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The Right Way to Run an Intervention

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The Right Way to Run an Intervention

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NATO's operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention. The alliance responded rapidly to a deteriorating situation that threatened hundreds of thousands of civilians rebelling against an oppressive regime. It succeeded in protecting those civilians and, ultimately, in providing the time and space necessary for local forces to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi. And it did so by involving partners in the region and sharing the burden among the alliance's members.

NATO's involvement in Libya demonstrated that the alliance remains an essential source of stability. But to preserve that role, NATO must solidify the political cohesion and shared capabilities that made the operation in Libya possible—particularly as its leaders prepare for the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago this May.

RAPID RESPONSE

When the people of Libya rose up against Qaddafi in February 2011, many hoped that the nonviolent protests would follow the successful path of similar uprisings

in Tunisia and Egypt. But rather than capitulate, as had Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, Qaddafi launched a brutal crackdown.

The international community responded swiftly. In late February, the UN Security Council placed sanctions, an arms embargo, and an asset freeze on Libya and referred Qaddafi's crimes against humanity to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Shortly thereafter, the Arab League suspended Libya from its sessions and then called on the international community to impose a no-fly zone. On March 17, the Security Council granted that request, mandating "all necessary measures" to protect civilians.

The United States facilitated this rapid international reaction. In late February, Washington was the first country to cut off Qaddafi's funding, freezing \$32 billion in Libyan assets and prompting other countries to follow suit. Washington also led the charge for the UN resolution that authorized the intervention, justifying the action as consistent with "the responsibility

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to protect,” the norm that calls on the international community to intervene when governments fail to safeguard their own civilians. And on March 19, following the UN authorization, the United States led a coalition in launching air and missile strikes against Libyan forces—including against a large concentration of armored vehicles approaching Benghazi, the headquarters of the revolution and home to 750,000 people whom Qaddafi had labeled as “rats” when he threatened to “cleanse Libya house by house.” The initial intervention rescued the people of Benghazi, obliterated Libya’s air defense system within 72 hours, and deployed aircraft and naval vessels to enforce the UN resolution.

Following this early success, U.S. President Barack Obama sought NATO’s agreement to take over command and control of the operation in order to ensure the effective integration of allied and partnered militaries. Washington would continue to participate in military operations but would do so mainly by gathering and analyzing intelligence, refueling NATO and partner aircraft, and contributing other high-end military capabilities, such as electronic jamming.

With many NATO countries, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, already contributing to the intervention, NATO was the logical choice to assume command, and it agreed to do so on March 27. Dubbed Operation Unified Protector, the alliance’s mission in Libya consisted of three separate tasks: policing the arms embargo, patrolling the no-fly zone, and protecting civilians. Although it immediately solidified the maritime blockade and the no-fly zone, it encoun-

tered difficulties in protecting the Libyan people. The proximity of the regime’s forces, facilities, and equipment to civilian infrastructure; the initially limited ability of the Libyan opposition to defend itself and the population centers under its control; and the need for NATO to minimize harm to civilians all slowed the operation and at times led to a perception of deadlock and stalemate.

By the middle of August, however, the opposition had gained enough strength to attack Qaddafi’s strongholds, first in Tripoli and then in Sirte. Within two months, the Libyan National Transitional Council had secured control over the entire country and rebels had captured and killed Qaddafi. Operation Unified Protector ended on October 31, 222 days after it had begun.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT

By any measure, NATO succeeded in Libya. It saved tens of thousands of lives from almost certain destruction. It conducted an air campaign of unparalleled precision, which, although not perfect, greatly minimized collateral damage. It enabled the Libyan opposition to overthrow one of the world’s longest-ruling dictators. And it accomplished all of this without a single allied casualty and at a cost—\$1.1 billion for the United States and several billion dollars overall—that was a fraction of that spent on previous interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

But the Libya operation had its challenges as well, both in conception and in execution. If NATO is to replicate its success in the future, it must examine and learn from these challenges.

