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Key Points

- ◆ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Operation *Unified Protector* could become the symbol of American success in convincing its Allies that Europeans must take a greater share of the burden and assume greater responsibility for security in Europe and its periphery.
- ◆ NATO should prepare for a strategy review on Libya in the context of the 2012 Chicago Summit. The summit could be an opportunity to highlight allied capabilities with necessary partners' contributions to conduct limited interventions—short-term 6-month “bridging missions” mandated by the United Nations—from open crisis to stabilization that paves the way for reconstruction efforts.

NATO and the Arab Spring

by Isabelle François

The public debate that surrounded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led operation in Libya gave an impression of an Alliance in trouble. There is, however, a good story to tell. The United States, as the host of the May 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago, may wish to present the case for a new type of operation and call for a strategy review on Libya in order to develop a balanced approach to Allies' possible contributions to stability in North Africa and the Gulf region.

NATO Inherited Libya

In the spring of 2011, dramatic events unfolded in the southern rim of the Mediterranean. Countries from Egypt to Libya were swept by significant popular uprising and political change. The events led to regional upheaval and ultimately armed conflict, resulting in a NATO-led operation in Libya. Following serious unrest, which began in Benghazi on February 17, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1970, which instituted an arms embargo, froze the personal assets of Libya's leaders, and imposed a travel ban on senior figures. NATO stepped up its surveillance operations in the Central Mediterranean. NATO Defence Ministers met on March 10 and supported the decision of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to have Alliance ships move to the same area in order to boost the monitoring efforts.

On March 17, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1973, authorizing member states and regional organizations to inter alia take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians in Libya. NATO members immediately followed the UN call by launching a NATO-led operation to enforce the arms embargo against Libya on March 23. In addition, on March 24, NATO decided to enforce the UN-mandated no-fly zone over Libya given the UNSC resolution call for a ban on all flights except those for humanitarian and aid purposes to avoid air attacks from Libyan authorities perpetrated on civilians inside the country. Finally, on March 27, following intense internal debates, NATO agreed to accept

the whole military operation in Libya under UNSC Resolution 1973, taking over from a coalition led by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, which had intervened militarily in the early days of the Libyan crisis with the first airstrikes on March 19, 2011.¹

The purpose of the NATO-led Operation *Unified Protector* has been to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas. NATO took action as part of a broad international effort, and immediately indicated its desire to work with its partners in the region. The NATO-led operation had the necessary legal basis through UNSC Resolution 1973 to intervene militarily. Moreover, the support from the Arab League provided the necessary political legitimacy for the intervention.

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In this context, NATO was able to consult with and get some concrete support from countries in the region. The Allies were able to make best use of partnership frameworks, notably the Mediterranean Dialogue with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Allies reached out to all their partners, including in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, to share information, ensure transparency, and give an opportunity to willing contributing nations to provide assets to the operation. Three partners have contributed militarily to date, notably with aircraft from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar from the Gulf region, as well as Sweden among the Partnership for Peace partners. In addition, some staff support was provided by Jordan, while Malta assisted the Alliance in its operations both at sea and

in the air. Others have given their political support, enhancing the legitimacy of the operation. The partnership with Gulf countries developed significantly within a few months, and should be built upon to institutionalize the level of cooperation reached between NATO and some Gulf countries.

Post-operation Libya

NATO's engagement in Libya, despite its sound legal and political basis, has faced significant challenges in terms of internal cohesion, as well as external pressure on the Alliance in light of the summer stalemate. The mandate for operation was renewed by NATO Defence Ministers on June 8 for another 3 months until the end of September.² Despite various bilateral efforts and attempts between the forces of Muammar Qadhafi and the rebels from the Transitional National Council (TNC), a negotiated settlement was impossible. Taking over Tripoli in mid-August, the TNC will have to prepare for transition in Libya in order to ensure inclusive political representation in future government institutions and the electoral process, as well as to guarantee territorial integrity. This will no doubt take months and NATO will remain engaged, abiding by its commitments until the TNC decides on—and international community supports—the requirements after the operation ends.

