

NATO'S LIBYA TEST

NATO's Strategic Concept, while in no way de-emphasizing expeditionary operations, put a greater focus on asymmetrical new threats (i.e. cyber, missile); Libya yanked the Alliance back to reality and demonstrated that it would be called on to fight conventional wars again sooner than anyone could have thought. Given the political strains and limited capacity demonstrated by Operation Unified Protector (OUP), without significant capability development (read defense spending in Europe), the question of NATO's ability to sustain such a fight in the future remains open. Regardless, nations will continue to call on NATO to act, for sensible reasons. They must therefore be ready to back those calls to action with collective resources.

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Strolling the corridors of the Alliance's Summit in Lisbon in November 2010, a casual observer of NATO would surely have sensed the zeitgeist: the buzzwords of the day included cyber threats, missile defense, and Russian re-sets; burden-sharing; and, of course, transition, the new guiding principle in the ongoing Afghan War. Even while leafing through the Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon by the assembled leaders, which emphasizes crisis management as an Alliance core task for the next decade, such an observer could surely have been forgiven for failing to predict what lay just around the corner: the launch of a major new conventional campaign in North Africa.

And yet, in mid-March 2011, less than half a year later, NATO member states found themselves collectively engaged in exactly that: another complex, politically challenging operation that has tested Alliance cohesion as well as the capabilities put at the Alliance's disposal by the nations.

These challenges once again wound up a recurrent question: Was the demise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, forecasted periodically since the end of the Cold War, imminent? Thus far, among other crisis points, the Alliance had survived the demise of the Warsaw Pact; the strategic fallout of Gulf War I; and the strains of the Afghan conflict. Would the dual challenge of protecting Libyan civilians from a murderous despot in an era of shrinking defense budgets prove the final nail in the coffin?

An Unlikely Affair

Certainly, NATO did not appear to be headed towards new expeditionary conflicts prior to the launch of Operation Unified Protector. In fact, the broad trend lines signaled the opposite: a scaling down of major Allied deployments that had been the overriding focus of its activity since the late 1990s.

In the Balkans, the residual presence of NATO troops in Kosovo – the KFOR mission that had been the first true test of NATO crisis management – had been reduced over two years from 15,000 to roughly 6,000 as of June 2011, with a further reduction to roughly 2,000 envisaged. In Afghanistan, even the “surge” of troops into combat, completed in the fall of 2010, had always been understood as a temporary measure to reverse the momentum of a flaring insurgency in order to stabilize the situation and speed eventual handover to Afghan national security forces. Indeed, by the time of the Lisbon Summit, while NATO assured Afghanistan of its enduring commitment and partnership, Allies such as Canada and the Netherlands had already announced the end of their combat missions; other Allies were similarly signaling their intent to reduce their presence over time.

Even more modest missions such as Operation Active Endeavor, NATO's counter-terrorist naval operation in the Mediterranean, was transitioning to a concept that would see it rely less on the resource-intensive patrols of NATO ships, towards an intelligence-driven, deploy-when-necessary model that would reduce its overall personnel and platform requirements.

Whether a result of weariness of militaries stretched by years of high operational tempo, flagging public and parliamentary support for operations abroad –particularly in the face of increasing financial pressures– or frustration that hard-won military gains were not being equally matched by positive political steps by local political elites, it appeared there was little appetite within the Alliance to take on a new and resource-intensive expeditionary operations as the first decade of the 21st century came to a close.

NATO's strategic thinking had also focused increasingly on asymmetric challenges. Given the view of most Allies that there are no major conventional rivals in the Euro-Atlantic space, the need to address other types of emerging threats rose on the Alliance's agenda. The creation of a new Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD) at NATO's headquarters saw the new attention given to energy security, missile proliferation, cyber attacks, and terrorism ratified through a formal, institutionalized response. Indeed, reflecting on his final days as NATO's Secretary General in August 2009, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told a group of parliamentarians in April 2011 that he had perhaps focused too extensively on the asymmetric challenges facing the Alliance as opposed to the remote-seeming possibility of a conventional conflict engaging NATO again so soon.¹

Strategic Surprise and Rapid Response: Operation Unified Protector

In this context, the rapidly unfolding Arab Spring caught NATO off guard – just as it did much of the world. The Alliance tread carefully at first, not wanting to appear to intrude on what were national movements expressing long-simmering grievances against autocratic regimes; officials were acutely conscious that any hint of outside support, particularly from a political-military alliance, could prove counter-productive.

