



European journal of American studies

13-2 | 2018
Summer 2018

Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama's Libyan Decision

Mikael Blomdahl



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13224>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.13224

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Mikael Blomdahl, « Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama's Libyan Decision », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 13-2 | 2018, Online since 19 July 2018, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13224> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.13224

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama's Libyan Decision

Mikael Blomdahl

Introduction

- 1 President Obama's foreign policy has at times puzzled both critics and supporters alike. The administration's foreign policy has for example been described as "ideological pragmatism", as abandoning the "democracy promotion tradition" of U.S. foreign policy, as "incoherent" and as "pragmatic realism" (Muravchik 2009; Nau 2010; Drezner 2011; Walt 2014; Kay 2014). Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration had been grappling with how the U.S. should respond to the democratic uprisings sweeping the region. One country, Libya, stood apart from the rest of the uprisings given that president Obama confronted issues not raised elsewhere: questions about the proper use of force and presidential power (Mann, 2012). Yet on March 19, 2011, President Obama ordered U.S. military forces to launch Operation Odyssey Dawn (OOD) against Libyan military targets. OOD was a noteworthy departure from the traditional pattern of US military interventions and has been argued to be "first new war for President Obama", a new American paradigm of "leading from behind", and a demonstration of President Obama seeking to "off-load" responsibility to American allies. (Hendrickson 2013; Lizza 2011; Goldstein 2016).
- 2 Initially, however, several factors worked against support for intervention and this case underline problems of intervention amidst both domestic and international factors. At the international level, the U.S. was in the phase of withdrawing from two unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the domestic political level, the administration faced congressional criticism, public war-weariness and financial constraints. Given these conditions, combined with reluctance of the defense officials from major military powers within NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) to become involved in Libya, there seemed little probability for any US participation in this case (Michaels, 2014: 22).
- 3 Previous research on why states participate in "humanitarian interventions" consists of a variety of rival theories, taking into account various levels of analysis, independent

factors and causal mechanisms (Wheeler, 2000; Gibbs, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2001; Bellamy, 2004; Chandler, 2004; Glanville, 2006; Hildebrandt et al. 2013). Previous analysis of the Libya intervention has, for example, examined on the viability of NATO, humanitarian interventions, international law, if the operation meant the implementation of a so-called “Obama Doctrine” in US foreign policy, questions of OOD's constitutionality and ramifications for presidential war powers, and the implications of airpower-centric strategy for forthcoming US military interventions (Barry 2011; Drezner 2011; Jones 2011; Hallam and Schreer 2012; Hendrickson 2013; Chivvis, 2014; Engelbrekt et. al, 2014; Michaels 2014).

- 4 Hence, previous research has been successful in identifying how different factors contributed to the U.S. decision to join OOD. The scholarship of the Libya intervention has , however, not accounted for how a broader framework can contribute to the understanding of this case. What has been missing is a framework that examine explanatory factors from a number of different perspectives.¹ Another limitation in previous research is the lack of debate about interaction effects between different explanatory factors. Analyses based on a combination of explanatory factors and how they interact can, therefore, further the understanding of this significant decision by the Obama administration. This article focus on the following questions: what were the necessary conditions behind the decision made by president Obama to participate in OOD, and how did these circumstances interact with each other?
- 5 The study demonstrates that it is essential to take into account factors from a number of particular perspectives in order to explain the U.S. decision. To start with, insights from a constructivist perspective on the decision making is required. The mounting use of humanitarian intervention since the end of the Cold War is mainly the outcome of states having included ethics, values and humanitarian concerns into their foreign policies to a greater extent than before (Wheeler, 2000; Finnemore, 2003; Bellamy, 2004; Chandler, 2004; Glanville, 2006). Hence, according to a constructivist view, states can perceive humanitarian intervention as a moral duty to intervene in the domestic affairs of states to protect individuals from genocide or collective persecution. The empirical analysis, below, illustrates that the U.S. decision reflected, in part, feelings of humanitarian considerations. Thus, several central actors within the Obama administration perceived the humanitarian situation in Libya as startling, and this view contributed to the decision.
- 6 In addition, it is also necessary to incorporate a rationalist perspective on foreign policy decision making. Starting from this position, proponents call attention to various forms of self-interest in decisions to intervene (Neack, 1995; Krauthammer, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2001; Hildebrandt et al. 2013). This literature is based on the assumption that, even if political leaders have an inclination to help others, the actual willingness to do so depend on other circumstances. In other words, if a potential intervention is perceived by the government to impact negatively on its self-interest, there will almost certainly be no intervention.
- 7 Finally, it is crucial to include an evaluation of the domestic politics of OOD. As argued by Hildebrandt et. al, (2013: 247) “humanitarian intervention—although waged for seemingly altruistic ends—proceeds along the same domestic political paths as other uses of force”. If states decide to engage in humanitarian efforts, they are putting their troops, defense budgets, and political support on the line. Thus, decisions of this kind can lead to political crises at home and is, therefore, not a decision that states make without difficulty (Hildebrandt, 2013: 244). The involvement of domestic political factors offers researchers

the chance to examine the specific influence of political factors on humanitarian intervention decision making (Redd 2005). Based on this, the article builds on a small but growing literature on humanitarian intervention decision making (Shannon, 2000; Glanville, 2006; Ward, 2010; Hildebrandt et. al 2013; Krieg, 2013; Doeser, 2014). Thus, this approach draws on the insight of Hudson (2005) and Yetiv (2004) that we should aim for multi-causal explanations in foreign policy research.

