

# US, European officials debate military intervention in Libya

By Patrick O'Connor and Patrick Martin  
3 March 2011

At congressional hearings Tuesday and Wednesday and in statements to the media, top officials of the Obama administration and Congress are publicly debating the prospects for American military intervention in Libya, as the Pentagon moves ships and warplanes towards the North African country. The same debate is going on across the Atlantic among the European powers that have deployed their own military assets to the region.

In this official debate, the rights and interests of the Libyan people count for nothing. The US and European imperialists are concerned about the practical difficulties of deploying military forces into a huge and largely desert country, and about the political implications of the launching of a third major intervention against a predominately Muslim country, with Libya following Iraq and Afghanistan into the cauldron of war.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, questioned yesterday by the House subcommittee on defence appropriations, cautioned “there’s a lot of, frankly, loose talk about some of these military options.” He continued: “Let’s just call a spade a spade—a no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya, to destroy the air defences. That’s the way you do a no-fly zone... It also requires more airplanes than you would find on a single aircraft carrier. So it is a big operation in a big country.”

Gates pointed to the broader consequences of intervention in Libya. “If we move additional assets, what are the consequences of that for Afghanistan, for the Persian Gulf?” he said. “And what other allies are prepared to work with us in some of these things?” He concluded, “We also have to think about, frankly, the use of the US military in another country in the Middle East.”

The Pentagon chief was responding to the attack on the Obama administration’s policy by Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee in 2008, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, the right-wing Democrat who fervently supported the Bush administration throughout the war in Iraq. McCain told the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank, Tuesday that the US should immediately impose a no-fly zone over Libya.

“Of course we have to have a no-fly zone,” McCain declared. “We are spending over \$500 billion, not counting Iraq and Afghanistan, on our nation’s defense. Don’t tell me we can’t do a no-fly zone over Tripoli.” He criticized the Pentagon brass for trying “to find reasons why you can’t do something rather than why you can.”

Democratic Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, used less bellicose language to push the

same policy. He told a hearing Wednesday that while a no-fly zone over Libya is “not a long-term proposition,” the US military should be ready to implement it. He claimed that the Libyan people “need the tools to prevent the slaughter of innocents on Libyan streets, and I believe the global community cannot be on the sidelines while airplanes are allowed to bomb and strafe.”

Obama administration officials have downplayed suggestions that a no-fly zone over Libya is in the immediate offing. Addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: “We are a long way from determining a no-fly zone is needed for Libya.” Admitting her concern about the country “descending into chaos and becoming a giant Somalia”, Clinton nevertheless emphasised that, “There is a great deal of caution that is being exercised with respect to any actions that we might take other than in support of humanitarian missions.”

Libya has a relatively advanced air defence system. An extensive bombing campaign, inevitably involving civilian casualties, would be required to destroy it.

Gates is speaking for a section of the military establishment that is deeply concerned over the possible implications of launching another potentially protracted war, given the disastrous situation confronting American forces elsewhere. Last week, he declared that anyone urging the deployment of a large American land army into Asia, the Middle East, or Africa in the future ought to “have his head examined.”

Similar concerns have been raised in Europe. British Prime Minister David Cameron has appeared to step back from his bellicose rhetoric, including suggestions of arming opposition forces in Libya. The *Guardian* reported: “senior British military sources expressed concern that Downing Street appeared to be overlooking the dangers of being sucked into a long and potentially dangerous operation ... at a time UK forces are stretched in Afghanistan, and against the background of a serious budget crisis to the forces.”

James Hackett of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies spoke with the *Financial Times* about arming the Benghazi-based opposition. “The problem here is that you have to ask yourself who would you be arming,” he warned. “You are probably dealing with a range of different tribes and communities that have very different agendas once Gaddafi goes.”

German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle said that a no-fly zone should be considered, but warned that “the impression that

this is about military intervention must not emerge under any circumstances.” He added that public discussion of US and European military action against Libya was likely to “encourage the propaganda of the dictator” and strengthen Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi politically.

Media claims of widespread air attacks by forces loyal to the Gaddafi regime have fuelled the calls for outside military intervention. But Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a congressional hearing in Washington that the US military had been unable to confirm such attacks.

The *Washington Post* also quoted a senior administration official Tuesday denying that such attacks had taken place outside of attempts to bomb arms depots. “I don’t think we’ve seen ... indications they’re bombing people,” he told the newspaper.

