

The Role of the United States (U.S.) Interests in the Intervention in Libya 2011

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Abstract

The subject of humanitarian intervention has always attracted many researchers and has been a popular and controversial topic, both in theory and in practice. This piece of work examines the intervention in Libya in 2011 and focuses on the distinct influences of the United States U.S. interests on the decision-making process. It assesses the decision to intervene based on the claim of humanitarian norms, on the one hand, and state interest, on the other hand. In the case of Libya, the U.S. and its allies were willing to intervene against the regime, but in other cases, no decisive action was taken. The U.S. response to the crisis in Libya was remarkably quick and decisive, whereas in many other cases of mass atrocity, those crimes have failed to generate sufficient and timely political will to protect civilians at risk. This study based on the neo-realism theory observes the importance and influence of national geo-strategic interests and the influence of domestic politics in comparison to humanitarian assistance. The conflict in Libya that initiated involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the demonization of Colonel Gaddafi as a ruthless tyrant, along with the use of force to overthrow him from power, clearly showed the desires the U.S. of intervention for African resources.

Keywords: Humanitarian Intervention, Libya, R2P, the U.S., State Interest, Double Standards.

1.1. Introduction

Concerning the specific role that states have in the decision-making process and the possible execution of a humanitarian intervention, two characteristics make state-level actors unique: firstly, an intervention need to be accepted as legitimate by the international community and the doctrine of the Responsibility to protect (R2P), and secondly, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the organ most qualified to provide international legitimacy.¹ As a result, member states of the UNSC are crucial in the process of providing international legitimacy for an intervention. In the Libyan case, the states that were both permanent members of the UNSC and those that became the protagonists of an intervention are most important.

This paper aims to shed some light and understand the U.S. position or, more specifically, its actions in the context of the intervention in Libya in 2011. This study explores the policies of the U.S. toward the crisis in Libya to examine why the U.S. pressured the international community to intervene. Thus, this chapter looks at the political decision-making process and the motivating factors behind the U.S. chosen policy for the intervention in Libya.

1.2. The U.S. policy towards the Libyan Crisis

In late February 2011 and from the beginning of the Libyan conflict, world leaders and the U.S. were involved in the case of Libya. They tried to force Gaddafi to withdraw his crackdown on rebel forces.² On 22 February 2011, the first warning sign from the U.S. came as a condemnation. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the violence “completely unacceptable.”³

In a speech on 23 February, President Obama referred to the “violent international norms and very standard of common decency,”⁴ and he directly appealed to the idea of the Libyan government’s responsibility and accountability to protect its civilians. One day before the UN called for multilateral sanctions in UNSC resolution 1970, on 25 February 2011, the U.S. shut down its embassy in Tripoli and imposed unilateral sanctions against Libya. In addition, Clinton said a no-fly zone was “an option we are actively considering.” On 3 March, President Obama called for Gaddafi’s immediate exit from power, saying that he had lost legitimacy

¹ International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, December 2001, p. 7.

² Shawn Fitzgerald, “Military Intervention in Libya: Humanitarian Assistance or Inevitable Regime Change?,” 17.478 Military Intervention Term Paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, 12 December 2011.

³ Mark Lander and Dan Bilefsky, “Specter of Rebel Rout Helps Shift U.S. Policy on Libya,” *The New York time*, 16 March 2011, (accessed at 5 December 2013), available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/world/africa/17diplomacy.html?_r=1&>

⁴ “Obama’s Speech on Libya,” *The New York Times*, 23 February 2011, (accessed 29 November 2013), available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/24/us/politics/24obama-statement-libya.html>>

and should relinquish power.¹

On 10 March, Clinton announced that she would meet with rebel leadership while on a scheduled trip to Paris. Six days later, the Obama administration pushed for a UNSC resolution authorizing military force against Gaddafi's forces. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Susan Rice, indicated for the first time that the U.S. administration supported a no-fly zone.² In her capacity as the U.S. ambassador to the UN, she was reported to have played a major role in the passing of UNSC resolution 1973.³

On 19 March 2011, President Obama ordered the U.S. military forces to launch attacks against Libyan military targets in support of the resolution.⁴ Two days later, in his report to the U.S. Congress, President Obama noted that "the growing instability in Libya could ignite wider instability in MENA, with dangerous consequences to the national security interests of the U.S."⁵ On 28 March 2011, the U.S. government claimed that "at a minimum, a massacre in Libya could have imperiled transitions to democratic government underway in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia by driving thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders."⁶ Based on these factors, President Obama could reasonably find a significant national security interest in preventing Libyan instability from spreading elsewhere in this critical region.

