

War in Libya: Europe's confused response

Although European countries have been prominent in the military operation in Libya, the crisis has exposed sharp disagreements between them. Many of the 26 European members of NATO are not taking part in the operation, while others are contributing to widely differing degrees. As the military conflict moves into what could prove to be a long-running impasse, there is little sign that divisions over how to approach the Libyan uprising are being bridged.

The fragmented European responses to the Libyan war show once again how difficult it is for Europe to forge a common foreign policy and to respond as one to crises through multilateral frameworks. In particular, they have exposed the shortcomings of the defence structures that the European Union (EU) has been painstakingly crafting for two decades. They have shown the emptiness of claims that the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 would make the EU better fitted to take action than it was during the crises of the Balkans.

Lisbon's changes

In 1991, as Yugoslavia fractured, the then Luxembourg foreign minister Jacques Poos declared that 'this is the hour of Europe. It is not the hour of the Americans.' The remark entered the annals of public ridicule, and the EU has since sought to remedy its incapacity to manage regional crises, and to resolve its military inadequacies. It has been forging security policy institutions, seeking to improve military and civilian capabilities, fine-tuning decision-making procedures, and establishing leadership positions. The fundamental purpose of all these steps has been to give the Union the wherewithal to tackle international crises in a coherent and robust manner.

Throughout the 2000s, the EU jostled for position in security and defence policy with NATO, carving out a role for its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) supposed to be complementary to NATO, an organisation which itself had long moved beyond its core business of collective defence into crisis management operations. After the 2009 ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which reformed the EU's structures, it was widely claimed that Europe would be better placed to act than it had been in 1991. However, this has proved not to be the case.

The Treaty created a President of the Council (currently Herman van Rompuy of Belgium) with responsibility for 'driving forward' the executive work of the 27-member bloc; a High Representative (Catherine Ashton of the UK) to 'conduct the Union's common foreign and security policy [and] contribute ... to the development of that policy'; and an External Action Service to provide diplomatic support for the common foreign policy. The Union's ten year old ESDP, under which it had launched 24 overseas missions since 2003, was 'upgraded' and re-titled the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

In the recent crisis, none of this institutional engineering has counted for much – in fact, it is hard to see how it could, given the complex and competitive wrangling which has pitted member states against one another. In spite of the

strong leadership role being taken in military operations by key EU member states, notably the UK and France, there was never any question of framing the Libyan intervention operation as an EU crisis management mission under the CSDP – though a humanitarian mission, EUFOR Libya is now being prepared in case this is requested by the UN. Instead, the command was taken by NATO itself – a move presented in Washington as a European alternative to an American command structure.

For NATO too, the basic differences of view between European countries presented problems in determining the correct oversight and command structures for the operation, and in deploying the military assets required. Following on the heels of NATO's new strategic concept, which was supposed to unite allies around a shared understanding of NATO's purpose and means, the debate over Libya planted renewed doubts as to the political cohesion trumpeted in November 2010, when the new strategy was adopted.

Diplomatic and institutional factors

It was not a surprise that President Barack Obama should expect Europe to take a leading role in dealing with a crisis such as Libya's. From the outset of his tenure, he insisted that a post-Bush United States would not rush to intervene unilaterally in crises, would seek to mobilise the international community, would partner with regional actors and would prioritise multilateralism. Theoretically, then, the EU should have been the ideal structure through which to tackle the Libyan crisis – perhaps in conjunction with bodies such as the African Union, the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The first collective EU reaction came during a meeting of the 27 foreign ministers on 21 February, four days after the 17 February 'Day of Rage' in Tripoli. Their communiqué restricted itself to demanding an 'immediate end to violence'. Within days EU member states were quarrelling: Italy, Malta and Cyprus held out for a week against French, German and Dutch proposals to impose sanctions on the Gadhafi family. Some European parliamentarians called for a no-fly zone (NFZ), but such suggestions were shot down – ironically in view of the sequel – both by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and by new French foreign minister Alain Juppé.

The institutional voice designed to articulate a collective EU position, that of High Representative Catherine Ashton, was effectively silent while she sought to define what amounted to the lowest political common denominator among member states. Thus, while European leaders and officials were making many proposals for action, she was among the last to call for sanctions, to make a statement that Gadhafi should go, to make contact with the Benghazi-based Transitional National Committee and to support military action – which she resisted until 17 March, when it was authorized by the UN Security Council under Resolution 1973, at which point she 'welcomed' it.

Ashton's resistance to the imposition of a NFZ led to a blazing public row with British Prime Minister David Cameron and with French President Nicolas Sarkozy at a European Council meeting on 11 March. She felt that, in articulating an EU position, she had to pay close attention to those member

states that were uncomfortable with the Union playing a lead role, and particularly a military role.

Several European countries had begun to build ties to Libya following its renunciation of a nuclear weapons programme in 2004. Italy had in 2008 signed a 'reconciliation pact' with Gadhafi whereby Rome paid \$5 billion in compensation for its colonial occupation and Tripoli pledged to control cross-Mediterranean migration, a problem of growing urgency for the Italian government. The two countries had agreed multi-billion dollar industrial and commercial investment projects. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his foreign minister Franco Frattini were initially loath to prejudice these arrangements.

