

Over the Horizon: Drawing the Right Lessons on Airpower from Libya

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Some defense analysts have suggested that the outcome of the Western military intervention in Libya indicates that airpower has fulfilled its promise, having matured to the extent that it can win wars with only a minimal ground component. The effect of such a conclusion on austerity-afflicted military budgets in Europe and the United States could be huge and costly, as it is almost certainly premature.

The battle to define the lessons of the Western intervention in Libya began almost as soon as the first Tomahawk missiles started hitting that country's air defense network back in March. Many of the arguments have focused on the viability of the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine of international humanitarian intervention and how it might apply to such countries as Bahrain or Syria. However, defense analysts also subjected the military character of the campaign to scrutiny, with some now suggesting the fight in Libya indicates that airpower has finally fulfilled its decisive promise, having matured to the extent that it can win wars with only a minimal ground component. According to retired USAF Lt. Gen. David Deptula, "Whether one agrees or not with the intervention, one thing is clear -- and no surprise to objective observers: Modern air power is the key force that led to the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime." The effect of such a conclusion on austerity-afflicted military budgets in Europe and the United States could be huge and costly, as it is almost certainly premature.

In a previous op-ed written before the intervention with the Heritage Foundation's Mackenzie Eaglen, Deptula notoriously argued that any no-fly zone over Libya should employ U.S. Air Force F-22 Raptors. Ironically, that aircraft was grounded for safety reasons for the bulk of the Libya campaign. Deptula and Eaglen's piece represented a bald argument on behalf of the institutional interests of both the U.S. Air Force and Lockheed Martin, the producer of the F-22, but when made in less-cartoonish fashion, the case may have an effect on future procurement decisions.

Some are already using the Libya precedent to argue for military intervention in other countries. For example, Sen. John McCain has called for action against the Syrian government, presumably along the lines of the Libya operation. When individuals like Deptula claim that airpower has won the day without sufficiently examining the complexity of the case, they make McCain's posturing more politically viable. In the United Kingdom, as well, the Royal Air Force was quick to take credit for rebel victories, using its experience as ammunition in the never-ending struggle for resources between the RAF and the Royal Navy.

In fact, the Libya campaign supplies only very tenuous and measured support for the idea that airpower has become decisive in modern warfare. The focus on tactical rather than strategic targets represents a profound retreat from the principles that guided the employment of airpower as recently as Operation Iraqi Freedom. Historically, the U.S. Air Force, like the air forces of many other countries' militaries, has resented "tactical" tasks such as hunting and killing enemy tanks and supply vehicles or bombing entrenched enemy positions. Direct attacks on fielded enemy forces can hurt, but they also require great skill and lack the "multiplier effect" supposedly accrued by attacks against "strategic" targets such as communications networks and command nodes. Tactical campaigns also tie air assets to the whims of ground commanders, in this case a combination of French and British special forces and Libyan rebels. In the minds of many pilots, a tactical campaign turns an air force into an exceedingly expensive artillery branch. While there is no doubt that such a campaign can have an effect, most advocates find it a waste of airpower's potential.

Moreover, the actual use of airpower in Libya highlights the fact that "airpower" is not necessarily the same thing as a country's air force. Tomahawk missiles launched by American and British submarines "broke open the door" to the air campaign over Libya with a barrage on the first day of the war. The French aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle subsequently proved instrumental for carrying out much of the campaign, launching a significant percentage of French strike sorties. U.S. Marine Corps Harriers undertook strikes from the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge. Finally, in order to carry out close air support missions, attack

helicopters flew from the decks of the British assault carrier HMS Ocean and the French Tonnerre. Meanwhile, British and French special forces supplied expert advice to Libyan rebel commanders and targeting intelligence to NATO strike planners, allowing bombs to find their mark and facilitating combined arms offensives. Finally, American Predator drones scoured the country searching for targets of military and political importance. The NATO operation in Libya was very much a joint undertaking, both in terms of its multinational character and its organizational diversity.

Finally, the death of Gadhafi and the declaration of victory by the National Transitional Council do not by any means indicate that the war is over. Gadhafi loyalists continue to operate in the hinterlands of Libya, and NATO strikes also continue, with the alliance flying 42 sorties, including 12 strike sorties, on Oct. 23. While everyone hopes that the NTC will form a stable transitional government that can maintain order throughout all of Libya, the prospect of infighting within the rebel coalition, as well as a prolonged struggle with loyalists, continues to worry many observers. Although airpower certainly contributed to Gadhafi's defeat, it cannot build a government that can operate effectively in his stead.

The lessons we take from Libya matter, because they will inform military procurement and intervention decisions for years to come. In the United States, the Army is battling budget hawks who will no doubt take solace in the perceived effectiveness of airpower in Libya. In the United Kingdom, the RAF and the Royal Navy will continue their nearly century-long struggle for both funding and control of air assets. To be sure, none of the major powers had an interest in launching a major ground campaign in Libya, much less a prolonged occupation. Still, policymakers should be hesitant in the face of claims that airpower has displaced ground power or sea power, just as they should resist arguments that future interventions will be cheap and bloodless. The war in Libya surely does carry many lessons for military action, but they should be drawn and analyzed only with the greatest care. And if the principle lesson learned from Libya is that "airpower can win wars cheaply and bloodlessly," rather than "the combined naval and air assets of the NATO alliance, in close coordination with an extensive rebel army, took six months to topple a weak, unpopular regime without a professional army," then we have a problem.

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