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NATO's Libya Mission: U.S. and U.K. Must Assert Strong Leadership

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has announced that an agreement has been reached by the 28-member NATO alliance to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya. This follows several days of tense negotiations within the alliance, with Turkey and Germany now dropping their opposition to a NATO-led mission. But serious disagreements remain among alliance members over the rules of engagement in Libya.

It is also unclear whether NATO will be in command of air-based and sea-based missile strikes against Libya's military and political infrastructure, which projects a great degree of uncertainty. At this critical juncture, President Barack Obama should seek congressional approval of the use of force that would clarify for the American people the scope and goals of U.S. participation in the Libya intervention.

Confusion in Washington. As NATO prepares to take over command of the no-fly zone in Libya, there remains a great deal of confusion in Washington about America's role and the White House's endgame. The U.S. military has been extensively involved in missile strikes against Libyan targets, but Great Britain and France have taken the lead in the campaign on the world stage, with President Obama playing a distinctly backseat role.

The President has come under heavy fire from both sides of the political aisle for failing to assert strong U.S. leadership and hesitating to outline a clear strategy on Libya. His Administration seems almost paralyzed in terms of decision making and

has barely consulted Congress. In sharp contrast, British Prime Minister David Cameron has made a direct appeal to Parliament, outlining the reasons why Britain is intervening in Libya and why he is putting British armed forces in harm's way.

The President Should Consult Congress. As the Libya intervention unfolds, it is critical for the President to clarify to Congress the role, scope, and purpose of the U.S. commitment, which he has so far failed to do. He should also seek a mandate from Congress for further military action.

In a stinging letter to President Obama on military action in Libya, House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) wrote, "It is my hope that you will provide the American people and Congress a clear and robust assessment of the scope, objective, and purpose of our mission in Libya and how it will be achieved."

Boehner is absolutely right in demanding clear answers to tough questions on the Libya operation. As the Speaker noted:

I and many other members of the House of Representatives are troubled that U.S. military resources were committed to war without clearly defining for the American

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people, the Congress, and our troops what the mission in Libya is and what America's role is in achieving that mission. In fact, the limited, sometimes contradictory, case made to the American people by members of your Administration has left some fundamental questions about our engagement unanswered. At the same time, by contrast, it appears your Administration has consulted extensively on these same matters with foreign entities such as the United Nations and the Arab League.¹

The Anglo-American Alliance Matters in Libya. It is important that the United States assert a key leadership role on Libya, especially acting alongside Great Britain, America's closest friend and ally. The Special Relationship should be at the very heart of the Libya operation, and President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron should carefully coordinate operations against the dictatorial regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi.

The Libyan operation should prompt not only the United States, but Britain and other NATO allies to rethink military budget cuts. If the U.K. is to play a leading role in major NATO operations such as this one, it has to spend more on defense. Britain is now a nation at war on two fronts— in the skies over North Africa and the battlefields of Afghanistan. Her defense spending levels have to reflect this reality if she is to fight successfully against the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the barbaric regime of Colonel Qadhafi, not to mention prepar-

ing for a looming threat on the horizon from the Islamist dictatorship in Tehran.

In order to back up a more robust foreign policy, Cameron must lay the foundation for the rebuilding of Britain's military power after a decade of erosion under earlier Labour governments. In light of the huge changes sweeping the Middle East, he must now give urgent consideration to reversing the damaging defense cuts his Coalition introduced.

U.S. Leadership Is Vital. A new Reuters/IPSOS poll released this week reveals a striking lack of public confidence in President Obama's ability as commander in chief, with just 17 percent of Americans describing his leadership as "strong and decisive" compared to 36 percent who believe it is "indecisive and dithering."² This should come as no surprise, as the Obama Administration floundered for several weeks before even committing to international efforts to rein in Colonel Qadhafi.

This is not a moment for weakness and vacillation from the White House but a time for American assertiveness and self-confidence in the face of a monstrous tyrant who has brutalized his own people for decades and murdered hundreds of Americans. U.S. leadership remains vital within NATO, especially alongside its key ally, Great Britain.

—Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

1. House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), letter to President Barack Obama, March 23, 2011, at http://www.speaker.gov/UploadedFiles/POTUSLetter_032311.pdf (March 25, 2011).
2. Arshad Mohammed, "Few Americans see Obama as strong military leader," Reuters, March 24, 2011, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/24/us-libya-usa-poll-idUSTRE72N1JN20110324> (March 25, 2011).