- 8 As demonstrated in the analysis, four particular circumstances influenced the characteristics of OOD and acted as a major influence on the timing and scope of the intervention (Marsh 2014a: 127). The first necessary circumstance was that some actors within the Obama administration perceived a feeling of moral obligation to intervene in order to help individuals in need and were not part of their nation.
- 9 The second circumstance was the legal basis and international support for the use of force, which was provided by the mandate from the UN Security Council (UNSC) on March 17. Given continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, a military operation absent international authorization and support would be to step into a risky situation with unforeseeable consequences for American credibility (Chivvis, 2014: 55; Clinton, 2014: 364).
- 10 The third circumstance was that public war-weariness and congressional skepticism and reluctance affected the decision-making by excluding any form of ground troops in the final decision. When sending troops abroad, governments want to make sure that the decision does not impact negatively on their political power at home (Kreps 2010). One way of doing this is to limit the risk of the intervention and the U.S. mission was intended to be short and involving no ground troops. Thus, by limit the risk of casualties it protects the government from electoral punishment. Hence, this circumstance provide support for theories on the domestic politics of military intervention (Howell and Pevehouse, 2005; Redd, 2005; Drury et. Al, 2010; Kreps, 2010; Hildebrandt et. al, 2013).
- 11 The fourth circumstance was that the U.S. could take a supporting role and quickly transfer control of the operation to NATO for self-interest based reasons. A limited air operation and quick transfer of command and primary mission responsibility to NATO presented the Administration with a more cost-effective approach to conserve U.S. strength in time of economic crisis and military overstretch. These findings can be related to the realist perspective, which claims that material interests are always present in the foreign policy calculations of states (Krauthammer 1999; Gibbs 2000; Mearsheimer 2001; Dueck, 2009).
- 12 In sum, President Obama's decision to launch a limited air operation on Libya can be seen as the result of a combination of factors: altruism; the legal basis and international support for the operation; domestic political constraints and the possibility to limit U.S. participation and transfer control to NATO. The next section demonstrates through an analysis of primary and secondary sources the way in which these circumstances influenced the U.S. decision making.² The final section summarizes the primary argument of the study and discusses the need for further research.

The Beginning of the Crises: Reluctance vs Altruism, 13 January–11 March

- 13 The Libyan crisis began with peaceful demonstrations against Colonel Muammar Qaddafi in Benghazi on 13 January 2011. As the protests in Libya developed into armed rebellion

in mid-February, Gaddafi responded with systematic attacks by air and ground forces, often against non-combatant civilians (Domansky et. al, 2012: 2).

- 14 In Washington heated debates over intervention started as soon as the revolution broke out (Chivvis, 2014: 6). On February 23, President Obama voiced U.S. support for the universal rights of the Libyan people and stated that the Qaddafi regime had a responsibility to refrain from violence, if not, the regime would have to be held accountable (Obama 2011a). On the day after, with their citizens out of harm's way, the U.S., France, and Britain moved quickly to sanction the Qaddafi regime. On 26 February, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1970, which imposed an arms embargo in Libya in an attempt to stop the violence (UNSCR 1970). The resolution was fully supported by the Arab League.
- 15 Within the U.S. administration, President Obama, who was reluctant to any U.S. intervention, had begun a series of discussions on how to handle Libya. Yet, the question of whether to move forward military intervention was now clearly on the table (Hastings, 2012: 286). The actors broke down into two distinct camps. On the critical side were top-level Pentagon and White House advisers who were skeptical of further military intervention, given the continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Iraq (Sanger, 2012). This group included Secretary of Defense Gates, who dubbed calls for intervention "loose talks" (Gates, 2011a). From the outset, Gates was among the most vocal skeptics against the proposal of a no-fly zone over Libya. On March 2, during a hearing before the Senate, Gates said that: "Let's just call a spade a spade. A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses (...) and then you can fly planes around the country and not worry about our guys being shot down" (Gates, 2011a). Gates pointed to US economic realities after Iraq and Afghanistan, which were not the best.³
- 16 On the other side of the division within the administration was a faction of actors within the White House and the State Department. These actors viewed Libya as an opportunity to enact a new form of humanitarian intervention, one they had been sketching out for nearly a decade. One actor, belonging to this group, UN ambassador Susan Rice, had used her first statement in the UN Security Council to endorse the principle of "the responsibility to protect" (Rice, 2009). Moreover, within the NSC (National Security Council) there were a group of staff members who joined ranks with Rice and pushed for military intervention. These staff members belonged to a core of a White House group that argued the case for humanitarian intervention (Hastings, 2011). One of these staffers, Samantha Power had devoted much of her professional career to the question of how to prevent mass killings. Alongside Rice, Power was the second senior official who had come into the Obama administration determined to prevent any further atrocities like those in Bosnia or Rwanda (Mann, 2014: 284-285).⁴
- 17 The preferences of this group reflect a life-long personal sympathy for humanitarian intervention and memories of the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Rwanda (Hastings, 2011; Mann, 2012: 339). This group was not so imbued with the more cautious traditions of the State Department and the Defense Department. They strove to ensure that the president heard alternative options from the one's from Pentagon and the military and viewed the events in the Middle East as a sign of a new era. Obama was thus confronted with conflicting views within his administration between proponents of "realism", who urged him to stay out of Libya, and proponents of "humanitarian interventions", who wanted him to act (Mann, 2012: 266-289).

