Libya – a political decision

One of the most controversial recent episodes in Germany’s security policy is the country’s 2011 abstention from the UN Security Council vote on Libya. This section looks at the discussion in Germany, the prevalent explanations and whether Afghanistan played a role in that decision. Given that these discussions did not lead to a German participation in Operation Unified Protector in Libya, this section will not analyze practices or symbols, but only the discourse part of Germany’s strategic culture.

The Arab Spring revolutions which swept Northern Africa and several other Arab states at the end of the first decade of the 2000s also led to a public uprising in Libya. The Libyan security forces’ attempt to counter the early protests by force of arms eventually resulted in an escalation of the demonstrations into outright rebellion which sought to depose the dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi, who had ruled the country with an iron fist for more than four decades. As Gaddafi’s military started indiscriminate aerial bombing, ruthlessly slaughtering the Libyan civilians, the country plunged into civil war. Fearing that instability would spread beyond Libya’s borders, on February 26, 2011 the UN passed Resolution 1970 condemning Gaddafi’s brutal use of force against his own people and imposing several international sanctions on members of his regime, such as an asset freeze and a travel ban.

As these attempts to stop Gaddafi did not work, the international community started to deliberate the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya upon requests from the Arab League. The Arab states’ involvement meant that this was a historic UN decision; instead of supporting a dictatorial regime, which used to be the norm, the UN decided to support...
the rebel forces. On March 17, the UN Security Council passed a corresponding resolution, no. 1973. In that decision, five non-permanent members of the Council abstained from voting. The Federal Republic was one of them – it was the only EU and NATO member to do so. In the aftermath, this political decision proved to be one of the most controversial in Germany’s recent military history.

In late February and early March, the Federal Republic had pressed for several non-military means to weaken Gaddafi. As soon as France started to openly call for military measures, Westerwelle issued warnings against the use of such methods. A NATO-led mission, he feared, could change the mood in the Arab region. ‘We do not want to become part of a civil war party.’\textsuperscript{1} Importantly, however, Westerwelle found that a no-fly zone would still be an option, probably not realizing in the beginning that this was a \textit{military} option. Similarly, Angela Merkel expressed concerns regarding a military mission: ‘You also have to consider the end.’\textsuperscript{2}

While some of Germany’s international partners continued calling for a UN resolution and drafting it, Westerwelle did not fundamentally change his position – except that he was no longer stating that a no-fly zone could be an option. On the eve of the decision leading to Resolution 1973, he told the UK \textit{Guardian}: ‘Your own instinct is to say “We have to do something.” But a military intervention means participating in a civil war that could go on for a long time. Germany has a strong friendship with our European partners. But we won’t take part in any operation and we will not send troops to Libya.’\textsuperscript{3} In contrast, Merkel’s reasoning seemed more strategic when she told a German newspaper that Germany’s security need not be defended in Libya, unlike in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{4} On March 17, Westerwelle warned in parliament: ‘No one should follow the illusion that [a no-fly zone] is like putting up a road sign.’\textsuperscript{5} Though he again said that Gaddafi had to go, he failed to explain how. Nevertheless, parliament was generally supportive of his opposition to a no-fly zone.\textsuperscript{6}

But according to State Secretary Wolf of the German MoD, the Foreign Minister was not the only one preferring a more cautious course of action:

‘Libya was truly a political decision. The various departments and specialists of the Defense Ministry will and can not give more concrete statements. The Defense Ministry gave the Minister its military advice concerning the effectiveness of a military deployment. This advice was rather conservative and reluctant, because a military solution in Libya seemed highly difficult; the country was in the midst of a civil