

Final article for the Daily Telegraph as edited – Wednesday 24 August 2011

By David Owen

During the darkest moments of Nato's campaign in Libya, it was suggested that its sluggish progress represented the death knell for the doctrine of humanitarian intervention – that a West chastened by its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and enfeebled by debt lacked the money, the morale and the military resources to take action against those who broke international law. Now that the rebels have swept into Tripoli, the opposite argument is being made – that their success represents a vindication of the Nato strategy, and provides a template for the toppling of despots in Syria and elsewhere. The truth, however, is that Libya is not a successor to Kosovo or Sierra Leone. Instead, it is the prototype for a new kind of intervention, one that reflects the very different world that we find ourselves in today.

From the start, the campaign faced a wall of scepticism from military and diplomatic experts. Yet it was sustained by a number of important features: first, it was entirely legal, authorised by the UN through the Security Council, and second, it resonated with those ashamed by our inertia over Rwanda and Srebrenica. There was also admirable unity between the political parties: while public opinion was divided, David Cameron and William Hague were supported at every stage by Ed Miliband and Douglas Alexander.

One thing that worried many advocates of intervention was the attitude of America. From the start, the US adopted the position that it would not lead the military operation: it was ready to play a role, but others in Europe had to take the lead.

Fortunately, France and Britain were ready to live up to their responsibilities as permanent members of the Security Council. Yet they still relied on American assistance: the first few days of the campaign were dominated by US forces taking out Gaddafi's ground-to-air missiles and sophisticated aircraft. This was done predominantly by more than 100 Tomahawk cruise missiles. No one in Europe should pretend that this military venture could have even been contemplated had we not had this initial use of sophisticated American weaponry, much of which does not even exist in European arsenals, let alone in such quantities.

The essence of the Nato strategy was to use air power to tilt the balance of fighting on the ground. There are no exact precedents for such an operation, although the first seeds lay in the protection of the Kurds against Saddam in the aftermath of the Iraq War, in which northern and southern no-fly zones were enforced by US, British and French airpower. It was also reminiscent of the strategy in Bosnia in 1993, when the establishment of a no-fly zone culminated in the widespread use of Nato bombing and the deployment by the British and French of a Rapid Reaction Force, or the pinpoint strikes and daisy-cutter bombs used in support of the Northern Alliance during the march on Kabul.

But if the military strategy was familiar, the diplomatic environment was not – and it is this that makes the Libyan campaign the first example of what might be called "constrained intervention". Rather than acting of its own accord, Nato was dependent on UN endorsement; and what was crucial in persuading the Russians and Chinese not to veto the relevant resolution was that the call for help came from the Arab League.

Once the enforcement of a no-fly zone passed to Nato, the constraining influence of the UN resolution was felt throughout the operation. Its ban on deploying ground troops ensured that there was no occupying

power to inflame Arab opinion, and made it possible to explain, throughout the campaign, that the targeting strategy was focused on protecting civilian lives. The justification for protecting the advancing liberation forces, once Benghazi had been secured, was relatively easy, given Gaddafi's brutal use of power and employment of ruthless mercenaries.

Of course, these constraints created tension within Nato, and were seized on by those who predicted failure. But the long-term advantage of respecting the UN resolution was twofold. First, the passage of the months allowed the liberating forces to develop its cohesion and fighting skills, and enhanced the authority of the National Transitional Council. Second, it set a precedent for the future, providing the first clear example of the mechanisms that can be used to enforce the new "Responsibility to Protect" that was incorporated into the UN Charter in 2005.

Paradoxically, it is Nato rather than the UN that emerges battered and divided from the intervention. Only eight of its 28 members - less than one third - agreed to engage their air forces and bomb Libya. Britain and France bore the brunt of the work, flying over Libya day in, day out. Italy, the old colonial power, did make airfields available, and was broadly supportive. Canada and Norway also contributed. Yet Germany, the most powerful country in Europe, was opposed to intervention, and refused to become involved. Poland was not ready to engage. Turkey and Spain refused to fly attack missions. What was even worse for Nato's self-esteem, however, was its demonstrable incapacity. Robert Gates, the outgoing US Defense Secretary, did not mince his words when he said in his farewell speech in Brussels in early June: "The mightiest military Alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country - yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions."

Does this mean, therefore, that Nato is no longer fit for purpose? Not exactly. For all its limitations, it did provide the crucial infrastructure needed for command and control, covering the three essential forces - US, French and British. The campaign proved that Franco-British military co-operation, which is becoming a cornerstone of both countries' defence strategy, can and does work - a huge lesson, and a huge relief, for both London and Paris. These two countries, and these two alone, provide the core of Europe's defence capability. Yet we have also learned that we still rely enormously on the US, and need to operate jointly with them - and that, in effect, means Nato should continue.

More broadly, we have a better idea of what we can and cannot do in the world. Global opinion, and the view of rising powers such as China, can no longer be ignored by the West - we are, and will be, constrained by economic and military realities. Yet we have also set a precedent: that intervention can and does work.

There is now an immense opportunity for Britain and France to live up to their responsibilities in the Security Council, and to provide the core of a well-equipped Rapid Reaction Force, under UN auspices, pledging planes and where necessary an aircraft carrier from their navies. Such a force should also draw upon the resources of the other three permanent members - China, Russia and the US - and should train together. That may sound idealistic, but Russia worked effectively with the UN and then with Nato in Bosnia, playing a crucial role. Also in Kosovo persuading Milosevic to withdraw his forces. China is demonstrating its own readiness to project global power by acquiring its first aircraft carrier, and has already shown in Sudan that it has an interest in maintaining stability. It is not the swashbuckling approach of old - but constrained intervention, with the global legitimacy that UN backing confers, can be better than no intervention

at all, and is likely to do more lasting good than going it alone.