- 18 On March 1, the USA Senate passed a non-binding Resolution calling for the resignation of Gaddafi and the possible establishment of a no-fly zone (S.Res.85, 2011). So, in early March, when Gaddafi's forces began to move toward Benghazi, this group of actors began to support the use of force if necessary to stop mass killings. Rhodes, the president's speechwriter, argued that the Libya case fit Obama's own criteria for humanitarian intervention (Sanger, 2012: 342).
- 19 On March 9, the president's top national security advisors met to discuss U.S strategy, but the official U.S. position did not change. The United States would support humanitarian action but nothing more (Carney, 2011). Yet, the "interventionist" group within the administration perceived that the humanitarian situation in Libya was acute and dire (Mann, 2014; Sanger, 2012). Rice and her team at the UN began preparing a resolution that called for international action in Libya.
- 20 However, this perception by itself did not lead to the conclusion that the administration should work for the use of military force within the frameworks of the UN. Thus, feelings of altruism on their own did not result in any attempts by the government to argue for a military intervention. If altruism had been the sole reason for the later decision to launch air strikes, it seems reasonable to assume that the Obama administration would have supported the establishment of a no-fly zone more actively already in the beginning of March. Instead the Obama administration adopted what can be called a 'wait and see approach', in order to await the situation in Libya and observe what the UNSC and Congress were up to. Altruism can, nonetheless, be seen as one of several reasons for the final decision on March 15. Another reason is the legal basis and international support for OOD.

Resolution 1973 and International Support, 12 March-17 March

- 21 On March 12, discussions on how to handle the Libyan crisis intensified within the UN Security Council. Within Washington, the State Department had all along been divided on how to act in Libya and Secretary Clinton was skeptical of any military actions (Cooper and Myers, 2011). At first, she stuck with Gates and worried that if an intervention failed to remove Qaddafi, or failed to gain enough international support, it would jeopardize American credibility (Clinton, 2014: 367).
- 22 From March 12, however, after the Arab League had requested action from the UN, Clinton seemed to have decided to split from Gates and work actively for an intervention in Libya. The rapid developments on the ground, Clinton's traveling in Europe and North Africa and private meeting with National Transitional Council of Libya (NTC) representatives in Paris, made Clinton shift her view as she saw the international support for such a mission (Clinton, 2014: 367). In an interview, Clinton stated that the U.N. backed intervention in Libya is "a watershed moment in international decision-making" (ABC-News 2016).
- 23 Thus, Clinton ultimately supported the intervention and formed a unified front with Rice, Power, Smith and Rhodes. Why did Clinton change her mind? Important for this change were three preconditions: two diplomatic and one humanitarian. First, on March 12, the Arab League came out in favor of a no-fly-zone. Over the following days on a trip to Paris, Cairo and Tunis, Clinton met with both Arab leaders and with those of the Libyan opposition. She reported back to Obama that the leaders in the region were serious and