The case of Libya, however, presented three main elements that made a NATO intervention conceivable – once it was championed by some of its leading member states. The first was a legal mandate provided by UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 (it is worth recalling that NATO's founding Washington Treaty cites the Charter of the United Nations no less than six times). The second was regional

¹ "NATO Parliamentary Assembly Mission Report, Visit to the Hague, Netherlands," NATO Parliamentary Assembly, April 2011, <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=2493>.

support, which emerged in the call to action by the Arab League. The third was a broad recognition that NATO engagement would provide unique added value in addressing a crisis situation.

After a U.S.-coordinated coalition of 13 nations crippled the Qaddafi regime's air defenses and halted the regime's advances on the rebel city of Benghazi, NATO's own operation to, in the words of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, "take all necessary measures" to "protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack" began on 31 March 2011. OUP was underway.

The Libya operation has, in some ways, demonstrated NATO at its best. Clearly, the prevention of a humanitarian catastrophe and large-scale killings by the Qaddafi regime in response to a call to action by the United Nations was a clear contribution to international peace and security, as well as, to addressing a security challenge of immediate geographic concern to the Alliance.

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The speed of the response is also to NATO's credit. It took one short week for OUP to move from initial deployment to full operational capability. NATO planners have, for the most part, done a remarkable job in avoiding civilian casualties, given the realities of an air campaign and in particular the lack of personnel deployed on the ground to accurately direct strikes.

One largely unsung success of the mission has been the extent to which respect for much-needed humanitarian assistance has been a focus of attention of NATO's military planners. A new system for the notification and de-confliction of any humanitarian movement by land, sea or air in or out of Libya has reportedly functioned well, and NATO is coordinating closely with other organizations including the United Nations, which has taken the lead on humanitarian assistance.

Another significant positive element of OUP is the contribution made by partners. While non-NATO contributions to NATO operations, especially by close partners such as Sweden, are now the rule rather than the exception, the participation of Arab nations including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan has provided an operational, and more significantly, political boost to the engagement.

Both the involvement of partners and the strong coordination with other institutions reaching into the humanitarian realm can be seen as progress in NATO's ongoing attempts to adopt a "comprehensive approach" to operations, in which commanders are sensitized to the civil-military interaction necessary between different actors within the international community to achieve the overall goals of the intervention.

Some observers consider that the Operation has also demonstrated the continued value of NATO's institutions. As the Chief of Defense of Italy, Vincenzo Camporini recently told a visiting delegation of parliamentarians, the time-tested NATO command structure had once again shown its ability to rise to an unforeseen challenge. If these institutions had not existed and been exercised, they would have had to have been invented, he suggested, at a high cost.²

However, it is also clear that OUP has put into stark relief a number of challenges to the Alliance, some of which have been splashed across the front pages of international media, causing further strain. These difficulties have manifested in the closely linked realms of politics and capabilities.

The political strain within the Alliance regarding the various roles and missions of its member states within the operation is reminiscent of similar discussions in the Afghan context. Indeed, debates over various national caveats –as the political restrictions on national forces' actions in theater are known in the NATO context–, have featured throughout the Afghan campaign, in which some national contingents were, for instance, forbidden from fighting at night, or could not be moved beyond a given geographic area by campaign commanders.

Similarly, various Allies have made clear the limits of the actions of their military contingents in Operation Unified Protector. As former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates underlined in his blistering farewell address in Brussels in June 2011, fewer than half of the Allies were participating in the operation at all, and fewer than one third were actively engaged in striking targets on the ground (as distinct from the more "passive" enforcement of the no-fly zone or arms embargo). Of course, the largest and most impactful caveat has been the unprecedented choice by the U.S. to remain in a supportive role in this operation, emphasizing European leadership of the effort –given its direct implications for European security.

As Gates said, however, the low level of participation for a mission approved by the North Atlantic Council was not only an issue of political will, but also one of capabilities. Many of the Allies simply do not have the ability to contribute to the

² "NATO Parliamentary Assembly Mission Report, Visit of the Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Defense and Security Cooperation to Rome, Italy," NATO Parliamentary Assembly, July 2011, <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=2530>.

operation. This has meant that the nations leading the fight are bearing most of the costs.

What's more, those Allies who actively conducted operations faced well-publicized capability/capacity shortages. These have included shortages of targeting specialists; of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; of air-to-air refueling capabilities; and of precision-guided munitions to sustain targeted strikes over time. While short-term, workable solutions were found for each successive difficulty, and operational commanders insisted that NATO faced no shortage that had an operational impact, the fact that these difficulties have afflicted, in the words of Robert Gates, "the mightiest military alliance in history...only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country" cannot but raise serious questions for NATO's future, if the Alliance is to continue conducting operations of this sort.³

If not NATO, Who?

