qaeda and participate in a peaceful political process'.¹⁶ Whether or not her intended audience is now more amenable to that choice is debatable, but it is now at least an established historical fact that regimes, such as Afghanistan's pre-2001 Taliban, or individuals, such as Osama bin Laden, who are complicit in a major attack on the United States are very likely to be destroyed as a result.

In Libya, the understandable fear is that stalemate and Gadhafi's survival in power will make America look, in Richard Nixon's immortal phrase, like a 'pitiful, helpless giant'.¹⁷ It is not clear, however, that the immediate fall of Benghazi would have made America look much better than that. In any event, the long-term fate of the Arab Awakening will be decided in Egypt and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia. Obama's decision to intervene in Libya insulates both countries from the consequences and contagion that would result from Gadhafi's unchecked oppression. This will not guarantee the success of democracy in the region, but it does buy more time for Egypt and Tunisia to consolidate recent gains.

III

Is this, finally, the hour of Europe? The Obama administration clearly wishes that were possible. If there is a clear doctrine coming out of the president's address to the nation about Libya, it has less to do with the

conditions for humanitarian intervention than with the exercise of global leadership. In an attempt to draw a contrast with the leadership style of the previous Bush administration, Obama insisted:

American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all. That's the kind of leadership we've shown in Libya.¹⁸

The success of this doctrine hinges on whether the Europeans are up to the challenge. The outcome will be close at best.

The first point to note is that the European Union is largely absent from the equation. As Anand Menon points out elsewhere in this issue, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is virtually irrelevant.¹⁹ Although Europe's foreign ministers managed to pass a supportive resolution, they did so only on 1 April 2011 – well after the fact. This should not be surprising. The precondition for a successful European foreign and security policy is that the member states agree to act in common; it does not work the other way around, with a pressing issue building unity for action. Hence the EU rarely emerges as a coherent actor in response to sudden changes in world events, particularly where the immediate concerns of the member states are likely to differ, as when those events are close to home.

The EU will be important to Libya over the longer term, but that importance will only develop much later, once the member states have had time to build consensus on priorities for action and as the European Commission and Parliament seize the opportunity to bring the Union's considerable resources for development assistance, political cooperation and market access to bear. Post-stabilisation, the EU will likely become Libya's most important partner. Hence the European challenge is to manage events in and around Libya through the perilous short and medium terms.

In this period of decisive action, 'Europe' is not the European Union. It is the member states – France and Great Britain in particular. Europe is also the NATO Alliance, drawing upon the support of America's unique capabilities but shouldering both the lion's share of the costs and risks associated with military operations. Finally, Europe is the idea of collective regional security. It is the difference between unilateral intervention and what Obama characterises as 'leadership'.

The problem for the Obama doctrine is that 'leadership' depends so much on the successful delegation of responsibility to other countries. This is particularly true within the NATO Alliance. The United States may create the conditions for France and Germany to assume a higher profile within NATO, but then France and Germany must be able to lead the smaller members of the Alliance as well. In turn, France and Germany must either create the conditions for the smaller Alliance members to assume a significant share of responsibility for the Libyan intervention, or they must accept to carry a disproportionate share of the burdens themselves. This is where things are most likely to break down. France and Great Britain have already expressed concern that the smaller Alliance partners are not doing enough; that concern will only increase once the true cost of intervening in Libya becomes apparent and as the transition from intervention to stabilisation and, one hopes, democratisation begins to take hold. The rising tide of migrants to Europe from Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa is just one illustration of the wider problem. For France to chide Italy for not being more active in Libya while at the same time closing the Franco-Italian frontier to stem the flow of Tunisian migrants was incoherent. Either France and Italy share security objectives in the region or they do not; if they have different interests, then they should be free to pursue different policies. This is precisely the sort of situation where the European concept of collective security is most likely to founder. Fortunately, this time it did not. Italy pledged to become more actively involved in Libya even as France and Italy agreed to work together to suggest new protocols for introducing border controls within the Schengen regime.

In any case, tensions arising between France and Italy were but the tip of the iceberg. Germany's abstention in the UN Security Council and more

general northern European reluctance to assume active combat roles pose an even greater problem. The danger is that the smaller NATO Allies will each find reasons to object to French and British requirements. The French and British will become frustrated with their disproportionate share of the load. And the Obama administration will find itself re-assuming responsibility for what the French and the British claim not to be able to manage. In other words, the greatest threat to the new Obama doctrine on leadership will rise from the bottom up. The end result could look less like leadership than over-commitment.

