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As the United States, France, and Britain take the plunge into Libya's internal conflict, there seems to be a disagreement on the objectives of the mission and therefore what the exit strategy should be.

The trouble is that objectives are unclear because tactics, as opposed to strategy, are being discussed, and hence national leaders and their military advisors have proved incapable of formulating an exit strategy. For example, UN Security Council Resolution allows for the use of "all necessary means" to protect civilians, and it also advocates the idea of tilting the balance of power against Qaddafi. However, neither of these can be achieved without arming rebels and having troops on the ground. Meanwhile, there seems to be a consensus on a maximalist objective which is to say Qaddafi must go. Unclear is what role the alliance can and should play once he is gone given the NATO members' preference for minimalist tactics and narrow commitment in pursuit of their maximalist objective.

Hence, the international community, and in particular Britain, ought to seek to resolve the conflict via covert diplomatic means while keeping their forces on alert so to ensure that Qaddafi regime will put its words into action. This is so given that an immediate departure of the Qaddafi family from power will almost certainly create a de-ba'athification symptom which could easily embroil Libya into internal battles with different parts of the country dominated by rival tribes.

In terms of political infrastructure, Libya is equivalent of Afghanistan and Yemen, and that should Qaddafi go, Libya's political structure must be rebuilt from scratch. Qaddafi does not have a formal position to match his actual authority and thus he cannot be expected to resign. He makes the key decisions, but there are no formal institutions through which he does so. Therefore, the existence and predominance of informal ties and a lack of institutions should constitute the cornerstones of British strategy in the country which, in turn, require more realism as opposed to idealism.

What is crystal clear in Libya today is that there is a strong opposition to Qaddafi. However, it is not clear whether there is any internal coherence to that opposition which, in and by itself, is problematic in a country like Libya with a population of just over six million. The majority of the competent people in Libya have, in one way or another, worked with the Qaddafi regime. Hence, once Qaddafi is gone, there will not be enough trained bureaucrats to construct a new Libyan government that is not an extension of the old one. This fact alone could propel Libya back into some form of tribalism and create a power vacuum that will then be up for grab by contesting forces leading to emergence of a prolonged civil war; indeed a breeding ground for emergence of extremist discourses in North Africa. This becomes all the more alarming given the fact that Libya used to be the second-leading source of insurgents entering Iraq via Syria, Libyan rebels' possession of weapons and missiles looted from government stockpiles, and the regime's increasing attempts to arm its supporters for defensive purposes.

British interests in Libya are threefold: namely, securing British investment and energy needs,

preventing Qaddafi from "brutalising" his own people, and averting societal instability and/or civil war. The underlying question, therefore, is that can a UN backed no-fly zone assist the government in its attempt to secure those interests? And the short answer is most probably not albeit the credible threat of use of force can prove effective in forcing the Libyan regime to make compromises.

Establishing a no-fly zone can be a very time consuming and complex endeavour requiring troops on the ground in order to provide meaningful protection to citizens as well as near-perfect clarity on the rules of engagement. While the latter might prove very difficult to achieve due to involvement of poorly trained troops from Arab states, the former is disallowed by the UN Resolution and Western leaders, in particular President Obama, are unwilling to contemplate it.

The UK's relative influence is clearly on the wane, not only because the "special relationship" is no longer that special but also because financial crisis of 2008 accelerated the transformation of economic and political power from the West to China, India and other rising powers. To be effective, therefore, UK foreign policy practitioners must be able to exploit short-lived opportunities and develop new types of partnership based on a well-defined vision for Britain's future role in accordance to the rapidly evolving geopolitical realities of this Century. Securing British interests abroad will require the government to be able to influence and/or persuade others to work with it on shared goals, and a prerequisite to achieving this end is to be seen as an enabler; an actor that has the knowledge and resources to help other states to develop sufficient vision and knowledge with regards to their involvement in critical parts of the world.

As such, the coalition government ought to be credited for persuading others to back its call for the use of credible threat under the guises of no-fly zone. Nonetheless, much more needs to be done in the form of covert diplomacy if Britain and its allies are to avoid another lengthy military commitment in a Muslim land. Covert diplomacy is needed to facilitate talks between pro and anti Qaddafi forces if there is going to emerge a reform-minded, representative government in Libya. This requires understanding Saif Qaddafi's motives, and Britain is well-equipped to take on this role.

Saif Qaddafi is British educated and has close links to this country; that is to say, we know him well and he knows us well too. He is, in fact, amongst the very few people in the Libyan government that Western officials can engage with on both political and intellectual levels. He is a reformer who, according to people close to him, believes in Western liberalism as evident in his writings. Writing him off for remarks, which were considerably taken out of context when reported, would be a major geostrategic mistake. It has to be realised that one single rule that every Arab is familiar with is that of 'family first, everything else next'. And Saif Qaddafi is no exception. Britain has the means to influence Saif and as a result can persuade its allies to support its efforts for a diplomatic solution.

A diplomatic end to the current instability in Libya can help Britain and its allies to avoid acquisitions of meddling in Muslim affairs and/or hijacking the Libyan revolution which will be voiced regardless of Arab states involvement. Moreover, Qaddafi's money and cheap oil have helped Robert Mugabe to buttress his position in Zimbabwe. Hence, a negotiated end to the Libyan drama can help Britain to force Qaddafi stop bailing out Mugabe thereby weakening his

position in Zimbabwe indirectly. Finally, there is the real danger of a sharp drop in Libyan oil flow to Europe in events of a revolution or prolonged civil war which could be avoided if Britain merges the threat of force with covert diplomacy.

A reduction in Libyan oil production leads to further dependency on the Saudi oil thereby making Britain more vulnerable to Saudi demands at this critical time in the region. Already, it seems that there is an agreement between the West and the GCC in the form of Arab consent and help over Libya in return for Western silence over Bahrain. The trouble is that GCC regimes suppression of Shia in Bahrain is helping the Iranian government to expand its influence there. Should the GCC governments fail to stabilise Bahrain and Bahrain falls under the Iranian influence, treating Iran, already an influential actor in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza, as an equal partner might very well become a strategic necessity.

In short, that a military no-fly zone is an insufficient, risky strategy is clearly evident in Western powers desperate attempts to present it as a joint operation between NATO and the Arab League. What has been happening in the past couple of weeks is making of a tribal war and entirely unclear is what glue will hold together this decentralized country in the absence of nationalist identification.

As a result, danger of Britain ending up inheriting an open-ended protection of a new mini-state is real and can only be avoided if Britain and its allies do not limit their strategy to the use of force. Aside from its obvious and immediate geostrategic consequences – i.e. civil war, the cut-off of oil, and the possible re-empowerment of Al-Qaeda in North Africa –, foregoing covert diplomacy in favour of overt use of force will drastically reduce Britain ability to portray herself as an enabler in the Arab world. This is important because British interests can be very well secured if Britain is seen as an enabler, especially by emerging powers and in particular India, in resource rich regions.