

What Libya says about the future of the transatlantic alliance

By Tomas Valasek

★ Libya is the first war fought according to Barack Obama's rules: the United States is taking a back seat, while the Europeans absorb most of the risks and costs. So it is puzzling that so many Americans see the operation as reason to despair about the state of the transatlantic alliance.

★ In fact, Libya is cause for cautious optimism about NATO. In contrast to the Balkan operations in the 1990s, the 2011 campaign demonstrates that the European allies can take decisive military action to maintain the stability of their neighbourhood, provided they have access to US equipment.

★ The allies have arrived at a new division of labour for European operations, which should be encouraged and developed further. That will require a conscious effort from the Obama administration to challenge overly negative assumptions about NATO in the US. For their part, the Europeans need to make more common and efficient use of their military budgets and equipment if the transatlantic alliance is to remain credible.

Most US officials and pundits think of the current NATO-led mission in Libya as yet another proof that the transatlantic alliance is decaying. One hears two lines of complaint: many, such as Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, see the war as affirmation that Europe has lost its capacity to fight. "The mightiest military alliance in

¹ Robert Gates, 'Reflections on the status and future of the transatlantic alliance', Brussels, Belgium, June 10th 2011.

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", Gates said in a widely-reported valedictory speech in Brussels in early June.¹ Other US officials complain that NATO has failed to function as a proper military alliance since many member-states have failed to send forces.² To this, Europeans add their own bit of self-criticism: that Libya has been a disaster for Europe because EU countries disagreed on how to

² Unless otherwise attributed, quotations come from personal interviews with the author between April and July 2011.

respond to Muammar Gaddafi's violence. This has made it impossible for the EU to do much more than send humanitarian aid and impose sanctions.

This gloom is only partly warranted. Europe does face a shortage of troops and weapons, though the problem lies more in the future than the present, and there are remedies for it. Libya has indeed divided NATO – but the alliance has fought every one of its four wars (Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya) with fewer than the full complement of member-states. With the right policies, it can continue to be effective and strong, despite the lack of unity. And Europe has hardly 'failed' in Libya; European countries have made the greatest effort to stop Gaddafi's forces. In fact, if the war ends well, Libya may yet come to be seen in hindsight as the moment when Europe assumed its rightful share of responsibility for the security of its neighbourhood.

The US takes a back seat

One of Barack Obama's consistent aims has been to convince rising powers and old allies alike to assume greater responsibility for global security. The administration has repeatedly made clear that the United States, exhausted from fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and plagued by an economic crisis at home, will be less keen than its predecessors to intervene abroad. "The nation that I am most interested in building is our own"³, Obama told the Americans shortly after assuming office. Vice President Joe Biden implicitly confirmed that this new introspection requires the Europeans to take the lead for maintaining the security of their own region: "America will ask for more from [its] partners", he said in 2009.⁴

³ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the president in address to the nation on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,' US Military Academy at West Point, New York, December 1st 2009.

⁴ Joseph R Biden, 'Speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference', February 7th 2009.

Previous administrations made similar appeals but the Libya war marks the first time that the US has carried out its threat to leave Europe to take responsibility for a war in its neighbourhood. The Obama administration – never too keen on the Libyan intervention in the first place – turned over command to NATO shortly after its initial stage, which was mostly led by US forces. One senior State Department official described the current US role in Libya as "not allowing the operation to fail", meaning that the American military only steps in if and when allies lack the necessary weapons and munitions to win. The US has also provided niche weapons, such as Predator drones, and has more armed forces on standby. But on a day-to-day basis, the vast majority of bombing runs are left to European air forces. This marks a complete role reversal from the mid to late 1990s, when the US dropped over 90 per cent of all NATO bombs in Yugoslavia, engineered the enlargement of the alliance to Central and Eastern Europe and thought of itself as a 'European power'.

This new US approach – controversially termed as "leading from behind" by one administration official⁵ – has left many Europeans nervous: how far will the US go in devaluing military responsibilities? The new NATO countries, which count on the Americans to lead the alliance in case of a conflict with Russia, have been particularly concerned. But evidence suggests that such fears may not be warranted. Obama pushed NATO in 2010 to draft plans to defend the Baltic states, and the US military has held more exercises in Eastern Europe under Barack Obama than under George W Bush. In 2010, the US government reversed the previous administration's decision to withdraw two of the four combat brigades in Europe and instead decided to retain three, citing the possible need to defend the continent. In addition, Washington plans to deploy Aegis ships in European waters to defend it against hostile missiles, and to establish a new permanent air wing in Poland, as well as missile defence bases in Poland and Romania. These are not the actions of an ally reneging on NATO's mutual defence pledge.

