Libya and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention

How Qaddafi’s Fall Vindicated Obama and RtoP

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The fall of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi is a significant foreign policy triumph for U.S. President Barack Obama. By setting overall strategy while allowing others to shoulder the burden of implementing it, the Obama administration achieved its short-term objective of stopping Qaddafi’s atrocities and its long-term one of removing him from power. This was all done at a modest financial cost, with no U.S. troops on the ground, and zero U.S. casualties. Meanwhile, as the first unambiguous military enforcement of the Responsibility to Protect norm, Qaddafi’s utter defeat seemingly put new wind in the sails of humanitarian intervention.

One must be careful, however, not to overdraw lessons from the Libyan experience. It was a unique case and is unlikely to be repeated.

For one, Libya had Qaddafi, a villain straight from central casting, who had managed to alienate nearly all UN member states, including his erstwhile Arab and African allies.

The timing was also perfect. As the UN, NATO, and United States debated intervention, leaders in the Middle East were still reeling from the Arab Spring. Acutely aware of the vulnerability of their own regimes, the members of the Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Gulf Cooperation Council all endorsed the UN’s declaration of a no-fly zone over Libya, including the use of “all necessary means” to prevent mass atrocities.

In addition, China and Russia, the two permanent members of the Security Council (UNSC) most averse to authorizing military intervention under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, had no special relationship with, or interests in, Libya. So, they had no reason to veto a collective action.

Moreover, Libya is a small country, with a population of only 6.4 million [2], which is concentrated along a fairly narrow strip of land by the Mediterranean. Thus, the logistics of military intervention promised to be less daunting there than it would have in Sudan, for example, which is fifty percent larger, almost seven times [2] as populous, and has hundreds of thousands [3] soldiers under arms. And since Libya is situated on Europe’s doorstep, NATO and the EU were more motivated to provide aerial power and political support for the mission, since regional instability and a wave of refugees would effect them if the revolution failed.
The country also possessed a credible, fairly cohesive, and increasingly capable opposition movement, which provided the ground force that casualty-averse Western governments would not. These rebels ultimately proved able to defeat Qaddafi's military machine.

Finally, Libya was an unambiguous case for applying the RtoP doctrine. To be sure, the atrocities Qaddafi orchestrated in Libya prior to the intervention pale in comparison to those committed during the course of other recent violent conflicts. In Sri Lanka, for example, the government killed thousands of civilians while finishing off the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009. And forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have raped tens -- or perhaps hundreds -- of thousands of women over the past decade to sow terror. Qaddafi's violent crackdown on this spring's protests and his explicit promise to "have no mercy and pity" on residents of Benghazi, the opposition stronghold, also left little ambiguity. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in March, "left unchecked, Qaddafi will commit unspeakable atrocities."

Qaddafi's ouster may vindicate the RtoP idea, but the application of the norm will inevitably remain selective and highly contingent on the political context. The humanitarian imperative is a strong and growing global impulse, but statecraft is still subject to constraints of geopolitics, resources, and political will.

What has been most striking in the Libyan case is the Obama administration's vocal leadership in seeking to consolidate RtoP as a vital global norm -- a stark contrast to the lukewarm attitude of the Bush administration. Washington's embrace of RtoP is critical, because the United States is the only country with the power and the credibility to actually enforce it.

Lest one imagine that the Libyan case is a one-off, on August 4 the Obama administration released the Presidential Study Directive on Mass Atrocities (PSD-10). The directive defines the prevention of mass atrocities as both "a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States." PSD-10 is a groundbreaking document and represents a huge victory for NSS Senior Director Samantha Power, a leading administration hawk on Libya.

The PSD-10 recognizes a simple truth: the United States will inevitably confront atrocities that cannot be ignored. The directive expands the menu of policy options available in such cases, which should range from complete inaction to sending in the marines. This escalatory ladder is meant to encompass preventive diplomacy, economic and financial sanctions, arms embargoes, and ultimately coercive action.

