

Ramesh Thakur

Acting responsibly to protect Libyans The Star 13 March 2011 **Ramesh Thakur**, professor of political science at the University of Waterloo, was an R2P Commissioner and a principal author of its report. His most recent book is *The Responsibility to Protect: Norms, Laws and the Use of Force in International Politics*.

(...) Libya today is the place and time to redeem or renege on R2P's solemn pledge. The people's uprising against Moammar Gadhafi is tailor-made for it. Many have already been killed and carnage is feared. After 42 years of autocratic rule, Gadhafi is using deadly violence to crush and kill his people in open revolt against his dictatorship. Putting all options on the table in response to planes, bombs and tanks seems a pusillanimous response.

Three sets of issues are involved: military capacity, legal authority and political legitimacy.

Boots on the ground may be neither wanted, helpful nor even feasible. Instead, military operations would entail four activities: surveillance and monitoring, humanitarian assistance, enforcement of the arms embargo and enforcement of a no-fly zone. Only the West has the military assets and operational capability for these tasks. But NATO would be ill-advised to take any military action on its own authority.

Calls have grown for a no-fly zone, not the least from rebels under aerial attack. Military analysts seem divided on the complexity and feasibility of the option. U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates says it would require the destruction of the Libyan air force; others warn of mission creep and the risk of being branded Western imperialists.

Yet a no-fly zone was successfully declared and enforced over Iraq to protect the Kurds for 12 years until 2003. It did not lead to mission creep: the 2003 war was a deliberate policy choice for totally independent reasons. The quality of Libya's air force is suspect: "a known unknown." A no-fly zone could tip the balance for Libyan air force officers' motivations to bomb fellow-citizens and defection to the rebels or the West.

The risks of mission creep and a deepening quagmire leading to nation-building would arise only if ownership of the uprising was appropriated from the Libyans by the West, as would happen with ground troops. But no one is asking for this.

Legal authorization from the UN Security Council should be restricted to the four military tasks listed above. The usual suspects have been very reluctant to support such a resolution. Their opposition could be overcome if and as it becomes clear that the Arab, Islamic and African nations, as well as the mass of defecting Libyan diplomats, support prompt and effective action

to protect Libyan civilians, oust Gadhafi and promote democratic reforms.

If the Security Council dishonours the world's collective

responsibility to protect

, limited and legitimate action by NATO is still possible under clear mandate from the African Union and Arab League, backed by the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Absent that, NATO guns should stay silent. (...)

See

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