The first lesson is that NATO is uniquely positioned to respond quickly and

effectively to international crises. Some countries have significant military reach. But when a group of countries wants to launch a joint intervention as a coalition—which confers political legitimacy—only NATO can provide the common command structure and capabilities necessary to plan and execute complex operations. Multilateral coalitions built on an as-needed basis, by contrast, have no common doctrine for conducting military operations, no common capabilities or command structure for quickly integrating national forces into a cohesive campaign, and no standing mechanisms for debating and then deciding on an agreed course of action. Such ad hoc coalitions therefore almost always rely disproportionately on a single nation to bear the brunt of security burdens that ideally should be more equally shared.

In Libya, NATO coordinated the actions of 18 countries—14 member states and four partners—under a unified command. The United States certainly played a critical role, providing intelligence, fueling, and targeting capabilities. But other states made similarly indispensable contributions. France and the United Kingdom flew over 40 percent of the sorties, together destroying more than a third of the overall targets. Italy provided aircraft for reconnaissance missions and, along with Greece, access to a large number of air bases. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates deployed fighters for combat operations, and Jordan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and Qatar helped enforce the no-fly zone. Many of these states, as well as Bulgaria and Romania, also deployed naval assets to enforce the arms embargo.

The second lesson of Libya is that although NATO's political unity is improving, more work must be done. NATO allies overcame their early differences on Libya and forged a course of action acceptable to all. Every ally contributed to the operation through NATO's command structure, and no allies restricted the use of their personnel assigned to NATO command centers in places such as Mons, Belgium; Naples, Italy; or Ramstein, Germany. But although 14 member states contributed directly to Operation Unified Protector, an equal number did not. Many of the countries that did not participate lacked the resources to do so but still lent their political support. Some countries, such as Germany, however, decided not to participate even though they could have. Berlin did not block NATO's decision to act in Libya and even assisted alliance operations as a whole by increasing its involvement in aerial surveillance in Afghanistan. But it abstained from the UN Security Council vote authorizing the intervention and stayed out of the military operation. And even though Poland assisted by selling precision munitions to other NATO countries, it, too, refrained from participating directly.

Some commentators, such as Anne Applebaum, have expressed fears that the absence of a substantial number of NATO members from the mission in Libya signaled a lack of solidarity or, worse, the emergence of a two-tiered alliance, in which some members focus on humanitarian and peacekeeping missions and others bear the burden of combat.

Such a concern is misplaced—at least for now. When NATO's work is viewed through the context of the entire span of its missions, from that in Afghanistan to

antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, it becomes clear that every member state participates to the best of its abilities—including Germany and Poland, both of which are playing significant roles in Afghanistan and Kosovo. Yet although the Libya operation showed that the allies' political commitment to NATO is improving, the allies must work to translate this political will into reality by sharing more equitably in the alliance's overall defensive burden.

The intervention in Libya also demonstrated that a politically cohesive NATO can tackle increasingly complex, and increasingly global, security challenges. For its first 40 years, NATO concentrated on defending the borders of its member states. But after the Cold War, the alliance expanded its focus beyond deterrence, making it the partner of choice for international security operations. This trend began with the Partnership for Peace in the mid-1990s, a program of practical cooperation and political dialogue with nonmember states across Europe and Central Asia. And it has continued into the current century, with 50 nations placing their forces under NATO's command as part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

NATO again took the lead in Libya. Some countries hesitated to place NATO in charge of a military action, fearing that the alliance would not garner enough support in the region, but it turned out that Arab states preferred to work through NATO; several of them, such as Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates, had already participated in NATO-led operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and others had fostered closer relations with NATO through the Mediterranean

Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. These programs, launched in 1994 and 2004, respectively, expanded NATO's ability to partner with countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

These partnerships with non-NATO members signify the increasing role of the alliance beyond its borders. Such cooperation may not have a decisive military impact; as in the Balkans and Afghanistan, alliance members supplied the bulk of the military capability in Libya. (Nearly 90 percent of the non-U.S. forces in Afghanistan, for example, come from countries in Europe.) But this kind of burden sharing is politically essential to the overall effectiveness of NATO's operations. The participation of Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and their support for Libyan opposition forces proved critical to the liberation of Tripoli, both by demonstrating Arab political support and by providing additional military capabilities. Regional participation also helped allay potential friction within the alliance, reassuring many otherwise reluctant NATO members of the mission's legitimacy.

