

Point Of No Return: U.S. And NATO Prepare For War With Libya

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March 7 was a pivotal moment in plans by Western powers to launch military operations against Libya.

After meeting with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Washington, President Barack Obama stated “we’ve got NATO, as we speak, consulting in Brussels around a wide range of potential options, including potential military options, in response to the violence that continues to take place inside of Libya.”

In an interview she gave to The Australian newspaper immediately before her departure for the U.S., Gillard stated that she supported the “US placing more military forces on Australian soil if it believes this is necessary in the light of the growing might of China and India.” Her government is also on record as backing military action in Libya.

On the same day North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen held a press conference at the military bloc’s headquarters in Brussels and while formally disavowing plans to intervene in the North African nation said that “as a defence Alliance and a security organisation, it is our job to conduct prudent planning for any eventuality.”

He revealed his true intentions with further statements like:

“We can see a strong wind of change blowing across the region – and it is blowing in the direction of freedom and democracy.”

“This is a humanitarian crisis on our door-step that concerns us all. The civilian population in Libya is the target of systematic attacks by the regime. So we must remain vigilant. The whole world is watching events in Libya and the wider Middle East. Many of our Allies have been evacuating their nationals and helping other people in need. We strongly condemn the use of force against the Libyan people. The violation of human rights and international humanitarian law is outrageous.”

Rasmussen also announced that the defense ministers of NATO’s 28 member states, including American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, will meet at NATO Headquarters on March 10-11 to “discuss the situation in Libya, and the longer term prospects for the region” and to “consider how NATO can do more to help partner countries in North Africa and the wider Middle East.” [1] NATO partnership nations include Libya’s neighbors to the east and west, Egypt and Tunisia, members of the Alliance’s Mediterranean Dialogue.

Almost simultaneously, the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, Netherlands-born Ivo

Daalder, informed reporters that on the same day NATO military planners had completed an assessment for enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya in time for the defense chiefs meeting three days later and had decided to conduct around-the-clock air surveillance of the country using AWACS aircraft. The no-fly operation assessment had been presented to the ambassadors of NATO's 28 members, who planned to meet again on March 8 and 9 to deliberate on the issue.

Daalder also stated that "In coming days, military assessments should be completed into a no-fly zone and how to enforce an arms embargo." [2]

The U.S. envoy was the National Security Council director for European Affairs in charge of Bosnia policy in the mid-1990s in which capacity he assisted in overseeing the last days of NATO no-fly operations conducted over Bosnia, which is to say largely over the Republika Srpska (the Bosnian Serb Republic), from 1992-1995, Operation Sky Monitor and Operation Deny Flight.

In 1995 Operation Deny Flight gave way to Operation Deliberate Force, directed against the Republika Srpska with 400 aircraft flying 3,515 missions against 338 targets. Daalder also supported the U.S. and British no-fly zone over Iraq in the 1990s and in 2006 co-authored an article for Foreign Affairs, journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, entitled "Global NATO" in which he applauded the military alliance's role in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Darfur region of western Sudan. [3] At the time the article appeared many in the U.S. were calling for a replication of the no-fly operations employed over Iraq, Bosnia and later Yugoslavia for Sudan.

Daalder criticized his then-former chief President Bill Clinton in 1999 for not introducing ground troops into Kosovo in conjunction with the 78-air war the U.S. and NATO mercilessly prosecuted against the nation.

Susan Rice, like Ivo Daalder a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution currently on leave, in her case as American ambassador to the United Nations, demanded in 2007 that the U.S. and NATO enforce a no-fly zone over the Darfur region of Sudan and "signal its readiness to strike Sudanese military and intelligence assets, including aircraft and airfields, if necessary." She also called for the deployment of NATO Response Force troops to western Sudan. Rice will vote on a no-fly resolution for Libya when it is introduced in the UN Security Council. [4]

On March 6 Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told the television news program Meet the Nation "that Libya's air force could be disabled without the kind of expense and commitment required to maintain previous no-fly zones in Iraq and the Balkans," [5] and instead "One could crater the airports and the runways and leave them incapable of using them for a period of time." His position on grounding Libya's air force was echoed by two of the Senate's top Republicans, John McCain and Mitch McConnell.

Kerry also called for turning an unspecified amount of the \$30 billion in Libyan assets seized by the American government over to rebel groups in the country, adding, "I assume that a lot of weapons are going to find their way there from one means or another over the course of the next weeks."

Former U.S. ambassador to the United Nation Bill Richards, too, advocated a plan to

“covertly arm the rebels” (as did White House spokesman Jay Carney) and enforce a no-fly zone over Libya.

George W. Bush administration national security advisor Stephen Hadley chimed in, telling CNN: “Obviously, if there is a way to get weapons into the hands of the rebels, if we can get anti-aircraft systems so that they can enforce a no-fly zone over their own territory, that would be helpful.”

Reports have circulated about Washington enlisting Saudi Arabia to airlift weapons to rebels in Benghazi.

Pentagon spokesman Colonel David Lapan told Agence France-Presse that in regard to U.S. plans for Libya, “all options are being considered.”