- even willing to take part in the military operation (Clinton, 2014: 370). According to Clinton this was not just “hollow calls for action”.⁵
- 24 Second, British and French officials privately made clear that they not only wanted but expected America to join them. According to Clinton, British Foreign Secretary William Hague's positive stand on a military intervention “counted for a lot” (Clinton, 2014: 368).
- 25 Third, in Libya, Gaddafi's forces were approaching Benghazi where a large group of civilians could soon be left defenseless at the hands of the Libyan troops. So, the horizons for diplomacy were limited and Clinton took a decisive step: she came down on the side of intervention, supporting the views of Rice and Power (Clinton, 2014: 373). Clinton argued that absent international authorization, the U.S. would be stepping into a situation whose consequences are unforeseeable. (Clinton, 2014: 364, 367; Chivvis, 2014: 55). At a minimum, the Secretary of State had a responsibility to insist on multilateralism and it was, thus, decisive for Clinton to reach consensus with U.S. allies and get legal support for any military actions.
- 26 Overall, Clinton's view played a significant role in influencing President Obama's decisions concerning Libya (Warrick 2011). Without her presence, it is quite possible that the president would have relied more on Gates and his more cautious approach (Marsh, 2014b). President Obama was more reluctant to use force in the initial stages of the crisis in Libya, when Gates seemed to have the upper hand, but he was more aggressive in the latter stages beginning in mid-March 2011, when Clinton began to assert herself more forcefully.
- 27 Late in the afternoon of March 15, 2011, President Obama meets with members of his NSC in the Situation Room of the White House. Mullen laid out the plans for a no-fly zone. The president asked Mullen whether this no-fly zone would stop the possible bloodbath in Benghazi. “No sir”, said Mullen. “Then why are we focusing on a no-fly zone? I want more options”, asked the president (Sanger, 2012: 343). The NSC meeting restarted at nine and this time the president was presented a range of military options. One was to use no American force at all, but simply to provide intelligence and other support for the French and the British. Another was the no-fly-zone. The third was to go beyond the no-fly-zone by sending out planes to strike at Libyan targets at the ground. They went around the table and Gates again voiced his reservations. Clinton was out of the country but had made her views in favor of intervention known in advance (Cooper and Myers, 2011). Finally, the president chose the third military option (Mann, 2012: xiii). Rice and the NSC advisers argued that a no-fly zone would lead to unavoidable further military action, and this aspect should therefore be permitted in any U.N. resolution (Morris and Osborne, 2011).
- 28 On March 16, Rice signaled publicly for the first time that the Obama administration supported the Security Council's discussion of further international steps, including a no-fly zone in Libya (Rice 2011). According to Rice, it was necessary to be prepared to contemplate steps that might go beyond, a no-fly zone given that a no-fly zone has inherent limitations in terms of protection of civilians at immediate risk (Rice, 2011). One day later, following several rounds of diplomatic negotiations, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973, which authorized a no-fly zone and the use of all means necessary short of foreign occupation to protect civilians (UNSC Resolution, 1973).⁶ Among others, Clinton argued that absent international authorization, the U.S. would be stepping into a situation whose consequences are unforeseeable (Chivvis, 2014: 55;

Clinton, 2014: 364). The UNSC mandate provided the operation with a legal basis, and thereby one obstacle to U.S. military involvement had disappeared.

Domestic Political Constraints, 15 March-19 March

- 29 President Obama had entered office at a time when public opinion of the U.S. in the Middle East had fallen to historic lows (Chivvis, 2014: 19-20). The American public regarded the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as expensive adventures that had largely failed to achieve their objectives. Public opinion polls showed on 15-19 March that the vast majority of Americans were concerned about the situation in Libya, but did not consider it to be the responsibility of the US to handle. For example, a Pew Research Center (2011) poll showed that the U.S. public expressed significant war-weariness since 63 percent of the public said that the U.S. did not have any responsibility to act in Libya. 51 percent of the public approved that this was related to already overcommitted forces. In addition, US public opinion strongly opposed even a limited role for the U.S., only 13 percent emerged in public support for the introduction of US ground forces into the conflict. Indeed, polls expressed concern over objectives in Libya and according to one Gallup poll the support for the airstrikes in Libya was only 47 percent, which comparatively is lower than for other recent U.S. military actions (Gallup, 2011). Consequently, President Obama faced an American public that was reluctant and skeptical to employing US military forces in humanitarian interventions.
- 30 Concerns of how the public would react to use of force was expressed by, among others, Vice President Joe Biden, who thought that getting involved in Libya was stupid and, politically, nothing but downside, and Chief of Staff Daley who asked how the U.S. are going to explain to the American people "why we're in Libya" (Hastings, 2011; Lewis, 2012). On several occasions, President Obama emphasized the limited nature and scope of OOD and that any ground troops would not be deployed to Libya (Obama, 2011a; 2011b). Thus, the Administration's desire to uphold at least a modicum of public support shaped both the nature of the operation as well as President Obama's official statements concerning OOD (Marsh 2014a).
- 31 Also in relation with Congress President Obama emphasized the limited nature of OOD. It is clear that the president anticipated Congressional opposition to any use of force in Libya. In his official letter to Congress on March 21, he explicitly pondered on the limited nature of the operation (Obama, 2011b). The president restated that OOD would not involve U.S. ground troops and that operational control would quickly transition to NATO:
- The United States has not deployed ground forces into Libya. United States forces are conducting a limited and well-defined mission in support of international efforts to protect civilians and prevent a humanitarian disaster. (...) We will seek a rapid, but responsible, transition of operations to coalition, regional, or international organizations that are postured to continue activities as may be necessary to realize the objectives of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 (Obama, 2011b).
- 32 Congressional support for any kind of military involvement in Libya was low. Given budget cuts and the expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq the money was not available. Republicans in Congress was not interested in giving the president unrestricted authority for OOD. For example, Senator Mark Begich (D-AK) questioned Gates about the financial cost of OOD and how the Administration intended to pay for it (Toohey 2011). Based on

this, Congress in effect constrained the politically feasible policy options available to the Obama administration. In view of that, a small-scale air and naval campaign and quick turnover of command and primary operational role appeared to be the best available alternative to achieve the president's objectives in Libya (Marsh, 2014a).