IT GETS BETTER

However successful, NATO's intervention in Libya suggested that the organization must strengthen its basic infrastructure if it hopes to increase its role in global security. NATO's integrated command structure and shared funding bind the alliance together, but serious gaps remain in its overall capabilities. Within the command structure, for example, the alliance has failed to devote the necessary resources to developing key skills, including the capacity to find and engage the types of

mobile targets common in contemporary operations, plan joint operations in parallel with fast-paced political decision-making, support the targeting process with legal advice, and provide timely and reliable information on operational developments to the public. NATO has also neglected to cultivate essential tools for military campaigns, such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, precision targeting, and aerial refueling—despite nearly two decades of experience that have demonstrated their value.

Instead of investing in NATO, many member states have depended on the United States to compensate for these deficiencies. In Libya, Washington provided 75 percent of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data employed to protect Libyan civilians and enforce the arms embargo. It also contributed 75 percent of the refueling planes used throughout the mission—without which strike aircraft could not have lingered near potential targets in order to respond quickly to hostile forces threatening to attack civilians. And U.S. commanders in Europe had to quickly dispatch over 100 military personnel to the NATO targeting center at the outset of the intervention when it became clear that other member states lacked the knowledge and expertise to provide their aircraft with the correct targeting information.

The heavy reliance of alliance members on the United States during the conflict highlighted the cost of a decade of European underinvestment in defense. On average, U.S. allies in Europe now spend just 1.6 percent of their GDPs on their militaries, and many spend less than one percent; the United States, in contrast, spends over four percent of its GDP. The

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fact that Washington spends nearly three times as much on defense as the other 27 NATO allies combined has opened a growing divide in the capabilities of the member states. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned in his valedictory policy address last June, this imbalance threatens to create a two-tiered alliance that will ultimately prove unsustainable.

NATO began to address these shortfalls before the war in Libya began. At the Lisbon summit in November 2010, for example, the alliance adopted a new “strategic concept” to guide it for the next decade. In it, the allies committed to deploying the “full range of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of [its] populations.” It also identified and prioritized the ten capabilities that member states agreed were essential to the organization’s strength not only in today’s operations (such as enhanced methods to counter improvised explosive devices and improvements in information sharing) but also in the future (such as missile defense and joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance—a key deficiency in Libya).

The alliance will now have to summon the political will to implement these standards in a period of fiscal austerity. NATO countries can continue to invest in their military capabilities on their own—which means investing inefficiently and often insufficiently, while leaning on an increasingly impatient United States to make up the difference. Or member states can invest through NATO and other multinational programs, saving money, promoting cooperation, sharing capabilities, and demonstrating solidarity. NATO will

continue to succeed only if every member state chooses the latter course.

Should NATO members rise to the challenge, their investments will fund vital programs that can address some of the shortfalls of the Libya operation. One such program is the Alliance Ground Surveillance system, which is designed to help locate mobile and concealed ground forces and will thereby strengthen NATO’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. Members should also consider pooling their investments in aerial refueling and precision-guided weapons and sharing data on their own national munitions stockpiles in order to improve planning.

The allies must also remember that the operation in Libya was relatively small—about one-fifth the size of that in Kosovo in terms of the number of military assets involved. If defense spending continues to decline, NATO may not be able to replicate its success in Libya in another decade. NATO members must therefore use the Chicago summit to strengthen the alliance by ensuring that the burden sharing that worked so well in Libya—and continues in Afghanistan today—becomes the rule, not the exception. 🌐