Prepared Statement
of
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Council on Foreign Relations
before the
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
on
Perspectives on the Crisis in Libya

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Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for asking me to appear before this committee to discuss recent U.S. policy toward Libya. Let me make two points at the outset. First, my statement and testimony reflect my personal views and not those of the Council on Foreign Relations, which as a matter of policy takes no institutional positions. Second, I will address today's topic from two perspectives: first, the lessons to be learned from recent U.S. policy toward Libya, and second, my recommendations for U.S. policy going forward.

Analysis must be rigorous. In two critical areas, however, I would suggest that what has been asserted as fact was in reality closer to assumption. First, it is not clear that a humanitarian catastrophe was imminent in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. There had been no reports of large-scale massacres in Libya up to that point, and Libyan society (unlike Rwanda, to cite the obvious influential precedent) is not divided along a single or defining fault line. Gaddafi saw the rebels as enemies for political reasons, not for their ethnic or tribal associations. To be sure, civilians would have been killed in an assault on the city – civil wars are by their nature violent and destructive – but there is no evidence of which I am aware that civilians per se would have been targeted on a large scale. Muammar Gaddafi's threat to show no mercy to the rebels might well have been just that: a threat within the context of a civil war to those who opposed him with arms or were considering doing so.

Armed intervention on humanitarian grounds can sometimes be justified. But before using military force to save lives, we need to be sure of the threat; the potential victims should request our help; the intervention should be supported by significant elements of the international community; the intervention should have high likelihood of success at a limited cost, including the cost to our other interests; and other policies should be judged to be inadequate. Not all of these conditions were satisfied in the Libyan case. Such an assessment is essential if we are asking our troops to put their lives at risk, if we are placing other important interests at risk, and if we are using economic and military resources that puts our future more at risk.

Second, it was (and is) not obvious that what happened or happens in Libya would or will have significant repercussions for what happens elsewhere in the region. Libya is not a particularly influential country; indeed, Gaddafi's isolation in no small part explains why it was possible to get Arab League and UN support for a resolution supporting armed intervention. The dynamics in Syria or Bahrain or Egypt, not to mention Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, will be determined mostly by local factors and forces and not by what happens in Libya.

American policymakers erred in calling explicitly early on in the crisis for Gaddafi's removal. Doing so made it far more difficult to employ diplomacy to help achieve U.S. humanitarian goals without resorting to military force. It removed the incentive Gaddafi might have had to stop attacking his opponents. The call for Gaddafi's ouster also put the United States at odds with much of the international community, which had only signed on to a humanitarian and not a political mission when voting for UN Security Council resolution 1973. It increased the odds the intervention would be seen as a

failure so long as Gaddafi remained in power. And, as I shall discuss, requiring Gaddafi's removal actually makes it more difficult to effect the implemention of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and stop the fighting.

Multilateralism is not a reason for doing something. Multilateralism is a mechanism, no more and no less, for distributing burdens. It can add to the legitimacy of an action; it can also complicate policy implementation. Such pros and cons need to be assessed. But multilateral support does not make a policy that is questionable on its merits any less so. To think otherwise is to confuse ends and means.

Inconsistency is unavoidable in foreign policy, and in and of itself is not a reason for rejecting doing something that makes sense or for undertaking something that does not. Some humanitarian interventions may be warranted. But inconsistency is not cost free, as it can confuse the American public and disappoint people in other countries, in the process opening us up to charges of hypocrisy and double standards.

It is acceptable in principle to intervene militarily on behalf of interests deemed less than vital, but in such cases – what I would deem "wars of choice" – it must be shown that the likely costs are commensurate with the interests involved and that other policies would not have done equally well or better in the way of costs and outcomes. Otherwise, a war of choice cannot be justified.

As I expect you have gathered from what I have said here today and both said and written previously, I did not support the decision to intervene with military force in Libya. But we are where we are. So what would I suggest the United States do in Libya going forward?

We must recognize that we face a familiar foreign policy conundrum, namely, that there is a large gap between our professed goals and the means we are prepared to devote to realizing them. The goals are ambitious: protecting the Libyan people and bringing about a successor regime judged to be preferable to what now exists. But the means are limited, as the president is clearly looking to our partners in NATO to assume the major military role and has ruled out the introduction of American ground forces.

Whenever there is such a gap between ends and means, a government has two choices: it can either reduce the ends or elevate the means. The Obama administration has up till now mostly emphasized the latter course. The no-fly zone was quickly augmented by additional air operations designed to degrade Libyan government forces. This proved insufficient to tilt the battlefield decisively in favor of regime opponents.

Now there is apparent interest in arming opposition forces. I would advise against taking this path. We cannot be confident of the agenda of the opposition towards either the Libyan people or various U.S. interests, including counter-terrorism. Nor can we be certain as to which opposition elements with which set of goals might in the end prove dominant. Arms once transferred can be used for any purpose. Bad situations can always get worse.

The only way to ensure the replacement of the current Libyan regime with something demonstrably better would be through the introduction of ground forces that were prepared to remain in place to maintain order and build capacities in the aftermath of ousting the government. As we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, the only thing certain about such a policy trajectory is its human, economic, and military cost. U.S. interests in Libya simply do not warrant such an investment on our part. And it is obviously far from certain whether any other outside party has both the will and the capacity to introduce ground forces on a scale likely to make a decisive military difference.

There is little reason to conclude that the Libyan opposition will any time soon be able to defeat the Libyan government. It appears to lack the requisite cohesiveness and skill. The combination of a no-fly zone, bombing, and arming might, however, have the effect of leveling the playing field and prolonging the civil war, leading to more civilian casualties in the process. This would be an ironic result of an intervention designed to promote humanitarian ends. The Libyan government may implode, but we cannot base our policy on this hope.

This all argues for reducing the immediate aims of American foreign policy and giving priority to humanitarian as opposed to political goals. This would entail undertaking or supporting a diplomatic initiative to bring about the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1973 and, most importantly, a cease-fire. A narrow cease-fire is

probably unrealistic, though. What would also be required to gain the support of the opposition would be a set of political conditions, possibly including specified political reforms and a degree of autonomy for certain areas. Sanctions could be added or removed to affect acceptance and compliance. Gaddafi might remain in office, at least for the time being. The country might effectively be divided for some time. An international force could well be required on the ground to keep the peace.

Such an outcome would be derided by some. But it would stop the civil war and keep many people alive who would otherwise perish. It would create a window for political reform and possibly over time lead to a new government without Muammar Gaddafi. The United States could use this time to work with Libyans in the opposition and beyond to help build national institutions without the added weight of ongoing fighting.

A compromise, negotiated outcome would also be good for this country, as it would allow the United States to focus its resources – economic, diplomatic, military, and political – elsewhere. Far more important than Libya for U.S. interests in the region are Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, and Iran. The United States also needs to reserve resources for other parts of the world (the Korean Peninsula comes to mind), for possible wars of necessity, for military modernization central to our position in the Pacific, and for deficit reduction.

Foreign policy must be about priorities. The United States cannot do everything everywhere. This consideration would have argued for avoiding military intervention in Libya; now it argues for limiting this intervention in what it seeks to accomplish and what it requires of the United States.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before this committee. I look forward to your questions.