

## THE MARCH OF INTERVENTION

With 130.000 NATO troops still engaged in Afghanistan, 42.000 American troops present in Iraq and shrinking budgets following the global financial crisis, few would have expected renewed military interventionism in the international arena. Yet, three military interventions took place in March 2011.

Following the approval of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, on 19 March US, British, and French air and naval units began Operation Odyssey Dawn against Libyan forces to establish a no-fly zone (NFZ) over the country and arrest Muammar Gaddafi's forces' advance towards the rebel city of Benghazi, with the operation subsequently taken on by NATO (Operation Unified Protector). A few days before, on 14 March, Saudi and UAE forces were deployed in Bahrain with the endorsement of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to help quell the ongoing protests in the country. On 31 March, military units of the French mission and UN Operation in Ivory Coast (UNOCI) intervened in the ongoing conflict between Laurent Gbabo and Alassane Outtara's forces in Abidjan favouring the demise of the former.

Western intervention in Libya in particular has brought the question of Liberal interventionism back under the spotlight. Why this renewed interventionism? What does Libya tell us about intervention today? And where is all this going? To answer these questions three dimensions need to be addressed: an ideological and normative dimension; a political and strategic one; and a military one.

## THE (ETERNAL) RETURN OF LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM

The first dimension refers primarily to the ideological drivers of Western interventionism and the debate around Liberal interventionism. Simply put, Liberal interventionism refers to the doctrine advocating intervention in foreign societies, including the use of force, to promote Liberal values of freedom and human rights. Liberal interventionism burgeoned during the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s and reached its most ambitious experiment in Iraq 2003.

Despite the human, political, economic costs of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Liberal interventionism remains an influential doctrine among both Western policy-makers and intellectuals. As Toby Dodge argued one year ago on these pages (Ideas Today, Issue 2, 2010), 'there is no silver bullet that will keep it out of international relations. It will keep bouncing back'. Why is it so?

First, Liberal interventionism is here to stay for a very simple reason: the Liberal creed upon which all Western politics is predicated, which legitimates Western political discourse, institutions, and the political leaders that run them. A significant part of this creed is shaped by the belief in both democracies' action as a force for good in world politics as well as in the often taken-for-granted assumption of the right of democracies to intervene to rectify wrongdoings perpetuated by tyrannical regimes or fill the authority voids left by failed states. In this sense, Liberal Interventionism has not come back – it was never dead in the first place. The Arab Spring and the images of young protesters challenging autocratic regimes have simply provided new fuel to the ideational engine of Western interventionism.

Second, the experiences of the 1990s provided Western leaders with a set of lessons and a narrative over the possibility offered by the multilateral use of force, particularly air power and peacekeeping operations, in addressing humanitarian crises and domestic conflicts, as well as a stark reminder over of the costs of inaction (e.g. Srebrenica, Rwanda). It is an experience that is still exerting an enormous influence today: not surprisingly, intervention in Libya has often been justified as way to prevent a 'new Srebrenica' in Benghazi.

# Intervene Today



UN security council vote for a no-fly zone over Libya. Photograph: Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images

Third, it is an evolving doctrine that can be implemented through various forms of military and non-military action. In this sense, its adaptability to changing contexts helps explain its long-term appeal. Its latest evolution can be identified in the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). Adopted by the UN in 2005, the doctrine allows for the international community to take all the measures when a state fails to protect its own citizens from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This trend found expression in UNSC Resolution 1973 calling members states to take 'all necessary measures... to protect civilians' in Libya.

UNSC 1973 reference to the protection of civilians and the BRIC countries' (Brazil, Russia, India, China) abstention over the resolution has been hailed as the manifestation of an emerging consensus over the R2P doctrine beyond Western circles. At closer look however such optimism is misplaced. The BRICs' abstentions resulted from exceptional circumstances, including the presence of regional support for intervention provided by the Arab League and the lack of any primary strategic interests in Libya for the BRICs.