Since the situation in Libya will remain volatile, NATO should prepare for a strategy review on Libya in the context of the 2012 Chicago Summit. The Alliance may no longer be in the lead when it comes to the Libyan transition by May 2012, but it will still have lessons to learn and to share. Moreover, NATO will have a role to play in support of stability and reconstruction in Libya and the region. It would also be useful for the Alliance to continue to engage with the regional partners and develop closer cooperation, notably in the framework of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Lessons Learned

Following the widely reported speech by outgoing U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in June 2011,

many interpreted the remarks as evidence of a decaying Alliance in the face of a new challenge in Libya.³ (Others, however, heard the speech as a wake-up call.) Operation *Unified Protector* was used as a prime example of NATO's inability—"11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country"—to keep up with the requirements of modern warfare. Criticisms were also leveled because only a small number of Allies (eight) contributed to the strike operation. Key European members such as Germany fundamentally disagreed with the mission and rendered the European Union (EU) unable to contribute much more than humanitarian aid and sanctions against the Qadhafi regime. Despite what can be interpreted at the end of August 2011 as a qualified success for the Alliance in Libya, NATO continues to suffer from a public image deficit in many quarters, and member nations may have to consider how much transformation is likely to be sufficient for the Alliance to be able to "rebrand" its image.

The Libyan operation has faced the usual challenge of maintaining consensus within the Alliance as time went by without a political settlement in place. From the early days of consultation within NATO, differences of approach and diverging political interests on the part of various Allies (notably France, Germany, and Turkey) did not escape media attention. In June, consensus was challenged following the meeting of NATO Defence Ministers: On June 22, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini called for a suspension of the campaign in the face of civilian casualties in the wake of NATO air strikes, saying it was necessary for humanitarian aid to reach people—a reversal of the position confirmed a couple of days later by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. At an EU summit on June 24, Berlusconi pushed for a final solution to the Libyan crisis. That said, for as long as public opinion was supportive of the Allies' military engagement against Qadhafi forces, consensus within NATO was likely to be maintained.

It should be clear, however, that in the absence of a major threat to the Alliance, various interests on the part of member states will make "difficult consensus" the norm rather than the exception. Moreover, in most cases, as we

have seen in the Balkans and now in Libya, NATO-led operations can count on only a limited number of member nations to contribute forces that will assume combat or strike roles in any given operation. As NATO transitions to "out of area" operations, there is no requirement for all Allies to contribute to a NATO-led operation, and it should not come as a surprise when a number of them opt out. Such decisions, provided that they do not affect consensus and do not get in the way of the mission, are not undermining the Alliance; they may actually provide added flexibility for NATO to act and may prove to be the process by which most operations will be approved in the future. This should not be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness on the part of the Alliance. NATO's strength lies in its ability to manage the consensual basis for its military action irrespective of obvious differences often made public for internal purposes.

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NATO's dependence on the international community to move from a military operation to broader stabilization and reconstruction efforts is yet another key challenge and its comprehensive approach to crisis management. Operation *Unified Protector* has shown progress in terms of NATO partnerships with other international and regional organizations, and has reached out quickly and decisively to various partners in the region. However, Alliance strategic success has depended on the ability of the international community to deliver a political settlement, relying notably on the Libyan Contact Group set up in London in April 2011. Moreover, NATO will likely face a difficult transition from military operation to civilian efforts at reconstruction once the UN and the

international community have taken the lead on the basis of a still elusive final outcome in Libya.

A Good Story to Tell

For all the challenges facing a transforming Alliance, Operation *Unified Protector* is not a bad story to tell. It could actually be the tell tale sign of a winning transatlantic partnership for the Allies' publics—if the United States chooses to make the operation a deliverable at the Chicago Summit.

One of the key themes of the summit will be “smart defense”—that is, identifying capability areas where Allies need to keep investing and working multinationally to mitigate the decline in defense spending and to address some of the concerns raised by Secretary Gates last June. The Libya operation is not irrelevant to that

although the operation has exposed military weaknesses on the part of Europe, it has shown that Europeans can project fighting power in complex operations and find the political will to take the lead

debate as it outlined where NATO should focus in addition to its frontline capabilities.⁴ Although the operation has exposed military weaknesses on the part of Europe (nothing that was not already known), it has shown that Europeans can project fighting power in complex operations and find the political will to take the lead.

