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Learning from Libya: The Right Lessons for NATO

As Qaddafi's regime crumbles and Libyan rebels assume the mantle of governance, many are bemoaning rather than celebrating the role of NATO in the Libyan revolution. As the Alliance winds down its military campaign and contemplates next steps, now is the time to draw lessons from what worked and what did not, and to prepare to act on these lessons in time for NATO's next summit in Chicago in May 2012.

NATO Succeeds in Libya

First, let's be clear: while the operation has revealed strains within the Alliance and foreshadows future challenges, the Libya operation is a great success. NATO's Operation Unified Protector prevented an imminent humanitarian catastrophe as Qaddafi's forces threatened to overrun Benghazi in March. NATO's intervention subsequently gave the rebels breathing space to organize, helped them drive Qaddafi from power, allowed Libyans to take control of their own destiny, and prevented Qaddafi's brutal repression from ushering in an end to the Arab Spring. And NATO did this without losing a single allied troop and minimizing civilian casualties perhaps more than any comparable campaign in history. This accomplishment is even more remarkable given the Alliance mustered the political will and resources to pull this off during an existential financial and economic crisis for Europe.

Yes, Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us that the tough part of transition after a military campaign is just beginning. But in Libya, from day one, this transition has been led by Libyans who view the international community and NATO in particular as responding to their revolution, rather than instigating regime change. Libyan rebels, not NATO forces, took control of Tripoli. NATO did not break and therefore does not own Libya and its reconstruction. Rather the international community's responsibility is to continue to play a major supporting role in the transition.

What Worked

While NATO operations continue and Qaddafi remains at-large, policymakers in allied capitals can still begin to draw the right lessons from Libya.

The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft, and Fred Kempe, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials, and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

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Never underestimate surprises. When Alliance leaders last met in November 2010 to adopt a new Strategic Concept, their biggest concern was managing a transition out of Afghanistan. Given the difficulty of the Afghan operation, no one could contemplate a scenario in which NATO would soon commit forces to combat again. And yet, just four months later, it did just that. The Alliance demonstrated impressive agility. It must remain flexible and capable enough to be prepared for the unknown.

The allies will fight. Libya shows Americans that Europe and Canada are not denuded, post-modern pacifists. In this battle, Europeans took the lead, demonstrating that they can and will use force when they have the political will to do so. A corollary is that such political will derives from decisive national leaders, not the European Union or its nominal leaders. In this case, the Atlantic community acted because of the leadership and resolve of President Sarkozy of France and Prime Minister Cameron of the United Kingdom—and the European public's acceptance of the use of force to protect civilians.

NATO works. Libya underscores how relevant NATO remains. At the start of this crisis, no one was anticipating the Alliance would play a leading role. Yet as leaders scrambled to determine how best to organize a military campaign, NATO was the only viable instrument. The European Union was never a credible possibility. Furthermore, the default option—a coalition of the willing led by France or the UK—didn't sit well with others willing to join the fight, but unwilling to do so under the leadership of one European nation. No entity is better suited than NATO to integrate multinational contributions into an effective operational force. While there was much hand-wringing over the decision to assume command of the operation, the reality is that the Alliance took only ten days to agree to enforce the arms embargo by sea, then enforce the no-fly zone over Libya, and then adopt the civilian protection mission which formed the core of the combat mission.

Partners are key. Libya has demonstrated in spades the value of NATO's partnership policy. The loudest voices calling for NATO to lead the effort in Libya were not NATO allies, but rather Qatar, the UAE, and Sweden. These nations wanted to join the operation and knew how to do so if it were a NATO operation given the habits of cooperation developed over years of Alliance exercises with partner nations. These voices proved to be decisive, especially as Arab states pushing for NATO to lead the effort undermined those arguing that a NATO label would be too controversial in the region. Furthermore, the political value of having Qatar, the UAE, Morocco, and Jordon join NATO's political structure overseeing the operation underscores the foresight of NATO's outreach to the Middle East and North Africa through its Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Small allies count. Operation Allied Protector is a reminder of the value of small allies. While it has become fashionable in Washington to dismiss the contributions of most of America's allies, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and others contributed much to this fight. Indeed, at one point, Nordic allies were conducting 25 percent of all strike sorties, punching well above their weight class.

