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The Limits of British Leadership—Test Case Libya

In mid-February 2011, many Libyans rose up against the country's regime, headed by Col. Qaddafi and took to the streets in demonstration. The popular uprising followed similar revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and the wider Arab world. In response, the Qaddafi regime used excessive force to suppress the popular unrest. The Obama administration's reluctance to assume a lead role in response to the subsequent crisis has sent a clear signal to Europe—allies and partners must assume more responsibility for the security of the European continent. The Libyan crisis thus has offered an opportunity to assess whether Europe can meet U.S. expectations.

Britain has been at the forefront of the European and wider international response to the crisis. The government has been instrumental in driving many international initiatives, including UNSC Resolution 1973, which mandated military action to protect Libyan civilians. The armed forces have since been heavily involved in the implementation of Resolution 1973. Still, Britain's response to date has raised some question marks about its willingness and exposed the limitations of its ability—even when working in concert with France—to lead Europe. In view of Britain's status as one of Europe's more credible and capable military actors, this conclusion appears to raise questions about its future security.

The U.S. Role in Europe

The U.S. has shouldered the greater part of the responsibility for the security (and the defence) of (Western) Europe since the Second World War. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has been steadily scaling back its commitment to the European continent, evident in the transformation of its force posture as well as its attitude towards crises in and around Europe's periphery. Early 2011 has witnessed the latest manifestations of this trend. In April, the Obama administration announced that one of the four Brigade Combat Teams currently stationed in Europe will be withdrawn in 2015, reducing the total number of U.S. military personnel based on the continent by 5,000 (the present total stands at about

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80,000, down from 315,000 at the end of the Cold War).[1] The administration also has taken a back seat to recent developments in Libya. It purposely watched on as Europe took the political initiative. The U.S. led the initial military action, making a decisive contribution, but swiftly transitioned into a supporting role, transferring the bulk of the political and military effort to Europe in the long-term. Financial pressures and structural shifts in the global system likely will combine to continue, and may even accelerate this trend in the future.

The result is that Europe will have to assume greater responsibility for the future security of the European continent, particularly crises in and around its periphery. Whether Europe can do so will largely depend for now on the willingness and the ability of France and Britain—two of the continent's more credible and capable military actors—to lead subsequent endeavours.[2] Their willingness to work together and ability to act in concert will be equally important. France appears willing to bear more of the burden, having spent decades trying to advance a European security and defence capability. However, the British position is less clear-cut. This paper will examine British policy on Libya to assess whether Britain is willing and able to assume the duty, and whether it is willing and able to work with France.

The Rationale Behind British Policy on Libya

The British government justified its involvement in UN-authorized military action over Libya with respect to two broad factors. The first was humanitarian. It argued that involvement was a bid to avert a "bloodbath" in Benghazi. In this regard, memories of the massacre in Bosnia and genocide in Rwanda along with British involvement in the controversial military intervention in Iraq of 2003 were particularly prominent. By intervening in Libya on humanitarian grounds, Britain perhaps hoped to right past wrongs. The second factor related directly to national interest. The government argued that if left unattended, Libya would become a source of instability on Europe's periphery, raising the prospect of terrorism along with refugees being exported to the continent. It also claimed that instability in Libya would serve to undermine the earlier revolutions in nearby Tunisia and Egypt, on which Britain's prosperity and security depended. The first factor appears justifiable. The second is debatable, however. It is doubtful whether instability in Libya would have *directly* undermined the earlier revolutions, as the respective regimes had already fallen. Further, it is unlikely that Britain would have seen an uncontrolled influx of refugees given that the country is not party to the Schengen agreement.

Several other factors may have also influenced the British stance on Libya. The government's initial response to the crisis was marred by a string of misjudgements, which prompted heavy domestic criticism and arguably cultivated a need to act decisively. The first misjudgement occurred as the crisis broke. The Deputy Prime Minister, while on holiday in Switzerland admitted that he "forgot" he was in charge of the country. At the time, the Prime Minister was promoting British defence exports in the Gulf amid reports that British-

[1] Bartosz Wiśniewski, "Transformation of the U.S. Military Posture in Europe," *PISM Bulletin No. 42* (259), 5 May 2011, www.pism.pl.

