

Why Libya is Not (Yet) Kosovo: The Time for a Ground Option has Arrived

Written by Michael J. Reese

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MICHAEL J. REESE, JUL 23 2011

In the aftermath of the Libya Contact Group's recent decision to officially recognize the rebel Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimately-recognized government of Libya, cautiously optimistic declarations of a "post-Qaddafi" era have begun to appear. Amid reports of Qaddafi's diminishing military stocks, and the declining morale among his remaining troops, this sense that the worst is coming to an end is understandable but premature. The current situation in Libya suggests that the most dangerous – and potentially the most costly – phase of the war is only just beginning. The actions of the international community in the coming months are likely to have a much farther-reaching effect than is generally appreciated. As a result, the time has come for renewed and vigorous action, not complacency. The time has come to discuss the formation of an international ground force for participation in the Libyan conflict.

In early June, the world was treated to the image of a confident Qaddafi appearing before reporters with the President of the International Chess Federation. Although the defiant symbolism of the event itself was disquieting clear, the timing of the episode was significant for an additional reason: it marked Qaddafi's success in outlasting Slobodon Milosevic. The NATO-sponsored Kosovo intervention, which began at roughly the same date (March 24th) in 1999 as the Libyan intervention (March 19th) this year, had by early June achieved Milosevic's capitulation. In its early stages, supporters hailed the Libyan intervention as joining the Kosovo war in setting a new standard for advisable humanitarian operations. However, at six weeks and counting longer than Kosovo, this hopeful comparison has become increasingly strained. Why has Qaddafi managed to outlast Milosevic? More importantly, what does it suggest about the future course of the Libyan war?

The Limitations of Airpower

Although Kosovo is frequently identified as a successful application of low-risk military airpower to rectify a humanitarian crisis, the truth behind this conventional wisdom remains a subject of substantial debate. Observers, both journalistic and academic, have noted that Milosevic only succumbed when the credible threat of an external ground invasion by NATO forces had become a tangible reality for the Serbs in early June of 1999. It is therefore difficult to say to what extent airpower, which in that conflict was falsely expected to result in a quick resolution, independently mattered in resolving the Kosovo war. This issue is naturally obscured by the fact that actual ground intervention turned out to be unnecessary in Kosovo – merely the credible *threat* of one appears to have sufficed in ending the conflict.

The problematic comparison with the effort in Libya is obvious when considering the very different approach NATO has taken towards ground forces. The United States, Britain, and France have repeatedly rejected any possibility of introducing their own ground troops. Not only that – the leaders of the Libyan effort have repeatedly dodged responsibility for providing any post-conflict peacekeeping troops while at the same time admitting they might eventually be necessary. This stands in stark contrast to the Kosovo intervention, where the immediate introduction of an international monitoring force, including NATO troops, was demanded from the very beginning.

To be completely fair, Libya's rebels have been somewhat inconsistent in their attitude toward a foreign ground

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intervention. The approach taken by the Libya Contact Group is therefore understandable for reasons beyond a simple selfish desire to avoid a costly military quagmire by passing-the-buck. Nevertheless, this approach has placed the full burden of the ground effort on rebel forces. The question becomes whether this threat will suffice to pressure Qaddafi to stand down. The evidence suggests he is content to hold his cards at this point. Why?

Qaddafi's Plausible Path to Victory

The answer lies in the current state of the Libyan rebellion. Qaddafi's survival, as is the survival of all leaders placed in a situation of dramatic asymmetric disadvantage, will turn on his ability to impose costs on his opponents greater than they are willing or able to pay. Only when a leader in an unfavorable asymmetric position is convinced that their stronger opponents are in a position to credibly pay those costs will capitulation become an attractive alternative. As long as his primary land opponent remained a group of poorly- trained, loosely-equipped, and unevenly-lead irregulars in the guise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Milosevic retained a plausible belief that he would be able to outlast his adversaries. Only when the Serbs became convinced a vigorous NATO land intervention was imminent did they come to doubt their ability to pursue a successful cost-imposition strategy.

Qaddafi, faced with a rebel opposition not much different capability-wise than the 1999 KLA, is understandably placing a bet on his ability to outlast his adversaries. To begin with the obvious reason, the rebel troops have proven to be not nearly as imposing as those from a professional state military. Of course, this is not due to any lack of motivation but a dearth of adequate weaponry and military know-how. Although military advisors have been dispatched to Libya in growing numbers, they have been accompanied by pointed denials that these soldiers are providing anything more deadly than logistical support. On the other hand, Qaddafi's forces, although small in number and harder-pressed, retain sufficient capabilities to hold these forces off for now. Indeed, by doing Qaddafi the favor of identifying the weakest constitutions among his inner circle, the intervention has thus far served to increase the reliability of the few troops he has retained.

