

Responsibility to Protect – The Case of Libya

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses Keerith Sampath Kumar 2 May 2011 (...) Situations such as Libya are always a cause of dilemma for the international community. What causes more harm, engaging or becoming complicit bystanders? When should the UN Security Council sanction military intervention and when should it not? As Gregg Carlstrom wrote, 'the Libya no-fly zone is either a humanitarian mission or an excuse to meddle, depending on who you ask.'

[1](#)
This pretty much sums up the debate over the military intervention in Libya. While the West and other supporters of the no-fly zone over Libya call it a humanitarian operation that prevented wider civilian casualties, critics (read China and Russia) on the other hand opine that it would lead to a 'humanitarian disaster' and warn against causing civilian casualties through the use of armed force. (...)

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Those who support the need for intervention argue that if, in the case of Libya, R2P was ignored, then the whole principle of protecting civilian populations would have been seriously weakened, if not rendered totally worthless.

The military action in Libya has, however, raised several questions among the sceptics. Resolution 1973 states it clearly that the military intervention is about protecting Libya's civilian population from attacks by its own government and not concerned with occupying or dismembering the country.

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The commitment of returning the territory to its sovereign owner at the conclusion of hostilities should be clear right from the outset. But observers argue that the hidden agenda behind the intervention in Libya is 'regime change'. This fear is justified given that the Western leaders recently affirmed their stance on Libya by stating, '...it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Qaddafi in power.'

[3](#)
David Hillstrom assesses the situation as one where there is a glaring double standard at play. He questions, if Libya, then why not Yemen and Bahrain? Violence is perpetrated against humans in many places, but how does one intervene in one spot and not in another without drawing accusations of hypocrisy? The West has been backing, even arming, regimes in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia that are crushing dissent at the very time that coalition troops are intervening to supposedly protect dissidents in Libya.

The implementation of Resolution 1973 has also drawn opposition from the African actors. Days after the enforcement, the African actors, including the African Union, questioned the

interpretation of the mandate and argued that what is happening in Libya involves more than just implementing a no-fly zone and that the powers involved are exceeding the stated intentions and objectives of the resolution. There is also apprehension about the ambiguity of the objective behind the intervention. The term 'any means necessary', as mentioned in the resolution, could allow ulterior motives or interests to creep into the mission in Libya. Though the situation in Libya calls for a humanitarian intervention, it has been posited by some critics that the primary motivation for the intervention is to secure Libya's oil supply. (...)

(...) Though the Security Council authorized the war in Libya, it does not necessarily make it legitimate. Russia, China, India, Brazil and Germany, which represent more than 40 per cent of the world's population, abstained on UNSCR 1973, thus raising doubts about the international support for such a mission. The abstention of these five members of the Security Council on the issue has also come under the scanner. Given that the ambiguity of UNSCR 1973 caused apprehensions among the critics in Russia and China, their abstention from the resolution has only enabled military aggression and expansion of war in the region. The onus lay on them to use their veto power and stall any further action on the resolution until and unless they were provided with a comprehensive report on the situation. Neither does it absolve countries like India, Brazil and Germany of 'their failure to mount an effective political challenge to the drive for war.'

Along with a clear and unambiguous mandate, pre-intervention planning also demands an exit strategy of intervening troops. There is no substitute for a clear and effective exit strategy. But the coalition forces that intervened in Libya lack an exit strategy and this has caused apprehensions among the African nations. Moreover, an unplanned exit could have disastrous or unsettling implications for the country and could serve to discredit even the positive aspects of intervention.

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The lack of clarity about the goal led to a split between the military and the politicians in Britain and the US over whether Gaddafi himself is the target. Cracks have also developed within NATO over the military strategy in Libya. Additionally, the initial talk of a no-fly zone has proved to be irrelevant as the Gaddafi threat came from the ground and not from the air. The distance from the ground also made it hard for the coalition forces to target the pro-Gaddafi forces. This caused civilian deaths, the very people whom the intervention sought to protect, and the West effortlessly euphemized them as 'friendly fire' attacks. Voices within India have not been parsimonious with their criticism of the West and it is not without reason. Brahma Chellany argues that the military intervention in a tribally divided Libya highlights a selective approach to the promotion of freedom and the protection of civilians. The 'mission creep' that has characterized the Western powers' military attack raises troubling questions about their Libyan strategy. (...)

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