

Obama on Libya: A war for US “interests”

By Bill Van Auken
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In his first speech to the American public on what is now a 10-day-old war against Libya, President Barack Obama Monday night made a case for US imperialism’s right to carry out military aggression anywhere in the world where it sees its “interests and values” at stake.

Riddled with contradictions, evasions and lies, Obama’s speech failed to enunciate in any comprehensible form what these “interests and values” are. Nor did it explain to the American people why and how he had arrogated to himself the right to launch a war without first explaining its causes and aims, much less seeking a vote of authorization from the US Congress.

Obama put forward a narrative of the events leading up to the Libyan intervention that was false from start to finish.

“For more than four decades,” he said, “the Libyan people have been ruled by a tyrant—Muammar Gaddafi.” Last month, he continued, “Libyans took to the streets to claim their basic rights,” but Gaddafi began “attacking his own people.” While Obama decreed that Gaddafi had lost “the legitimacy to lead,” the Libyan leader refused to listen, prompting Washington to go the UN Security Council to obtain a resolution authorizing “all necessary measures to protect the Libyan people.”

In the face of an imminent massacre in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, Obama continued, he found himself compelled to authorize military force because “It was not in our national interest to let that happen.”

First of all, this potted history fails to explain why it is that over the past decade successive US administrations established ever closer—and more lucrative—relations with the Libyan “tyrant.” In the wake of September 11, 2001, his secret service became one of the most important regional allies of the CIA in the so-called “global war on terrorism.” Bush’s national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, flew to Tripoli to cement the US-Libyan alliance.

Under Obama, relations became even more cordial. In April 2009, Hillary Clinton welcomed Gaddafi’s son—and national security minister—to the State Department, proclaiming the administration’s desire to “deepen and broaden our cooperation” and “build on this relationship.”

Only last month, another of the dictator’s sons, Khamis, spent four weeks in the US on a tour overseen by the State Department of US military installations. He was compelled to cancel a scheduled visit to the West Point military academy at the last minute in order to return to Libya to fight the so-called “rebels.” Presumably, American “values” were placed on hold during the decade in which Clinton and her predecessors concentrated on currying favor—and signing oil deals—with Gaddafi.

The violence that erupted in Libya was not merely a matter of peaceful Libyan citizens taking to the streets for democracy and then being attacked by the regime. The country fractured along regional

and tribal lines, with Western powers and intelligence agencies stoking an insurgency that developed along the lines of a civil war.

The claim that the regime was on the verge of launching a massacre of near genocidal proportions in the city of Benghazi is presented as fact, though there is no evidence that killing on any similar scale took place in other cities that had fallen to the rebels but were retaken by forces loyal to Gaddafi.

Obama claimed that the US military action had been carried out “to stop the killing” and had successfully “stopped Gaddafi’s deadly advance.” In reality, Washington has intervened in a civil war that it played no small role in fomenting. The US Air Force along with smaller numbers of warplanes provided by Washington’s NATO allies has functioned as the air force of the rebels, obliterating from the air troops loyal to the government in Tripoli, thereby clearing the way for the US-backed forces on the ground.

Having presented a false justification for the action, Obama went on to suggest that the US role was largely over, with his administration acting to “transfer responsibilities to our allies and partners,” namely NATO.

The patent aim of the speech was to present the Libyan intervention as something other than a US war. Even the staging of the address—held at the National Defense University before a captive audience of military officers, rather than in the White House Oval Office, and scheduled early so as not to interrupt prime time television—was meant to suggest that this was not something comparable to the US wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

This is another deception. Placing military operations in Libya under formal NATO command no more removes the US from playing the decisive role than the formal command of NATO in Afghanistan makes the war there any less of a US operation.

NATO is dominated by the US military, which will continue to play the decisive role in the attack on Libya. Even as the Obama administration was talking about the winding down of US military operations, the *Washington Post* reported Monday that the Pentagon has deployed AC-130 and A-10 attack planes. These are aerial gunships that are used to massacre ground troops with heavy machine guns and cannons. As the *Post* noted, the deployment was an indication that the US military has “been drawn deeper into the chaotic fight in Libya.”

Obama half-heartedly and dishonestly addressed some of the arguments made by opponents of the war. “They argue that there are many places in the world where innocent civilians face brutal violence at the hands of their government, and America should not be expected to police the world.”

While accepting that Washington cannot intervene “wherever repression occurs,” Obama insisted that “we must always measure our interests against the need for action.”

Presumably this explains why he sees no need to intervene against

the brutal crackdown by the dictatorial monarchy in Bahrain, a US ally and host of the American Fifth Fleet, but instead supports it. Or why his administration takes a similar attitude toward the bloody repression unleashed by the Yemeni dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has given the CIA and US Special Forces permission to hunt down and kill alleged Islamist militants in his country.