- 33 On March 19, cruise missiles and bomber strikes from a U.S.-led coalition destroyed Libya's air-defense systems, forced Qaddafi's armored columns to retreat and, established a no-fly zone over the country (Chivvis, 2014: 3). The president's multiple references to limiting US involvement and exclude ground troops in the Libya intervention reflect decision-making consideration of both public opinion and Congress and its impact on OOD. Both the American general public and Congress acted as constraining domestic political factors and influenced the decision to limit the scope and duration of OOD. As demonstrated below, however, the Libya decision also involved calculations of self-interest at the international level.

NATO, Strained Resources and Burden-Sharing, 20-27 March

- 34 On 20 March 2011, when French air-strikes destroyed a Gadhafi regime column about to storm Benghazi, the Obama Administration announced that the U.S. was taking a supporting role in the conflict and would quickly transfer control of the operation to NATO (Sanger, 2012: 352-353). Two weeks later, command of the military operation to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1973 passed from the U.S. to NATO. The U.S. withdrew forces from direct combat on 4 April, although the United States continued to play a major supporting role. Why was it so important to restrict the U.S. role and let NATO take control of the operation?
- 35 The Obama Administration inherited a military that was exhausted by a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The president himself believed that a large-scale ground operation in Libya was an insensible use of US military resources. Obama maintained that the massive ground force deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan were mistakes that should not be replicated in Libya or elsewhere (Obama, 2011c). Besides, the Department of Defense was facing impending series of major defense spending cuts in response to the economic downturn and facing the American political system throughout the spring and summer 2011. These heavy reductions placed an immediate constraint on current and future U.S military operations (March, 2014: 127).⁷
- 36 Between 20-21 March, Ivo Daalder, U.S. Ambassador to NATO, worked to bring operations under NATO command. Daalder was able, in part of his own connections to the White House, to make the argument for NATO at multiple levels within the U.S. government. Others agreed and by March 21, a consensus was forming in Washington (Chivvis, 2014: 71). President Obama worked out a deal with British prime minister Cameron and French president Sarkozy under which the United States would help initiate the air campaign over Libya, and then, after a few days, let Britain and France and other NATO allies and partners take over the work.
- 37 Administration officials described Obama's strategy as one that was more focused and favored "smaller footprints" and the leveraging of unique US capabilities (Gates, 2011b). Thus, OOD denoted a new development in how the U.S. conducted military operations.⁸ The President also explained in his March 21, report to Congress that the use of military force in Libya serves important U.S. interests in preventing instability in the Middle East and preserving the credibility and effectiveness of the UNSC. The President also stated

that he intended the anticipated United States military operations in Libya to be limited in nature, scope, and duration (Obama, 2011a).

- 38 On 25 March, NATO Allied Joint Force Command in Naples took command of the no-fly zone over Libya and combined it with the ongoing arms embargo operation under the name Operation Unified Protector (OUP). NATO offered several benefits. First of all, the organization had well-established working relationships with non-NATO European powers and Arab states that had offered to participate. NATO also had command and control systems that could bring the broad coalition that would participate in the operation together into a single, coordinated chain of command (Chivvis, 2014: 71).
- 39 On 27 March, NATO assumed full responsibility for the no-fly zone and all other military aspects of the UN Security Council resolution. The president believed that the USA should play more of a supporting role and encourage its allies to shoulder more of the burden in military operations. In fact, one of Barack Obama's consistent aims has been to convince old allies to assume greater responsibility for global security. The administration has repeatedly made clear that the United States will be less keen than its predecessors to intervene abroad. Obama spoke to this new conception of US leadership in a speech on March 28 where he stated that "we should not be afraid to act – but the burden of action should not be America's alone. As we have in Libya, our task is instead to mobilize the international community for collective action" (Obama, 2011b).⁹
- 40 Obama also emphasized how the limited, supporting role of the U.S. in OOD greatly reduced the cost of operations. Washington's calls for burden-sharing with allies are not new and the positive experiences from Libya together with an increased focus on Asia-Pacific should indicate that the US will continue to encourage European allies to assume a larger responsibility for its geographical neighborhood. Yet, the administration distanced itself from the description of having "led from behind" in Libya after critics meant it implied lacking US leadership on the international arena.
- 41 There were additional national security benefits to the limited U.S. role. First of all, the realist component of OOD was to set forth a model of U.S. leadership at the international level. As argued by Ben Rhodes "If we were to sit this one out, it would have sent a signal that the U.S. isn't really a leader (Mann, 2014: 293). President Obama, thus, made it clear that the US will not hesitate to lead 'wars of necessity' in defence of European allies. But it will not take the lead in 'wars of choice' in or around Europe, such as the one in Libya. Such a stance advances Obama's goal of conserving US strength in time of economic crisis and military overstretch: a reduction in non-essential engagements saves money. A second national security side benefits to the limited role was that other NATO countries- at least the British and French- were willing to take responsibility for a large share of the war. In other words, in the Libya case allies were both paying their share and willing. The president's multiple allusions to restricting US involvement, lower costs, and sharing burdens also reflect consideration of self-interests and its impact on foreign policy.