[2] Germany has the potential to play an equally decisive role. Yet for now, its credibility is in question as Berlin appears to lack the political resolve to use force when necessary.

supplied crowd control weapons had been used to quell a popular uprising in Bahrain.[3] This was followed by the slow evacuation of British nationals from Libya and the false announcement by the Foreign Secretary that Col. Qaddafi may have fled to Venezuela. In an apparent attempt to regain the initiative, the Prime Minister refused to rule out the use of military assets to protect Libyan civilians, but then appeared to backtrack after receiving lukewarm support from key allies. The final misjudgement came, when "a small diplomatic team" comprising British Special Forces was embarrassingly detained and later released by anti-Qaddafi forces. The opposition accused the government of "serial bungling" as a result and the Foreign Secretary was singled out for special criticism. The general public appeared to agree with this assessment. A survey conducted on February 24-25 showed that only 20% of those polled thought that the government had responded "well" to developments in Libya.[4] It cannot be ruled out therefore, that the government wanted to regain the initiative, to demonstrate that it had control of the situation in Libya and chose to adopt a tough stance towards the Qaddafi regime accordingly. Public opinion appeared to improve as a result.[5]

British policy on Libya may also have been shaped by the country's earlier dealings with the Qaddafi regime. From the mid-1980s to the late-1990s diplomatic ties between Britain and Libya were severed following the murder of a British policewoman outside the Libyan Embassy in April 1984. Several incidents, including Libyan involvement in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in December 1988 created further distance between the two countries. Relations markedly improved, however, following the turn of the 21st century when the Qaddafi regime distanced itself from terrorism and renounced WMDs. As a sign of the growing intimacy of British-Libyan relations, several lucrative commercial deals followed, including a $900 million deal between British Petroleum and Libya's National Oil Co. in May 2007. [6] Hence, it cannot be excluded that the government's tough stance on Libya may have been informed by a desire to distance itself from the Qaddafi regime. In view of the fact that two Arab dictators had already fallen to popular revolts by the time the crisis in Libya began, the government also probably wanted to avoid ending up on the wrong side of history, which may have undermined commercial interests in the country. Additionally, the incumbent Prime Minister may have wanted to distance himself from the policies of his two predecessors, having earlier accused them of conducting "dodgy deals" with the Qaddafi regime in relation to the alleged release of the Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi in return for commercial concessions, including progress on the aforementioned BP deal.

Some have suggested that British policy on Libya also may have been informed by commercial interests, specifically the prospect of receiving preferential oil and arms

[3] Peter Beaumont and Robert Booth, "Bahrain uses UK-supplied weapons in protest crackdown." *The Guardian*, 17 February 2011, www.guardian.co.uk.

[4] YouGov/The Sunday Times Survey Results. 27 February 2011, www.yougov.co.uk.

[5] On 17-18 March, shortly before the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1973, a survey showed that 37% of those polled thought that it had responded "well" to the situation in Libya. The figure later rose to 50% shortly after the onset of military action. See YouGov/The Sunday Times Survey Results 20 March 2011 and 27 March 2011, www.yougov.co.uk.

[6] Press release, "BP's single biggest exploration commitment, says BP group chief executive," 29 May 2007, www.bp.com.

agreements in the event that Qaddafi is removed from power.[7] British energy interests in Libya primarily relate to lucrative revenues resulting from the production of oil and gas by British companies. Despite having agreed to the aforementioned BP deal in May 2007, BP currently has no production in Libya due to several setbacks. In February 2011, the company announced that production in Libya would finally begin by the end of the month. However, the current crisis scuppered those plans and has cast doubt over the deal since. The need for BP to begin oil and gas production in Libya has apparently taken on an urgency following the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, which has apparently raised doubts over its future in North America. Hence, the possibility that the government adopted a tough stance towards the Qaddafi regime in an attempt to win the allegiance of his potential successors and thereby secure commercial interests in the country is also possible.

Other lesser factors shaping British policy on Libya may have been an attempt to draw public attention away from sensitive cuts in public spending, to demonstrate the capability of the armed forces despite the much criticized cuts in defence as well as to vindicate the Franco-British defence programme of collaboration agreed in November 2010.