This worst-case scenario is not inevitable. In any event, the best-case scenario of a strong and united Europe capable of assuming responsibility for political turmoil on its borders was not on the cards. The unilateral involvement of American forces without European allies would be ineffective, while any attempt to ignore this unique opportunity to prevent a massacre by a brutal dictator would be unacceptable. The United States cannot expect to find a better situation and should not hope for better allies. Instead, the Obama administration has to play the hand it was dealt.

Notes

- 1 Barack Obama, speech given in Chicago, IL, 2 October 2002, transcript available at <http://www.economics.utoronto.ca/munro5/ObamaonIraqOct2002.pdf>.
- 2 See, for example, Richard Spencer, 'Libya: Col Gaddafi's Speech his Last Stand?', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8341374/Libya-Col-Gaddafis-speech-his-last-stand.html>.
- 3 United Nations Security Council, 'Security Council Approves "No-fly Zone" over Libya', press release and full text of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, 17 March 2011, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>.
- 4 Bruce D. Jones, 'Libya and the Responsibilities of Power', *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 3, June–July 2011, p. 52.
- 5 Saskia van Genugten, 'Libya after Gadhafi', *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 3, June–July 2011, pp. 61–74. On the limitations of the rebels see, for example, Claudia Gazzini, 'Chi sono i ribelli di Bengasi?', *La Guerra di Libya – Quaderni Speciali di Limes (Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica)*, vol. 3, no. 2, April 2011, pp. 49–56.
- 6 Assessment offered by Karim Mezran, director of Rome's Centro Studi

- Americani and a long-time expert on Libya's relations with the West.
- ⁷ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya', National Defense University, Washington DC, 28 March 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.
- ⁸ Barack Obama, Nobel Lecture, Oslo, 10 December 2009, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html.
- ⁹ We do not deal explicitly with claims like those made by Alan Kuperman that the threat posed by Gadhafi to his own civilians has been exaggerated, except to say that not only are such claims inconsistent with Gadhafi's history of oppression, but they are also based on a reading of Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that is wildly inaccurate. Contrast, for example, Alan J. Kuperman, '5 Things the U.S. Should Consider in Libya', *USA Today*, 22 March 2011, and Alan J. Kuperman, 'False Pretense for War in Libya?', *Boston Globe*, 14 April 2011, with the actual text of the 10 April 2011 HRW report on Misurata: 'Libya: Government Attacks in Misrata Kill Civilians', <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/04/10/libya-government-attacks-misrata-kill-civilians>. Subsequent HRW reporting is even more revealing in its condemnation of Gadhafi's attacks on civilians, which includes use of cluster bombs.
- ¹⁰ This cost estimate went out over the Reuters wire on 30 March 2011 and reverberated widely across other media outlets. See 'Libyan War Cost \$550 million So Far, Lawmaker Says', <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/30/us-libya-usa-cost-idUSTRE72T6XZ20110330>.
- ¹¹ See Karen De Young and Greg Jaffe, 'NATO Runs Short on Some Munitions in Libya', *Washington Post*, 15 April 2011.
- ¹² Megan Scully, 'Obama Authorizes Predator Drones for Libya', *National Journal*, 21 April 2011, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/domesticpolicy/obama-authorizes-predator-drones-for-libya-20110421>.
- ¹³ See, for example, *The Long Term Budget Outlook* (Washington DC: Congressional Budget Office, August 2010), pp. 27–46.
- ¹⁴ The Republican proposal ('The Path to Prosperity: Restoring America's Promise') was made by Representative Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee, on 5 April 2011, and is available at: <http://budget.house.gov/UploadedFiles/PathToProsperityFY2012.pdf>. Obama's budget proposal for fiscal year 2012 is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget>.
- ¹⁵ Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001). On the Obama administration's move, during the debate over a Libya intervention, to a more operational support of Wilsonian principles, see Ryan Lizza, 'The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy', *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza.
- ¹⁶ 'Bin Laden Death: Clinton Says "You Cannot Wait us Out"', BBC News,

- 2 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13260603>.
- ¹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, 'Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia', 30 April 1970, available at <http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/nixon430.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya'.
- ¹⁹ Anand Menon, 'European Defence Policy from Lisbon to Libya', *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 3, June–July 2011, pp. 75–90.

NO EXIT

North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security

Jonathan D. Pollack

To be launched at
the Shangri-La Dialogue with
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