Realist critics have bemoaned it as a blueprint for interventionism run amok, anticipating meddling in foreign conflicts on a grand Wilsonian scale. But an honest evaluation of the directive should be informed by the United States' previous experience with RtoP; given the country's sorry record in actually confronting mass atrocities -- in the killing fields of Cambodia and the bloody hills of Rwanda, to name just two -- the realist critique seems off base. Indeed, the far greater risk is that the directive will gather dust on a shelf, while the United States and the international community ignore the victims of atrocities.

Ultimately, the fate of the PSD-10, and perhaps of the RtoP norm itself, will depend on the attitudes of future U.S. presidents and the American people. Will they be willing to devote resources, and potentially lives, to address the suffering of strangers? The question is, in part, a moral one: What obligations does the United States have to those living beyond its borders? It is also a strategic one: How does a policymaker weigh the potential benefits of an intervention (in terms of lives saved) against the costs to the United States (including in the lives of its own soldiers).

There is no easy answer to this question. In the late nineteenth century, Bismarck famously remarked that the entirety of the Balkans was not worth the bones of a single "Pomeranian grenadier." A century later, NATO dithered before summoning the will to intervene in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the United States pulled out of Somalia after the deaths of eighteen U.S. Army Rangers.

Now, two decades later, no senior official in the Obama administration nor member of Congress has issued a call for intervention in Somalia to assist the delivery of emergency food aid, as that country faces
its worst famine in decades. Al Shabaab, a U.S. designated terrorist organization, controls the vast majority of drought-affected areas and is obstructing the delivery of foreign aid. Without assistance, 3.2 million [10] Somalis will likely die. The United States' silence on Somalia contrasts starkly with its policy on Libya.

The United States will remain selective about humanitarian intervention, because it must balance the goal of preventing suffering with other interests and commitments, and because some conflicts, such as anarchic Somalia, are dauntingly complex and would impose unacceptable burdens on well-meaning intervenors.

As Obama has noted, however, that is no excuse for inaction everywhere. Although rigid criteria for involvement are unrealistic, the U.S policy on armed humanitarian intervention should be guided by several principles, which I first outlined [11] in 2004, when I was on the State Department policy planning staff.

First, the United States should set the bar for intervention high. It should be limited to stopping or preventing egregious atrocities -- situations in which governments or insurgents are targeting large numbers of civilians with genocide, systematic rape, mass murder, expulsion, or other crimes against humanity.

There are prudent reasons for this limitation. Sovereignty remains the stabilizing force of the world order -- a barrier to global anarchy. In addition, U.S. capacities are finite. Without discipline, its resources could be quickly exhausted.

Second, armed intervention should be an option of last resort. Given the costs, risks, and the unpredictable consequences, it should be employed only when other measures fail or when the speed and scale of atrocities outpaces slower instruments. And then, the mission should be undertaken using means proportional to the conflict, and should be coupled with a realistic long-term political strategy to address the violence's root cause.

Third, multilateral interventions are vastly preferable to unilateral ones. They offer both increased legitimacy and the promise that others will share the load.

Finally, the United States should undertake armed humanitarian intervention only if its leaders are committed to marshaling and sustaining the domestic support required to stay the course even if the going gets rough. Absent enthusiastic public or congressional sentiment in favor of intervention, the president must be ready to lead on his own.

When it came to authorizing and conducting the Libya intervention, the Obama administration checked all these boxes. It set the bar high; moved to military force after other expedients had failed; designed a military strategy with good prospects of success, using proportional means; and it forged a broad coalition, legitimated by the UN Security Council. Finally, Obama displayed the political courage to do what was right, sticking with the campaign even as U.S. public support [12] flagged from lukewarm 43 percent in late March to a dangerously low 24 percent by July.

Libya has demonstrated the viability of a well-implemented RtoP intervention. Yet just because the doctrine has survived a significant test, one should not assume that the United States and its allies will apply it universally. As atrocities emerge in other contexts, the international community will need to cultivate and weigh other policy options against armed intervention, so it is not faced with stark choice of military action or inaction. The Obama administration's PSD-10 is a step in that direction.

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