A Conditional Willingness to Lead

Since the crisis in Libya began, Britain has demonstrated a willingness to take the political lead on issues when it believes there is a moral duty to act, national interests are threatened or political interests at home can be served. It has been instrumental in driving many initiatives undertaken by Europe and the wider international community such as UNSC Resolution 1970 adopted on 26 February, as well as Resolution 1973 approved on 17 March, which authorized military action to protect Libyan civilians. Since the onset of the UN-authorized action, Britain has remained at the forefront of political efforts on Libya. On March 29, it hosted an International Conference, which culminated in the creation of a "Contact Group" to help drive the political process in the country, if and when the Qaddafi regime falls. Later, it co-chaired the Group's first meeting in Doha on April 13. Britain has also shown a readiness to use force and to be at the forefront of military action. The armed forces have assumed a prominent role in the implementation of Resolution 1973, first under U.S. command and since NATO formally assumed the duty on 31 March.

Along the way, Britain has exhibited a clear preference for NATO to head multinational operations and a willingness to lead subsequent political and military efforts within the Alliance. From the moment the U.S. declared its intention to surrender leadership of the Libya operation, Britain began lobbying for NATO to assume the duty. Since NATO took control, the British contribution to operation "Unified Protector" has grown. On 5 April, it doubled the number of aircraft assigned to the airstrike campaign from eight to 16 and alongside France has borne the greater part of the burden for strike sorties and subsequent air strikes. More recently, Britain has raised the possibility of deploying attack helicopters as part of the campaign. It also has actively lobbied fellow NATO allies to increase contributions as well as adopt a more aggressive targeting strategy. The British government justified its preference for NATO leadership by arguing that the Alliance was "tried and tested." The argument is valid since NATO has commanded complex, multinational no-fly zones and

[7] "Europe's Libya Intervention: France and the United Kingdom." *STRATFOR*, 25 March 2011, www.stratfor.com.

airstrike campaigns in the past. Still, the desire to keep the U.S. and more specifically, U.S. capabilities fully engaged in the military action over Libya also would have had a decisive impact on the British decision. Government ministers and high-ranking military officials would have been concerned that if the action had proceeded outside Alliance structures, then the U.S. commitment to the campaign may have waned, particularly given the outspoken opposition of some prominent members within the Obama administration to U.S. involvement in general and scepticism within the U.S. military regarding the value of a no-fly zone in particular. Crucially, the preference for NATO command and control raises a question mark about whether Britain is prepared to lead a coalition of countries in a *high-intensity, war-fighting* military operation without U.S. participation in the future. Britain's readiness to lead political and military efforts within NATO reflects the importance it assigns to the Alliance. NATO holds a privileged position within British political and military circles on account of U.S. membership. There is currently some concern however, that the value of NATO within U.S. circles is in decline. Therefore, by taking the political and military lead within NATO, Britain appears to be trying to demonstrate the continued relevance of the Alliance as well as the value of the U.S.-UK bilateral relationship in U.S. planning.

In the build-up to military intervention in Libya, Britain appeared to overlook the European Union, when weighing its options. This reaffirms the primacy of NATO in British planning. Further, it indicates that Britain is not prepared to lead "political" Europe in any military endeavour unless NATO cannot or will not. NATO primacy also has meant that British governments of all hues have long since opposed any EU-wide initiatives that may undermine the Alliance (e.g., an EU operational HQ). Nonetheless, they have accepted initiatives that may enhance allied contributions to NATO-led operations (e.g., the Helsinki Headline Goal, EU battlegroups, etc). However, they appear no longer willing to do that.[8] Instead, the incumbent government has chosen to work on a bilateral basis with those European countries willing to invest in defence as well as to fight. Britain arrived at this conclusion after years of disappointment and frustration with the failures of many European governments to deliver on EU (and NATO) commitments.[9] British frustration was compounded by the restrictions imposed by several European governments on when, where and how their military forces may be used (also known as "national caveats") in the NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan along with the reluctance of some to contribute additional troops to the mission. Of course, given the largely overlapping membership, British frustration should also permeate NATO. However, the fact of the matter is that U.S. membership provides the Atlantic Alliance with added credibility in the eyes of the British. The reluctance of some European governments to commit to the Libya campaign is likely to reinforce current British thinking, particularly the policy of bilateralism.

Having said all that, Britain appears to support EU involvement in a post-conflict Libya. In addition, it appears to back the deployment of an EU military force to North Africa to assist humanitarian efforts. Still, it is unlikely that it will contribute to EUFOR Libya if the UN OCHA calls.

