

Firing into a Continent

The American Spectator Matthew Omolesky 2 May 2011 *Matthew Omolesky* specialized in European affairs at the Whitehead School of Diplomacy's graduate program, and received his juris doctor from The Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law. Formerly a researcher-in-residence at the Institut za Civilizacijo in Kulturo (Ljubljana), he is presently a researcher for the Laboratoire Europeen d'Anticipation Politique (Paris) and a specialist in international human rights law.

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he recommendations of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty did constitute a significant step in a new direction. By proffering that "[w]here 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," the Commission was proposing a paradigm shift in international relations. (...)

(...) The ongoing multinational

intervention against Muammar Gaddafi and his

Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, enabled by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, has been expressly predicated on the idea of a responsibility to protect Libyan civilians, and as such represents a useful test case for the nascent doctrine. (...)

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It has, as it turns out, been a decidedly limited intervention, the chief elements of which have been the enforcement of a no-fly zone and an arms embargo, the application of asset freezes, and military action to protect civilians but with the express exclusion of "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." It is essentially an arm's length intervention, an act of "firing into the continent" and hoping for an improvement in the situation. The Libyan rebels -- described by Patrick Cockburn as "a rabble even by the lowly standards of militias in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan" -- now have a de facto air force courtesy of NATO and Qatar, but little else. Thanks to the air campaign, Benghazi was spared the carnage and blood-letting promised by Gaddafi, but other cities, including Ajdabiya and Misurata, are still imperiled as fighting goes on unchecked. Christopher Hitchens has complained that what is "utterly lacking in Libya, still, is an

entrance

strategy," but the intervention has been expressly designed to avoid any considerable imprint on the ground.

Whether this "time-limited, scope-limited" approach is appropriate under the circumstances, whether it is "shameful," as Hitchens insists, or whether it instead constitutes something more like Conrad's "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil," remains a matter of much debate in the

international community. What is certain is that the diffident campaign has satisfied very few. Opponents of the intervention have voiced suspicions about the sinister prior affiliations of various rebel leaders (Abdul Hakeen al-Hassadi, for instance, who was last seen fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan), or the harsh treatment of African migrant workers by rebel sympathizers. Proponents see the campaign as weak-kneed or feckless, and participants in the rebellion readily acknowledge that they would benefit from more proactive international efforts. This acid test for international efforts, based as it is on the perceived responsibility to protect civilians in Libya, as opposed to efforts made in the steely interests of national or international security, has proven to be anything but straightforward or entirely satisfactory. (...)

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The hesitant nature of the ongoing campaign, with its "firing into a continent" without directly addressing the root causes of the conflict, seems all too familiar. (...)

(...) This decidedly post-modern military operation, with its emphasis on humanitarian sentiments rather than harsh geopolitical realities, has only served to widen cracks in the Atlantic alliance, and has led one German diplomat to opine that a common European defense policy

"died in Libya -- we just have to pick a sand dune under which we can bury it." The squabbling and uncertainty that have attended this intervention, along with its paucity of results after week after week of bombings, indicates a growing lack of confidence amongst the former guarantors of international security. (...)

(...) As Jeremy Sarkin has correctly pointed out, a shift from "non-interference to non-indifference" can still mean unresponsiveness and inaction, and even responsiveness and action may not be of the efficacious variety. The civil war in Libya has exposed the dilemmas created by that relatively new entry into the international relations lexicon -- the duty to protect civilians -- and in the process has exposed many of the deficiencies of the current international system. As enormities continue to be perpetrated on the ground in Libya, it is up to those leaders who have masterminded the operation to find a way to accomplish their original goals while ultimately saving face. It will be almost impossible to do so under the rules laid out under Resolution 1973. (...)

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