Conclusion

- 42 President Obama's decision to launch a limited air operation on Libya can be seen as the result of a combination of factors: altruism; the legal basis and international support for the operation; domestic political constraints and the possibility to limit U.S. participation and transfer control to NATO. Without one of the factors, the president might have picked another alternative than an air operation. Altruism within the "interventionist"

group at the NSC seems to have been necessary for creating a sense of obligation to act on the part of the administration. This obligation to act became stronger when Clinton saw the international support together with the legal basis for OOD, which was provided by the mandate from the UN Security Council on March 17. The constraining factors of Congress, the public and strained resources influenced the timing and scope of the intervention in which the president perceived that U.S. could act without detriment to its self-interest at the domestic political and international level, respectively.

- 43 How did the four circumstances interact with each other in the decision-making process?
- 44 First, it is possible to observe some interactive effects linking feelings of altruism and international legal authorization. The perceived feelings of altruism of the “interventionist” group increased their hopes that the UN would be able to authorize a military operation, and when Resolution 1973 was adopted, the moral obligation of Rice, Power, and eventually Clinton was reinforced further. Given the legal basis and international support for OOD it became more difficult for the Obama administration to stay outside a military mission, because of their previous officially declared feelings of altruism in relation to Libya. Second, the possibility to transfer control to NATO contributed to the decision to limit U.S. participation. Without the interactive effects of these two factors, the government’s commitment to Libya would most likely have been limited to verbal condemnation of Gaddafi and to humanitarian support. Hence, it is possible to find interactive effects among some of the factors, but not among all of them. Consequently, the way in which different factors interact in US foreign policy should be examined further in detailed case studies as well as in comparative case studies (Doeser 2014).
- 45 What are the comparative implications of this examination of OOD? First, the combination of factors could be used as an analytical tool for examining other decisions on humanitarian intervention made by the U.S. or other liberal democratic states. When some Western powers considered an intervention in Syria in August–September 2013, President Barack Obama stated that a “red line” for US intervention in Syria would come if the Syrian regime used chemical weapons. But when evidence emerged that Syria's forces had used sarin gas in an attack that killed nearly 1,500 people in Damascus, Obama eventually backed down after threatening a military response.¹⁰ Although the Obama administration had a clear humanitarian purpose for joining an intervention in Syria, the operation would have lacked international authorization and support. Based on this, he would not have been able to transfer the operation to NATO. Thus, without one of the conditions, the U.S. will most likely not participate in the particular operation, and, here, two out of four circumstances were absent. In addition, the domestic political constraints in this case were even stronger given that the president sought congressional approval for military intervention in Syria, which he was not likely to get.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABC News: "This Week Transcript: Hillary Clinton, Robert gates and Donald Rumsfeld", March 27, 2011, Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/week-transcript-hillary-clinton-robert-gates-donald-rumsfeld/story?id=13232096>, (Accessed January 30, 2014).
- Barry, Ben (2011) 'Libya's Lessons', *Survival* 15, no. 5: 51-60.
- Bellamy, A.J. (2004) "Motives, outcomes, intent and the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention". *Journal of Military Ethics* 3(3): 216-232.
- Carney, Jay, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney", *White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, March 9, 2011.
- Chandler, D. (2004) "Culture wars and international intervention: An 'inside/out' view of the decline of national interest". *International Politics* 41(3): 354-374.
- Chivvis, Christopher (2014) *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Clinton, Hillary (2014) *Hard Choices*, London: Simon and Schuster.
- Cooper Helene and Myers, Steven Lee, "Obama Takes Hard Line with Libya after Shift by Clinton", *The New York Times*, March 18, 2011.
- Doeser, Fredrik (2014) "Sweden's Libya Decision: A Case of Humanitarian Intervention", *International Politics* 51, pp: 196-213.
- Domansky, K., Jensen, R. and Bryson, R. (2012) "Canada and the Libya coalition". *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 14(3): 1-29.
- Drezner, Daniel, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times", *Foreign Affairs* 90/4 (July/August 2011), 57-68.
- Dueck, C. (2009) "Neoclassical realism and the national interest: Presidents, domestic politics, and military interventions". In: S.E. Lobell, N.M. Ripsman and J.W. Taliaferro (eds.) *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 139-169.
- Dumbrell, John. (2008) "President Clinton's Secretaries of State; Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 6 (3): 217-227.
- Engelbrekt, Kjell, Mohlin, Marcus and Wagnsson, Charlotte (ed.) (2014) *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Erlanger, Steven and Schmitt, Eric, "NATO Set to Take Full Command of Libyan Campaign", *New York Times*, March 25, 2011, accessed June 24, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/africa/26libya.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- Finnemore, M. (2003) "The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force". Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press. Foreign Ministry.
- Gates, Robert "Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations House of Representatives", *Senate Armed Services Committee, 112th Congress*, 2 March, 2011a.