Moreover, Operation *Unified Protector* tells the story of an Alliance yet unmatched in terms of its command and control capability and its flexibility and ability to conduct a complex operation. Perhaps even more importantly, NATO was the only organization with the political will to take over from the American, French, and British coalition in Libya, despite differences of views within the Alliance. Finally, Alliance capacity in terms of command and control was trusted by partners in the

region to be able to run the operation, thereby gaining their political support.

In fact, the Libyan operation can be seen as the symbol of America's success in convincing its Allies that Europeans have to take a greater share of the burden and assume greater responsibility for security in Europe and its periphery.⁵ The operation was the first in which the United States agreed to play a pivotal but supporting role while Europeans took the lead. It is a prime example of American forces and assets being made available to Europeans through NATO as Allies lacked the necessary weapons and munitions to carry out the mission. The United States was indispensable to the operation, but the supporting role came after America provided the initial heavy strikes and the Europeans finally agreed to do the heavy lifting. That is transatlantic partnership at its best.

The Libya operation has managed to identify what a limited model of intervention can be with a supporting yet indispensable role for the United States. It also outlines the type of support that European Allies are likely to need in today's operations. This seems to indicate a clearer division of labor rather than an inability to act on the part of the Europeans or disengagement on the part of the United States. It also corresponds to the burden-sharing requirements imposed by today's fiscal constraints, stopping short of giving in to the isolationist forces within member parliaments. It is hardly a sign of despair for the Alliance, although the lack of European capabilities identified should not be met with complacency.

Concrete Summit Deliverables

A strategy review in Chicago could offer three types of deliverables. First, there is the NATO circle for discussion among the 28 member states. One of the lessons learned by Allies from the Balkan operations is that without the deployment of ground troops, it is difficult to win from the air. We will have to see whether there will be a need for ground troops to assist in the monitoring and transition phase following air operations, and which organization will have to take the lead (if any) given that no Ally seems inclined to deploy ground troops. There

may be no request from the Libyan operation for any assistance in this regard, but the capability should exist.

Operation *Unified Protector* may be a turning point for NATO recognizing the flexibility to conduct different types of operations—from the demanding conditions of Afghanistan to the shorter UN-mandated “bridging missions,” which are less demanding in human and financial terms. NATO is the only organization with the flexibility to operate at both ends of the spectrum, and this flexibility has proven critical in the face of uncertainties in contemporary operations. Moreover, smaller scale missions may be more likely because of budgetary constraints. These bridging missions could also make best use of NATO’s decision at the 2010 Lisbon Summit to improve the ability to deliver stabilization and reconstruction effects by agreeing to form an appropriate but modest civilian capability to interface more effectively with others and conduct appropriate planning in crisis management.⁶ These missions, aimed at roughly a 6-month period toward stabilization, would pave the way for another organization to take the lead in reconstruction efforts, while buying time for the international community to assist “home grown” political settlements necessary for stabilization prior to reconstruction.⁷ In any case, this type of operation should foster cooperation with other international organizations and refrain from any competing calls between organizations.

The Allies will be called upon in Chicago to consider their core capabilities for future operations on the basis of the guidance provided by the 2010 Strategic Concept, while taking full account of today’s fiscal constraint. It may prove useful to consider reviewing the case of Libya and draw some key conclusions when it comes to defining NATO’s core capabilities for limited operations.⁸ This should not detract from the major allied focus or from U.S.-led efforts in operations, such as the International Security Assistance Force. Afghanistan will undoubtedly remain the central theme of the Chicago Summit.

Second, the Libyan crisis can offer some lessons in terms of NATO partnerships. Inviting partners to a NATO strategy review of Operation *Unified Protector*

in Chicago would recognize the contribution of NATO partnerships both militarily and politically in terms of the support provided by partners both in the region, such as Qatar, and beyond, such as Sweden. This would militate in favor of a “big tent meeting” at the Chicago Summit where the Libyan operation, and possibly the post-operation strategy, could be reviewed. While the tendency at NATO would likely be to organize a meeting with troop-contributing nations, it may be that the Allies would gain from reaching out more broadly to countries in the region in order to develop a balanced political dialogue.⁹

A partnership meeting on the post-Libyan operation, open to other international organizations, might also give focus to ongoing discussions regarding whether and how NATO could assist countries south of the

bridging missions would pave the way for another organization to take the lead in reconstruction efforts, while buying time for the international community to assist “home grown” political settlements

Mediterranean in developing the necessary security reforms in the face of popular uprisings experienced in the wake of the Arab Spring. Partnering with the EU in this context may offer some valuable prospects for enhancing NATO–EU cooperation.¹⁰ Cooperation with other regional organizations, such as the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, and African Union, also hold significant potential in developing capacities in the region.

