



First Lessons from the Libya Operations

Jo Coelmont

In this *Security Policy Brief*, Jo Coelmont expresses his concern, if a comprehensive vision within the EU would remain absent.

Operations in Libya have been going on for some two weeks now. For military intervention to be successful, a number of rules of thumb must be respected. Absolute clarity about the military tasks and about the Rules of Engagement, and unity of command are essential. The forces must possess all required capabilities and need rapidly deployable reserves so as to be able to deal with all possible contingencies. The civilian dimension demands equal clarity. At the political level, the ultimate objective, the desired end-state, must be defined unambiguously, and be substantiated by a political roadmap. Military operations cannot achieve durable results unless they are part of a comprehensive political vision, of an overall strategy. Finally the support of public opinion is needed, both at home and in theatre.

Experience teaches that if any item (military, civilian or political) from the above list is missing, failure is more probable than success. Vague declarations can temporarily obscure the real state of affairs, but on the ground only reality matters. Public opinion is quick to see through such statements in any case. What is presented as constructive ambiguity quickly

turns out to be destructive. Clarity is an indispensable prerequisite, for public opinion and military planners alike.

Room for Interpretation

Every crisis has its own characteristics. The whole world – Europe, the direct neighbour included – was taken by surprise by the recent events in the Arab world and in Libya in particular. The speed and unity with which the international community spoke out against Gaddafi was striking. But it hides a first ambiguity, for the consensus comprises both countries that seek to support the revolutions in the region and others that prefer the stability of the status quo.

UNSC 1970, which refers the issue of Libya to the International Criminal Court, fits both options. More difficulties emerged in the next phase however. To support the rebels' progress, France and the UK pleaded for a no-fly zone. That would only have made sense though if the destruction of the fighting power of Gaddafi's air force would have meant the end of his military superiority and his power base. If not, it would have made the countries enforcing the no-fly zone into silent witnesses of slaughter on the ground, like in Bosnia in the 1990s.

For that reason, the no-fly zone is only one element of UNSC 1973, next to an arms

embargo and, most importantly, the authorization “to take all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack”. This goes much further than a no-fly zone – but how much further? Does it imply the complete destruction of Gaddafi’s military capacity? Can close air support be provided to the rebel forces in contact with troops loyal to Gaddafi? Can foreign ground troops be deployed to protect civilians? UNSC 1973 explicitly forbids occupation forces. Technically speaking that are military forces that remain in theatre without specific combat tasks. Who follows that interpretation? And who is authorised to provide the forces for intervention? The Resolution leaves it to the Member States of the UN, to regional organizations, and, also, to ad hoc coalitions. It thus gives a de facto right of interpretation to those that intervene militarily.

Many commentators equalled UNSC 1973 with a mandate to install a relatively innocent no-fly zone. Little wonder that its concrete interpretation quickly puts pressure on the lauded international solidarity and raises questions with public opinion.

Lack of a Global Strategy

Which lessons can be drawn from the initial phase of crisis management? Militarily speaking, the first weeks of operations have been successful. France, the UK and especially the US quickly assembled the required military means to neutralize Gaddafi’s air defences, the assault on Benghazi was forestalled, and a no-fly zone was set up. Command and control structures for the conduct of the operation were improvised. The US in any case did not want to take the lead and was looking to Europe. Although the US and European countries intervened together, the transatlantic political dialogue did not take place in NATO, but between the capitals of the willing nations. The political direction of the military

operations will continue to be decided upon at that level, through an ad hoc “contact group”. NATO, whose flag is not everywhere equally welcome, has been assigned the technical, executive functions of the military conduct of the operations. The military tasks vary from one country to another: from embargo, to no-fly-zone, to protection of civilians, for the time being with air forces and missiles only. As for the deployment of ground forces, several options are being kept open. How long operations will last, is not clear.

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Politically, the EU is less divided this time than over the invasion of Iraq. But there is far from complete agreement. Initially France and the UK were taking the lead; some countries, such as Belgium, were following immediately; others, such as Germany, were abstaining. Contrary to other crises in the past, reaction has been relatively quick. But far from being preventive, the intervention nearly came too late. When operations started, there was a desired political end-state, Gaddafi’s departure, but no clear political roadmap to reach it. Nothing had been elaborated in terms of a long-term solution after the military phase, neither for Libya nor for the region. And even now, after the London conference, all this remains pretty much “work in progress”.

All indications point in the same direction: a lack of common approach based on an overall strategy. As the US is looking to Europe, the EU comes into the picture. Clearly, France and the UK alone cannot carry the military and political burden. That already proved

impossible at the time of the civil war in former Yugoslavia, a fact which inspired Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac to create a security and defence policy within the EU. The Iraq crisis subsequently inspired the Convention to include the required institutional instruments in the Treaty texts. Now our shortcomings in dealing with the Arab revolutions in general and with the Libyan crisis in particular must stimulate Europe to improvise less, to act preventively, and to finally give substance to the objectives it committed to in the Lisbon Treaty. The needs range from more structured military cooperation, civilian and military structures for command and control – vital for each operation – to elaborating an overall political strategy for EU external action, with specific objectives for each region. Durable cooperation with the Arab world must take place with the EU, which should now give concrete meaning to its so-called strategic partnerships.

It is striking, and unfortunate, that again it requires the US to point the EU into the right direction.

Conclusion

Europe has now crossed the Rubicon of engaging in a military intervention, the political direction of which is coming its way. In the immediate future, a balance must be sought between a minimal military footprint and protection of civilians, and between the

interpretation to be given to UNSC 1973 and safeguarding a broad consensus, including notably with Arab countries, even if the military phase might last longer and become more complex than hoped. The end-state is what matters, not the end-date. Speeding up a positive conclusion can only be done through a forceful political roadmap with a clear EU imprint. In a first phase, military intervention can be necessary to achieve the objectives. But without a political framework, intervention quickly becomes part of the problem. That too experience has taught us.

Brigadier-General (Res.) Jo Coelmont was the Permanent Military Representative of Belgium to the EU Military Committee, and is a Senior Associate Fellow of Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

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EGMONT

Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

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