- Gates, Robert, "Hearing to Receive on Operation Odyssey Dawn and the Situation in Libya", *Senate Armed Services Committee, 112th Congress*, 31 March, 2011b.
- Gates, Robert (2014) *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Gibbs, D.N. (2000) "Realpolitik and humanitarian intervention: The case of Somalia". *International Politics* 37(1): 41–55.
- Glanville, L. (2006) "Norms, interests and humanitarian intervention". *Global Change, Peace and Security* 18(3): 153–171.
- Goldstein, Jeffrey, "The Obama Doctrine: The President explains the hardest decisions about America's role in the world", *The Atlantic Monthly* 317/3 (2016), 78.
- Jahn, B. (2012) Humanitarian intervention – What's in a name? *International Politics* 49(1): 36–58.
- Jones, Bruce (2011), 'Libya and the Responsibilities of Power', *Survival* 53, no. 3 (2011): 5–14;
Anand Menon, 'European Defence Policy from Lisbon to Libya', *Survival* 53, no. 3,; 75–90.
- Hastings, Michael, "Inside Obama's War Room". *Rolling Stone*, October 13, 2011.
- Hendrickson, Ryan, "Libya and American War Powers: War Making Decision in the United States", *Global Change, Peace and Security* 25/2 (2013), 175.
- Hildebrandt, T., Hillebrecht, C., Holm, P.M. and Pevehouse, J. (2013) "The domestic politics of humanitarian intervention: Public opinion, partisanship, and ideology". *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9 (3): 243–266.
- Hudson, V. (2005) "Foreign policy analysis: Actor-specific theory and the ground of international relations". *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1(1): 1–30.
- Kay, Sean (2014) *America's Search for Security: The Triumph of Idealism and the Return of Realism*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Krauthammer, C. (1999) "The short, unhappy life of humanitarian war". *National Interest* 74(1): 5–8.
- Kreps, S. (2010) "Elite consensus as a determinant of alliance cohesion: Why public opinion hardly matters for NATO-led operations in Afghanistan". *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6(2): 191–215.
- Krieg, A. (2013) "Motivations for Humanitarian Intervention: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations". New York: Springer.
- Larres, Klaus (2010) "Hillary Clinton as a Secretary of State: a new engagement with the world". In *The US Secretaries of State and Transatlantic Relations*, edited by Klaus Larres. New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis.
- Lewis, Michael, "Obama's Way", *Vanity Fair*, October, 2012.
- Lizza, Ryan, "The Consequentialist", *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.
- Mann, James (2012), *The Obamians: The Struggle Within the White House to Redefine American Power*, New York: Penguin Group.
- Marsh, Kevin (2014a) "Leading from Behind": Neoclassical Realism and Operation Odyssey Dawn", *Defense and Security Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 120–132.
- Marsh, Kevin (2014b) "Breaking Miles' Law: The Curious Case of Hillary Clinton the Hawk", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, doi: 10.1111/fpa.
- Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton.

- Michaels, Jeffrey (2014) "Able but not Willing: A Critical Assessment of NATO's Libya Intervention", in Engelbrekt, Kjell, Mohlin, Marcus and Wagnsson, Charlotte (ed.) (2014) *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Mindzie, M.A. (2010) "Intervention and protection in African crisis situations". *Criminal Justice Ethics* 29(2): 174-193.
- Morris, Nigel and Osborne, David, "Cameron frustrated with Obama's refusal to act", *Independent*, March 17, 2011.
- Muravchik, Joshua 'The Abandonment of Democracy', *Commentary* 127/7 (July 2009), 21-26
- Nau, Henry R., "Obama's Foreign Policy", *Policy Review* (April-May 2010), 27-47.
- Neack, L. (1995) "UN peace-keeping: In the interest of community or self?" *Journal of Peace Research* 32(2): 181-196.
- Obama, Barack, "President Obama Speaks on the Turmoil in Libya: "This Violence Must Stop", The White House, *Office of the Press Secretary*, 23 February, 2011a.
- Obama, Barack, "Letter from the President regarding the commencement of operations in Libya", The White House, *Office of the Press Secretary*, 21 March, 2011b.
- Obama, Barack, "Speech Given at the National Defense University," March 28, 2011c, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>. (Accessed March 2014).
- Pew Research Center, 'Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya: Broad Concern that US Military is Overcommitted', 14 March 2011, available at: <http://www.people-press.org/2011/03/14/public-wary-of-military-intervention-in-libya/>. (Accessed March 2014).
- Redd, Steven B. "The Influence of Advisers and Decision Strategies on Foreign Policy Choices: President Clinton's Decision to Use Force in Kosovo", *International Studies Perspectives* 6, (2005), pp. 129-150.
- Rice, Susan, "Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative, on the UN Security Council and the Responsibility to Protect, at the International Peace Institute Vienna Seminar, New York, NY, June 15, 2009, Available at: <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/125977.htm>.
- Rice, Susan, "Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the Security Council Stakeout on Libya", New York, NY, March 16, 2011, Available at: <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2011/158451.htm>. (Accessed March 30, 2014).
- Sanger, David (2012) *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising use of American Power*, New York: Crown Publishers.
- "S.Res.85 2011, - A resolution strongly condemning the gross and systematic violations of human rights in Libya, including violent attacks on protesters demanding democratic reforms, and for other purposes". 112th Congress (2011-2012), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/senate-resolution/85/text>
- Shannon, V.P. (2000) "Norms are what states make of them: The political psychology of norm violation". *International Studies Quarterly* 44(2): 293-316.
- UNSC Resolution. (1970) S/RES/1970, adopted by the UNSC on 26 February 2011, <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=S/RES/1970%20%282011%29>, accessed 7 February 2016.