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Constrained Intervention

Intervention in Libya faced a wall of scepticism from military and diplomatic experts but it was sustained by a number of important features, not least that it was legal and authorised by the UN through the Security Council. It also resonated with people ashamed by inertia over the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, particularly Srebrenica. While public opinion was divided over Libya fortunately in the UK political parties were united and David Cameron and William Hague were supported at every stage by Ed Miliband and Douglas Alexander.

This was a constrained intervention very different from the many different interventions that have taken place since the protection of Kuwait in 1991. From the start, the Americans adopted a distinctive stance that they would not lead the military operation. They were ready to play a role but others in Europe had to take the major share of the responsibility. Fortunately, with memories of the 1956 Suez fiasco at long last put behind them, France and Britain were ready to live up to their responsibilities as permanent members of the Security Council. Another key element which was crucial in persuading the Russians and Chinese not to veto the UN resolution was that the call for help came from the Arab League.

The essence of the strategy was to use airpower to tilt the balance of fighting on the ground. There are no exact precedents for such an operation but the first seeds lay in the protection of the Kurds against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Kuwait operation and the northern and southern no-fly-zones enforced by US, British and French airpower. The no fly zone over Bosnia in 1993 culminated in the widespread use of NATO bombing and the deployment by the British and French of a Rapid Reaction Force with radar targeted artillery in 1995. Thirdly, in Afghanistan US carrier-based F/A-18 Hornet fighter bombers hit Taliban vehicles with pinpoint strikes and used daisy-cutter bombs and AC-130 gunships in support of the Northern Alliance commanders moving the frontline forward in the march on Kabul.

In Libya the first few days were dominated by US forces taking out Gaddafi's ground to air missiles and sophisticated aircraft. This was done predominantly by over 100 US Tomahawk cruise missiles. No one should pretend in Europe that the Libyan military venture could have been even contemplated had we not had this initial use of sophisticated US weaponry much of which does not even exist in European military arsenal let alone in such quantity. It was also extremely helpful that before the UN resolution was passed, Robert Gates, the US Defense Secretary, had made it crystal clear that such an operation was an integral part of imposing a no-fly-zone. It was also critical that the French flew their aeroplanes immediately to stop Gaddafi forces entrenching themselves in the outskirts of Benghazi.

Once the enforcement of a no-fly-zone passed to NATO the constraining influence of the UN resolution became a reality. Russia and China and other critics had no serious grounds for complaint. The resolution's ban on occupying forces ensured there was no occupying power to enflame Arab opinion and throughout it was possible to understand the targeting strategy as being focussed on protecting civilian lives. The justification for also protecting advancing liberation forces was made easy to justify given Gaddafi's brutal use of power and employing mercenaries.

These constraints created tension within NATO and were seized on to predict failure. But the long term advantage of respecting the UN resolution was twofold. Firstly, the passage of the months allowed the liberating forces to develop their cohesion and fighting skills and also enhanced the authority of the national transitional council, allowing for discussion with other countries about the future constitution and aftermath planning. Secondly, it set a precedent for the future that the important new 'Responsibility to Protect' interpretation of the UN Charter that was agreed at the Heads of Government Summit in 2005 now had a legal mechanism for its implementation.

It is NATO rather than the UN that emerges battered and divided from the intervention. Only 8 of its 28 members – less than one third – agreed to engage their air forces and bomb Libya. Germany, the most powerful country in Europe, was diplomatically opposed to the intervention and militarily not prepared to be involved. Poland, a large country, was also not ready to engage. Turkey and Spain refused to fly attack missions. Italy, by contrast, being the previous colonial power, did make airfields available and

was broadly supportive. What was even worse, however, for NATO's self-esteem was the demonstrable incapacity of the Alliance. Robert Gates did not mince his words when he said in his farewell speech in Brussels in early June, "The mightiest military Alliance in history is only eleven weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country – yet many Allies are beginning to run short of munitions."

Britain and France bore the brunt of the attack aircraft flying day in, day out over Libya but in addition to some other EU countries, it was important that Canada and Norway contributed. Yet for all NATO's limitations it provided the crucial infrastructure for command and control covering the three essential forces – US, French and British. If the oppression in Syria continues it might be possible, if Turkey was ready to be the lead NATO country, for a somewhat similar constrained intervention to be mounted as that which developed over Libya.

Most importantly, there are huge lessons from Libya to be drawn together in Paris and in London. Franco-British military cooperation does work. It, and it alone, provides the core for European defence. But it needs to operate jointly with the US and that in effect means NATO should continue. There is now an immense opportunity for Britain and France to live up to their responsibilities in the Security Council and provide the core of a UN well equipped Rapid Reaction Force and pledge planes and where necessary an aircraft carrier from their navies. Such a Force should have the participation of all the other three permanent members – China, Russia and the US and should train together. Constrained intervention rooted in the UN will have global legitimacy. Russia worked effectively first with the UN and then with NATO after the Dayton Accords in Bosnia. Kosovo stretched that partnership to breaking point militarily but it did not stop President Yeltsin playing a crucial role in persuading Milosevic to withdraw his forces, something that NATO bombing on its own did not and would not have achieved. China is demonstrating its own readiness to project global power by acquiring its first aircraft carrier. Sudan has already shown that they have these interests in Africa. Constrained intervention can be better than no intervention and is likely to have a more lasting beneficial effect than unauthorised intervention.

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