1.3. The Three Different Arguments of The U.S. Intervention in Libya 2011, and the Role of State Interests:

In regards of the role of state interest in the case of Libya, there are three main arguments surrounding the motivation factors of the U.S. participation in intervention in Libya in 2011.

1.3.1. The Advocates for Intervention

The supports of intervention in Libya, and the believers of this argument raise some facts to support their point of view. According to the advocates, since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. strategy has been based upon preventing the rise of any threat to its hegemony by deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.⁷

George Friedman, a prominent American political scientist, believes that the "U.S. military intervention was never intended to achieve something as much as it is to prevent something, specifically to prevent stability in areas where another power might emerge... to destabilize."⁸ It is clear that the U.S. has a strong national security and foreign policy interest in security and stability in MENA, which was threatened by Gaddafi's actions in Libya.⁹ Furthermore, the U.S. was concerned with China's growing influence in the region because China had made significant investments in energy in Libya. Military intervention in Libya first provided an excuse to evacuate over 36,000 Chinese who live there and, secondly, to ensure the replacement of China-friendly Gaddafi with a new regime less favorable to China.¹⁰

Washington wanted to overthrow Gaddafi mainly to expel China from Libya. It was primarily against the Chinese penetration on the African continent, where Beijing seeks to develop its access to energy sources.¹¹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) published a report that explains that the era of the U.S. is near its end

¹ Gary Bauer, "Obama a Hesitant Crisis Manager," *Human Events*, 21 March 2011, (accessed 4 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.humanevents.com/2011/03/21/obama-a-hesitant-crisis-manager/>>

² Susan E. Rice, "Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the Security Council Stakeout on Libya," *The US Mission to the UN*, New York: United Nations, 16 March 2011, (accessed 10 December 2013), available at: <<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2011/158451.htm>>

³ Helene Cooper and Steven Lee Myers, "Obama Takes Hard Line With Libya After Shift by Clinton," *The New York time*, 18 March 2011 (accessed at 4 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html?pagewanted=all>>

⁴ Kori Schulman, "Remarks by the President on Libya: 'Today We are Part of a Broad Coalition. We are Answering the Calls of a Threatened People. And We are Acting in the Interests of the United States and the World,'" *The White House*, 20 March 2011, (accessed 4 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/03/20/remarks-president-libya-today-we-are-part-broad-coalition-we-are-answering-calls-thr>>

⁵ The White House, "Letter from the President Regarding the Commencement of Operations in Libya," The White House Press Release, 21 March 2011, (accessed 5 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/21/letter-president-regarding-commencement-operations-libya>>

⁶ Caroline D. Krass, "Authority to Use Military Force in Libya," *Opinions of the Office of Legal Counsel*, Vol. 35, 1 April 2011, p. 12.

⁷ Gavan Gray, "Japan's Passive Support for US Wars: Examining the Case for Humanitarian Intervention in Libya and Syria," *Ritsumeikan International Affairs*, Vol. 10, 2011, p. 289.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Krass, "Authority to Use Military Force in Libya," p. 10.

¹⁰ Christina Lin, "China's Strategic Shift toward the Region of Four Seas: the Middle Kingdom Arrives in the Middle East," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No.1, 2013, pp. 33 & 44.