The New York Times on March 6 listed what those options are. They include the deployment of the USS Kearsarge amphibious assault ship, on which the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit is embarked and which took on board 400 more Marines in addition to the 1,200-2,000 it arrived with on the Greek island of Crete and with the USS Ponce amphibious warfare ship is now heading for the Libyan coast in a deployment ordered by Pentagon chief Gates. USS Kearsarge is equipped to carry V-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft and MH-53E Super Stallion helicopters, the largest and heaviest helicopters in the U.S. military arsenal.

“The flotilla can be seen as a modern-day example of ‘gunboat diplomacy,’ intended to embolden rebels and shake the confidence of loyalist forces and mercenaries, perhaps even inspiring a palace coup.” [6]

Gunboat diplomacy is the proper term, reminiscent as it is of the dispatching of four American warships to Tripoli in 1801 where they enforced a blockade of the harbor and where the USS Enterprise defeated the privateer ship Tripoli in a naval battle off what is now Libya’s capital.

The current USS Enterprise, the world’s first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, is positioned in the Red Sea with a carrier strike group attached to it which includes the guided missile cruiser USS Leyte Gulf, guided-missile destroyers USS Bulkeley, USS Barry and USS Mason, and the fast combat support ship USNS Arctic.

On February 16 Enterprise and Kearsarge, the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group and Expeditionary Strike Group 5, met up in the Red Sea leading to the Suez Canal which USS Kearsarge and USS Ponce passed through on March 1 to the Mediterranean Sea and the American naval base in Souda Bay, Crete.

The New York Times laid out further options in addition to the stationing of American warships off the shores of Libya. They include several offered by planners on the Pentagon’s Joint Chiefs of Staff and its field commands:

Signal jamming “aircraft operating in international air space,” thus disabling “Libyan government communications with its military units.”

“Administration officials said Sunday [March 6] that preparations for such an operation were under way.”

The aforementioned use of the Kearsarge and the Ponce amphibious assault ships, "Known as a Marine Air-Ground Task Force," which "provides a complete air, sea and land force that can project its power quickly and across hundreds of miles, either from flat-decked ships in the Mediterranean Sea or onto a small beachhead on land."

"In this task force are Harrier jump-jet warplanes, which not only can bomb, strafe and engage in dogfights, but can also carry surveillance pods for monitoring military action on the ground in Libya; attack helicopters; transport aircraft - both cargo helicopters and the fast, long-range Osprey, whose rotors let it lift straight up, then tilt forward like propellers to ferry Marines...across the desert; landing craft that can cross the surf anywhere along Libyas' long coastline - and about 400 ground combat troops of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines."

Other operations being planned are air-dropping weapons to insurgents in the country and "inserting small Special Operations teams...to assist the rebels, as was done in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban."

Another option is to launch a "handful of strikes on valued government or military targets...as was done in the Gulf of Sidra raids in 1986," by the Ronald Reagan administration.

"There are ample planes based in Europe and on the aircraft carrier Enterprise and its strike group, now in the Red Sea, for missions over Libya.

"Pentagon officials said Sunday that those vessels were carefully sailing in the direction of the Suez Canal, gateway to the Mediterranean."

USS Enterprise, should it join other U.S. and NATO nations' warships in the Mediterranean, will provide as many as 85 aircraft.

The newspaper account also detailed these actions:

"The destruction of Libyan air-defense radars and missile batteries would be required, perhaps using missiles launched from submarines or warships. A vast fleet of tankers would be needed to refuel warplanes. Search-and-rescue teams trained in land and sea operations would be on hand in case a plane went down.

"The fleet of aircraft needed for such a mission would easily reach into the hundreds. Given the size of such a mission, it would be expected that American and NATO bases in Europe would be used, and that an American aircraft carrier would be positioned off Libya." [7]

On March 1 the Wall Street Journal quoted an unnamed senior U.S. official recommending another expedient: "The best outcome for those Libyan leaders who are defecting will be [to put] two bullets into the heads of Gadhafi and his son."

NATO's Aviano Air Base In Italy, across the Mediterranean from Libya, hosts 42 U.S. F-16 jet fighters. Aviano is the base from which U.S. F-15s and F-16s and NATO warplanes took off for the bombing of the Bosnian Serb Republic in 1995 and Yugoslavia in 1999. In the second case over 38,000 air missions were conducted.

A Russian analyst recently wrote of the parallels between NATO's first full-scale war in 1999 and the impending campaign against Libya:

“The old term used to describe such actions, ‘gunboat diplomacy,’ is no longer politically correct. Now ‘liberal intervention’ is preferred. But while the name may have changed, the methods have not. Libya appears to be maneuvered down the same path of action that culminated in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, which started on March 24, 1999, after a no-fly zone was announced.

“The quest for UN approval is an essentially meaningless but nevertheless indispensable political ritual that always precedes violations of international law. The same thing happened before NATO’s Operation Allied Force (Noble Anvil) in Yugoslavia.”

“The military preparations underway in the Mediterranean go beyond the simple redeployment of U.S. warships ‘just in case.’ These preparations always have a critical mass – the line beyond which war becomes unavoidable.

