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Humanitarian Intervention From Above: 'No-fly Zone' Over Libya?

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Synopsis

The complexities and challenges of establishing a No-fly Zone over Libya are immense. Any attempt to do so without due consideration of its operational and strategic implications will unnecessarily put lives at risk.

Commentary

AMID FEARS of further air strikes on civilian targets by Libyan Air Force crews loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, calls for an establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya is slowly gaining political momentum in the United States and the United Kingdom. In theory, "humanitarian intervention from above" in the form of a no-fly zone secured by coalition air forces can protect civilians from the violent excesses of Gaddafi loyalists. In practice, however, there are immense difficulties in the implementation, enforcement and efficacy of such a mission across the international, strategic and operational levels.

Such concerns have been voiced by serving and retired military officers in the US and UK – including Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; General James Mattis, Commander, US CENTCOM; and Admiral Alan West, former First Sea Lord. In the current geopolitical climate where the US is already at war in the region, these difficulties will be further magnified if the no-fly zone initiative is perceived by the international community as a US-led venture.

Need for International Legitimacy

For a start, any lack of support from even a single permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is sufficient to derail any hope of a UNSC resolution on the issue. Short of a significant upsurge in violence or a rapid deterioration of conditions leading to a major humanitarian crisis, it is highly unlikely that a UNSC resolution authorising the establishment of a no-fly zone will be passed. A UNSC resolution is a badge of international legitimacy which in this case directly translates into tangible steps towards mission success.

Hundreds of aircraft, including fighters, aerial refuelling tankers and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft will be required to enforce and sustain the no-fly zone over Libya. The immense requirements of such a large-scale operation preclude the possibility of sustaining the no-fly zone from US Navy Carrier Battle Groups alone. Hence, the bulk of air assets will have to be US Air Force (USAF), Royal Air Force (RAF) and other coalition land-based aircraft operating from Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Malta, Spain and possibly Tunisia and Egypt.

However, without a clear mandate from the UNSC, it is unlikely that the necessary approval will be given by the host countries in the Mediterranean. At the very least, NATO endorsement of some sort is required to lend the mission a sense of international legitimacy. With the US already at war in the region, international consensus for such an operation is vital to mission success.

Operational Complexities

Operation Deny Flight, the enforcement of a UN-authorised no-fly zone over Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1993 to 1995 by NATO, is likely to be the no-fly zone template for both coalition forces and Gaddafi loyalists. Even in this rather clear-cut UN authorised mission supported by aircraft from twelve NATO members, the operational complexities of sustaining and enforcing the no-fly zone were immense.

Rather than challenge the overwhelming superiority of the NATO air armada in the air, Bosnian Serb forces preferred to engage NATO aircraft from concealed surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. On June 2, 1995, a USAF F-16 piloted by Captain Scott O'Grady was shot down by a Bosnian Serb SA-6 SAM system. Similar tactics were adopted by the Yugoslav Army in 1999 during Operation Allied Force with remarkable success – including the detection and downing of a USAF F-117 Stealth Fighter by an 'obsolete' but modified 1960s era SA-3 SAM system.

On the other hand, attempts by Yugoslav Mig-29s to engage NATO fighters in aerial combat resulted in the loss of all Yugoslav aircraft. Moreover, low-flying aircraft such as sub-sonic jets and helicopters were able to fly successful sorties beneath the NATO air umbrella. Considering that the Migs and Sukhois of the Libyan Air Force are even more outdated than the Mig-29s flown by the Yugoslav Air Force, it is unlikely that the Libyan fighters will contest coalition fighters in the air. Nonetheless, like in the Balkans, 'flying low and slow' sub-sonic jets and helicopters have the ability to successfully sortie out and avoid the hi-tech fast jets of Western air forces.

What the Libyan Air Defence Command does possess in the hundreds, however, are SA-3, SA-5, SA-6 and SA-8 SAM systems – many of them self-propelled. As demonstrated in the Balkans, these highly mobile SAM systems are a clear danger to coalition aircraft enforcing any proposed no-fly zone.

On 2 March 2011, General James Mattis informed the Senate Armed Services Committee that setting up a no-fly zone over Libya would first require disabling Libya's air defence system. However, there is no consensus among NATO partners on this issue. For example, do coalition aircraft attempt to take out all SAM systems with active radars or should they do so only if illuminated by the fire-controlled radar from the SAM systems? In the absence of any joint agreement on the use of military force, complications in the Rules of Engagement (ROE) will arise.

Strategic Implications

It must be remembered that the commitment of US air assets in support of humanitarian intervention in the Balkans was pre-911. Currently, there are about 100,000 US troops committed to operations in Afghanistan – many of whom depend on air support to do their job and stay alive. To move vital air assets away from the Afghan theatre of operations will have dire consequences for the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan and put the lives of servicemen and women at risk. Transfer of air assets from other theatre of operations such as the Pacific is a possibility. Such a transfer, however, will send the wrong signal to key US allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region.

A humanitarian disaster in Libya should not be allowed to happen. Nonetheless, there are better ways of preventing a humanitarian crisis than implementing an unsustainable no-fly zone in extremely challenging conditions. In sum, an ill-conceived no-fly zone contingency put into action will not only unnecessarily put lives at risk, but also backfire strategically.

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