⁵ Ryan Lizza, 'How the Arab spring remade Obama's foreign policy', New Yorker, May 2nd 2011.

⁶ 'US seen as less important, China as more powerful; Isolationist sentiment surges to four-decade high', Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 3rd 2009.

President Obama's thinking on European security seems to run thus: the US will not hesitate to lead 'wars of necessity' in defence of European allies. But it will not take the lead in 'wars of choice' in or around Europe, such as the one in Libya. This is now a job for Europe. Such a stance advances Obama's goal of conserving US strength in time of economic crisis and military overstretch: a reduction in non-essential engagements saves money, while a re-affirmation of mutual defence guarantees discourages possible challengers from testing the existing order in Europe. This, in turn, avoids the need to mount a costly US response. The policy seems set to hold, irrespective of which candidate wins the 2012 presidential elections. While top Republican candidates have spoken about the need for a more assertive US global presence, their ability to field military forces abroad will be constrained by fiscal constraints and an increasingly isolationist public.⁶

Smile, America: Europe steps up

Obama's policy has had the desired effect on Europe: it has energised the allies. While Washington agonised over whether to launch strikes on Libya, the Europeans took the political lead. President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister David Cameron spearheaded the campaign for a UN Security Council resolution. European militaries have performed the majority of the bombing raids.

There are those who argue that Europe has failed because divisions among member-states have prevented the EU from taking the lead in ending the civil strife in Libya. However, what matters more than branding is the impact of current European efforts. Europe acted collectively in Libya in the sense that France and the UK, the continent's largest military powers, along with Denmark, Norway and other allies, have between them provided two thirds of the attack aircraft flying over the country. The rest of the world sees the war as a largely European affair, for better or worse.

In a sense, the Libyan campaign is the antithesis of operations in Bosnia in the 1990s. When bloodshed in the Balkans broke out, some EU politicians and commentators hailed the ‘hour of Europe’: the moment when an economic union would become a foreign policy and security power. But key European capitals failed to summon the political will to send in military forces, and it fell to the US to lead a NATO intervention to bring an end to the Balkan conflict. In Libya, European countries acted quickly and – along with the Americans – almost certainly prevented a massacre in Benghazi. And even though the French or the British do not fight under the EU flag, this has been a good few months for Europe. The fact that Germany has not sent forces, and even abstained from the UN Security Council vote authorising the war, is deeply worrying. But this does not negate the fact that the Libyan campaign is indisputably ‘European’; Germany’s absence simply means that Europe’s diplomacy and military operations in Libya will lack the punch they would have had with Europe’s largest country on board.

Although the operation has exposed real military weaknesses on Europe’s part, it has demonstrated on balance that Europe can fight relatively big wars with limited US support. Critics point to NATO’s difficulties in dislodging Gaddafi and argue that without the weapons that the US withdrew after the first few days of the conflict, the Europeans cannot prevail.

Those familiar with day-to-day NATO diplomacy on Libya do not agree, however. What the allies are trying to achieve – forcing a regime change from the air, in partnership with relatively unskilled and weak Libyan rebel forces on the ground – is inherently difficult. The task would remain challenging even with the active involvement of the US air force (although French experts say that the rebels could have advanced much further had the Americans not withdrawn their close air support aircraft). Without the deployment of ground forces – for which neither Europe nor the US have the political appetite – the best solution is a slow, daily campaign of attrition, combined with improved military support for the rebels. This sort of war appears well within the grasp of the Europeans, although they continue to need US help in key areas such as drones and digital communications. This is not to say that success is inevitable; the air war may yet fail to dislodge Gaddafi. As George Robertson, a former NATO secretary-general, points out, NATO did not

prevail in Kosovo until it also threatened a ground invasion.⁷ No ally seems willing to send troops to Libya. And there is the possibility that NATO countries will run out of patience before Gaddafi leaves. If so, this will be a failure of political will, not capabilities. There is little evidence that European armed forces backed by US help lack the military resources to win, and their victory remains the most probable outcome.

