

Divisions deepen as NATO digs in for a prolonged war against Libya

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Foreign ministers from all 28 NATO countries met in Berlin on Thursday in an atmosphere of growing tension and recriminations between alliance states. The main issue to be discussed at the two-day summit is the NATO-led war in Libya.

The UK and France are exerting pressure on other NATO countries to take part in the military campaign and in particular provide fighter planes to strengthen the NATO offensive on behalf of the Libyan opposition.

On Wednesday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with the British Prime Minister David Cameron in Paris to work out a joint approach for the NATO summit in Berlin. At the end of the meeting between the two leaders, a French official declared that the NATO coalition should have “all the means it needs” and should demonstrate its “total determination”. This is diplomatic doublespeak aimed at justifying a blitzkrieg by NATO forces to ensure regime-change in Tripoli.

In the event, following the first day of discussions in Berlin, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was forced to concede that, despite his plea for increased participation in the NATO operation, no firm pledges had been made by any of the countries attending the summit.

Currently just seven out of NATO’s 28 members—the US, Great Britain, France, Canada, Belgium, Norway and Denmark—are officially involved in air strikes against Libya, and relations between these countries are far from harmonious. Earlier this week, Belgium bluntly rejected an appeal from the UK and France to increase its involvement in the NATO mission.

At the Berlin meeting, Spanish Foreign Minister Trinidad Jiménez rejected any direct participation in the NATO operation, while the Norwegian foreign minister expressed his doubts regarding the claim that “NATO was not doing enough”. The German foreign minister indicated that German forces could be involved in an independent EU so-called “humanitarian mission” to

Libya, but repeated his claim that there could be no military solution to the Libyan conflict.

Germany abstained on the United Nations vote to commence military action against Libya, and the German government has refused to deploy its military forces under NATO command. Another key NATO member, Turkey, has also expressed its opposition to the current NATO military offensive.

Another central issue in the discussions and conflicts between foreign ministers on Thursday was whether to provide arms to the Libyan rebels.

On Tuesday, a meeting of 20 foreign ministers, Arab leaders and members of the Libyan self-appointed Interim Transitional National Council met in Doha, Qatar and concluded their deliberations with a statement declaring that the Libya Contact Group would “continue to provide support to the opposition, including material support”.

After the meeting, Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani told reporters that such support referred to “humanitarian means, and also means of defence. And that means that the Libyan people should get the means that they need to defend themselves”.

On Thursday, official sources in Doha confirmed that the tiny oil-rich country had in fact already been shipping French made Milan missiles to assist opposition forces in the Libyan town of Benghazi.

The initiative to supply the Libyan opposition with arms was supported by British Foreign Secretary William Hague, who co-chaired the meeting in Doha. Hague acknowledged that Britain had already supplied military equipment to the opposition and would continue to do so.

Qatar is one of the closest allies of the US in the Arab world and also the first Arab country to recognise the Libyan opposition and join the NATO-led offensive.

There can be no doubt that the conduct of the Doha meeting and its conclusions, including a deal to confiscate Libyan funds abroad and give them to the opposition

movement, along with moves by Qatar to assume control of Libyan oil exports, were worked out with the approval of Washington.

For his part, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini indicated that his own country was also prepared to consider sending arms to the so-called “rebels.” The UN resolution “does not prohibit supplying arms...for self-defence”, Frattini said. The head of the Interim Transitional National Council, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, is due to visit Rome on Friday for a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Acknowledging, however, that there was no consensus among NATO nations for supporting the policy of arming the opposition, one of its spokesmen, Mahmud Shammam, declared after the Doha meeting, “If necessary, we will request (arms) from countries on a bilateral basis”.

While the US administration has publicly expressed its opposition to arming the TNC rebels, it has undoubtedly sanctioned the backdoor arming of the rebels by Qatar and Great Britain.

At the start of April, the US announced that it was withdrawing from a leading role in the NATO operation against Libya but behind the scenes it continues to exert massive pressure on other NATO countries to step up to the plate and become embroiled in what is increasingly turning into a savage and prolonged military campaign to overthrow the Gaddafi regime and gain control of the country’s sizeable oil reserves.

On the diplomatic front, the American State Department announced that the TNC representative for foreign policy, Mahmud Jibril, was due in Washington on Thursday for high-level talks with Defense Department officials and members of Congress. According to State Department spokesman Mark Toner, “These meetings will allow us to continue to have a better sense of the opposition and the TNC and its vision for Libya”.

The visit by Jibril had been initiated by Democratic Senator John Kerry, who had met the Libyan rebel leader during a trip to Cairo in March.

The US is also continuing to take part in the NATO military operation despite pledges by American officials that the Pentagon would stand down from active military engagement. According to a report in the *New York Times*, 11 US warplanes have flown nearly 100 sorties since April 4, when official command of the mission was handed over to NATO.

At the summit in Berlin, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that Washington would continue to play a

leading role in the NATO mission, even as it pressures its partners to take more military responsibility.

Back in Washington, Republican Senator John McCain pleaded for a more aggressive stance on the part of the Obama administration. Taking his cue from a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, McCain called for the intervention of specialised American warplanes—AC-130 gunships—to blast a path to Tripoli for the rebels.

In his speech to the US-Islamic World Forum in Washington, McCain also revealed the real relation between the US and NATO: “We appreciate contributions from all of our allies, the efforts they’re making, especially the British and the French. But the reality is the United States is NATO”.

At the moment, the position put forward by McCain for intensified intervention by the US is not the consensus within the administration in Washington and the US military high command.

Having played, and still continuing to play, the leading role, militarily and financially, in recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US administration is demanding that other countries take up more of the burden of the campaign to depose Gaddafi. At the same time, the US is intent on securing its own imperialist interests in the Arab countries and northern Africa via the services rendered by its closest allies such as Great Britain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

However, as the first day of the NATO summit in Berlin made clear, US intransigence, compounded by the aggressively belligerent role of France and Great Britain, is creating centrifugal pressures that threaten the very existence of the alliance.



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