The war in Libya and the new scramble for Africa

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Today's international conference on Libya in London will be dutifully reported in the media as a gathering of concerned parties determined to honour their pledge to safeguard civilians from reprisals by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

In reality, state dignitaries from 40 countries—including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and African Union Chairman Jean Ping—have gathered like vultures to either take part in or provide political cover for those picking over the spoils of a post-Gaddafi carve-up of Libya and Libyan oil reserves, the largest in Africa and the ninth largest in the world.

The meeting's agenda in deed, if not in word, is based on the drive for regime change, which will put opposition forces long cultivated by the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies in power.

Attending from the Libyan Interim Transitional National Council (TNC) is its putative prime minister, Mahmoud Jibril, who taught for many years in the US after receiving a PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. From 2007, he headed Gaddafi's National Economic Development Board (NEDB), which is linked to consulting firms from the US and UK and is in partnership with the London School of Economics.

The NEDB has been a key conduit for US and UK penetration of the Libyan economy. Ali Tarhouni, an economics professor at the University of Washington who had lived in exile since 1973, was appointed TNC finance minister.

Last week, the TNC announced the formation of the Libyan Oil Company as its new supervisory body on oil policy. This effectively bypasses the Libyan National Oil Corporation, the assets of which were frozen by the UN Security Council on March 17.

On the eve of the London conference, Clinton held closed-door discussions in Paris with Jibril in a luxury Paris hotel. Jibril also met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy last week.

The key actors in the imperialist assault on Libya—the US, Britain and France—are vying with one another for control of the future spoils. This struggle led to a conflict over who would control the military operation, won by Washington and London after NATO supervision was agreed rather than France's proposal for a coalition of all those taking part in bombing Libya.

More is at stake, however, than securing control of Libya. The imperialist powers have the Middle East and the whole of Africa in their sights.

The strategic importance for imperialism of the Middle East, site of the world's major oil reserves, hardly needs stating. But Africa is also considered to be a prize of immense value, in part thanks to the discovery of substantial oil and gas reserves.

According to the 2008 BP Statistical Energy Survey, Africa had proven oil reserves of 117,481 billion barrels at the end of 2007, or 9.49 percent of the world's reserves. Five countries dominate Africa's oil production, accounting for 85 percent of the total—Nigeria, Libya, Algeria, Egypt and Angola. But Gabon, Congo, Cameroon, Tunisia, Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ivory Coast also produce oil, and exploration is ongoing in Chad, Sudan, Namibia, South Africa and Madagascar.

Africa's oil is of a high quality and easy to mine, often from offshore rigs, and is distributed through existing sea lanes. The continent is the location of more than a third of the world's new discoveries since 2000 and could be the site of far greater reserves than now thought.

It is also the site of 8.22 percent of global natural gas reserves, ranks first or second in quantity of world reserves of bauxite, cobalt, industrial diamond, phosphate, platinum and zirconium, and holds substantial gold deposits.

Washington is particularly anxious to offset the challenge to its influence in Africa coming from China. Trade between Africa and China was worth $115 billion from January to November 2010—a 43.5 percent increase over the same period in 2009. The Standard Bank Group predicts that China's gross investment in Africa will rise to $50 billion and that bilateral trade will be worth $300 billion by 2015.

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The BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China—are meeting in mid-April in Beijing to discuss economic cooperation. The meeting will see South Africa admitted as a full member.

The BRIC countries all abstained in the United Nations vote on Libya. Afterwards, China said it "regretted" the bombing, while the *People's Daily* wrote that "humanitarian intervention is only an excuse for military intervention in other countries' domestic affairs." The statement cited "the blood-soaked tempest" in Iraq as a warning that those claiming to be "motivated by morality" are "driven by narrow political and economic interests."

For the European powers, particularly France and the UK, the shaking of the political kaleidoscope in North Africa and the Middle East is viewed as a golden opportunity to at least partially overcome the subordinate position into which they have been long cast in their former colonial preserves by Washington and, latterly, Beijing. Politically, it also provides the crisis-ridden regimes in Paris, London and the US with an opportunity to divert public attention from worsening social tensions that have produced mass protests against austerity measures.

Libya is seen as setting a precedent for other military interventions wherever their imperialist interests dictate.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy told the European Union summit last week that there was now a new post-UN Security Council Resolution 1973 model of "world governance" based on the "responsibility to protect."

Sarkozy declared, "Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand, that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on each time be the same." He named the Ivory Coast and Syria as possible targets for United Nations-sanctioned intervention.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague last week spoke at the "CEO Africa" summit sponsored by Rupert Murdoch's the *Times* newspaper. He began by declaring that events in North Africa and the Middle East "are already set to overtake the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11 as the most important development of the early 21st century."

Stating that these "momentous events do not necessarily stop at the borders of the Arab world," he too identified the Ivory Coast as well as Sudan and Zimbabwe as countries where "others" like Gaddafi "stand in the way of a brighter future for their countries."

"Britain has an ambitious foreign policy which seeks to build up our standing and influence in the world, and to support our economy," he said, stressing that he saw "the nations of Africa" as a strategic area of UK interest.

Sarkozy is not alone in citing UN Security Council Resolution 1973 as a turning point. It marks the first time that military action has been authorised by the UN based upon the principle of the "right to protect"—or R2P, as it is known.

R2P was adopted by the UN only in 2005. It overrides national sovereignty and gives the imperialist powers carte blanche to wage war wherever they see fit, on the grounds of protecting "civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack."

In the past, the "threats to the peace" and "acts of aggression" provisions of Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which allows for military action, have been employed to justify interventions in Afghanistan, Somalia and Sierra Leone. But as Ban Ki-moon boasted, Libya was the occasion for "the historic decision" to cite a "threat of attack" on civilians.

In the arsenal of the imperialist powers, the "right to protect" now occupies the same position as the concept of the "white man's burden" immortalised by Rudyard Kipling in the late nineteenth century to justify the colonialist "scramble for Africa" of that period. As part of the eruption of imperialist seizure and plunder, Italy occupied the territory that later became Libya.

The UN provided the green light for Britain, France and the US in Libya and will do so again. As Kenneth Clarke, Britain's lord chancellor and secretary of state for justice, told the *Guardian*, "What we seem to have almost established in international law is the humanitarian basis which can, in exceptional cases, justify intervention by the international community."

Such statements give the lie to the claim that the intervention in Libya will be a short-term operation with supposedly minimal costs. Libya represents a deepening of a drive to militarism in Europe and internationally that will involve massive increases in arms budgets, paid for through ever more brutal attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class.

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