Military planning continues as divisions mount over Libyan intervention

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Sharp divisions within ruling circles have not halted the military preparations for an attack on Libya. This is despite very public disputes over the advisability of military intervention within the Obama administration, in European governments and between European Union member states, on the UN Security Council and among the Arab regimes.

US President Barack Obama disregarded warnings from leading US officials—including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who criticized "loose talk" of US intervention in Libya—and indicated his support for Gaddafi's ouster. He said, "Colonel Gaddafi needs to step down from power. You've seen with great clarity that he has lost legitimacy with his people ... We will continue to send the clear message that it's time for Gaddafi to go."

Obama refused to rule out imposing a no-fly zone in Libya—that is, unilaterally declaring that US or NATO forces will shoot down Libyan aircraft flying in Libyan airspace. Imposing a no-fly zone in Libya would entail bombing the country to destroy its air defenses. Obama explained, "I don't want us hamstrung."

Three Dutch marines have been detained by Libyan government forces, after they landed in a Lynx helicopter near Sirte. They claim to have been on a mission to rescue Dutch civilians, but this appears to be a flimsy cover for a reconnaissance operation. A Dutch naval vessel, HMS Tromp, has joined what is now an international flotilla of warships off the Libyan coast.

Two US amphibious landing craft, the USS Kearsarge and the USS Ponce, passed through the Suez Canal on Wednesday heading for Libya. They join the USS Barry, which is already in position. The Kearsarge can carry 2,000 marines.

Citing unnamed intelligence sources, the British *Daily Mirror* has reported that Egyptian special forces have been allowed to cross the Tunisian border into Libya to reinforce the anti-Gaddafi opposition. The close connections between the Egyptian army and the Pentagon mean that any such operation would have been coordinated with Washington. The same article claims that there are plans involving British special forces, which are currently in Malta, to assassinate Gaddafi. The *Mirror's* source suggests that this would be done using a military drone.

Britain has already used its special forces to airlift civilians from remote oil camps. The SAS and SBS personnel involved will not have all been withdrawn. One of the British government's first actions as the Libyan crisis developed was to move the SAS and SBS to a forward base on the island of Malta. They have worked alongside US forces in Afghanistan, identifying targets from the ground for assassination by drone strike, and could play the same role in Libya.

Prime Minister David Cameron has become one of the most vocal advocates of a no-fly-zone, despite the doubts expressed by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Russia, China and France have warned against any attempt to impose a no-fly zone on Libya. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Jiang Jiu said that Beijing was "concerned" about the threat of military intervention and appealed for the conflict between the regime and anti-government forces to be "resolved peacefully through dialogue."

Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said that it was important to "concentrate on the full implementation" of sanctions and avoid what he described as "superfluous" actions.

French government spokesman Francois Baroin insisted that the priority must be humanitarian aid.

All three countries have vetoes in the UN Security Council. While that by no means rules out the imposition of either a no-fly zone or other military measures by a "coalition of the willing", it underlines the extraordinarily tense situation which has emerged in North Africa and the Middle East since the uprising began.

Any overt military action by the US and its allies will have explosive implications for the region and beyond. Several Middle Eastern leaders have spoken out against the threatened intervention, fearing their own governments will be destabilised.

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan warned, "A military intervention will raise the nationalistic fervour of the population there, with no clear end in sight, and as a consequence of that I would not advise it."

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that regional states would respond if there was any threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Libya.

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As US Defense Secretary Robert Gates pointed out Wednesday, the imposition of a no-fly zone would begin with the bombing of Libyan air defences. The US has attacked Libyan military facilities before, including in 1986 when President Ronald Reagan bombed air force targets, naval bases, army barracks, and Gaddafi's own compound. Even in that short operation, one US aircraft was shot down, demonstrating the significant military dangers associated with any effort to destroy Libya's entire air defence system.

A US-led intervention would be centrally aimed at establishing a client regime in Tripoli that would safeguard Libya's oil for the major energy conglomerates. Libya would effectively function as a strategic beachhead in the region, from which operations would be directed against the revolutionary movement of workers and young people across North Africa and the Middle East.

The Arab regimes are offering their services as a proxy for the imperialist powers in order to conceal Washington's predatory ambition regarding Libya. The Arab League said that it could enforce a no-fly zone over Libya, in alliance with the African Union.

Elements in the leadership of the opposition to Gaddafi are looking for US backing. Muftah Queidir, a lawyer who is close to the governing coalition in Benghazi, urged, "We want logistical foreign intervention, air embargoes, bombardments of air bases, communication centres and supervision of the coasts."

The opposition leadership is rife with figures from within the old regime who had worked with Gaddafi for years. Former interior minister, Abdul Fattah Younis al Abidi, is already positioning himself to head a post-Gaddafi government.

Even Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of Gaddafi who promised "rivers of blood" has expressed his desire to see democratic reform. Prior to the uprising he was working closely with the London School of Economics (LSE) to train a new generation of Libyan administrators and was awarded a PhD. His foundation donated £1.5 million in 2009 and a further £300,000 more recently to fund a North African research programme. The LSE has been criticised for accepting the donation, and director Howard Davies has been forced to resign, but the university has only followed the lead of Tony Blair and Lord Peter Mandelson in opening relations with Gaddafi following the infamous "deal in the desert".

The *Daily Mail* noted that the board of the study centre at the LSE with links to the Gaddafi regime includes four men who have served at the highest levels of British intelligence—Sir Mark Allen, former head of MI6's Middle East desk, and two ex-chairmen and one former member of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Sir Colin Budd, Sir Richard Mottram and Gordon Barrass.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has begun to investigate Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, three of his sons and other figures close to him for crimes against humanity.

ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo said, "We have identified some individuals with de facto or formal authority, who have authority over the security forces." As well as threatening the regime, the ICC prosecutor vowed there would be "no impunity in Libya" and that opposition forces would also be investigated. This was widely interpreted as a warning to the anti-Gaddafi leadership that the Western powers expect then to toe the line and, when it is required, to come forward to police and subdue the protesters they presently lead.

Within Libya, the Gaddafi regime appears to be consolidating, at least for now, its control over Tripoli and surrounding areas in the west. Several reports have described a terror campaign in working class suburbs of the capital, from which previous anti-government protests drew the most support. In the outlying industrial centre of Tajoura, Gaddafi's forces have conducted house-to- house raids at night, and mass arrests of young men regarded as opponents of the regime.

Government forces have also increased their presence along the western coast between Tripoli and the Tunisian border, including erecting roadblocks and manning border checkpoints. Checkpoints have also been set up around the western oil port and refinery city of Zawiyah, previously claimed by opposition forces. Government minders took reporters to an oil refinery in Zawiya province which they claimed was running at 80-90 percent capacity.

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