¹¹ House of Commons - Defence Committee, *Libya: An Uncertain Future*, Report on a Fact Finding Mission to Assess Both Sides of the Libyan Conflict, CIRET- - AVT& CF2R, Paris, May 2011, p. 32.

and that the U.S. economy will be surpassed by China during the next five years. Washington is trying to stop this development of the Chinese economy by limiting its access to natural energy resources, which are indispensable to its growth.¹

Furthermore, the U.S. concerned about natural resources, especially oil. The U.S. not only had an interest in maintaining the established contracts and expanding the mutual relationship with Libya but also, in a broader context, in stabilizing Libyan oil production. A long-lasting conflict within Libya that removed the Libyan oil production from the world market could damage the world economy through increased oil prices. The U.S. noted that, since the beginning of the conflict, oil prices had risen about US\$20 a barrel by March 2011², especially after Gaddafi's decreased willingness to participate "efficiently" in oil exportation, as this could hurt the U.S. economy. On the other hand, it also became a significant motive for the U.S. and other NATO allies to want Gaddafi expunged from Libya.³ With Gaddafi gone, the country's oil production could go back on the top stage of world production.⁴

In addition, Libya's oil reserves are not widely found throughout the world and are difficult to replicate. According to Philip Verleger, an oil economist at the University of Calgary, not all oil is created equal. He explains, "Libyan crude has almost no sulfur and produces a great deal of diesel fuel per barrel of crude, which means it is very valued."⁵ The U.S. also uses such fuels to create jet fuel.⁶ Libyan crude also on average costs only US\$1.00 a barrel to refine.⁷ This makes it even more desirable and coveted. It is almost irreplaceable in world oil markets. Professor Verleger explains, "The loss of the Libyan crudes may not be easily replaced by just boosting Saudi production... in theory you might need 4 barrels of Saudi crude for 2 barrels of Libyan crude to get the same amount of diesel, but if you do not have the capacity to take out the sulfur, the Saudi crude is useless."⁸

Moreover, another motivation of the U.S. engagement in Libya was to repay its NATO allies for their support in the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, something that Secretary of State Clinton implied as she pointed that, "we asked our NATO allies to go into Afghanistan with us 10 years ago. They have been there, and a lot of them have been there despite the fact that they were not attacked. The attack came on us they stuck with us. When it comes to Libya, we started hearing from the UK, France, Italy, and other of our NATO allies. This was in their vital national interest."⁹

Another point that should be taken into account is that there was a possibility that Libya could return to being a state sponsor of terrorism. This would be a major concern to the U.S. and the European nations who are in close proximity to Libya.¹⁰ If Gaddafi's forces were to win such a conflict, it may very well become a conduit of terrorism similar to its activities of the 1980s.¹¹ According to Christopher Boucek at the Jamestown Foundation, "For decades, the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi maintained a well-documented history of extensive state sponsorship of terrorism. Indeed the employment of different terrorist groups by the Libyan government was an intrinsic feature of its foreign policy for a number of years and at one point even propelled it into direct military confrontation with the U.S."¹² Thus, the intervention in Libya served the vital U.S. interest in the region.

1.3.2. The Double Standards' Use of Intervention:

¹ Ibid.

² Paul Davidson, "What's Libya's Impact on Oil?," *USA Today*, 3 October 2011, (accessed 2 December 2013), available at: <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/industries/energy/2011-03-10libyaoil10_ST_N.htm>

³ Steven Mufson, "Conflict in Libya: U.S. Oil Companies Sit on Sidelines as Gaddafi Maintains Hold," *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2011, (accessed 2 December 2013), available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/conflict-in-libya-us-oil-companies-sit-on-sidelines-as-gaddafi-maintainhold/2011/06/03/A_GJq2QPH_story_2.html>

⁴ Alexandra T. Steele, "One Nation's Humanitarian Intervention is Another's Illegal Aggression: How to Govern International Responsibility in the Face of Civilian Suffering," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2012, p. 113.

⁵ Christopher Joyce, "Ripple In Libyan Oil Markets Make Waves Worldwide," *National Public Radio*, 25 February 2011, (accessed 3 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.npr.org/2011/02/25/134056647/ripple-in-libyan-oil-markets-make-waves-worldwide>>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Byron York, "Gates: Libya not vital U.S. Interest. Clinton: Yes, it is," *Washington Examiner*, 27 March 2011, (accessed 6 December 2013), available at: <<http://washingtonexaminer.com/article/142814>>

¹⁰ James R. Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," *Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 12 March 2013, p. 4.

¹¹ James JF Forest and Jennifer Giroux, "Terrorism and Political Violence in Africa: Contemporary Trends in a Shifting Terrain," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 5, Nos. 3-4, 2011, p. 6.

¹² Christopher Boucek, "Libyan State-Sponsored Terrorism: An Historical Perspective," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 5 May 2005.

