

Libya: NATO's Long-Drawn-Out Bay Of Pigs

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NATO troops in Libya: No entry, no exit

Libya, of course, is not the "Bay of Pigs" where in April 1961 CIA-trained Cuban exiles, backed by the U.S. Air Force, landed on the island in the hope that they would overthrow the Castro government. The European allies are getting bogged down in Libya much more slowly and therefore more deeply. All they can do is clench their teeth and try to push on through until victory can be proclaimed, if not actually achieved.

The Libyan rebels' somewhat dubious success in Tripoli threatens to draw NATO into a ground operation while Washington is wondering whether the European coalition was right to rush into battle.

Who is fighting on the side of the rebels in Libya?

The saga of Tripoli's fall and the toppling of the Gaddafi regime in Libya continues. The European allies seem to be launching a new phase of their Libyan operation, one that is marked by even greater military involvement. So far, only one thing is certain: increased activity in terms of technical intelligence gathering and on the part of the Special Forces.

"I can confirm that NATO is providing intelligence and reconnaissance assets to the NTC (National Transitional Council) to help them track down Colonel Gaddafi and other remnants of the regime," Britain's Defense Minister Liam Fox said Thursday in an interview with Sky News.

But all the signs are that this involvement is not limited to sharing intelligence with the rebels. Citing UK defense sources, The Daily Telegraph reported "the SAS has been in Libya for several weeks." If the newspaper's sources are to be believed, British Special Forces "played a key role in coordinating the fall of Tripoli" and that they were even to be found mingling in rebel ranks "dressed in Arab civilian clothing and carrying the same weapons as the rebels."

The Special Forces being referred to are the elite 22 SAS Regiment comprising experts in air assault and counter-terrorist operations. The newspaper's sources add that SAS men will now be re-oriented to hunting down Gaddafi. Reporting Liam Fox's interview with Sky News, Reuters noted that he declined to comment on this Daily Telegraph story.

The French President Nicolas Sarkozy was less ambivalent than Fox, and on Wednesday he denied reports that French Special Forces were involved in the ground operation in Libya. This denial proved timely, considering the proliferation of unconfirmed reports online about

French Foreign Legion fighters taking part in the operation around Tripoli. There are also reports of Arab mercenaries from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and members of private security firms being engaged in combat operations in Libya.

Earlier Gaddafi announced that his forces had captured Iraqi and Egyptian mercenaries who were fighting with the rebels. True, these individuals were never paraded before the journalists, and the fact that the alleged incident was not exploited to the max places a question mark over the initial claims.

NATO boots on the ground?

Despite the heavy media and blogger presence around Tripoli nobody has yet provided convincing evidence of direct European military participation in the ground operation, although it is probable.

First, the initial phase of the storm of Tripoli went so smoothly that raises the suspicion that it was carried out by well-trained units with a much broader tactical prowess than the ragtag rebel army can surely muster.

Second, the direct participation of NATO personnel on the ground is inevitable: coordinating air strikes within city limits required qualified people who were both familiar with modern battlefield reconnaissance systems and up to date on NATO target identification procedure.

The theory that these professionals could be trained up by NATO instructors locally within two to three months should be dismissed as totally unrealistic. That is barely enough time to prepare passable cannon fodder, i.e. to train people not so much to use modern military hardware and weaponry as to obey discipline and form combat units.

That is the most that can be achieved within such a short time. Such doubts seem to be reinforced by The Daily Telegraph reports that the British SAS embedded in the rebel ranks had effectively organized and conducted the storm of Tripoli and are now hunting Gaddafi.

One can issue any number of denials of the European commandos' presence on the ground in Libya, but world practice of covert support for similar operations suggests that if the Special Forces are not present, it indeed would be such an extraordinary approach, so very much out-of-the-box, that it would require an explanation.

So, NATO is most probably involved in the ground operation. The strength and scale of this operation remain to be seen, and the exact functions it is performing (apart from the air support and intelligence transfers admitted officially) also require some clarification.

A short victorious war for the new Entente

The slow pace of the Libyan campaign may be in some way related to the thinking of those running the operation: just one little push and everything will come tumbling down all by itself. Perhaps "the Arab spring", which swept away several regimes across North Africa and the Middle East, gave Paris and London a false sense that the Gaddafi regime was on its last legs.

But the Gaddafi regime is not crumbling yet. Force and perhaps even a full-scale invasion will be needed to finish it off. Everyone, except perhaps the euphoric rebels, oppose that

scenario. However, NATO finds it hard to backtrack and will find it harder with every day the Libyan campaign lasts.

But is this talk of NATO correct? Looking at what led up to this Libyan adventure and considering how events unfolded, it should be called a Franco-British operation – of course with a sprinkling of other Europeans, Americans and Arabs from the Gulf States. Moreover, the secondary coalition members, who can hardly be described as having been enthusiastic from the start (not counting the Arabs), have been gradually scaling down their participation in the operation. This is especially true of the United States.

On Tuesday former U.S. NATO envoy Kurt Volker published a long, bitter and acerbic article in the journal Foreign Policy about the woeful lack of coordination between European countries and the U.S. in this joint NATO-led operation.

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France and Britain have not been very successful in pursuing this complex campaign independently. Not that the European powers are lacking in ambition: last autumn Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron essentially committed themselves to forming a close bilateral military-political alliance. That included joint military deployment where it is in the two countries' common interests as well as joint control and improvement of their nuclear forces.

The Libyan operation has become the first test of this “new Entente.” It seems to be punching above its weight.

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