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Time for a Long-Term Strategy for Libya

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The Obama Administration must avoid wishful thinking about an “easy button” policy for liberating Libya from the oppressive and murderous Qadhafi dictatorship. The hope that a quick Western intervention through imposing a no-fly zone would ensure the toppling of the regime, reassert American leadership in the “fight for freedom,” or stem a serious humanitarian crisis is not realistic. Even if he is deprived of airpower, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi has mustered sufficient military force to make a stand, and it is unlikely that a mere show of force by Western powers would precipitate the collapse of his entrenched regime. That said, the U.S. has significant interests in the outcome of the current conflict. Qadhafi has committed crimes against Americans, and it is in the national interest to bring him to justice. Moreover, a protracted civil war in Libya risks spreading instability throughout the region, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis that could spill over to NATO’s front door, and creating a failed state that could become a sanctuary for transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda.

It is time for American leadership. The White House must craft a long-term strategy rather than being consumed by the short-term decision over whether to establish a no-fly zone. While short-term actions may be warranted, they should not be taken simply for the short-term need to “do something.” Rather, military action must be designed to advance long-term strategic goals, and it should be recognized as a first step that might require protracted engagement in the region.

First Things First. In recent days Qadhafi loyalists have blunted the momentum of the opposition and sought to regain control of the important oil facilities and air base at the port of Brega. The uprising now appears to be morphing into a protracted conflict. The most immediate need is to address the deepening humanitarian crisis posed by the exodus of more than 100,000 refugees from Libya and worsening shortages of food and medicine inside the country. The U.S. Navy can provide logistical support for an international emergency aid operation.

Although Qadhafi long has been a thorn in America’s side, there is no guarantee that his successors will be much better. Little is known about many of the self-appointed leaders of Libya’s fractious ad hoc opposition coalition or about opportunistic political leaders who might emerge out of the post-Qadhafi chaos. The U.S. and its allies must work rapidly to increase their situational awareness of conditions among the Libyan opposition.

Imposing a no-fly zone would not decisively tilt the balance of power against Qadhafi. His armed forces, which operate largely without air support, have claimed most of their victims in ground opera-

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tions and would be free to continue doing that. This is not to argue that a no-fly zone should be ruled out. Such an operation may be necessary to safeguard the lives of innocents and assist in removing an odious regime. But the purpose of the mission should be clearly stated and be both feasible and suitable.

In addition, before that step is taken, the U.S. should be sure its actions will be constructive. It is not clear, for example, that Libyan opposition forces desire a U.S. intervention. Billboards recently appeared in Benghazi, the leading opposition stronghold, proclaiming: “No foreign intervention. Libyan people can do it alone.” Before Washington intervenes, it should be sure that such actions are desired by suitable partners on the ground, preferably a provisional government that is recognized by the United States and a broad coalition of other countries. Once a provisional government is established and recognized, the U.S. should mobilize international support to help that government liberate Libya from Qadhafi.

Washington should also mobilize the support and contributions of Western, Arab, and African allies. A U.N. Security Council resolution is not necessarily required. The Clinton Administration’s 1999 air campaign to liberate Kosovo from Serbian domination, which proceeded without the backing of the U.N. Security Council, was much more successful than the disastrous U.N.-backed humanitarian intervention in Somalia, which collapsed in 1993. More important than U.N. support is the support of the Libyan people, who should be empowered to determine their own future.

Washington might then provide arms and ammunition, and economic, diplomatic, and intelligence support, but the fighting should be done by Libyans to the maximum degree possible. The U.S. and other countries could provide technical support to help the provisional government utilize the many warplanes that the regime abandoned at air bases in eastern Libya. The U.S. should also assist in efforts to prevent foreign fighters and arms from reinforcing the Qadhafi regime or allowing transnational terrorists to incite further violence.

Next Steps. The White House must move quickly to establish a long-term strategy. Ensuring

the U.S. has adequate military forces to respond to contingencies ought to top the list. Any option is likely to require significant military commitments for some time. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned in his March 2 appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Pentagon does not have the military resources to fight a third ground war and that even a no-fly zone would involve acts of war: “Let’s call a spade a spade. A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy air defenses.” Because the Pentagon lacks enough stealth aircraft to enforce the no-fly zone, the regime’s anti-aircraft missile batteries first must be neutralized. Gates cautioned that “it is a big operation in a big country” that would require more aircraft than are normally deployed on a single aircraft carrier. Currently there are no aircraft carriers in position to carry out the operation.

The fact that this relatively modest crisis is straining U.S. military power and putting other missions at risk demonstrates that now is not the time to cut back U.S. armed forces. Amphibious ships, stealth aircraft, and aircraft carriers are exactly the kinds of forces needed for this kind of crisis. Yet these are the same forces that some of those calling for a U.S. intervention want to reduce to even lower levels.

The United States prudently should avoid a direct military intervention on the ground that would vindicate Islamist propaganda claims that the U.S. is “at war with Islam” or bring other unintended consequences. On the other hand, U.S. military power can be the great enabler to help U.S. friends and allies achieve our joint aspirations for a region that is free, prosperous, and at peace. To employ U.S. military power in an effective manner that supports U.S. interests, the White House needs to craft a strategic plan that engages with the Libyan opposition, musters international support, and maintains a robust U.S. military.

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