# Intervention day

In addition, the Libyan case may well create a precedent that other states could use. Humanitarian considerations were cited by Russia in the war in Georgia in 2008 and tomorrow Moscow could invoke the same to

address the consequences of what might be turbulent political transitions in Central Asia and the Caucasus. More importantly, military stalemate in Libya and casualties among civilians might well strangle R2P in its newfound Libyan cradle. Emerging powers' increasing criticism of NATO air strikes in Libya already indicates that they won't probably repeat the experience.

Where is all this leading? On the one hand, Liberal interventionism's relevance in Western political discourse and the political instability produced by the Arab Spring underscore the likelihood of future interventions. On the other hand, deficit cuts and the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq have left a profound scepticism about the use of ground troops and stressed the need for allied and regional consensus to secure sufficient legitimacy and support. As a result, what we are experiencing is a shift from the proactive and imperial forms of Liberal intervention symbolised by Iraq 2003 and a return to more classic, reactive forms of Liberal interventions following and addressing revolutions, domestic conflicts, and human rights violations.

## A COMPLEX STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

Intervention is a highly political decision, shaped by both domestic and international contexts and contests. Both domestic and international factors interplay in shaping interventionary policies. For instance, domestic politics help explain both French activism

as well as German and Italian reluctance to intervene. At the same time, the US's limited role resulted from a compromise between a more interventionist position present primarily in the State Department (Hilary Clinton, Amb. Susan Rice) – yet not exclusively (Samantha Power) – and a more cautious Pentagon (Robert Gates). But domestic politics and bureaucratic compromises tell only part of the story.

European and American positions have been shaped by the different interests and vulnerabilities with regard to the Libyan question, in terms of the different costs that Libyan instability entailed to different actors. More importantly, allied decisions stemmed from need to adapt to a rapidly changing situation on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean, in a strategic setting defined by competing interests among interveners themselves. Such a competitive stance derives from the need to secure not only competing security and economic interests but also a favourable position in the new regional order that could assure access and influence over the emerging regimes. Intervention appealed to



*A Bosnian woman mourns over coffins of a newly identified victims during preparations for mass burial at the Potocari Memorial cemetery near Srebrenica on Saturday. AFP photo*

European governments in particular as a shortcut to get back on the right side of history when transitions appeared inevitable. Allied humanitarian aid, the de facto and official recognition of the National Transitional Council in Benghazi, the provision of military support – all need to be addressed from the perspective of a renewed competition for credibility, prestige, influence and economic positions in a politically altered region, vis-à-vis new regimes and Arab public opinion after the initial ambiguities and the previous support for the autocratic regimes in the area. As in earlier cases of allied interventions in the Balkans, competing views and interests will make the survival of the coalition an objective in itself. This will likely lead alliance decision-making into compromise and ineffective military solutions at the operational level that in turn will leave NATO the familiar choice to either wait or escalate.

At the same time, coalition politics takes place within two broader dynamics. First, rising powers have played an indirect but important role so far, by abstaining in the UNSC. However, they have been increasingly vocal about NATO airstrikes in Libya, advocating a negotiated resolution of the conflict proposed by the



African Union (AU). Relations between NATO countries and rising powers will likely determine the shape of NATO exit strategy from Libya as well as provide indications on the emerging balance between Western countries and the BRICs.

Second, regional actors – state and inter-state – are becoming more relevant in shaping interventionary responses. The Libyan case, in particular, highlights the role played by France and the UK and US willingness to give European allies a leading role with regard to operations in the European and Mediterranean region. Obama's remarks in his recent speech at Westminster Hall on the indispensability of the transatlantic alliance further stressed this point. It is a trend that encompasses also the Middle East and Africa. The Arab League played a key role in legitimising intervention in Libya. In the Gulf, the Arab Spring has pushed Saudi Arabia and the GCC into a more interventionist role, exemplified by the intervention in Bahrain and diplomatic initiative to solve the political crisis in Yemen. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) request for a stronger UN mandate in Ivory Coast ignited the process leading to UN troops' air strikes against Gbagbo's compound.

