

Imperialist hands off Libya!

Patrick Martin
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The United States and the European powers are moving towards direct military intervention in Libya. They are seeking to exploit a legitimate popular uprising against the 41-year rule of Muammar Gaddafi, preempt any possibility of a more radical regime emerging, and install a colonial-style puppet in place of the discredited dictatorship.

The pace of the shift in American policy, in particular, is extraordinary. Washington has moved from relative silence on the movement against Gaddafi to leading the charge for outside intervention.

As in every US operation in the region, the driving forces are twofold: a grab for the resources of one of the major oil-producing countries and the pursuit of the broader strategic interests of American imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa. Imperialist military forces on the ground in Libya would be in a position to influence the future course of events in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, all now in turmoil, as well as across the Sahara in Sudan, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

No one—least of all the Libyan people themselves—should believe the claims of humanitarian concern put forward to justify the entry of American, British, French, German, Italian and other military forces. The same powers stood by when the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, massacred demonstrators seeking jobs, democratic rights and an end to the plundering carried out by a corrupt ruling elite. They offered political, diplomatic and in some cases direct security assistance in an effort to prop up these stooge regimes.

During the same two weeks that Gaddafi's security forces have shot down opposition demonstrators, similar crimes have been committed by US allies in Oman and Bahrain and by the US client regime in Iraq without any public rebuke by Washington, let alone the organization of an international campaign for military intervention.

A full-scale propaganda blitz is under way, modeled on the campaigns that paved the way for US and NATO intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, highlighting atrocities committed by the Gaddafi regime as an argument that a joint intervention by the imperialist powers is needed to “save” the Libyan people. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set the tone Monday, denouncing Gaddafi's use of “thugs” and “mercenaries” and declaring, “Nothing is off the table so long as the Libyan government continues to threaten and kill Libyans.” British Prime Minister David Cameron chimed in, telling the House of Commons, “We do not in any way rule out the use of military assets” in Libya.

Taking its cue from Washington, London and other imperialist capitals, the international media has focused enormous attention on the alleged use of air power by Gaddafi's forces against rebels in eastern Libya and around Tripoli, the capital city. The attacks actually documented have been limited to a handful, since many of Gaddafi's pilots have defected.

Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd emerged from a meeting with Clinton to declare that a no-fly zone should be imposed immediately. “Guernica is known throughout the world for the bombing of the civilian population,” he declared, referring to the massacre carried out by Nazi warplanes during the Spanish Civil War. “We have seen evidence of that in Libya. Let us not simply stand idly by while similar atrocities are committed again.” Far from standing idly by, Australia has been a full partner in American wars of aggression in both Iraq and Afghanistan, which have produced far greater atrocities.

The US-European posture of humanitarian outrage has no credibility. Until two weeks ago, these powers were paying court to Gaddafi to obtain lucrative contracts for the exploitation of the oil and gas resources of Libya. A parade of Western suitors—Condoleezza Rice, Britain's Tony Blair, Chirac of France, Berlusconi of Italy, Zapatero of Spain—followed the smell of oil to Tripoli. They paid no heed then to Gaddafi's police state and the screams emanating from his torture chambers.

The United States made a major political and financial investment in the cultivation of friendly relations with Gaddafi, regarding his sudden rapprochement with Washington and US foreign policy after 2003 as a major strategic gain. Hillary Clinton recently feted one of Gaddafi's sons in Washington and appointed the founding chairman of the US-Libya Business Association to be the State Department's coordinator for international energy affairs.

If these powers are now lining up to return to Libya as the supposed patrons of the opposition forces that have seized control of much of the country, they are being driven by the very same appetites for profit and plunder. And despite their professions of support for Gaddafi's overthrow, the entry of military forces of the United States and the former European colonial powers is no favor to those genuinely fighting to overthrow the dictatorship.

Foreign intervention will inflame popular hostility. Many of those engaged in the uprising in Benghazi have already declared their vehement opposition to the entry of US and European troops. It is the only thing that could allow Gaddafi to resume his bogus posture as an anti-imperialist and give his regime a new lease on life.