[8] See: Clara Marina O'Donnell, "Britain's coalition government and EU Defence cooperation: Undermining British Interests," *International Affairs 87:2* (2011), pp. 419-433.

[9] Ibid.

A Limited Ability to Lead

The Libyan crisis has shown that Britain is able, on occasion and in concert with others to lead Europe and the wider international community on relatively uncontroversial issues. A good example is UNSC Resolution 1970, which imposed sanctions on the Qaddafi regime and an arms embargo on the country. Still, the crisis also has illustrated the limits of British leadership on more contentious issues such as the use of force. On 28 February, the Prime Minister raised the possibility of using military assets to protect Libyan civilians, including a no-fly zone. Subsequently, British officials lobbied for the establishment of a no-fly zone in a range of international forums but with limited success. On 11 March, the European Council agreed to "examine all necessary options" to protect Libyan civilians for example, but failed to explicitly back a no-fly zone as did a meeting of G8 Foreign Ministers four days later. The adoption of UNSC Resolution 1973 on 17 March, which in effect establishes a no-fly zone over Libya appears to run contrary to this claim and offers an unqualified success. However, while British lobbying may have been important, the shift in the U.S. position on the eve of the UN-vote was more likely the decisive factor in its adoption. It should also be noted that despite its adoption, Europe and the wider international community remained divided on the issue. Germany, one of the EU and NATO's most prominent members remained sceptical of a no-fly zone and subsequently abstained from the UN-vote along with Brazil, China, India and Russia.

Britain also has failed to convince a majority of NATO allies of the value of using force despite the UN mandate and the threat that unrest in Libya poses to countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. NATO did formally assume command and control of all three missions mandated by Resolution 1973 by 31 March. However, this followed protracted and often, heated negotiations, which prevented the Alliance from taking charge of the three missions collectively. Allied contributions to operation "Unified Protector" illustrate the limited ability of British officials to drive consensus within the North Atlantic Council. Currently, only half of the 28 NATO members are actively participating in the operation. Of that figure, only seven are reportedly involved in the airstrike campaign to protect Libyan civilians.[10] Britain also has visibly struggled to persuade those NATO countries participating in the operation to increase their contributions. In the run-up to a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers on 14-15 April, British officials openly called for allies to contribute more aircraft to the airstrike campaign. However, the meeting ended without success. At the time, Italy, which was singled out as a key potential contributor, excluded the possibility. Rome did reverse its stance 10 days later. However, the decision is not the result of British lobbying *per se*. Instead, a request for greater Italian involvement from the head of the Libya Interim Transitional National Council during his visit to Rome on 19 April is likely to have been the decisive factor. The need to gain more influence over events in Libya may have also shaped the Italian decision, particularly given the rising number of Libyan refugees arriving in Italy and the country's dependence on Libyan oil. The U.S. also belatedly agreed to increase its commitment to the airstrike campaign by way of two armed UAVs. Still, this should not be chalked up to British lobbying, but rather an illustration of Britain's limited ability to cajole non-U.S. NATO allies into greater commitments. Britain also appears to have had limited success in persuading NATO allies to adopt a more aggressive targeting strategy, which it has advocated from the outset. NATO has belatedly adopted a more aggressive strategy, and has recently begun

[10] Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Norway, the UK and, belatedly, Italy.

targeting command and control structures and intensified airstrikes over Tripoli. Still, the shift is likely the result of an emerging stalemate on the ground and concern among some NATO allies, particularly the U.S., that the operation has lost momentum, rather than by British lobbying alone.

The military operation in Libya also has raised questions about Britain's ability and that of the coalition to conceive a coherent strategy for military action. The coalition appears to have planned a military operation to protect civilians then given it the added goal of regime change. The military objective became, in effect, regime change following the publication of an article written by the leaders of Britain, France and the U.S. on 14 April. In the article, the leaders explicitly tied the end of the military operation to the end of the Qaddafi regime.[11] The main problem is not the inability to plan a coherent military strategy, but perhaps the mistake to think that the use of military force in general would achieve political objectives. Consequently, the coalition finds itself locked into a strategy in which the ends fail to match the ways and means. Britain and its coalition partners have also laboured to achieve the initial military objective of protecting Libyan civilians. Admittedly, the U.S.-led military operation enjoyed some early success. It halted the advance of pro-Qaddafi forces across Eastern Libya, particularly on the city of Benghazi and likely prevented many civilian casualties as a result. NATO action since also has prevented pro-Qaddafi forces from re-taking the rebel-held city of Misratah along with additional civilian casualties. Still, NATO action has struggled to prevent pro-Qaddafi forces from shelling the city and mining the harbour. A tactical shift by regime forces has rendered the no-fly zone obsolete and exposed the limited effectiveness of Allied airpower. Part of the problem has also been the lack of suitable military capabilities on behalf of Britain and other Europeans. Some have argued that a shortage of precision munitions, or the absence of low-flying U.S. AC-130 gunships and A-10 tank busters, has undermined the effort.[12]

