

The 2011 Libyan operation cannot be a widely applicable model for future intervention, regardless of the military success of the campaign that helped rebels depose Qadhafi at little civilian cost. This is important to bear in mind as the unfolding crisis in Syria rumbles on, or new ones develop, claims a new report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) just published.

'Short War, Long Shadow' - released on the anniversary of Odyssey Dawn, the Western military operation against Qadhafi's regime - analyses the political and military legacies of the seven month campaign over Libya in 2011. The report argues that the Libyan operation seems 'destined' to go down in history, at best, as a 'strategic footnote', concluding that the intervention was a one-off case, not the 'model' for future endeavours and may indeed lead to some troubling implications for the fledgling concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

'The Libya intervention took place in a singularly unique moment where the international stars, as it were, had aligned in a set of propitious circumstances. Qadhafi had no powerful friends and was isolated in a way that Bashar al-Assad, for example, is not.'

'The Libya campaign was hailed as a triumph for the principle of the Responsibility to Protect. But the truth may be otherwise. For the manner in which the initial Security Council Resolution was contorted out of all recognition from the protection of civilians to, in effect, outright regime change has left a sour taste in the mouths of powers like China, Russia and India who still hold an absolute conception of state sovereignty. For advocates of the R2P, the worry should be that there is indeed a legacy of the Libya conflict: China and Russia will presume that the model in future operations is rather regime change under the cloak of R2P, and will be more forthcoming with vetoes. We have already seen this over Syria,' the report states.

'These conclusions are not merely theoretical concerns. The Benghazi scenario, averted in Libya, has already happened in Syria in Homs and Idlib precisely because the international community has not been able to wage a campaign as it could in Libya. If the analysis of the Libyan campaign has indicated that concerned powers still have the capability to intervene effectively, it also demonstrates that the political circumstances that permitted it cannot be easily transposed.'

Commenting on Odyssey Dawn and the implications for R2P, Dr Jonathan Eyal writes: 'Just days after the killing of Muammar Qadhafi, the NATO offensive was stopped, despite the fact that sporadic violence continued in other parts of the country. If the objective was just humanitarian, NATO should have continued its mission until there was conclusive evidence that further bloodshed was unlikely to occur. But this did not take place; the moment Qadhafi disappeared, NATO's planes also vanished.'

Professor Michael Clarke concludes: 'The Libyan operation seems destined to go down in history, at best, as a strategic footnote. It could easily have been a politico-military

embarrassment to Britain and its allies, but in the event it was a neat success, given the challenges. Not all the implications of success are good, however, and reflecting on this operation raises some interesting questions about the way strategic decisions were handled...'

'All military victories come at some diplomatic price and the costs of this one are becoming evident as subsequent events unfold. The military logic of enforcing the UN resolution [1973] effectively turned the coalition into the air arm of the rebels in a civil war - albeit a rebellion that most of the world thought legitimate. The political fallout of operating at the very edge of what the resolution authorised had a well-noted effect on both Moscow and Beijing...'

'While there is no direct relationship between success in Libya and failure in Syria, it is evident that Libya has reinforced the perception of how difficult a similar military outcome would be to achieve against President Assad, whilst also hardening the route to any immediate diplomatic solution.'

The report also warns that it is not clear that the UK has 'learnt its own lessons from Iraq and Helmand about the coherent, institutional formation of strategy'. Professor Clarke highlights that the top-down vision of intervention taken by a hawkish prime minister and key Cabinet figures pushed the operation forward, despite private military warnings of the risks, harking back to the Blair administration's informal style of 'sofa government'. Clarke argues that Cameron may have been clear and decisive, but his decision it was not strategic in the way the government had defined it, and whether this is a useful model for future interventions is therefore debatable.

The RUSI report can be viewed at: www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/RUSI_LIBYA2012.pdf