“USS Kearsarge is one of the world’s largest assault vessels of its kind. It has dozens of helicopters on board, missiles, landing craft, and over 2,000 Marines. The ship was used in the Yugoslavian operation in 1999 to deploy Marines, reconnaissance groups and special forces.” [8]

Associated Press reported on March 4 that “Some NATO countries are drawing up contingency plans modeled on the no-fly zones over the Balkans in the 1990s.”

The news agency cited a senior European Union official stating that “taking control of the airspace over Libya would more likely be modeled on Operation Deny Flight, a 1993-95 NATO mission in which its warplanes patrolled the skies over Bosnia as a civil war raged between government forces and Serb secessionists.”

“During Deny Flight’s 33-month duration, NATO flew more than 100,000 sorties. Roughly half were carried out by fighters and attack jets, and the others by transports, reconnaissance planes and aerial tankers. Four Serbian fighter-bombers were shot down during the operation.”

“NATO planes mostly operated from air bases in Italy and from carriers in the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean. Many of those bases, and those in Spain, Crete and Cyprus, could be used for a potential air mission over Libya.” [9]

On the first of the month the European Union scheduled a crisis summit of its 27 heads of state requested by British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy for March 11, which will be the second day of the NATO defense ministers’ meeting also occurring in Brussels. Earlier in the same week the EU imposed its most stringent sanctions to date against Libya and adopted an embargo on arms and equipment to the nation.

On March 5 the Daily Telegraph revealed that the Black Watch (3rd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland) has been placed on heightened alert, “prepared to deploy to North Africa at 24 hours’ notice.”

The 600-troop infantry unit returned from Afghanistan in late 2009 where it fought in Operation Panchai Palang (Panther’s Claw) and before that participated in the first attack on Basra, Iraq in 2003.

The British newspaper added:

“Nato members yesterday agreed to draw up contingency plans for how their armed forces could intervene. Britain is also preparing to send diplomats and specialist advisers to the eastern city of Benghazi, where the disparate Libyan opposition is based.” The advisers were Special Air Service (SAS) and Military Intelligence (MI6) operatives “carrying espionage equipment, reconnaissance equipment, multiple passports and weapons” who were captured by Libyan rebel forces in Benghazi at the time the above-cited report appeared.

The Guardian reported that Britain was also deploying Typhoon multirole combat aircraft to its base at Akrotiri in Cyprus.

On March 1 Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced in the House of Commons that he was ordering the frigate HMCS Charlottetown with 240 military personnel “to the waters off Libya to enhance its military presence in the region in response to the escalating unrest in the Northern African country.” Defense Minister Peter MacKay said it would take six days for the warship to arrive. Canada also has C-17 Globemaster and two C-130J Hercules military transportation planes as well as a military reconnaissance team of 13 soldiers based in Malta, 300 kilometers north of Libya.

The amassing of military assets – warships, warplanes, assault troops and special forces – near and in Libya means more than brinkmanship, demonstrates more than a show of strength, more than simply “sending a message.”

So does the enforcement of a no-fly zone over the country, which is not a substitute for but a prelude to war. Last week Defense Secretary Gates acknowledged that “A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses.”

It in fact demands the grounding of a targeted nation’s aircraft and the neutralization if not destruction of its surveillance systems and anti-aircraft batteries.

A no-fly regime is succeeded by war as day is followed by night. In Bosnia from 1992-1995 it led to a bombing campaign and the deployment of 60,000 NATO troops. In Yugoslavia in 1999 it was the opening move in an air war which resulted in 50,000 U.S. and NATO troops occupying part of the country’s territory. In Iraq from 1991-2003 it was the lead-up to an invasion and ongoing military occupation that will soon be eight-years-old.

Britain and France, in close consultation with the U.S. and Germany (collectively the NATO Quad), are jointly writing a draft resolution for a no-fly zone over Libya to be presented to the Security Council. If the resolution is supported by nine or more of the fifteen nations on the Security Council and if permanent members China and Russia don’t veto it, the stage will be set for a series of further military actions by the U.S. and NATO against Libya, which will be presented by the West as UN-sanctioned, in a manner alarmingly evocative of the process used to prepare the attack on Iraq in 2003.

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Notes

- 1) NATO Defence Ministers will discuss situation in Libya and longer term prospects in Middle East
North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 7, 2011
- 2) Wall Street Journal, March 7, 2011

- 3) Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, Global Nato Foreign Affairs, September/October 2006
http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/daalder/2006sept_oct.pdf
- 4) Susan E. Rice, The Genocide in Darfur: America Must Do More to Fulfill the Responsibility to Protect
Brookings Institution, October 24, 2007
http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/1024darfur_rice_Opp08.aspx
- 5) Washington Post, March 6, 2011
- 6) New York Times, March 6, 2011
- 7) Ibid
- 8) Andrei Fedyashin, The Yugoslavian option for Libya
Russian Information Agency Novosti, March 4, 2011
<http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20110304/162866224.html>
- 9) NATO weighing Libyan no-fly zone
Associated Press, March 4, 2011

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