

NATO Watch: How Good is NATO after Libya?

Dr. Ian Davis, Director, NATO Watch

NATO's reputation only a few weeks ago was less than stellar. As the intervention in Libya dragged on, from "days and weeks" to months, criticism of the mission grew on all sides. Many Western liberals and peace activists, as well as political leaders in powerful non-NATO states, such as Russia, China and India, charged that this was yet another US-led coalition fighting a third war without proper authority and for doubtful ends (it was all about securing preferential access to Libya's vast oil reserves according to some detractors). Meanwhile, mainly US conservative critics censured NATO (and especially European NATO) for doing it too slowly and with inadequate resources. Others, including this author, who initially supported the intervention under the principle of **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)**, grew more restless as the 'protection of civilians' morphed into 'regime change.'

What were the motives for the intervention?

R2P intervention is only justified, however, when demanding conditions are met and continue to be met. The intervention in Libya, unlike Iraq in 2003 (and in many ways, Afghanistan over the past decade), was prosecuted, initially at least, in a legal way. It was demanded by the people being attacked, it included the support of (large parts) of the Arab League and was authorised by UNSC resolution 1973. Similarly, while the motives for the 'early' French ground attacks were mixed at best, the risk of a large-scale massacre of civilians in Benghazi was real enough.

To those that argued, why Libya and not Syria, in the latter there was (and remains) no prospect of UN authorisation or multilateral agreement for military intervention, although some of the other non-military mechanisms in the **R2P** toolbox could and are being applied.

For the future of Libya, however, none of this conjecture may matter—the end may in time be seen to justify the means— but in the short to medium term the criticism from China, Russia, India and others, makes it less likely that a similar **R2P** intervention would gain international backing any time soon (as discussed further below).

How useful a template is Libya for future R2P missions?

Undoubtedly, the best way to overthrow dictators is through the people of the affected countries themselves doing so through the power of mass strategic nonviolent action—as demonstrated in Egypt, Tunisia, Serbia, Chile, the Philippines, Indonesia, Poland and many other countries. But when dictators refuse to go peacefully and threaten the lives of their citizens,

R2P

is meant to provide a lifeline. Most of the tools in the

R2P

toolbox are diplomatic, economic and humanitarian, with more coercive measures authorised by the Security Council as a last resort.

In some respects, the Libyan intervention has strengthened the proponents of the UN's **R2P** doctrine. Nothing succeeds quite like success. And as in Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone, humanitarian interventionism can at least point to a relatively successful outcome. As such, the spectre of Iraq for

R2P

interventionists may not be banished but is no longer the haunting presence it once was.

However, the appropriateness of an intervention and the honesty of its methods are vital if **R2P** is to carry its proclaimed moral clout. Here, the combination of air strikes and covert intervention and planning by limited ground forces raises questions over the honesty of these methods and therefore their suitability as a template for future potential

R2P

interventions. Over what other countries would NATO aircraft be allowed to fly with impunity for six months? And how likely is future UNSC approval for such a mission?

A deeper problem is that many political leaders still see **R2P** simply as a new cloak for a late form of western imperialism. Others note the overdependence on military force. In spite of its incorporation into UN thinking, **R2P** remains an idea of which the non-western world is suspicious, while at the same time NATO finds the idea of

R2P

by others, say Russia or China, extremely worrying. Indeed, NATO itself has yet to formally endorse

R2P

(although some individual member states have), let alone agree that it trumps national and collective security or traditional definitions of vital interests. It didn't even warrant a single mention in NATO's new Strategic Concept agreed at the Lisbon Summit last November.

R2P is neither discredited nor fully validated by the Libyan mission. It remains work in progress, and it is hoped that the lessons from the Libyan intervention may help develop a more coherent and comprehensive approach. To this end, NATO should set up an independent review of its Libyan operation, publish the findings and establish an **R2P** Committee to implement them. Such a Committee could also analyse threats of genocide and mass atrocities; develop military guidance on genocide prevention and response; and incorporate guidelines into alliance doctrine and training. NATO could also provide capacity- building assistance to international partners who are willing to take measures to prevent genocide and mass atrocities. In short, NATO could adopt **R2P** as an 'actionable norm' and seek to close the gap between

R2P

rhetoric and reality.

Has NATO emerged from the Libya campaign stronger or weaker?

Part of the problem is that within European NATO (combined military spending \$220 billion), the alliance is seen as the cornerstone of their respective national defence policies, whereas in the United States (£700 billion defence budget, although upwards of a \$1 trillion when all security funding is included) it is but one of several regional building blocks for a global military presence. Despite the acknowledged shortfalls, Europe's militaries are more appropriately scaled for their actual needs—homeland defence, peacekeeping and crisis management missions and limited **R2P** interventions—than their US counterpart. Indeed, it is wholly appropriate that an exceptional mission like Libya stretches European armed services to the limit. Iraq and Afghanistan revealed the extent to which over-the- horizon military interventions

by the US military in the post-9/11 decade were undertaken too quickly and without due consideration of the consequences – in part, simply because they could.

Conclusions

NATO must decide if it wants to make preventing genocide and mass atrocities a priority and not merely an idealistic add-on to the core collective defence agenda. It ought to be a moral and strategic imperative for the alliance to implement the **R2P** agenda, in which case, resources would need to be directed towards the development of a comprehensive approach to genocide prevention, including improved early warning mechanisms, early action to prevent crises, timely diplomatic responses to emerging crises, greater preparedness to employ NATO military assets in UN peacekeeping operations, and action to strengthen global norms and institutions.

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