

# United States-France Relations and Cooperation in Libya

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In many ways, 2011 was an exceptional year for French-American relations. As the world underwent deep transformations, particularly with the Arab Spring, the United States and France demonstrated the strength of their partnership and the importance of what they can accomplish together.

Our countries worked together with a rare degree of closeness, in the context of France's dual G8 and G20 presidencies, to confront the risk posed by the Iranian nuclear program, the risk of expanding terrorism from the Sahel to Yemen, from Somalia to Afghanistan, and the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. But most noteworthy in 2011 was the exemplary cooperation between our countries in the Libyan crisis, which saved so many lives and helped bring an end to a bloody, 42-year dictatorship.

Libya was a historic operation in many ways. First, it was historic due to the rapid response of the international community, which in just one month gave itself the means to act, in order to fulfill its responsibility to protect. Historic, too, because for the first time since the establishment of NATO, the European countries—and particularly France—shouldered most of the military burden carrying about 90 percent of strike sorties, with essential support from the United States. And historic because NATO demonstrated its flexibility by allowing Arab countries to participate in the operations, which was of crucial importance in this case, and was in line with the diplomatic efforts France and the United States displayed in the region, to gather support for a concerted action from the international community.

France's leading role was widely acknowledged, as was the quality of the relationship between our countries, starting with our cooperation in the United Nations Security Council. There France and the United States worked hand-in-hand to ensure the adoption of two robust resolutions, one of which (Resolution 1973) authorized the use of "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians. In the skies over Libya, our armed forces provided most of the necessary effort to fulfill this mandate. Beginning on March 19, 2011, French fighters stopped Gaddafi's tank columns, which were preparing to take Benghazi and crush the organized opposition (that would go on to topple the regime a few months later). The same evening, US and British missiles were used to neutralize military targets and set up a no-fly zone (also authorized under Resolution 1973), with the first strikes targeting the forces threatening Libyan civilians.

It is remarkable to note that from March 19 to 31, during an initial phase that was crucial for Libya, the American "Operation Odyssey Dawn" and the French "Operation Harmattan" worked together in perfect harmony, enabling the nascent National Transitional

Council<sup>1</sup> to maintain control over a portion of Libyan territory and thereby reinforce its legitimacy.

Beginning on March 31, NATO took over the coordinated allied action with “Operation Unified Protector.” The six months of military operations that followed also offered many lessons both for the French-American relationship and for NATO.

First, for French-American relations, because the definition of the NATO mission was the result of an agreement between Washington, Paris, London and their NATO partners, the French were notably concerned with ensuring, throughout the preparation of NATO’s entry on the scene, that its mission be neither more nor less than the one established by the Security Council. While certain allies were sometimes more reticent, the Washington-Paris axis effectively made it possible for the North Atlantic Council to decide in favor of NATO involvement.

Throughout the Libyan crisis, coordination between Paris and Washington was extremely close. The Americans saw that France was a politically resolute ally that would intervene when necessary, and was capable of deploying the appropriate means to do so. France also had the intelligence capacities that are required to take a fully autonomous decision, which, in turn, was the key to commit assets and risk lives in such missions. French planes, helicopters and ships were involved in about one-third of the operations in Libya, making France the leading contributor. Politically, too, it is important to emphasize that France never wavered in its commitment, which enjoyed a strong bipartisan consensus. In July 2011, the French National Assembly supported military operations in Libya by an overwhelming majority of 482 to 27.

But French-American cooperation was not born in Libya. Without going back to the founding Battle of Yorktown, which made the United States and France each other’s oldest allies, there are many recent examples of this important relationship. Whenever I bestow the insignia of chevalier of the Legion of Honor upon an American World War II veteran, I feel the same deep emotion and gratitude for what my country owes the United States. This solidarity has always existed. Even before Libya, France has participated in all of NATO’s foreign operations alongside the Americans since the 1990s. What was new in the Libya case, and was a revelation for many Americans, was that the United States had a larger training and operational capacity when it worked together with France, Britain and other European countries.

That is why transatlantic relations, and the ties between France and the United States after Libya, seem more important than ever. However, while the main security crises in Europe have been resolved, this relationship will look different in the coming years. It will be more outward-looking and less inward-looking. Europeans and Americans must work together to confront major global challenges, whether they be economic, whether they relate to monetary imbalances or the protection of intellectual property, security, proliferation or the fight against international terrorism. What the Libyan situation

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s Note:* According to *The New York Times*, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was established as Libya’s ruling body by anti-Gaddafi forces in February 2011.

demonstrated was that the Europeans, and notably the French, can not only participate in the management and resolution of a major crisis but can play a leading role when the United States must focus its resources elsewhere. It is this balance between Europe and the United States that will ensure the long-term solidity of the transatlantic relationship.

To that end, it is also in our common interest to further strengthen the ties between France and the United States, not only in the political, diplomatic and military arenas, but in every sector where our future competitiveness is at stake. Given the emergence of new economic partners who are sometimes competitors, it is essential for countries such as ours, which share the same values and interests, to cooperate more and more closely in all the areas of innovation on which our future place in the world will depend.

That is why I am constantly promoting greater cooperation between French and American universities and businesses. About 650,000 American jobs are now linked to the presence of French businesses here, while in France, 750,000 people are employed by US companies. The figures show that we have a common interest in strengthening one another through such investments. In a world that is more competitive each day, I am deeply convinced that it is in our interest to work first with those who share our values—those of freedom and the rule of law. And indeed, Libya was a striking demonstration of our shared values, on the basis of which we must now build an even stronger relationship.