

The Right Question to Ask About Intervention in Libya

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As Libya moves closer to possible civil war and what began as peaceful demonstrations against an autocratic leader have turned increasingly violent, the question of possible U.S. intervention has become significantly more real. Various proposals for U.S. action including a blockade, a no-fly zone, and a military intervention have already been raised.

The case for why the U.S. should intervene seems reasonably straightforward. Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi is a dictator who, during his 40 years in power, has oppressed his own people and supported terrorism. In recent weeks he has behaved erratically and violently, threatening to drag his country into a bloody civil war which could affect the broader region. Based on this behavior, there is a clear and compelling argument to be made as to why the U.S. should intervene.

Unfortunately, the question of whether or not the U.S. should intervene may not be the most relevant question they face with regards to Libya. The more relevant, and considerably more difficult, question is whether the U.S. *can* intervene in Libya. More specifically, can the U.S. afford to make a commitment in Libya that is unlikely to be brief or cheap? The question of *can* rather than *should* is going to be an increasingly important frame through which to approach foreign policy decisions as we move towards a multi-polar world, one in which the U.S. has far fewer financial and other resources at their disposal.

While the U.S. can probably sustain a no-fly zone over Libya, there is no guarantee that there will be no further action necessary once this no-fly zone is put in place. In fact, the opposite is more likely to occur; the no-fly zone will lead to further, costlier and longer term interventions in Libya which will lead to further U.S. involvement throughout the region. Given the difficulty of sustaining only a limited commitment in Libya, any engagement has to be viewed as the potential beginning of a engagement lasting many years and costing billions of dollars. The ability of the U.S. to make these kinds of commitments was once both a centerpiece of American foreign policy and of American identity; an ability that no longer exists.

In this regard, Libya raises many intriguing questions for U.S. policy and politics. Many of the same Republicans who have criticized President Obama for the increased deficit during his term are calling for an intervention that would drive that deficit up even more. These are the same Republicans who, in most cases, also happily ignored the effect the war in Iraq had to America's deficit during the Bush administration. The lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan are important, not because the situation in these countries is somehow analogous to Libya, but because once the wars were started, U.S. involvement in both cases was consistently escalated through decisions that were largely

defensible at the time, ultimately led to an unsustainable, and unaffordable, level of involvement. It is not hard to imagine the same scenario unfolding in Libya.

It is natural to look at what is occurring in Libya and demand a U.S. response. If the conflict turns more violent, the domestic and international pressure will grow stronger, making it difficult for the Obama administration to avoid intervention. The reticence to which the administration has thus far demonstrated may not be due to timidity or moral cowardice as some have charged, but rather because the President understands what is at stake; once an intervention occurs, controlling the expansion and financial burden will be extremely difficult, if not impossible.