For his part, Sarkozy had in 2007 effectively rehabilitated Gadhafi by inviting him to Paris for the 14 July Bastille Day celebrations which coincided with the launch of the French president's partnership project, the Union for the Mediterranean. But that visit had been unpopular domestically and Sarkozy, who is running for re-election in 2012 and trailing badly in the polls, had no compunction about leading the charge against the Libyan leader. He was the first leader to say that Gadhafi must go, the first to recognize the TNC, and the first to use military force against Gadhafi's forces. His recognition of the TNC was made unilaterally the day before a European Council meeting on 11 March which had been summoned precisely to reach collective agreement on such issues.

The UK had also been building relations with Libya, but Cameron was keen to take a lead in the crisis, mindful of Britain's role as a major European military power and of Obama's call for others to assume leadership. He was the first European leader to call for the imposition of a NFZ. Germany meanwhile blew hot and cold, keen to criticize Gadhafi and to demand sanctions but determined at all cost to avoid military action. Germany's decision to abstain on UN Resolution 1973, which authorised military action, did not spare Chancellor Angela Merkel the wrath of the German electorate in key provincial elections.

Political and military factors

Since the EU evidently could not be the lead entity for any military operations in Libya, NATO was the logical choice – and in any case, unlike the EU, it possessed the necessary command structures. However, this option immediately ran up against political problems. The first was Obama's reluctance to become embroiled in a third military campaign in a Muslim country. When on 28 February Cameron announced that he had asked the UK's Ministry of Defence to engage in planning for a NFZ, the American top brass, fearing entrapment, rapidly sought to emphasise the challenging scope of such an operation. The administration was hoping and expecting that the Europeans would step up to the plate without involving NATO, which is seen in the rest of the world as a US-dominated alliance. In Washington's eyes, was this not precisely the type of scenario for which the EU's CSDP had been devised?

The US was not alone in resisting NATO involvement. Sarkozy was also reluctant. He had signed a bilateral defence treaty with the UK in November 2010 and saw the Libyan operation as an excellent opportunity for the two major European military powers to engage in joint operational and political leadership under a bilateral, ad-hoc command structure. This was a step too far for the instinctively Atlanticist British.

The NATO badge was also initially resisted by Turkey, which opposed Western military intervention in Libya. However, it was even more fiercely opposed to the notion of France assuming leadership of a coalition of the willing. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's relationship with Sarkozy has long been rocky, not least because of French opposition to Turkish membership of the EU. Erdogan was incensed when Sarkozy omitted to invite Turkey to the international conference on Libya which France convened in Paris on 19 March to try to organize political control of the operation to be launched under the UN mandate. He therefore did an about-turn and made common cause with Cameron in lobbying for NATO to assume operational command. Obama, realising that there was by now no alternative, agreed that NATO would take over after an initial US-led assault, but with two caveats: first, that the US, after briefly deploying its extensive aerial capacity to take out Libya's air defence systems and loyalist targets, would then take a back seat in the military mission; and second, that NATO should be portrayed as an objectively non-American command structure.

However, there are problems with the notion that the US has handed over the Libyan operation to a Europe-led NATO command. First, the Canadian three star officer chosen to head NATO's Operation *Unified Protector*, Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard, reports directly to the NATO operational commander, US Admiral James Stavridis. Secondly, although the US has substantially reduced its air sorties, many of the intelligence, command-and-control, surveillance and logistics assets remain American. As the NATO mission appears to be reaching its operational limits without dislodging Gadhafi, there is likely to be increasing demand for a return of US strike assets.

Also, [the degree of European participation in *Unified Protector*](#) varies widely. Only 10 of the 21 EU member states of NATO have committed themselves to participating in the mission, though Norway and Turkey, which are members of NATO but not the EU, are taking part, as is Sweden, a member of the EU but not NATO. Of the 10, Bulgaria and Romania have said they will participate only in the naval dimension of the arms embargo, though their naval assets have yet to arrive in theatre. Only six of the countries – other than the US – offering air capacity are striking targets on the ground: the UK, France, Belgium, Canada, Denmark and Norway. The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden and Turkey – as well as Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – have political caveats restricting them to an air-air only role, which is of limited use now Gadhafi's fighter aircraft are grounded. The UK and France have voiced frustration that they are carrying more than 50% of the burden.

As for the political control of the mission, the picture is even murkier. Officially, the North Atlantic Council, NATO's decision-making body, is engaged, but given that several of its leading members are opposed to the mission, the Council's role is far from clear. A Contact Group of about 40 states and bodies has met on three occasions, but seems too unwieldy to have credible political oversight. Analysts must therefore conclude that political control is being exercised from Washington, Paris and London. This view was confirmed on 15 April when Obama, Sarkozy and Cameron signed a joint op-ed article in Western newspapers in which they said that NATO must keep up its operation until Gadhafi is no longer in power – a political objective not called for in the UN resolution. The three leaders gave no indication of how this was to be achieved.

Europe's structures

The Libyan crisis has thus once again opened wide divisions on foreign policy among European countries. It demonstrates that, 20 years after the Balkan conflicts broke out, the EU remains far from ready to assume a role as a regional power. But it also calls into question the unity and functioning of the Atlantic Alliance, which is looking increasingly like a vehicle for the generation of ad-hoc coalitions of the willing.

Volume 17, Comment 18 – April 2011