⁷ ‘George Robertson, Dillon Lecture 2011, Chatham House, July 6th 2011.

So far, then, Libya has been a good war for Washington: the allies have responded to US calls to assume more responsibility for the security of their neighbourhood. And the Americans have the luxury of prosecuting a war from the backseat, while the Europeans absorb most of the costs and risks. Many Europeans are therefore puzzled that the US establishment points to the Libyan campaign as a reason to despair of the NATO alliance in general. Secretary Gates would have served US interests better had he used his parting speech in Brussels to hail NATO’s new division of labour rather than focus on the perennial issue of European capabilities.

The defence secretary’s speech has also damaged the image of NATO in the US, with potentially serious consequences. This new form of US-European security relationship will only survive if the Americans continue to see the alliance as useful for their own security. So the fact that US politicians and media have been highly dismissive of the European performance in Libya, ignoring the allies’ newfound will to act, is worrying. It suggests that the US increasingly wants to stay out of other countries’ wars, and that irrespective of what the Europeans do, they may fail to entice the US to stay in their mutual alliance. This risk grows with each passing year, as Gates observed, because politicians and the military in the US tend to be less and less informed by the experience of the Cold War, and less inclined to view Europe as their default partner. Criticism of allies’ military shortcomings only accelerates the de-Europeanisation of US foreign policy. Those Americans who continue to believe in the importance of the transatlantic relationship should seize on Europe’s role in Libya as a positive shift to be nurtured and encouraged.

NATO endures

Changing US attitudes are hardly NATO’s only headache. The Libyan question has divided the European allies. Though NATO is formally in charge, only eight out of the 28 members – less than one third – have volunteered to drop bombs. Germany is the most notable absentee but it is hardly exceptional: Poland has sent no forces either, and Turkey and Spain (among others) have refused to fly attack missions. Never before have so few allies taken part in an ostensibly joint operation.

However, the alliance continues to do its work even if some countries pick and choose their battles. Greece stayed out of the 1999 war in Kosovo; protestors there even attacked American marines en route to their

peacekeeping mission. In Afghanistan, six countries have taken 90 per cent of all casualties; many of the rest have sent only symbolic contingents or have kept their forces out of harm's way. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been acting more like a shifting coalition of the willing than a true alliance. Without a common enemy, governments worry about different threats: some fear Russia; others worry about terrorism; and several are concerned about Iran's nuclear programme. Whatever their rhetoric, governments often fail to live up to NATO's ideal of collective security, whereby the concerns of one country are the concerns of all.

The alliance endures because while countries disagree on what they want from it, they feel strongly about the various benefits that membership offers: countries that fear an attack on their territory associate with NATO because its mutual defence clause deters enemies more effectively than individual armies can. To those governments such as Canada or the UK, which base their security on keeping threats at bay in places such as Afghanistan, NATO offers a way to spread costs and multiply their military strength. A number of other allies, judging by their levels of defence spending, have lost interest in NATO, but they remain members essentially as an insurance policy against the unknown. As François Heisbourg, a French strategist and military thinker, observes, NATO has become a service provider, with different allies turning to it for different services.

Crucially, many governments believe that the need for a credible NATO is reason enough for them to take part in missions which, on a purely national analysis, they would shun. Many countries send forces to NATO operations largely out of solidarity: because they want the alliance to stay together, and because they understand that they cannot demand help from others unless they are ready to give it. When NATO goes to war, its member-states now routinely split into four groups: those which have the right troops and weapons and view the given mission as central to their security; those with the right means but which take part out of solidarity; those which have real military forces but choose not to take part because they disagree with the mission; and those which simply do not have many meaningful forces to contribute. As long as there remains a critical mass of allies in the first two categories, NATO will endure, even if the alliance has become a more 'transactional' place than it used to be.

The effectiveness of the alliance is clearly somewhat diminished. With many allies now routinely choosing not to join operations, NATO missions last longer than they would if all allies took part. Arguably, more allied soldiers lose their lives as a result. This has been a source of great frustration to those countries that send their forces into peril. The most active nations have sought to spur others into action through peer pressure and proposals such as common funding. The latter would require all allies, whether they send troops or not, to share the costs of the operation. (At present, each country pays the cost of deploying its forces.)