UNSC Resolution. (1973) S/RES/1973, adopted by the UNSC on 17 March 2011, [http://www.un.org/ Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=S/RES/1973%20%282011%29](http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=S/RES/1973%20%282011%29), accessed 7 February 2016.

Toohy, Paul, 'War-weary US in No Mood for Another Costly Desert Fight', *The Advertiser*, 26 March 2011, 50.

Walt, Stephen, "Is Barack Obama More of a Realist Than I Am?", *Foreign Policy* (19 August 2014) http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/19/is_barack_obama_more_of_a_realist_than_i_am_stephen_m_walt_iraq_russia_gaza

Warrick, Joby "Hillary's war: Clinton credited with key role in success of NATO airstrikes, Libyan rebels", *Washington Post*, October 31, 2011.

Ward, M.R. (2010) *Identity in crisis: The politics of humanitarian intervention*. PhD Thesis, The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom.

Wheeler, N.J. (2000) *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Widman, E. (2013)

Yetiv, Steve (2004) *Explaining Foreign Policy: U.S. Decision-making and the Persian Gulf War*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London.

NOTES

1. For an exception see March, (2014a) who examine and test the precepts of neoclassical realism on OOD.
2. For a discussion of U.S. decision-making in this case, see Clinton, (2014); Gates, (2014); Hastings, (2011); Lewis, (2012); Mann, (2014); Sanger, (2012).
3. Other actors skeptical of another military commitment for over-stretched U.S. forces included Vice President Biden, CJCS Admiral Mullen, National Security Adviser Donilon, Counterterrorism Chief John Brennan, Chief of Staff Daley- These actors expressed caution in how to handle the Libyan situation. Enforcement of a no-fly zone would require scarce air assets, domestic political approval, and international authorization and divert resources from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.
4. Other staff members within this group included Ben Rhodes, Gayle Smith and Jeremy Weinstein. Rhodes, as a speechwriter, would have to write the speech explaining the decision, said that he preferred to explain why the United States had prevented a massacre over why it hadn't. See Lewis, (2012).
5. Interview with Ben Rhodes, quoted in Mann, (2012: 290).
6. The resolution also supported the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) by emphasizing the responsibility of Libyan authorities to protect the civilian population.
7. Secretary Gates believed that a Libya intervention was not a vital national interest for the United States and he expressed concerns for how overstretched and tired the military was. In a testimony before the Senate, he said that taking on another major commitment is "a very great worry for me". In meetings, Gates would ask, "Can I just finish the two wars we're already in before you go looking for new ones? (Gates, 2014: 511-512).
8. The American element of the operation was largely restricted to knocking out Libyan air defenses in order to allow NATO and allied aircraft to establish the UN-mandated no-fly zone and then providing support to NATO and allied forces as they conducted interdiction.

9. President Obama also declared that; “Because contrary to the claims of some, American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all” (Obama, 2011b).

10. The president eventually brokered a deal with Russia that saw Assad agreeing to destroy most of the regime's arsenal of chemical weapons.

ABSTRACTS

This article investigates why President Obama in 2011 ordered US air and naval forces to launch Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya. The president's decision was the result of a combination of factors, including feelings of altruism, the legal basis for the operation, international support, domestic political constraints and the possibility to limit U.S. participation. The case study attempt to trace the process by which Obama came to the decision to use force in Libya by relying on a multitude of different sources, such as government reports, speeches and remarks, parliamentary records, media coverage, secondary sources.

INDEX

Keywords: Operation Odyssey Dawn, the United States, foreign policy decision-making, humanitarian intervention, domestic politics

AUTHOR

MIKAEL BLOMDAHL

Mikael Blomdahl is currently Assistant Professor in Political Science at Stockholm University. He was awarded a PhD in 2009 for a thesis on the domestic political impact on U.S. foreign policy. His recent publications include articles in *Comparative Strategy*, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* and *Armed Forces and Society*. His primary research interests are Foreign Policy Analysis, U.S. foreign policy and humanitarian interventions.