A Conditional Willingness and a Limited Ability to Lead with France

Throughout the Libyan crisis Britain has demonstrated a readiness to share a political platform with France. Many of the European and international initiatives to date have been the result of a joint Franco-British effort. Libya also has shown the ability of the two countries to work together, when their respective interests align. Both have adopted a broadly comparable stance to the unfolding events in Libya. Still, two points should be added. While their overall policy has been comparable, the details have differed on several scores in the run-up to the adoption of Resolution 1973 and since.[13] Second, the British and French policy appears to have been largely driven by unique domestic circumstances, which raises questions about whether their policy on future crises or conflicts will converge to a similar extent.[14]

[11] Barack Obama, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, "Libya's Pathway to Peace," *New York Times*, 14 April 2011, www.nytimes.com.

[12] Hugh De Santis, "Europe Falters in Efforts to Implement the UN Resolution in Libya," *The New Atlanticist*, 22 April 2011, www.acus.org.

[13] Gareth Chappell, "Impact of the Libya Crisis on the UK-France Defence Programme," *PISM Bulletin No. 36* (253), 7 April 2011. www.pism.pl.

[14] Ibid.

In the past, Britain's reluctance to work independently from the U.S. on security and defence issues has appeared to undermine joint Franco-British efforts. The British policy on Libya appears to have shown a slight reversal in this trend. Britain raised the possibility of a military no-fly zone over Libya without apparently having consulted first with the U.S. Further, it pushed for a second UNSC Resolution on Libya without reportedly knowing the U.S. position. Still, the British preference for NATO to lead the operation in Libya appears to suggest that the tendency endures. Indeed, Britain reportedly rejected a French proposal of a unified Franco-British command in this context.

Franco-British cooperation on Libya follows an unprecedented agreement reached in November 2010, which sets out closer bilateral collaboration in the field of security and defence.[15] The comparable British and French stance to the crisis in Libya is likely to vindicate the agreement in the short-term. However, the manner in which the military operation plays out will have a decisive impact on the future of the confluence.

Conclusions

Britain has taken an active stance towards the crisis in Libya. Along the way, it has demonstrated a willingness to take the political lead on issues, when national interests are at stake or domestic interests can be served. The British policy also has illustrated a clear preference for NATO to command multinational operations and a readiness to lead subsequent political and military efforts within the Alliance. In both instances, Britain has demonstrated a willingness to lead alongside France. Still, British policy to date has raised several questions, particularly about whether Britain would adopt a similar posture to a future crisis or conflict in or around Europe's periphery if its interests were not served and whether it is willing to lead a coalition of countries in a comparable military effort without U.S. participation. Both questions are likely to rankle the French.

Britain thus far has had limited success in leading Europe and the wider international community on contentious issues such as the use of force, even when working in tandem with France. It also has struggled to drive political and military efforts within the Alliance to date, again in concert with France. Part of the problem has been the lack of political resolve among some European governments to see the value in using force. This is going to further frustrate British officials and high-ranking military officers, and subsequently may reinforce Britain's policy of security and defence bilateralism. While the EU will continue to suffer the consequences, Britain will remain committed to NATO for now.

In short, British policy on Libya thus far has raised questions about Britain's willingness and exposed the limitations of its ability, even when working in tandem with France, to lead Europe. In turn, this raises questions about the future security of the continent. More specifically, it appears to leave the continent more exposed to future crises and conflicts in and around its periphery.

[15] Gareth Chappell, "The New UK-France Programme of Defence Collaboration," *PISM Bulletin No. 135* (211), 25 November 2010, www.pism.pl.