After Iraq, regional support has become a key criterion for US intervention, as stressed by former Secretary of Defense Gates in the run-up to allied intervention in Libya. Yet, as the Arab League's case shows, regional support can be half-hearted and turn sour quickly once the objectives of the intervener become clearer and the costs of intervention – human, political, and economic – are made evident.

## TURNING UP THE HEAT IN LIBYA

In military terms, Libya may come to represent an emblematic case of post-Iraq military intervention, characterised by a return to the experience of the 1990s and the renewed comfort found by Western leaders in the promises of air power. The lessons of Kosovo – whether the correct ones or not – loom large in Operation Unified Protector. As in the case of Kosovo, however, operations in Libya have once again highlighted the illusion that air power can be successful alone. The intrinsic limits of air operations in assuring substantial gains on the ground have ignited a classic escalatory process. As air operations proved ineffective in securing an immediate result, the UK, France and Italy have deployed military trainers to Benghazi to provide organisational support to the rebels. Furthermore, in May 2011 NATO significantly escalated its air strikes against Tripoli and the ruling elite's sites and assets. In a other remarkable step, Apache, Tiger, and Gazelle attack helicopters have been deployed by Paris and London to the theatre of operations. As confirmed by British Prime minister David Cameron, these measures aim at 'turning up the heat' in Libya and exerting increased pressure on Gaddafi and his domestic allies.

Problems for alliance cohesion will arise if NATO strikes and the new measures adopted do not deliver. NATO leaders will find it difficult not to escalate and adopt further measures such as the provision of weapons, including heavy artillery to the rebels; a larger presence and role for military trainers to take on more operational and military training programmes; and an increased role for intelligence operatives and special operations forces. Significantly, the US might be forced to reassume a more prominent role in attack operations if the operation continues unsuccessfully.

Resolution 1973 explicitly prohibits any 'foreign occupation force of any form on any part of the Libyan territory'. Nonetheless, discussion over the possibility of using ground forces might still ensue. In particular, discussion of the use of ground troops will resurface in view of a solution to the conflict. Three outcomes are in fact possible: the failure of NATO operations, a NATO military success (ousting Gaddafi), or a negotiated settlement. In all three cases, ground troops might be required to, respectively: escalate the conflict and secure the alliance objectives; provide support to the reconstruction process in Libya; and monitor the eventual ceasefire.

## INTERVENTION IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

The March 2011 interventions have been a reaction to the revolutionary wave and the political transition processes in the Middle East and North Africa. This process is not over yet. Western and Middle Eastern governments will continue to operate in an a rapidly evolving political and ideological framework. Post-revolutionary phases are traditionally highly unstable and unpredictable and often characterised by series of interventions and counterinterventions. The outcome of this phase is still hard to detect. The French Revolution and the Russian February Revolution in 1917 toppled absolutist, autocratic regimes, only to pave the way in the short-term for Napoleon and the Bolsheviks. The French revolution changed Europe, but only after two decades of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary wars. In this sense, the Arab Spring will be shaped by both domestic developments in the region and external interference.

Evolutions in US doctrine also need to be taken into account. President Obama's speech on the Middle East (19 March 2011), pledging US support for the ongoing transition in the region, marks a significant Wilsonian shift away from the more pragmatic phase expressed in the Cairo speech. Obama has stressed how the ongoing process gives the US the chance to abandon its past acceptance 'of the world



as it is in the region' in the name of stability and instead 'pursue the world as it should be', placing self-determination as the new guiding principle of American policy in the region.