These admissions underscore the fraudulent character of the campaign waged by sections of the American and international media for a so-called “humanitarian” intervention into Libya.

From the outset of the crisis, Washington and its European allies have been centrally concerned with protecting their valuable stake in Libya’s oil industry and advancing their regional geo-strategic interests. The Obama administration initially waited to see if Gaddafi could crush the uprising, and only turned against its ally in Tripoli after the regime lost control of large parts of the country.

Then the drumbeat of war commenced, with a concerted propaganda campaign likening Libya to the Balkans, and even Rwanda or Sudan, in order to provide the pretext for an intervention aimed at turning the North African state into a semi-colony subservient to the operations of the major oil corporations.

The recent expression of tactical differences and concerns by elements within the American and European ruling elites in no way marks an end to the threat of foreign intervention.

A major military build-up continues in the Mediterranean Sea. The American destroyer USS Barry and two amphibious assault ships capable of carrying helicopters, landing craft and hundreds of Marines are in position, after having been redeployed from the Red Sea. French, British, and other European naval and air force assets have also been positioned off Libya.

Hillary Clinton has stressed that potential logistical difficulties in establishing a no-fly zone did not rule out the option. “They said the same about the Balkans,” she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “Too difficult, too hard to maintain. But eventually it was determined that it was in the interests of security to have one.”

Yesterday White House spokesman Jay Carney responded to the defense secretary’s remarks by telling reporters: “The fact that the no-fly idea is complex does not mean it is not on the table... We are actively considering a variety of options. We have not ruled any options out.”

Within Libya, clashes continue between government and opposition forces. Pro-Gaddafi fighters yesterday attacked the eastern port town of Bregga, about 240 kilometres south of Benghazi, but were forced to retreat after heavy fighting. The government troops are believed to have travelled from Sirte, Gaddafi’s home town, which remains under tight government control. They were backed by air force jets that reportedly bombed

military targets in the town.

The *Guardian*’s Martin Chulov, in Bregga, reported: “The assault on Bregga appeared to be more strategic than vengeful. The area held by pro-government forces on Wednesday consisted of a university, an airport, a wharf and some factories. Access to the power supply that feeds Benghazi is nearby; so too is an oil refinery and the Sirte Oil Company, where more than 300 foreign nationals were employed before the 17 February revolution. This does not have the sense of an insulted strongman striking out in fury; rather, it’s more like a cold, calculated series of moves aimed at changing an equation that a week ago was considered irreversible.”

In other clashes, Gaddafi’s forces reclaimed Dehiba, a border post on the frontier with Tunisia. Heavy fighting also occurred in Ajdabiya, south of Benghazi, as opposition fighters resisted a push by government troops to oust them.

Gaddafi delivered a televised three-hour speech yesterday in which he offered concessions to the opposition, including amnesty for opposition forces who surrender, a new constitution, and a freer media. He also announced low-interest loans and other schemes to help people purchase their own homes. Addressing the US and European powers, Gaddafi threatened war if they intervened and also said he would encourage Chinese and Indian oil companies to begin operations in Libya.

The dictator’s central message, however, comprised an appeal to Washington to resume its warm relations with his government. Gaddafi again warned of Al Qaeda and Islamist forces—underscoring the degree to which he had been integrated into the so-called war on terror—and played to European governments’ fear of a massive migration of refugees. “We must understand Libya is the security valve of the Mediterranean,” he declared. “We are the ones preventing illegal migration to Europe and the reach of Bin Laden there. Don’t be stupid—like the man who burned down his house because he found a mouse inside.”

The self-appointed leadership of one of the main anti-Gaddafi opposition forces formed an “interim national government council” yesterday, and called for the imposition of a no-fly zone, enforced by US-European air strikes.

Headed by former justice minister Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, the council largely consists of former Gaddafi government and military figures. Spokesman Abdel-Hafiz Hoga told a press conference that the council urged “specific attacks” and “strategic air strikes” against Gaddafi’s African mercenary forces.

The stance of the so-called interim national government council in Benghazi underscores the reactionary character of its bourgeois leadership and the urgent need for the Libyan working class to develop its own revolutionary orientation, independent of all factions of the Libyan bourgeoisie, and based on a socialist program.

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