France's return to NATO helps. Coming on the heels of Sarkozy's 2009 decision to return his country to NATO's integrated military structures, the Libya operation demonstrates how France can pursue its own national interests by working within the Alliance. France essentially served as the lead nation in the operation and learned, as had the United States earlier, that working through the Alliance delivers greater political legitimacy than working around it. While there were strains between French national and NATO multinational commands, the past six months normalized France's role in and leadership of NATO military efforts.

Winning requires more than combat. The allies did not rely on military might alone to fight this battle. Drawing on the recognition of its limitations won the hard way in Afghanistan, allies adopted a comprehensive approach in the fight, turning to economic, diplomatic, and intelligence tools to tip the balance in favor of the rebels. Without efforts to sanction the regime, facilitate defections, train and arm rebel forces, cut off Qaddafi's access to capital, and boost international recognition of the Transitional National Council, western Libya would likely still be in Qaddafi's hands.

Pragmatism is a must. At the start, this mission seemed cursed given the mismatch between the mission (protect civilians) and political objectives of key allies (toppling Qaddafi). Yet allies overcame this serious handicap, unavoidable given the limitations of the United Nations mandate, with a healthy dose of pragmatism. In the end, NATO did what it needed to do to win and began to coordinate its air campaign more closely with the rebels' strategy on the ground, while giving a wink and nod to coalition members such as Qatar, France, the United

Kingdom, the United States, and Italy, who supplemented the NATO campaign with special forces training and other intelligence assets. NATO Secretary General Rasmussen's determined and pragmatic leadership style paid off.

What Didn't Work

While the Libya operation counts in the success column for the Alliance, and these lessons document what NATO got right, there are also important lessons to draw from what didn't work.

Disunity is corrosive. The lack of political solidarity over Alliance efforts in Libya is part of a larger, dangerous trend. Beginning with Germany's damaging abstention on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing the campaign, continuing with Turkey's effort to limit France's scope of military action, and Central Europe's absence in the campaign, Libya did little to heal the sense that the allies are drifting apart. Furthermore, the United States, by limiting itself largely to a supporting role after the initial phase, helped to legitimize the corrosive practice of allies picking and choosing what they will and won't do as part of NATO operations. Having spent years complaining about European "caveats" in NATO, the United States has now done exactly the same thing.

Lack of defense investment will foreclose future options. While our European allies had the capabilities to fight in Libya, they could only do so with critical enablers from the United States and several partners required resupply of armaments to sustain operations. More importantly, after a decade of deployments in Afghanistan, the Libya campaign drained many allies of equipment and arms such that any potential adversary today knows NATO's European allies could not muster sufficient resources for another operation in the near-term. More worrying, allies went to war in Libya as they were enacting historic cuts in defense spending, all but ensuring they would not be able to repeat a comparable operation in the coming years. Indeed, the best outcome for the Alliance would be if Libya serves as a wake-up call in European capitals to protect core defense capabilities even as they manage fiscal austerity. If European allies dodge this issue, they may ensure the Alliance is incapable of responding with military force in a future conflict.

The United States cannot hand off to NATO. Early in the conflict, the Obama administration underscored that the American combat role would cease as the United States "handed off" to NATO. Libya underscores that the United States cannot, and should not be able to, hand off to NATO. The United States is NATO's most powerful member. Americans permeate NATO's integrated military command, beginning at the top as an American always serves as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). While Europeans and Canadians played unprecedented leading roles in Operation Unified Protector, in the end the operation succeeded with significant US assistance and leadership—in fact, more than Washington has wanted to acknowledge. Political leaders do damage to the Alliance when they refer to NATO as if it were some autonomous actor rather than twenty-eight sovereign states working in concert toward shared goals.

