US, Britain step up plans for military intervention in Libya

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The United States and Britain took another step towards direct military intervention against Libya Tuesday, as President Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron discussed coordination of an international campaign to bring down long-time Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

Obama and Cameron want to insure that the popular revolt that began last month against Gaddafi does not disrupt the exploitation of Libya's natural resources by the big oil companies, or threaten the broader interests of the major imperialist powers in North Africa. They want to replace Gaddafi with a reliable stooge regime, and have already dispatched military units covertly into Libya.

According to the official announcement by the White House, Obama and Cameron agreed on "the departure of Gaddafi from power as quickly as possible." In furtherance of that goal, "The President and the Prime Minister agreed to press forward with planning, including at NATO, on the full spectrum of possible responses, including surveillance, humanitarian assistance, enforcement of the arms embargo, and a no fly zone."

Unstated, but no doubt included in this effort, is the deployment of clandestine forces, including the British SAS and SBS, and the American special operations units.

The coordinated US-British effort bears many similarities to the gang-up of George W. Bush and Tony Blair before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Obama and Cameron are seeking to persuade the European powers to join a new "coalition of the willing," one that requires a somewhat greater European participation to accommodate both the larger role of the European powers in Gaddafi's Libya and the diminished capacities of an American military still tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Washington and London are gearing up the political and military preparations for the imposition of a no-fly zone in readiness for a series of international meetings this week. NATO defence ministers, the European Union and the United Nations Security Council are all due to discuss Libya.

Obama kicked off this offensive with his remarks Monday about what he called "unacceptable" violence against civilians in Libya. He warned, "We've got NATO as we speak, consulting in Brussels around a wide range of potential options, including potential military options."

It was Obama's most direct statement yet about military action and it was immediately backed up by an announcement from NATO that it was extending its air surveillance of Libya from its current 10 hours a day to 24 hours. This is the first time that NATO has admitted that Libya is under air surveillance. Until now reconnaissance flights by AWACS planes have been officially described as "counter-terrorism" operations that were being carried out under the mandate put in place after 9/11.

The shift to round-the-clock monitoring has ominous implications. There is little night fighting in the ongoing conflict between rebel forces and those loyal to Gaddafi. Night monitoring is more than likely related to attempts to track the movements of Gaddafi's personal aircraft in order to target him and his sons for assassination.

Earlier this week, Al Jazeera broadcast recordings of conversations between NATO and air traffic control on nearby Malta. The recording showed that NATO had tracked a plane from Gaddafi's personal fleet visiting Belarus last week and more recently returning from Jordan.

Besides targeting Gaddafi personally, the US is considering other military options, including supplying heavy weapons to the rebel forces that hold the eastern half of the country. White House spokesman Jay Carney confirmed, "The option of providing military assistance to the rebels is on the table."

NATO defence ministers will discuss Libya on Thursday. Britain and France back the imposition of a no-fly zone. Germany has not yet made an official statement. But Philipp Missfelder, a leading member of the ruling Christian Democrats (CDU), has called for Chancellor Angela Merkel to back the proposal. "Germany should agree in the Security Council to the creation of such a zone," he said. "If the zone is agreed, as a Security Council member Germany will not be able to escape its responsibility."

Britain and France are in the process of drafting a UN resolution in support of a no-fly zone in time for a Security Council meeting Thursday. UK Foreign Secretary William Hague reiterated his support, saying, "At the UN Security Council, we are working closely with partners on a contingency basis on elements of a resolution on a no-fly zone, making clear the need for regional support, a clear trigger for such a

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resolution and an appropriate legal basis."

A US-European intervention in Libya will provoke massive opposition throughout North Africa and the Middle East, a fact that is well understood in imperialist capitals. The Obama administration is therefore seeking to engineer as much cover as possible from its client states in the region.

The six US-backed monarchies in the Persian Gulf, allied in the Gulf Cooperation Council, said Monday that they supported a UN-enforced no-fly zone over Libya. The six states—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman—condemned the killings by pro-Gaddafi forces in Libya as "massacres."

This is truly a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Bahrain has killed dozens of protesters seeking the end of the monarchy of King Hamad, while the Sultan of Oman has also ordered police and troops to open fire on demonstrators. Saudi Arabia has banned public protests on pain of death and is openly preparing military intervention in Bahrain if the movement there escalates.

Arab foreign ministers are due to meet on Saturday. Secretary-General Amr Moussa has already said that the Arab League should support a no-fly zone. Touring the Gulf, Kevin Rudd, the former Australian prime minister, voiced his own support, telling reporters that he saw growing backing in the Arab world.

The imposition of a no-fly zone is a highly aggressive military action. Attempts to dress it up in humanitarian terms are false. It would involve extensive bombing of Libya and, inevitably, would put civilians at risk. As the bombing of Afghanistan, Iraq and Serbia has shown, there is no such thing as a surgical strike.

Former Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain insisted that a no-fly zone would prevent air attacks on civilians. This is patently untrue. Military experts have pointed out that the size of Libya would make this impossible. Nor would a no-fly zone prevent Gaddafi's strike helicopters from flying. He is reported to have used them already in attacks on civilian demonstrators.

The reservations expressed by military leaders mainly relate to the ineffectiveness of this tactic. The implication of their warnings is that a no-fly zone would have to be the prelude to operations on the ground. It would inaugurate a bid by the US to seize control of Libya's oil and to terrorise the population of the entire region.

Obama's concern to build a coalition of support for his actions in Libya reflects the lessons that the US ruling elite has learned from Iraq. The US is determined that the US should not go it alone in Libya and to bring the major European powers on board. This will, to some degree, spread the military load, but the principal reasons for doing so are political.

A transparently unilateral action by the US would risk inflaming the entire Middle East, under conditions of an ongoing upsurge stretching from Tunisia, to Egypt and into the Gulf States—including Saudi Arabia.

The invasion of Iraq also produced a wave of opposition around the world in 2003. Demonstrations took place in every major city, in an unprecedented display of coordinated international action. To nakedly launch yet another wave of US military expansionism in the current economic and political climate would be to risk igniting opposition on an even larger scale.

Though there is little chance of securing UN backing for action given the opposition of Russia and China, a NATO-led campaign like that in Kosovo would need maximum support to claim legality and political legitimacy.

Recognising that military action is imminent, Gaddafi has intensified his own diplomatic efforts. When he met with an EU delegation headed by Agostino Miozzo, who leads the EU's crisis management team, Gaddafi invited the EU to send observers to undertake "an independent evaluation" of the situation in Libya.

The opposition Transitional National Council claims that Gaddafi has approached them about negotiating a deal in which he would step down if he were granted safe passage out of the country and immunity from prosecution, which Mustafa Gheriani said they had rejected. Gaddafi's regime denied that any such approach had been made. But on Monday night, former Libyan Prime Minister Jadallah Azous Al-Talhi appeared on state television and appealed to the rebels to "give a chance to national dialogue to resolve this crisis, to help stop the bloodshed, and not give a chance to foreigners to come and capture our country again."

As in the past, Gaddafi is attempting to negotiate a deal with imperialism. His radical rhetoric long abandoned, he has shown himself to be completely incapable of freeing Libya from the domination of the West or resolving any of the issues that confront the Libyan masses. The struggle against US aggression cannot be carried out by any section of the Arab bourgeoisie. It is the working class in North Africa and the Middle East, and above all in the main imperialist centres, that can and must fight the build-up to foreign intervention.

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