It is becoming increasingly clear that forcing Qaddafi out will require at least some marginally-adequate offensive capability to defeat his forces on the ground in and around Tripoli and its surrounding environs. While the rebel forces are surely on their way to attaining this ability, stumbling blocks remain. These stumbling blocks continue to provide Qaddafi with a weak but very real lifeline to cling to. Unfortunately, this lifeline only serves to prolong the conflict.

The Polyglot Rebellion

Although most of the attention has fallen on the Libyan rebels' ability to sustainably finance their increasingly protracted fight with Qaddafi, the somewhat mysterious coalition of political forces behind the rebellion is perhaps an even greater long-term concern. One of the reasons for the recent recognition of the rebel NTC by the international community was the hope that it would set the stage for some of the Libyan government's considerable frozen foreign assets to move under their control. While this, in conjunction with proceeds on resumed oil production, might assuage the rebel resource problem, it does nothing to address the diverse coalition of conflicting interests within the still-developing rebel alliance. Far from monolithic, the Libyan rebellion includes a collection of former regime-affiliated officials and human rights lawyers in the NTC itself, some historically anti-Qaddafi tribal groups primarily in Libya's eastern provinces, some historically pro-Qaddafi tribal groups that have only recently begun to turn on his regime, and some enthusiastic volunteer fighters that have joined start-up militia groups such as the Martyrs of the Feb. 17 Revolution Brigade.

The diversity of the rebellion increases the risks entailed in relying on it as a central component of the international effort to unseat Qaddafi. The diverse rebel movement has become an entity with a similarly diverse – and growing – array of individual agendas that will ultimately have to be accommodated. It is reasonable for Qaddafi to hold out hope that his small but dedicated and desperate band of supporters will be able to hold together longer than this somewhat unnatural alliance.

It is clear why the international community has hesitated so far to inject a substantial amount of weaponry and training into this volatile mixture as it is somewhat uncertain what kind of political forces it would ultimately

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strengthen. This hesitation echoes NATO's concerns about backing the somewhat similarly murky KLA too strongly during the Kosovo conflict – a path ultimately rejected in favor of developing a more direct ground intervention option. Although Qaddafi himself argues that he is primarily fighting al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist forces, comparatively little evidence for such a claim has so far emerged rendering the nightmare scenario of a “Libyan Taliban” somewhat remote. Nevertheless, the fact remains that arming the rebels would undoubtedly create a number of dangerous post-war power centers that might not meekly accept hearty congratulations in exchange for their quiet demobilization after a prolonged period of intense and bloody sacrifice.

This situation has left the international community on the horns of a dilemma: unless the Libyan rebels are armed and equipped more substantially than they are at present, they are unlikely to be able to directly remove Qaddafi. On the other hand, if the rebels do become so equipped, it raises the potential for complications in the post-conflict phase. The resulting delay only has only increased the costs of the conflict and given Qaddafi greater incentive to try and hold out longer. This, in turn, only raises the ultimate costs inflicted by the war thereby creating a vicious, and very dangerous, self-reinforcing cycle.

Reconsidering the Unthinkable Option

To be clear, Qaddafi having a plausible path to victory is by no means the same as having a *likely* path to victory. To date, the conflict has moved consistently if not inexorably towards Qaddafi's ultimate defeat. However, the evidence suggests that Qaddafi has little incentive at this point to make it any easier for his enemies, which only raises the probability of the further bloodshed the intervention was intended to forestall. To minimize the consequences of continued warfare, the time has come for the international community to put forth a more assertive vision of its involvement in post-Qaddafi Libya. At a minimum, an international post-conflict monitoring force must visibly enter the planning stages and its introduction into the country made a condition of Qaddafi's capitulation. Ideally, this force should also be able to credibly threaten its participation in the physical removal of Qaddafi should it become necessary. It is vital that these forces also begin visibly gathering in the Mediterranean region to underscore the message. By becoming visibly ready for escalating the war, the international community can increase the likelihood of Qaddafi's capitulation and make an actual invasion less likely to be necessary thus reducing the ultimate cost of the conflict.

Most certainly opinion, both international and Libyan, must be carefully prepared for such a turn in developments. Nevertheless, the time for the conversation to begin is now. The longer it is avoided, the greater the probable costs entailed and the greater the skepticism on all sides that will have to be overcome. Ultimately, the price of delay may include the worst possible outcome – an outright abandonment of Libya to its own fate by the international community. Such a disaster would only increase the probability of having a similar conversation again years later under far more adverse circumstances.

Surely, this prescription will be greeted as a bitter one to those who dreamt of an inexpensive opportunity to do a humanitarian good turn. Unfortunately, the events of the Libyan conflict have thus far only reinforced the lesson that there is no such thing as a “cheap” military solution to a political problem. To continue to operate under this seductive myth will only compound the error. By breaking the Libyan regime, the international community has bought its problems. It is therefore time to fulfill its responsibilities or face the consequences.

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