Equally cynical are the claims of concern over the fate of the hundreds of thousands who have been fleeing Libya since fighting broke out February 17 in Benghazi. The official spokesmen for the various imperialist powers claim that their own nationals, many of them technicians and other oil company functionaries, are in danger and must be rescued. At the same time, those countries with a Mediterranean coastline—Italy, France and Spain—have warned of a flood of refugees from the escalating civil war. Both problems, of course, have the same “solution”—military intervention, both within Libya and along its coastline.

The anti-Libya campaign is in the literal sense of the word an exercise in plunder. The first major action has been the effective seizure of \$30 billion in Libyan assets held in US financial institutions, and billions more in European accounts, after the passage of a sanctions resolution by the UN Security Council. While dubbed an asset “freeze,” it is in reality the confiscation of resources that belong to the people of Libya.

So flagrant is the theft that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking at a business conference in Germany, felt compelled to object. “Mistakes made by governments should not be paid by people,” he said. “We think discussions about an intervention in Libya or sanctions are worrisome considering the people of Libya and foreigners in this country.” He said that the outside powers should act on Libya “from a humanitarian perspective and not out of considerations for their oil interests.”

The momentum toward military intervention is accelerating. The Berlusconi government in Italy—the former colonial power in Libya and the biggest customer for its oil—officially repudiated its non-aggression pact with the Gaddafi regime Sunday. This is the necessary legal preparation both for Italian military action inside Libya and the unleashing of US warplanes at Aviano and other NATO air bases in Italy.

The Obama administration confirmed Monday that it has begun to redeploy naval assets into the Mediterranean Sea, bringing them within range of Libya. The Pentagon was caught off guard by the rapid spread of unrest into Libya, having dispatched the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea on February 15 in a show of force four days after the overthrow of Egyptian President Mubarak. The carrier battle group continued into the Arabian Sea, “showing the flag” in support of beleaguered pro-US dictator Saleh in Yemen and the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms.

A Pentagon spokesman announced Monday, “We have planners working and various contingency plans and... as part of that we’re repositioning forces to be able to provide for that flexibility once decisions are made.” The Enterprise and a smaller helicopter carrier, the USS Kearsage, have now moved back into the Red Sea, in position either to re-transit the Suez Canal or launch air strikes against Libyan targets. The operations under discussion range from “rescue” efforts like those already mounted by British and German commandos, to a no-fly zone, to the outright landing of the Marines.

An additional US concern is the role of China, which is mounting its first-ever military operation in the Mediterranean Sea. Beijing has dispatched the naval frigate Xuzhou from anti-piracy

patrol off Somalia through the Suez Canal to the Libyan coast to assist in the evacuation of the 30,000 Chinese citizens, mostly construction workers, trapped by the fighting.

There is an element of desperation and extreme recklessness in the anti-Libyan campaign. It has erupted only a few days after US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in a speech to a military audience declared, “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.”

Gates was voicing the pessimism produced by the intractable opposition of the Afghan population to long-term US military occupation, as well as the concerns of the military brass over the deteriorating condition of an all-volunteer force after ten years of constant overseas deployments.

Despite such trepidations, however, there is a logic to imperialism and the Obama administration is driven by it. The ultimate goal of US and European intervention would be to fill the “political vacuum” in Libya, as the *New York Times* termed it Sunday, by turning the country into a protectorate of the imperialist powers.

A US expert on Libya, writing in *Newsweek* magazine Sunday, directly compared an intervention in Libya to the long-term US role in the Balkans. The political situation in Libya, he wrote, “suggests the Balkans rather than neighboring Egypt or Tunisia as likely precursors for state building in Libya. And as with the Balkans, the international community could have a large and positive role to play by providing expertise and, temporarily, security forces.”

In other words, Libya is to be turned into a semi-colony, ruled by the United States and its fellow predators from Western Europe, who will seize control of the oil reserves and transform the country’s territory into a strategic base of operations against the mass uprisings now sweeping the Middle East and North Africa.

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