

Foreign Policy

What should we do about Libya? Stephen M. Walt 8 March 2011 *Stephen M. Walt is professor of international affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and previously taught at Princeton University and the University of Chicago. He is the author of Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy (2005).*

(...) For starters, let's acknowledge that the United States has no vital strategic interests at stake in the outcome of the Libyan struggle. Libyan oil production (about 1.6 million barrels/day prior to the recent violence) is valuable but not decisive, and can be made up by increased production in Saudi Arabia. Libya has no WMD (having been compelled to give up its various WMD programs by a protracted Western-led sanctions campaign), and it is not a significant military power.

Qaddafi has no links to al Qaeda (in fact, he's been a target of al Qaeda sympathizers in the past) and few, if any allies in the rest of the world. Libya's population is less than 7 million, and its economy (apart from oil) is unimpressive. Despite Qaddafi's many unsavory qualities and hostile acts, most U.S. presidents ultimately concluded that he was not important enough to remove from power, though the Reagan administration did target his residence in a bombing raid back in the 1980s.

Thus, the U.S. (and international) interest here is humanitarian, not strategic, which does not by itself mean that we should do nothing. What is going on in Libya does not constitute genocide -- a deliberate attempt to exterminate a whole category of people -- but the government's actions are clearly brutal, inhumane, and almost certainly involve war crimes. It thus falls squarely under the heading of the

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Responsibility to Protect

" doctrine (R2P), a new norm of humanitarian intervention promulgated with some fanfare a few years ago.

R2P

says "where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, *the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect*" (my emphasis).

The 2005

[United Nations World Summit](#)

adopted a

[modified version of](#)

[R2P](#)

, with the participants committing themselves to "take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." So if you take such pledges seriously, you might think that the international community would be strongly united in favor of decisive action in this case.

But here's where it gets messy (as usual). Russia opposes outside military intervention in Libya, which means that the Security Council is unable to authorize intervention along the lines suggested by

R2P

. (This is one reason why some of us were skeptical about the whole

R2P

initiative from the get-go). An alternative approach would have NATO or the EU or some coalition of regional organizations authorize outside action, but as numerous observers have already noted, this approach generates echoes of past colonial interference and could lend a certain (false) credence to Qaddafi's propaganda, which has sought to portray the rebels as some sort of foreign plot. Then remember that U.S. military forces are badly overstretched (which is why Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has been pouring

[cold water](#)

on the idea of a no-fly zone), and we've spent the past decade fighting wars in several other Muslim countries. Add all this up, and Obama's reluctance to send the Marines or impose a "no-fly zone" is understandable. It is not entirely clear that such a zone would make

[that much difference](#)

What this dilemma also highlights is the price the United States and its allies pay for the gross imbalance between U.S. military capabilities and those of its NATO partners. In practical terms, any strategically meaningful military intervention in Libya would depend almost entirely on U.S. forces and logistics. We might get some symbolic help from our NATO allies, but as in the Balkan wars, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the bulk of the heavy lifting would be borne by Uncle Sam. And that means that the United States will incur most if not all of the reputational costs for once again interfering in the Middle East, especially if the decision went awry in any way.

Back in the 1990s, Europeans (and Europhiles) spoke glowingly about the rise of Europe's "civilian power," which was seen as an alternative to America's old-fashioned preoccupation with military force and as a more useful tool in the postmodern 21st century. The Libyan crisis reminds us that this sort of civilian power is of little use against well-armed opponents who are willing to use force and that "hard power" of the sort that only the United States now possesses is indispensable. (The fact that Washington sometimes uses its capabilities unwisely is a separate issue). The problem is that the United States has good reasons to refrain from using its hard power in this case, yet our longtime strategic partners are incapable of action on their

own. The irony is that Europe's strategic interests are more fully engaged by events in Libya (if only because of the fear of large refugee flows), yet Europe lacks the capacity to do much in response.

If it were up to me, therefore, I'd use all nonmilitary means at my disposal to undermine Qaddafi's hold on power, and I'd stand ready to help Libya reform and rebuild in the event that his government finally falls. If other states want to funnel military aid to the rebel forces, I wouldn't object. If, as

[some sources](#) suggest,

Qaddafi himself might eventually be willing to leave power in exchange for a guarantee against prosecution, I might reluctantly take that deal for the sake of the greater good, however unjust it might be. But based on what has occurred thus far, I wouldn't be trying to organize a U.S.-led military intervention.

See

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