Despite the earlier argument that supported the U.S. participation in the intervention in Libya, there is another argument argues that it was difficult to see the logic behind Clinton's claim that it was their request of support for Libyan democracy that helped push the U.S. into action.¹ Noam Chomsky rebutted the U.S. invocation of the UN's R2P doctrine as justification, arguing that virtually every resort to force could be justified in those terms and that the key test was whether states applied such rules to themselves and their allies rather than only to states they found inconvenient.²

Obviously, the U.S. has a record of ignoring mass killings — especially the Rwandan genocide.³ Chomsky argued for a more nuanced view, maintaining that the threat of massacre was real, that “Obama may have believed what he said in his presidential address on 28 March 2011 about the humanitarian motives for the Libyan intervention,” but we must nonetheless conclude that the real American motive is to create a Libyan regime friendly to Western oil interests.⁴

This is in stark contrast to the response to protests in other nations where, even when there was clear evidence of one-sided violence by government forces against unarmed protesters, no calls for intervention were made. In Egypt, despite the fact that the violence was solely the government-instigated, the U.S. Secretary of State Clinton judged the regime to be stable and called for restraint on both sides.⁵ Protests against the government of U.S. ally Yemen drew weak encouragement for Yemen's leadership to focus on political reforms.⁶

In addition, in the case of Libya, there was no massacre in the offing,⁷ and in the towns Libyan forces had occupied, the casualties did not approach the magnitude of Rwandan and Syria genocides, despite Gaddafi's threats.⁸ According to a British conservative Member of Parliament, Rory Stewart, Libya was not a country in trouble because of genocide or ethnic cleansing, as the case was in Kosovo, Rwanda and many others, and Stewart argued that Libya did not meet the criteria needed for an intervention.⁹ On its face, military intervention in Libya in the absence of a massacre and non-intervention in Syria in the presence of one may seem hypocritical. As Canadian journalist Neil Macdonald stated, “Is Syrian life less valuable than Libyan life?”¹⁰ Hence, the double standard for using military force in Libya compared to other humanitarian needs can be easily seen.

1.3.3. The Opponents of Intervention

In the line of criticisms of the U.S. involvement in Libyan crisis, Henry A. Kissinger states that the U.S. had no direct interest in Libya.¹¹ This notion is worth repeating in any discussion about the direction of U.S. national security because the uprising created no military threat for the U.S. and did not threaten the security of the U.S. or its citizens.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, national security adviser, Thomas E. Donilon, and the counter-terrorism chief, John O. Brennan, also argued against American military action in Libya. They insisted that the conflict in Libya was not a vital interest to the U.S.¹² Gates said to worry about a Western intervention sparking a storm of protests throughout the Arab world, possibly leading to terrorist attacks.¹³ The lack of post-war planning as well as uncertainties about who the rebels were, including whether they had any connections to Al-Qaida, also played a role. Gates also mentioned the economic situation and pointed to the U.S. economic realities after Iraq and Afghanistan, which were not the best.¹⁴

¹ Gray, “Japan's Passive Support for US Wars,” p. 284.

² Noam Chomsky: “On Libya and the Unfolding Crises,” (Interview by Stephen Shalom and Michael Albert), *ZNet*, 31 March 2011, (accessed 3 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20110330.htm>>

³ Harry van der Linden. “Barack Obama as Just War Theorist: The Libyan Intervention.” *Scholarship and Professional Work – LAS*, Paper 234, 2012, p. 2.

⁴ Chomsky, “On Libya and the Unfolding Crises.”

⁵ Gray, “Japan's Passive Support for US Wars.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Clare M. Lopez, “U.S. Keeps Joining the Forces of Jihad,” *Gatestone Institute International Policy Council*, 27 June 2013, (accessed 1 December 2013), available at: <<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3785/us-intervention-jihad>>

⁸ Sarah Kreps, “Realist or Idealist Motives, or Both? Explaining Intervention in Libya and Non-- Intervention in Syria,” Paper Prepared for The Arab Uprisings and the Changing Global Order Workshop, *Storrs, Connecticut*, 27 March 2012, p. 2.

⁹ Rory Stewart, “Here We Go Again,” *In London Review of Books*, Vol. 33, No. 7, 31 March 2011, p. 21.