While the 2010 Strategic Concept certainly endorsed the Alliance's expeditionary role, few could have foreseen the near-immediate call from member states for NATO to deploy to manage an unfolding crisis. Even as NATO has increasingly turned its attention to new security challenges such as cyber defense, the reality of NATO's core capabilities in multinational interoperability and planning and execution of combat operations has once again been affirmed as the asset that its member states are most likely to call on. NATO remains, par excellence, the single political-military organization willing and able to deliver such effects at the behest of its member states.

This inevitably raises the comparison with potential alternative actors -in particular the European Union. Indeed, given the proximity of Libya to Europe, one might have expected the EU to seize the opportunity to demonstrate its embryonic Common Defense and Security Policy (CDSP) in action. Unfortunately, for advocates of the development of such an independent capability, the fundamental divisions that were laid bare among the major European powers on intervention in Libya has made it a near certainty that a credible CDSP will be unlikely to emerge for the foreseeable future. Indeed, a much-touted Polish EU Presidency initiative intended to revitalize CDSP, under the so-called "Weimar Triangle" with France and Germany, had to be shelved in the face of continued divisions amongst European powers.

While CSDP optimists might praise the plans developed by the EU to support humanitarian assistance operations in Libya, skeptical observers point out that this commitment was purely theoretical, in that the EU predicated the activation of any

such operation on a request from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – a request which was always extremely unlikely to be made.

If it is true that one of the principal lessons of the crisis in Libya is that the demand for well-coordinated, effective, rapidly deployed, multinational expeditionary operations has not abated in recent years, despite the challenges of ongoing operations around the world and the financial crisis; and if it is also true that credible alternatives to NATO do not as yet exist and are unlikely to emerge in the short or medium term; then, it is reasonable to conclude that demand for NATO's services as a security exporter and crisis manager will also remain high. This crisis, for all of the challenges it has posed to the Alliance, has only reinforced NATO's centrality to meeting the current and future security needs of its member states.

However, consumers of the benefits that NATO offers must also clearly understand this basic reality: the Alliance will only be able to continue to collectively meet the needs of its member states to the extent that those countries acquire and deliver the capabilities necessary to carry out the missions they assign to it. Put more simply, NATO is only ever as capable as the people, planes, predator drones, and precision munitions that are paid for, prepared adequately, and deployed on NATO missions by individual nations.

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The shortages that characterized OUP do raise concerns in this respect. The requirements of successfully carrying out such an operation in the future –to say nothing of the increasing range of ambitions for NATO more generally– stand in stark contrast to the shrinking resources in defense budgets which the Alliance relies on to carry out the tasks that member states assign it.

Looking to the Future

The inescapable reality remains that a major reinvestment in defense budgets across the Alliance –and particularly in European NATO– is unlikely in the extreme. The most regularly cited way to “do more with less” involves greater use of mul-

³ “Reflections on the status and future of the transatlantic alliance,” as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Brussels, Belgium, 10 June 2011, Security and Defence Agenda, <http://www.securitydefenceagenda.org/Contentnavigation/Activities/Activities-overview/tabid/1292/EventType/EventView/EventId/1070/EventDateId/1087/PageId/5141/Reflectionsonthestatusandfutureofthetransatlanticalliance.aspx>.

tinational arrangements such as pooling and sharing and specialization. Unfortunately, while such initiatives are useful and worthy, they offer mostly modest savings rather than the transformative solutions that are required.

One can only conclude that in the face of a growing to-do list and a pool of available resources that, at best, remains static, difficult choices will have to be made on the essential priorities of the Alliance. At a recent conference in Brussels, the Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola called for a focus on the operational requirements of deployable, usable, sustainable forces and surveillance drones and precision strike; as well as investments in missile and cyber defenses. He suggested that nations would have to accept that other areas are less vital and therefore of lower priority.⁴

Whether each of NATO's 28 nations, with its own history, geopolitical position, and economic concerns, will agree to maximize the value of their defense investments through NATO's collective planning rather than prioritizing national priorities remains to be seen. There is considerably less doubt, however, that NATO –fully resourced or not– will continue to be tasked by its member states to act, including through challenging expeditionary deployments. One can only hope they will provide it the means to continue to deliver on their requests.

⁴ "Shaping NATO's reform agenda," Security and Defence Agenda, 29 June 2011, <http://www.securitydefenceagenda.org/Contentnavigation/Activities/Activitiesoverview/tabid/1292/EventType/EventView/EventId/1059/EventDateId/1079/PageID/5161/ShapingNATOsreformagenda.aspx>.