

UK Defence: A Test Case

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The success of the air and naval intervention against Libya in 2011, in which Britain is playing a prominent role, should be judged in terms of the effect it has on the Libyan people, their quality of life, and the cohesion of their country.

(...) The intervention in Libya is also a test case for the noble but rather tarnished and almost forgotten doctrine of humanitarian intervention - the

Responsibility to Protect

(R2P), published in 2001 and endorsed by the United Nations in 2006. The motive behind

R2P

was to ensure that outrages such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which approximately one million Rwandans were massacred, could not be repeated. Thus, the opening pages of

R2P

assert that '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.'

Prime Minister Cameron's Conservative Party has recently taken a more cautious line on this matter. The Conservatives' 2010 general election manifesto contained a number of relevant observations: 'our policy must be hard-headed and practical, dealing with the world as it is and not as we wish it were'; 'we are sceptical about grand utopian schemes to remake the world'; and 'we will support humanitarian intervention when it is practical and necessary.' In a similar vein, in a speech in Cairo in February 2011 Cameron noted 'I am not a naïve neocon who thinks you can drop democracy out of an aeroplane at forty-thousand feet.' Yet within weeks of that speech British combat aircraft were flying over Libya on a mission to protect civilians from brutalisation by Gaddafi and his forces. And although the military goal of the intervention is tightly circumscribed by UNSCR 1973, the government's not-so tacit 'political' goal is regime change so that the Libyan people can secure for themselves a better future and western Europe can ensure a reasonably peaceful neighbourhood. In other words, Britain sees itself contributing to the remaking of Libya (if not yet the world).

It is too early to know how and when the intervention in Libya will end. It is also too early to know the extent of the revival of

R2P

, if that is what is taking place. Might there soon be another population in need of UN Security Council Resolutions, no fly zones and maritime embargoes? Where next to debate whether 'rebels' should be armed in order to liberate themselves from oppression? What is clear, however, is that it will be difficult for Britain to extract itself very easily from either the incident (Libya) or the idea (the revival of

R2P

). It would now be unthinkable for Britain to absent itself from Operations Ellamy and Unified Protector - perhaps on the grounds that military operations were meant to be concluded within a few weeks and that the costs are ramping up - and still retain credibility in and around Europe, with the United States and internationally. Equally, it seems unlikely that David Cameron could now rediscover his inner sceptic. In his statement to the House of Commons on February 28, Cameron made his ethically high-minded, universalist and regime-changing position clear: 'we must not remain silent in our belief that freedom and the rule of law are what best guarantee human progress and economic success. Freedom of expression, a free press, freedom of assembly, the right to demonstrate peacefully: these are basic rights'; 'They are not British or western values - but the values of human beings everywhere'; 'For the future of Libya and its people, Colonel Gaddafi's regime must end and he must leave.' (...)

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