



Mayhem in the Mediterranean: Three Strategic Lessons for Europe

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The crisis in Libya is a textbook example of a situation in which Europe, through the European Union, should have taken the lead and proved that it is an actor worth noting. Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing the use of force, the most difficult precondition for intervention to fulfil; regional support in the form of an unprecedented request for intervention from the Arab League; absolute clarity in the US that it will not take the lead. What more boxes needed to be ticked before the EU could step onto the breach and take charge of crisis management?

Alas, if all external conditions were fulfilled, the vital internal condition was missing: European unity. Luckily for Europe, and for the cause of freedom in Libya, France and the UK took the lead and with US support raised a broad coalition of North American, European and Arab countries that started military operations, with the participation of EU Member States Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. But with Italy initially most reluctant to let go of its very own special relationship with the Gaddafi regime, with Germany in New York abstaining on UNSC

1973, and with a number of Member States maintaining complete radio silence, it proved impossible for the EU as such to contribute to the military operations, let alone to take the lead through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

As a result, the EU is near absent from the scene, in spite of strongly worded statements from the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council requiring Gaddafi to relinquish power. The conduct of the military operations has been entrusted to NATO, and their political direction to the coalition of the willing. Diplomatic efforts at mediation, limited as they are, are in the hands of the United Nations and the African Union. As to a long-term vision for Libya and the region, that remains very much to be discussed.

Fortunately, thanks to French and British leadership, action is being taken. But it is a shame that it could not be done through the EU. First, the action does serve the interests of all twenty-seven EU Member States. Furthermore, the issue will end up on the EU agenda anyhow, when the long-term perspectives for the region are to be debated. The EU can yet benefit from this crisis, if it learns three key strategic lessons.

1. Stand up for your own Vital Interests

That vital European interests are at stake in the Mediterranean behoves no further explanation. Trade routes, energy supply, migration are but the most evident. The Libyan crisis has demonstrated once more what we knew already: *nobody will protect our vital interests for us*. Just like at the start of the Yugoslav conflict in the early 1990s, the US has signalled that it is willing to contribute, politically and military, but not to take the lead. And rightfully so, for this concerns Brussels much more than Washington.

EU capitals will hopefully realize that more leadership is expected from the EU, at the very least in what it has dubbed its Neighbourhood.

“Nobody will protect our vital interests for us”

2. Think and Act Strategically

Defending our vital interests requires strategy. The first strategic choice is to prioritize the regions where those interests are most directly at stake, and act accordingly.

The Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood definitely counts among those priorities. So do Central Asia and the Gulf, and maritime security from Suez to Shanghai and in the future probably in the Arctic, in view of the interests at stake. Sub-Sahara Africa can probably be added, given the continued need for external help with peace support. Another priority is assisting the UN in maintaining collective security, notably to uphold the Responsibility to Protect that now finds its application in Libya. Moral responsibility and defending our interests thus often coincide.

Three factors explain Europe’s reluctance, erroneously, to think in strategic terms about priority regions.

First, strategy is too much identified with the military. The aim is not to delineate a sphere of influence in which gunboat diplomacy will uphold Europe’s interests. Rather the idea is to identify regions where our vital interests are most likely to be challenged in order to provide a focus for a long-term strategy of *prevention*, which in a holistic and multilateral manner puts to use *all* instruments of external action, in *partnership* with local and regional actors, to create long-term stability. But we must be aware that, as a last resort, precisely because these are priority regions for our vital interests, we might be required to take military action if no other means can work, and must do our permanent military planning accordingly.

Second, the military option is too narrowly identified with EU-only military action. In fact, in crises demanding military action, depending on which partners want to support us, it can be implemented through NATO, CSDP, the UN, or an ad hoc coalition. Whichever is more likely to be effective in the case at hand. But the framework for the command and control of the military operations is but a technical matter. Regardless of the option chosen, as far as Europe is concerned the foreign policy actor directing the operation at the strategic level will always be the EU, for it is through the EU that we make our long-term policies towards these priority regions. In Kosovo European troops are deployed under NATO command; in Lebanon, under UN command; but in both cases Europe’s comprehensive long-term political strategy for the country is defined through the EU. So it ought to have been for Libya: up to the EU, not to a coalition of the willing, to assume strategic control and political direction of all actions, even though the military operations are under NATO command, for eventually we will review the Neighbourhood Policy and our specific Libya policy at the EU level as well.