Two aspects, nonetheless, remain unclear: first, the extent to which the US and its European allies will be willing to support other ongoing democratic transitions not only via the economic measures approved recently by the G8 but also via the direct and indirect use of military force. More importantly, it is not entirely clear where history is heading in the Middle East, i.e. whether the Arab Spring will lead the region towards increased participatory democracy or various forms of either Islamist or indirect military rulers.

The picture of political and ideological confrontation looks increasingly complex. It is a context shaped by the 'obsolescence of the al-Qaida model' and yet also a potential greater role for moderate Islamism, as argued by Gilles Kepel in this issue. Growing democratic aspirations, Western support for the latter, and military-led transitions further complicate the picture. Alignments in the region might also be altered. Interestingly, local Libyan Islamists are supporting Western intervention in Libya. At the same time, GCC discussions on Morocco and Jordan's membership in the council indicates the possible emergence of a counterrevolutionary front in the region.

Threats and windows for intervention will likely arise at the intersection of these ideological dynamics, competing political and strategic interests and escalatory military factors. In this sense, Africa and the Middle East are likely to provide most of the flash points in 2011.

In Africa, the electoral processes taking place in the first months of 2011 have already spurred regional and international crises. The civil violence ignited by the elections in Nigeria and Ivory Coast provide a stark reminder of the possibility of both domestic conflict and foreign intervention in the continent. The road ahead is marked by other warning signs. The Democratic Republic of Congo is heading towards elections in November-December 2011 in a context of political instability, ongoing international military presence, and human rights violations. The unfinished process leading to Southern Sudan's independence coupled with the domestic situation in Somalia completes a tense picture.

In the Middle East, Assad's repression of Syrian protests has been closely monitored by Western leaders. So far, this has resulted in new targeted sanctions against the regime and Obama's and European allies' calls for Assad to either reform or quit. Western action with regard to Syria is unlikely at this stage, however, and it will remain contingent on both the extent of continued protests, the extent of Assad's repression and its regional repercussions, and the ongoing NATO commitment in Libya. Iran represents the other obvious critical node due to both the Iranian nuclear programme and the possible resumption of youth protests in the country.

At the moment, however, Yemen represents a more immediate concern. Yemen is the recipient of significant Western economic and humanitarian aid. In 2009, US aid increased to approximately \$70 million, from \$5 million in 2006. In January 2010, 25 countries and international organisations, including US and EU countries, the GCC, Turkey, Egypt and the UN, established the 'Friends of Yemen' initiative in an attempt to avoid Yemen turning into a failed state and a safe haven for terrorist groups. More importantly, the US and the UK are already present in Yemen with military trainers. In addition, direct air strikes against members and facilities of al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) have been conducted – although officially not confirmed – via drones and cruise missiles.

Yemen represents a failing state of considerable interest to NATO not only because of its strategic position and the presence of AQAP in the country. Yemen matters to GCC governments because of the potential regional consequences of a rapidly deteriorating domestic context where anti-government protests add up to the political uncertainty ensuing President Ali Abdullah Saleh's departure from Yemen; the ongoing clashes between government troops and forces loyal to the Hashid tribal confederation led by Sadeq al-Ahmar; the consequences of the Houthi rebellion in the North; and secessionist movement in Southern provinces. Saudi border and air operations against the Houthi rebels in November 2009 exemplify the potential spill-over effects of Yemen's domestic conflict for neighbouring states. The failure of the GCC diplomatic initiative in April and the military clashes between government and anti-government forces in May have increasingly reduced the scope for a peaceful solution to the crisis in the country and opened the door for all-out domestic conflict.

The list of other possible flashpoints is undoubtedly longer, encompassing other regions. If anything, the Libyan case has stressed the role of strategic surprise in international affairs. Few observers noted the changing political landscape in the Arab world. Even fewer anticipated political change and domestic conflict in Libya. No-one could have imagined a few months ago that the West would be engaged in a military intervention against Gaddafi. But revolutions do accelerate history, and make it rather unpredictable. Hence, the only possible prediction: prepare for more surprises. ■

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