Ambivalent use of force is dangerous. Throughout the conflict, the United States and some other allies seemed ambivalent about the use of force in Libya. On the one hand, the United States played a major combat role in the opening phase of the campaign degrading Qaddafi's forces and infrastructure. Yet Washington quickly pulled back to play a significant, but supporting, role by providing key enablers. In the administration's desire not to be seen as leading the United States into yet another war, it buried the facts of US involvement and failed to make the case for action in Libya to the public or Congress. Nonetheless, the administration assumed the risk of putting American airmen, sailors, and soldiers in harm's way. In the end, the US decision may have rightfully placed a greater share of the burden of the military campaign on our European allies' shoulders, but it also may have resulted in the promised "weeks, not months" duration of the campaign becoming "months, not weeks."

Rogue regimes were watching too. As the Alliance contemplates its future security, it has identified the potential threat from weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as among its greatest concerns. Unhelpfully, but unavoidably, the Alliance's intervention signaled to rogue states that retaining WMD may be their best insurance policy. If Qaddafi had retained his WMD, the Alliance may have calculated that the cost of acting outweighed the cost of inaction. That said, Qaddafi's regime did retain an arsenal and know-how; allies effectively drew on intelligence to secure or destroy much of it.

Better to Win Ugly...But Learn the Right Lessons

NATO made mistakes in Libya. But policymakers must operate in the reality of an imperfect environment in which they have limited control over a myriad of variables in play during a crisis. Analysts should not lose sight of the outcome: NATO succeeded. NATO's efforts prevented a humanitarian catastrophe, helped Libyans topple Qaddafi themselves, and sustained the winds in the sails of the pan-Arab revolution.

Yet some argue that this crisis did not merit Western intervention and is a diversion from the more strategic transitions taking place in Egypt and Syria. There is no disputing that Egypt and Syria are more important to the future of the region and Alliance security than Libya. As such, developments in Cairo and Damascus demand the Atlantic community's attention and resources. But there was and is no prospect of the use of force in these transitions. Libya was *sui generis*, not a blueprint.

In Libya, a unique combination of factors made possible NATO's intervention in support of the rebels:

- The international community was facing an identifiable, imminent humanitarian catastrophe as Qaddafi's forces amassed outside Benghazi in March.
- Sarkozy and Cameron demonstrated remarkable political leadership galvanizing Europe and shifting the US position.
- Qaddafi had over the years so alienated other Arab leaders (sometimes by attempting to assassinate them!) that they agreed to back an Arab League call for international assistance to enforce a no-fly zone.
- The ability to secure United Nations Security Council backing conveyed critical international legitimacy to the operation, something Russia or China would be loath to repeat.
- NATO allies had the capability to be effective against Qaddafi's regime, both in terms of the air assets available and their geographic proximity that facilitated the operation.

This combination of factors is unlikely to repeat anytime soon.

Allies would be foolish not to learn from the mistakes made in Libya. But they would be doubly foolish not to draw lessons from what worked. NATO's experience with Kosovo in 1999 teaches the costs of drawing the wrong lessons from an operation. After NATO's 78-day air campaign led Slobodan Milosevic to withdraw Serbian forces from Kosovo, the Alliance underwent a years-long self-flagellation campaign in which "war by committee" became the conventional wisdom underscoring the Alliance's inability to fight a war effectively.

The "war by committee" accusation was based on excessive political involvement in targeting during opening days of the Kosovo campaign (which should not have been surprising given it was the first sustained military campaign in Alliance history). Despite the problem being essentially resolved within the first three days of the operation, the "war by committee" charge took hold as conventional wisdom, leading some in the American political class to be disdainful of working through the Alliance. Sadly, this contributed to the Bush administration rebuffing allies eager to help in the early days of the Afghanistan campaign and to delay by years NATO's takeover of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with unfortunate results.

Fighting with other nations always entails some compromise. However, the benefits from the political legitimacy afforded and military burden-sharing almost always outweigh the costs. Furthermore, fighting with allies and partners schooled in coalition campaigns through membership in or partnership with NATO smoothes the rough edges of multinational operations.

Now the task facing the Alliance is to learn from Libya, using this success, albeit with caveats, as a catalyst for action. When NATO leaders next gather in Chicago in May 2012, they must act to strengthen the Alliance on the heels of success in Libya by drawing the right lessons for the future.

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