But there is every chance that such efforts will not work. Barring a re-emergence of a new, dominant threat, it is more likely that governments will continue to disagree on what the alliance's priorities should be, and that some will want to refrain from taking part in operations that they consider tangential to their core security interests. When faced with the prospect of paying for such a mission, sceptical governments might choose to block NATO from acting altogether rather than pay a share of common funding. Far better to allow individual governments to abstain so that the other member-states can proceed under the NATO flag. Governments that abstain should also be free to do so without the sort of public scolding that has marred the war in Libya – it damages NATO's credibility and relations among allies. In exchange, those countries that do not take part in a given mission should agree to make it possible for NATO to use commonly-owned weapons, such as the AWACS aircraft (Berlin held up their deployment to Libya because many of the crew were German). The governments of countries not taking part should also refrain from criticising the conduct of the war or questioning the motives of allies. The fact that Poland not only stayed out of the Libya operation but also described it, effectively, as 'war for oil', has damaged NATO's reputation.⁸ Member-states should observe the simple principle that governments are free to express objections prior to a collective decision on whether to deploy military force but should 'forever hold their silence' after a vote to go to war is taken.

⁸ *Polish PM chides Europe over Libya "hypocrisy"*, Reuters, April 9th 2011.

A cautiously optimistic conclusion

The manner in which the Libya war started, and its conduct so far, suggest that the US-European military relationship is finding a new footing. The Americans have managed to reduce their role in discretionary operations without putting NATO's credibility and its mutual defence pledge in question, and the Europeans have taken over some roles from the Americans. Their mutual alliance, while less unified, remains sufficiently credible to keep allies interested in membership, even if divisions have reduced its military power.

This is not to say that all is well. The new division of labour between Europe and the US can only work if European governments continue to invest in their militaries. They are failing to do this: as one new study notes, over the past few years, small European countries have cut defence budgets by over 30 per cent on average.⁹ The big ones are faring better but not by much: the German defence ministry has been ordered to find savings of 25 per cent over five years and France has reduced projected spending over the next three years by ten per cent. The Libyan conflict has done little to change the trend: in the UK, top military personnel grumble about fighting a war amidst budget cuts (7.5 per cent over five years) but the defence ministry, if anything, is likely to reduce forces more steeply (mismanagement left it without the money to pay for equipment that it has contracted to buy). The Europeans, on balance, seem readier to reduce military ambitions than to increase funds: the economic crisis is not going away and defence is low on European governments' lists of priorities.

⁹ Sophie-Charlotte Brune and Christian Moelling, 'The impact of the financial crisis on European defence', Directorate-general for external policies, European Parliament, May 2011.

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This is a future problem rather than a present one: because years or decades pass between the purchase or development of military equipment and delivery, the European allies are fighting the war in Libya with equipment they bought in the 1990s, if not earlier. And, as argued above, they have done reasonably well, albeit only with significant help from the US. The risk is that in five to ten years, European militaries will have shrunk beyond recognition, as Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's secretary general, warned recently.¹⁰ If and when that happens, the Europeans will lose the capacity to act in situations where the Americans play only a limited role. Without real capabilities, Europe will also cease to offer meaningful help to the US, and Washington will have fewer reasons to take the alliance seriously. This is all the more true because of the generational change in the US policy establishment, against which Secretary Gates warned in his valedictory speech.

¹⁰ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, 'NATO after Libya', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011.

¹¹ Tomas Valasek, 'Surviving austerity: The case for a new approach to EU military collaboration', CER report, April 2011.

However, there are things that the Europeans can do in the meantime to offset the impact of the cuts, from getting rid of legacy Cold War equipment to buying and developing new weapons jointly. Most importantly, as a recent CER report argues, they ought to integrate much of the support infrastructure that underpins the militaries' work: exercise ranges, maintenance facilities or military academies.¹¹ This is where, along with personnel costs, 80 per cent of European defence money is spent, and spent very wastefully. There is evidence that the Europeans are moving in the right direction

– the French and the British recently agreed to share the costs of building and maintaining weapons, and more governments are exploring other ideas for collaboration. This trend, along with Europe's newfound will to assume greater responsibility for the security in its own neighbourhood, ought to give the Americans some reason for optimism – and it should be a source of quiet confidence and encouragement to Europe.

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