Speaking to the media hours before the speech, Obama's deputy national security adviser, Denis McDonough, made the same basic point a bit more bluntly: "I think it's very important that we see each of these instances...in the region as unique. We don't get very hung up on the question of precedent...because we don't make decisions about questions like intervention based on consistency or precedent. We make them based on how we can best advance our interests in the region."

In other words, when the US president starts talking about "American values" and "principles of justice and human dignity," hold on to your wallet. Such values and principles are invoked only when it provides a useful pretext for the pursuit of US interests.

And what are these interests in the case of Libya? While Washington had sought and to a large extent secured a profitable relationship with the Gaddafi regime, it had always viewed the Libyan leader—by dint of his anti-imperialist posturing and historical association with the struggle against colonialism—as an unreliable ally.

Moreover, the US ruling elite viewed with increasing alarm the signs that both Russia and China were establishing connections with Libya, in terms of oil deals, infrastructure projects and arms contracts, which threatened US interests in the Mediterranean and North Africa.

The aim of the military action is to install a more pliant regime—an out-and-out US puppet—in Tripoli.

Obama's speech points to another reason why "American values" and US "humanitarianism" were triggered by the events in Libya. He suggested a key concern was that the supposedly imminent massacre in the country would have "driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful—yet fragile—transitions in Egypt and Tunisia."

"The democratic impulses that are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of dictatorship, as repressive leaders concluded that violence is the best strategy to cling to power," he said.

What hypocrisy! First, it must be recalled, the Obama administration opposed the uprisings of the people of Tunisia and Egypt, supporting Washington's longtime allies, the dictators Ben Ali and Mubarak, until the last possible moment.

Second, eclipsing the struggles of the peoples of the region for their rights is precisely what the launching of a war by the US, in alliance with the former colonial powers in North Africa—Britain, France, Italy, Spain—is designed to do. It reaffirms imperialist hegemony in opposition to the revolutionary struggles of the working class and the oppressed masses.

As for other repressive rulers concluding that "violence is the best strategy to cling to power," they only have to look to US allies like Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia to learn that lesson.

Much of Obama's justification for the war was based on an invocation of Washington's supposed unique role as the world's guardian of moral values. "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries," he said. "The United States is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action."

Who does he think he's kidding? Just two days before his speech,

US forces committed yet another atrocity in Afghanistan as its warplanes attacked a car and killed the two men, two women and three children riding in it.

As for "images of slaughter," his administration and the Pentagon have gone to extraordinary lengths to suppress just such images now coming into public view and revealing the wanton killing of unarmed Afghans by a US Army unit that treated their dead bodies like trophies.

Obama tried to make an appeal to his supporters among Democratic liberals and the pseudo-left by contrasting the intervention in Libya—the first war begun under his administration—with the Iraq war launched by the Bush administration, which he is continuing.

First, he claimed that it was sanctified by the UN resolution and by "international support," and second he insisted that it was not meant "to overthrow Gaddafi by force." Instead, he said, US forces had been assigned merely "to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger, and to establish a no-fly zone."

The second part of this claim is a patent lie. The US military has played the decisive role in clearing a path for the US-backed armed opposition to advance against Gaddafi's forces. It has worked systematically to degrade the regime's military forces and infrastructure, with the aim of promoting regime change.

As for the UN resolution, it itself is a violation of the most fundamental tenets of the UN Charter, which rules out intervention in the internal affairs and conflicts of member nations. The message is, war is just whenever such a resolution can be rammed through and other imperialist powers can be brought onboard.

In conclusion, Obama drew attention to "what this action says about the use of America's military power, and America's broader leadership in the world, under my presidency." He noted that he would "never hesitate to use our military swiftly, decisively and unilaterally when necessary to defend our people, our homeland, our allies and our core interests."

But, he added, military force was also justified in situations in which "our safety is not directly threatened, but our interests and values are." He said that in circumstances ranging from "genocide" to "keeping the peace, ensuring regional security, and maintaining the flow of commerce," the US "should not be afraid to act."

This represents a far more expansive assertion of the right to wage war than was made even under the Bush administration, which claimed, based upon lies, that its wars were necessitated by an imminent threat from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Obama insists that no such threat is needed, merely a challenge to US "interests and values." Is there any corner of the world where the US-based transnational banks and corporations do not have at stake such "interests and values"—up to and including the "flow of commerce?" Obama is arguing for a rationale for US military aggression whenever and wherever it can serve to further the interests of America's ruling elite.

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