¹⁰ Kreps, “Explaining Intervention in Libya and Non-- Intervention in Syria.”

¹¹ Henry A. Kissinger and James A. Baker III, “The Grounds for U.S. Intervention,” *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2011, (accessed 30 November 2013), available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/grounds-for-us-military-intervention/2011/04/07/AFDqX03C_story.html>

¹² Maj Jason R. Greenleaf, “The Air War in Libya,” *Air & Space Power Journal*, 2013, p. 30.

¹³ John Barry, “Robert Gates' Fears about Libya,” *The Daily Beast*, 8 March 2011, (accessed 28 November 2013), available at: <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/03/09/defense-secretary-robert-gates-fears-about-us-military-action-in-libya.html>>

¹⁴ Ben Smith, “The Security Council's No-Fly Zone Resolution on Libya,” *House of Commons Library*, SI/IA/5911, 18 March 2011.

According to the critics' views, most troubling is that the U.S. did not know what would be required of the U.S. if there was an unanticipated escalation in the war or an outcome that led to the U.S. participation in the reconstruction of Libya. Senator Richard G. Lugar states that the last ten years have illuminated clearly that initiating wars and killing the enemy is far easier than achieving political stability and rebuilding a country when the fighting is over.¹

In the U.S., people also were against an intervention. Public opinion polls showed that the vast majority of Americans were concerned about the situation in Libya but did not consider it to be the responsibility of the U.S.² In early 2011, the U.S. population was war-weary. After eight years of conflict in Iraq and nearly 10 years of war in Afghanistan, with costs of more than US\$1,283.3 billion³ and more than 6,000 U.S. soldiers killed in both conflicts,⁴ public enthusiasm for military conflicts by the U.S. forces was limited.

An opinion poll in mid-March 2011 — in which only 32 percent of the population was in favor of a military engagement by the U.S. Air Force in Libya, only 22 percent favored the use of ground forces, and only 23 percent of the interviewed U.S. citizens favored the U.S.-led role in the conflict — showed a strong popular refusal for new military operations.⁵ Consequently, all of the arguments surrounded the U.S. national interest rather than concern about Libyan people and humanitarian issues, showing the real motivation behind Libyan intervention.

Conclusion

The work has examined the U.S. reaction to the crisis in Libya and the 2011 intervention through applying the theoretical framework that provided by the neo-realists. Structural realists deal with the world as it is rather than how one might wish it to be. Based on the above perspective, the concepts of humanitarian intervention and R2P, which demand state to protect civilians from violence (especially war crimes ethnic cleansing, genocide, and crimes against humanity), is contrasted with one widely accepted assumption deriving from realism: States in the international arena should, and do, base their actions on national interests.

The U.S. had different reasons for its specific actions in the Libyan case. Domestic politics, economic and geo-strategic interests dominated the discussion about norm-based humanitarian interventions. Indeed, one of the political goals of Libyan intervention was regime change. R2P does not accept intervention to change the political modality. In fact, trying to overthrow the political leader of a state abuses the main principle of R2P and is not acceptable. However, in the case of Libyan crisis, some of the Western leaders asked Gaddafi to step-down and for regime change. The goal of Western allies in the intervention was to oust an unfriendly ruler to establish friendly government that would serve their interests.

Consequently, the resistance toward intervention in Libya and R2P shows the use of double standard approach in cases of humanitarian needs and intervention. Critics of R2P have stressed that it is problematic that interventions are conducted on a case-by-case basis and hence on the basis of selective national concern, meaning that states interfere selectively and not all the time. Examples of this selectivity are the cases of Libya and Syria. Other critics have questioned whether an intervention in Libya was needed and legitimate in the first place since it was not a case of genocide or ethnic cleansing. They have called the intervention no more than one in a row in the Western war against hostile and defiant states.

Thus, the invasion of Libya by the U.S. and its allies will in the future allow intervention in states in the name of humanitarian concerns. Nevertheless, the issue remains highly debated, and one of the main concerns is that a codification of the right of intervention would provide a mandate for strong states to appeal to humanitarian concerns in order to exercise imperialist ambitions in weaker states.

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¹ Richard G. Lugar, "Hearing on Military Intervention in Libya," *Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 6 April 2011, p. 2.

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