

The U.S. recognizes its future stooges in a divided Libya

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Despite a NATO bombing campaign of more than 6,000 sorties against his forces and military installations, Gaddafi still remains entrenched in the capital Tripoli. Reports from Libya over the past few days indicate the rising tide of massive support for him by his followers, who have attended rallies and demonstrated their preparedness to confront the rebels and their backers.

Even as the stalemate in the fighting in Libya continues to confound the anti-Gaddafi elements, a number of measures are being taken to concretize the partitioning of the country into two administrative areas — Western Libya under Gaddafi and Eastern Libya under the rebel Transitional National Council (TNC).

The latest action is not unusual, even though delayed. The US has recognized the Libyan opposition as the country's "legitimate governing authority." This action is expected to boost the diplomatic interests of the TNC and weaken Gaddafi's hold on power; but it doesn't solve the country's overarching political problem, which currently dominates the discourse on Libya.

From the tone of the US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton's disclosure of this action at the just-ended 4th meeting of the Libya Contact Group in Istanbul, Turkey, we can foresee how the West is already working this diplomatic element into the military strategy for removing Gaddafi from office.

Announcing this decision, Mrs. Clinton said the US was satisfied that the TNC "continues to gain legitimacy as the representative of the Libyan people" and conducts "high-level diplomacy with governments worldwide" (BBC News, July 15, 2011).

Thus, "the United States views the Gaddafi regime as no longer having any legitimate authority in Libya," Mrs. Clinton said.

"And so I am announcing today that, until an interim authority is in place, the United States will recognize the TNC as the legitimate governing authority for Libya, and we will deal with it on that basis."

The US had previously stopped short of giving this recognition to the council, but Mrs. Clinton said that the body, based in Benghazi, Libya, "has offered important assurances today."

They include "the promise:

to pursue a process of democratic reform that is inclusive both geographically and politically,

to uphold Libya's international obligations, and

to disburse funds in a transparent manner to address the humanitarian and other needs of the Libyan people."

Thus, Mrs. Clinton was emphatic that the US "appreciates these assurances from the TNC, which reinforce our confidence that it is the appropriate interlocutor for us in dealing with Libya's present and addressing Libya's future." She added: "The TNC has offered important assurances today, including the promise to pursue a process of democratic reform that is inclusive both geographically and politically."

Mrs. Clinton said the US "will help the TNC sustain its commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and national unity of Libya, and we will look to it to remain steadfast in its commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The US' disgust for the Gaddafi government emerged too. "In contrast, the United States views the Gadhafi regime as no longer having any legitimate authority in Libya," she said, adding that the coalition will continue to target Gadhafi's command and control if he keeps threatening the citizenry.

Gaddafi swiftly rejected the move and insisted that he will not step down and will shed his blood in defence of his country and the legacy of his administration.

The US' recognition of the TNC comes across as part of the efforts to narrow Gaddafi's sphere of influence. It is nothing to suggest that the rebels will use it to eliminate Gaddafi or install themselves in office to begin presiding over the affairs of the country.

It, however, means that billions of dollars of Libyan assets frozen in US banks could be released to the rebels. Any action taken to release the funds to the rebels may be too premature, especially now that the rebels haven't yet properly organized themselves into a credible group of politicians capable of managing the affairs of the entire country. They still remain a rag-tag force bound together by nothing but their common hatred for Gaddafi. The situation in their ranks may not be the same in a post-Gaddafi Libya.

The Libyan funds and assets in custody of the US shouldn't be spent on purposes that will not serve the interests of the people. The rebels can't claim to be in the majority in Libya. That's why the US must hasten slowly in helping these rebels dissipate their country's resources just because they want to get at Gaddafi.

This strategy of strengthening the hands of the rebels against the political authority that still controls the national capital city and a large part of the country and its majority population is a good recipe for the partitioning of countries.

From historical precedent, we can tell that mere diplomatic recognition doesn't solve politically motivated problems that have unfortunately been worsened through recourse to military actions in support of one faction. The Korean Crisis (leading to the war between North and South Korea between 1950 and 1953 — whose repercussions are still being felt today) is still a major world problem despite the recognition given to South Korea by the US

and all other powers-that-be.

North Korea is still stuck to the very Communist centrally controlled socio-economic development pattern and political ideology that prompted its conflict with the Western-leaning South Korea. The rush by the West to recognize South Korea and repudiate the North has left its permanent scar on the Korean Peninsula — which is the division of that area into two different systems of governance.

It seems a replica of that paradigm is in-the-making in Libya, especially as the rebel Transitional national Council strengthens Benghazi as the headquarters of its administration of Eastern Libya and Tripoli remains in the hands of Gaddafi. We are seeing the events unfold to reveal two Libyas. I hope this country doesn't suffer that painful fate.

Even though more countries have recognized the rebel National Transitional Council as “the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people,” there is nothing specifically substantial happening to give the rebels that edge over Gaddafi.

I remain skeptical that this diplomatic manoeuvre will tilt the balance of forces in favour of the rebels such that the Gaddafi menace can be eradicated and Libya restored to normalcy without any worsening of the political or humanitarian problems.

First, the US' move will give some morale boosting impetus to the rebels as they press on to engage the pro-Gaddafi forces. It doesn't really translate into any victory unless NATO supports the rebel forces with the airstrikes that have so far aided their advances in pro-Gaddafi towns in the Nafusa Mountains in the west. Or unless NATO's direct involvement in the fighting in other parts of Eastern Libya, such as Bregga, clear the way for the rebels to establish control over those places.

By extension, we can say that unless the military muscle is flexed alongside these diplomatic manoeuvres, nothing concrete will be achieved to benefit the rebels. No matter what the Western and Arab members of the Libya Contact Group do by way of drawing up a plan to end hostilities — to be presented to Muammar Gaddafi for him to obey — nothing other than the already-known loss of limb and property will happen.

Second, the US' move is not unexpected, even though it was initially beset with foot-dragging. Being the major force behind NATO's military campaign, the US has nothing else to do but to join the chorus in giving diplomatic recognition to the rebels. It is part of the conditions underlying the NATO action in Libya.

In the final analysis, whatever financial or military benefits may accrue to the rebel Transitional National Council will go a long way to strengthen its hands in managing the affairs of the territories under its control. It means that the administration will get the resources it needs to strengthen its grip on power in the eastern part of Libya. We will then see that administration as a parallel structure that is operating in competition with the Gaddafi one in a divided Libya.

The rebels' hold on some areas in Western Libya is tenuous because of the ding-dong nature of the ongoing battle between them and the pro-Gaddafi forces. Not until they emerge as more powerful and, therefore, the ultimate winner of the battle, they can't claim those territories and add them to their stronghold in Benghazi or elsewhere.

The fighting is still going on, even in Misrata, which the rebels claim as their territory. The

NATO and rebels' coordinated attack on Bregga in the East, which has remained a pro-Gaddafi base, will have its own implications when the dust settles. Bregga is an oil-rich territory that has much of Libya's oil infrastructure. Its fall to the rebels will enhance their acquisitions but may not immediately yield resources for their benefit.

This recourse to diplomatic recognition for the rebel leadership is part of the concerted efforts by the West to strangle the Gaddafi government. It adds to the NATO military campaign and the one-sided "political solution" that the Libya Contact Group announced at the end of its meeting in Istanbul on Friday.

But it is not to be viewed as the solution that will help restore Libya to normalcy unless other measures are taken to win over those doggedly following Gaddafi. A post-Gaddafi Libya will not be stable if these forces continue to be sidelined and the rebels supported to impose their will on them.

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