NATO and Libya: The Dawn of European Security Management, a Warning, or Business as Usual?

Mark Laity*

In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.

(General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the first SACEUR)

In January 2012, President Barack Obama put Europe on notice regarding future security management. Launching the United States Strategic Defense Guidance, he announced a strategic “pivot” for the United States through “strengthening our presence in the Asia Pacific.” Importantly, he added a significant caveat, “We’re going to continue investing in our critical partnerships and alliances, including NATO, which has demonstrated time and again—most recently in Libya—that it’s a force multiplier.” However, in emphasizing the United States will not abandon NATO, the guidance was still clear; the United States saw Europe as a partner to help as well as be helped, stating, “Most European countries are now producers of security rather than consumers of it.”

But how good is Europe at producing security without US leadership? President Obama’s remark indicated the United States saw Libya as proof of NATO’s relevance, but it had also been a decision by the United States to take a backseat and let Europe lead. This chapter’s premise is that during the Libya conflict the European role within NATO indeed increased, but then it also assesses the degree to which it was able to shoulder the
leadership role. How capable is Europe of producing rather than consuming security? It would be difficult and wrong to distinguish between Europe’s management and NATO’s performance, so the chapter aims to assess NATO’s decision-making process and how it managed the Libyan conflict at the grand strategic, security, and theater levels.3

**Early Days of the Libyan Crisis**

For my purposes, the Libyan crisis and NATO intervention cover the period between February 15 and October 31, 2011. On February 15, street protests erupted in Benghazi, rapidly spreading across the country. Unlike other Arab nations during the “Arab Spring,” such as Tunisia and Egypt, where protests toppled the existing governments, Colonel Gaddafi’s regime responded brutally and the protests morphed into rebellion. As violence increased, the Libyan rebels formed a coalition, the National Transitional Council (NTC), while international opinion hardened against Gaddafi.

The first concrete sign of international willingness to act was the February 26 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 19704 imposing an arms embargo. At that stage, within Europe or NATO the political will to act was uncertain, but already on February 24, prudent contingency planning had begun within the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), NATO’s strategic military headquarters. The political sensitivities to the possibility of NATO being involved meant such early planning, although allowed, had to be discreet.

Within Libya, initial rebel advances once seemed on the verge of toppling Gaddafi, but their surge ran out of steam and the regime rallied. Pushing out from the capital Tripoli the regime regained ground and to the east advanced on Benghazi, the rebellion’s epicenter.

The critical situation and fears of massacres in Benghazi led to the hurried passing of UNSCR 19735 on March 17, imposing a no-fly zone but also authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect civilians. As the regime assault on Benghazi neared, the crisis grew, sharpened by Gaddafi’s threats to show “no mercy”6 to rebels if they did not surrender. With Gaddafi’s tanks in Benghazi’s suburbs and seemingly hours from victory, the decisions to launch air strikes were made in chaotic circumstances7 and on a national basis involving the United States, France, and Britain.

The early air campaign against Libya was a US-led coalition of the willing, Operation Odyssey Dawn. At this stage, NATO had no role, but importantly many of the national assets, bases, and personnel used by