Third, military action is wrongly identified with automatic participation by all Member States. In fact, as the record of CSDP proves, exactly the opposite is true. There is no expectation in the EU that all Member States take part in all operations. But there is a justified expectation that those not seeking to participate in a particular operation under discussion do not block, but provided political support to those proposing it, if it serves the vital interests of the EU and all its Members. Thus in the case of Libya, especially as the EU did adopt strong language calling for Gaddafi to leave, it could also have decided on implementing UNSC 1973 through a CSDP operation, under French or British command, without obliging all twenty-seven to take part. Unfortunately, the Council has only decided on a CSDP operation, if requested, to support the humanitarian efforts, which is more likely to create a perception of irrelevance than to have much effect on the ground.

3. Get the Right Capabilities

Acting strategically requires capabilities. In the military realm, European capabilities remain deficient. The Libyan crisis hopefully can spur EU Member States on to take action.

Taken together, the twenty-seven EU Member States are the world's second biggest military actor, after the US. But those impressive overall numbers hide strategic shortfalls in key areas, which the operations in Libya have highlighted. Precision-guided munitions (missiles), satellite observation, aircraft carriers: for lack of sufficient European capacity, US support was welcome and necessary. The coalition of the willing could have undertaken the operations without, but it would have been slower, dirtier and nastier, with a bigger risk of casualties on our side and of civilian casualties in Libya.

Unfortunately, the political fallout of the Libyan crisis may negatively affect the “Ghent

Initiative” for enhanced capability development that is now being discussed. The emphasis is on pooling and sharing of capabilities and task specialization, in order to enhance cost-effectiveness and operational output, and to create budgetary margin to address the strategic shortfalls. While it must be noted that pooling can be organized in such a way that all participants retain maximal flexibility to engage in separate operations, there is a big risk that Member States will now not be willing to engage in pooling and sharing with those seen as unlikely to join in when it comes to real operations. That impression can only be undone by those so accused, including by signalling their willingness to pool capabilities in substantive capability areas, to a substantive degree. That in turn will create the political energy necessary to ensure that the “Ghent initiative” becomes a long-term process that continues beyond this semester, in order to arrive eventually at a forum for effective strategic-level dialogue between national defence planning. Only through CSDP can such military convergence be achieved as the only way to produce more deployable capabilities by *all* Member States, which will thus also benefit the two military most powerful Member States, France and the UK.

“The picture is mixed: European countries are in the lead, but Europe is not”

One specific capability in which the EU is lacking is planning and conduct. The EU does not have a permanent operational headquarters. As a result, it cannot do permanent planning, so that whenever a contingency arises specific plans can be produced quickly. And it cannot but outsource the conduct (command and control) of an operation, either to a Member State or to NATO. The Libyan crisis demonstrates though that the availability of

NATO is not guaranteed. And even though in the end Turkish objections were overcome (though in future crises they will undoubtedly re-emerge in view of Turkey's new foreign policy stance), arguably conducting the operation under the NATO-flag, with all the connotations that carries in the region, has negative political consequences. The only EU Member States able to conduct such complex operations are France and the UK, and then only with difficulty. The inevitable conclusion is that if Europeans want to be sure they are able to act in every future contingency, the EU needs its own operational HQ. Now is the opportunity to set up an integrated civilian-military OHQ within the European External Action Service.

Conclusion

Today, the picture is mixed. European countries are in the lead, but Europe is not. Eventually, the EU will come back into the picture, for it is beyond the capacity of those individual EU Member States to set and implement long-term strategy for Libya and the Mediterranean, grateful though one must be for them assuming leadership of the current crisis management. If

the three strategic lessons listed above are learned and absorbed, the next time hopefully the EU will be in the picture from the very start, to the benefit of all concerned.

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