Finally, the interest of emerging powers in the Middle East and North Africa was demonstrated in the various diplomatic efforts toward a negotiated settlement in Libya on the part of Russia, South Africa, and others, and should be recognized by NATO. Moreover, dialoguing with countries that hold a seat on the UN Security Council and that supported UNSC Resolution 1973 is

a long-term requirement for UN-mandated NATO bridging missions. This could also be handled as a side event as a summit conference. A strategy review on the Libyan crisis would be an opportunity to engage a broad political dialogue beyond NATO partnerships, reaching out to significant security interlocutors at a time when the U.S. public and Congress seem to focus increasingly beyond Europe. There will likely be a growing interest internationally in ensuring security and stability prior to investing in the resumption of oil production in Libya. Chicago could be an opportunity for all interested parties to look beyond the superficial level while ensuring that the transatlantic partnership continues to deliver its unique and flexible capabilities in terms of command and control of complex operations when the security environment calls for action.

Notes

¹ See “Split in NATO over Libya mission,” March 22, 2011, available at <<http://nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Politics/22-Mar-2011/Split-in-Nato-over-Libya-mission>>; David Brunnstrom, “NATO still split on taking over Libya operation,” Reuters, March 23, 2011, available at <<http://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKTRE72M4T720110323?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>>; Steven Lee Myers and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Allies are split on goal and exit strategy in Libya,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2011, available at <www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/world/africa/25policy.html?_r=1&scp=12&sq=25%20march%202011&st=cse>.

² On June 8, 2011, NATO Defence Ministers “extended Operation Unified Protector for a further 90 days from 27 June.” See NATO, “Statement on Libya,” June 8, 2011, available at <www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_75177.htm>.

³ Robert M. Gates, “The Future of NATO,” June 10, 2010, available at <www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>.

⁴ For example, fighter bombers, warships, surveillance, aircraft refueling, and drones. See Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “NATO after

Libya,” June 29, 2011, available at <www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_75836.htm>.

⁵ Tomas Valasek, “What Libya says about the future of the transatlantic alliance,” *Essays* (London: Centre for European Reform, July 2011), available at <www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_libya_july11.pdf>.

⁶ At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, building on earlier efforts, NATO heads of state and government in their Declaration (para. 2) “decided to enhance NATO’s contribution to a comprehensive approach to crisis management, as part of the international community’s effort and to improve NATO’s ability to deliver stabilization and reconstruction effects.” To that end, they “agreed to form an appropriate but modest civilian capability to interface more effectively with other actors and conduct appropriate planning in crisis management.” See para. 9 in NATO, “Lisbon Summit Declaration,” November 20, 2010, available at <www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_tests_688828.htm?mode=pressrelease>.

⁷ Some analysts have made a strong case for the European Union to take over from NATO in Libya. See John E. Herbst and Leo G. Michel, “Why the EU should patrol Libya,” *European Voice*, July 14, 2011, 9.

⁸ For expediency, the NATO summit will focus on Afghanistan because it remains the most demanding allied operation. Also, there is an important public message to deliver in the context of transition. In addition, it would be difficult to gauge and prepare for a summit meeting on Libya without any certainty regarding what NATO’s role will be. However, smaller operations are central to Alliance efforts and transformation, and the political message of an operation with Europeans in the lead is one that demands attention.

⁹ The summit focus on Afghanistan could provide an opportunity for partners to attend based on their status as troop contributing nations to the International Security Assistance Force. It would be useful, however, to reach out beyond troop contributors to an operation. Allies and partners should consider future commitments for smaller operations such as *Unified Protector*, and should reach out more broadly to discuss the value-added internationally of United Nations-mandated bridging missions.

¹⁰ See Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “NATO and the Mediterranean: the changes ahead,” June 16, 2011, available at <www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_75547.htm>.

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