G8 fails to back proposed Libyan no-fly zone

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Divisions between the major imperialist powers have stymied proposals spearheaded by Britain and France for direct military intervention in Libya. A statement issued from a meeting of the foreign ministers of the Group of Eight—United States, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Canada and Russia—failed to even mention the proposal to use military force to ground warplanes backing troops loyal to Libyan dictator Col. Muammar Gaddafi in their drive to crush a month-old revolt.

Alan Juppe, the foreign minister of France, which hosted the G8 ministers meeting, read out the statement, but in remarks to the press afterwards made no effort to conceal the recriminations between the Western powers over the Libyan events.

The G8 ministers "agreed that the UN Security Council should increase the pressure, including through economic measure, for Muammar Gaddafi to leave," according to the statement read out by Juppe at the end of the talks. It added that the ministers had called on Gaddafi to "respect the legitimate claim of the Libyan people to fundamental rights."

Juppe acknowledged that he had failed to convince his counterparts on military action, and that the window of opportunity for launching an imperialist intervention under the pretense of protecting Libyan lives had probably closed. "If we had used military force last week to neutralize some airstrips and the several dozen planes that they have, perhaps the reversal taking place to the detriment of the opposition wouldn't have happened," the French foreign minister told Europe-1 radio. "But that's the past. What is happening today shows us that we may have let slip by a chance."

He was even more blunt in his comments to the French parliament's foreign affairs committee Tuesday. "If today we are stuck, it's not only because Europe is impotent, it's because at the Security Council, for now, China doesn't want any mention of a resolution leading to the international community's interference in a country's affairs," he said.

"Never mind that there's European impotence, but what about American power? What about Russian power? What's China's power over Libya?" Juppe told the parliamentary panel. While describing Russia's attitude as "evolving," he declared that "the Americans haven't yet defined their position on Libya."

In a transparent jibe at Germany, Juppe added, "Our plan wasn't followed simply because some of our partners were opposed to any mention of the use of military force."

The absence of even a call for the UN Security Council to consider implementing a no-fly zone reflected open opposition to the Franco-British proposal on the part of Germany, reservations expressed by Moscow and Washington's largely silent but nonetheless effective veto of military action.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle declared after the meeting, "Military intervention is not the solution. From our point of view it is very difficult and dangerous." He reiterated his earlier statement that Germany did not "want to get sucked into any war in North Africa."

The bitter disputes among the European powers was indicated in an account of last week's European Union summit on Libya posted by *Der Spiegel Online*.

It described the German government as "indignant" over the unilateral decision of French President Nicolas Sarkozy to recognize the opposition's Libyan National Transitional Council, formed in the eastern city of Benghazi, as the legitimate government of the country.

Speaking at the EU summit in Brussels, Chancellor Angela Merkel blasted the French action. "We cannot recognize the transitional council," she told the assembled European heads of state. "The former justice minister is a member of this body and look at the role he played in the case of the Bulgarian nurses," she added, referring to the frame-up of a Palestinian doctor and five Bulgarian nurses on false charges of deliberately infecting Libyan children with the HIV virus.

She also rejected the proposed no-fly zone. "What is our plan if we create a no-fly zone and it doesn't work? Do we send in ground troops?" she asked. "We have to think this through. Why should we intervene in Libya when we don't intervene elsewhere?"

The *Der Spiegel* article said that European leaders were clear that Sarkozy's promotion of military action stemmed from concern within the French ruling elite that it "could lose its traditional leadership role" in Northern Africa as a

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result of the popular upheavals that have toppled its close ally and client, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in Tunisia and are spreading throughout the region.

The article adds, “Until recently, France and Germany have had their separate areas of responsibility: While Paris looked after the Mediterranean area, Berlin was more oriented toward Eastern Europe. But in internal discussions, Westerwelle has already made it clear that this will no longer be the case. Much to the annoyance of the French, Berlin now also wants to have a greater say in the Mediterranean region.”

For her part, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made no statement following the G8 ministers’ meeting. She did hold a 45-minute meeting with Mahmoud Jibril, a representative of the National Transitional Council, at a luxury hotel in Paris Monday night. Jibril reportedly asked Clinton for US military aid in toppling the Gaddafi regime. US officials reported that Clinton responded by raising the possibility of US economic and political assistance.

While Sarkozy had met with the same Libyan opposition figure last week, appearing before the media with him, Clinton’s meeting was a largely clandestine affair. The location and identity of the participants were concealed until after it was over, and she made no public appearance with Jibril and no statements on the content of their discussion.

Washington’s attitude may well be driven by its skepticism that the Libyan opposition, dominated by former Gaddafi officials and emigres, will prove capable of toppling the regime and its doubts over whether a successful revolt will produce more favorable conditions for US imperialism and the American-based oil conglomerates in the region. Clinton and others within the Washington establishment have expressed concerns that radical Islamists could gain from the rebellion, while US national intelligence director James Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee last week that, in his opinion, the Gaddafi “regime will prevail.”

Over the past week, a counter-offensive by military forces loyal to Gaddafi has advanced steadily. On Tuesday, rebel forces surrendered control of the strategic city of Ajdabiya, the last major population center west of Benghazi. The city is a critical highway junction, controlling the coastal road to Benghazi as well a road through the desert to Tobruk on the Egyptian border. Its fall raises the threat that Benghazi, the last major stronghold of the revolt, could soon be encircled.

Also involved in Washington’s calculations is the primary US goal of quelling the uprisings in the Middle East and preventing their spread throughout the US-backed dictatorial emirates and monarchies in the Persian Gulf and, above all, Saudi Arabia. The hypocrisy of Washington’s verbal denunciations of the violence unleashed by Gaddafi’s regime against the people of Libya is exposed by its support for the violence being carried out against unarmed protesters in Bahrain.

Clinton left the G8 summit on a mission to Egypt and Tunisia. She headed Tuesday to Cairo, where she held a series of meetings with Egyptian civilian officials as well as the military command in the effort to shore up US interests in the wake of last month’s ouster of Washington’s long-time closest ally in the region, the dictator Hosni Mubarak.

Announcing her planned visit to Egypt and Tunisia in Washington last week, Clinton told US lawmakers that Washington has “an enormous stake in ensuring that Egypt and Tunisia provide models for the kind of democracy that we want to see.” She went on to warn against “ideologues who use violence or deception to seize power or advance an undemocratic agenda.”

What Washington wants are regimes that will continue to uphold the interests of the US and Israel in the region, subordinate their economies to the profit drive of US-based transnational banks and corporations and systematically repress any threat of social revolution.

The January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition, composed of six youth groups that participated in the mass demonstrations that forced out Mubarak, has refused to meet with Clinton and declared her visit to Egypt unwelcome.

In a statement, the coalition charged that “the US administration took Egypt’s revolution lightly and supported the old regime while Egyptian blood was being spilled.” It demanded that Washington issue a formal apology for its decade of backing for the Mubarak dictatorship. The statement added, “The Egyptian people are the masters of their own land and destiny and will only accept equal relations of friendship and respect between the people of Egypt and the people of America.”

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