

Recent actions in Libya show that ‘liberal interventionism’ to support the human rights of civilians is not exempt from politics

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Recent actions by NATO in Libya seem to some to represent a new ‘liberal interventionism’, and has started debates about different countries’ levels of involvement, especially after the recent withdrawal of US air power. [Chris Brown](#) finds that against this background the Western intervention in Libya, ostensibly to protect civilians and their human rights, is an unavoidably political one.

When, on March 17th 2011, the UN Security Council passed [UNSC 1973](#) authorising UN members to establish a ‘No Fly Zone’ (NFZ) and take ‘all necessary measures’ to protect the civilian population of Libya, there was some reason to think that this represented a genuine break with the past. Here, for once, we have an intervention to prevent human rights violations by a sovereign member of the UN which is supported by a UNSC Resolution and by the local regional organisation, the Arab League – this seems to validate the idea of a ‘[Responsibility to Protect](#)’ (R2P) which the UN acknowledged warily in [2005](#) but had not previously put into operation and, perhaps, to represent the coming of age of liberal interventionism after the false starts of Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq 2003. Three weeks on, does this positive assessment still hold true?

Of course, it is far too early to say – but then it always will be. Consider Iraq – a success and ‘mission accomplished’ in the Spring of 2003, a disaster three years later at the height of the insurgency, and now? Too soon to say ‘mission really accomplished’, but it is noteworthy that Iraq is one of the few Arab countries which is not facing calls to establish a democracy, because it already is one, of a sort, and that the Foreign Minister of Iraq is [now chairing](#) the Arab League and leading the calls for reform in the region. So perhaps something useful can be said even three weeks in to what is likely to be quite a long drawn out affair.

Source: Libya BRQ (CC)



First, let’s look at how Resolution 1973 was passed – 10 votes in favour (one more than was needed) none against, and 5 abstentions. The 5 abstainers included two Permanent members of the Council (Russia and China) along with Germany, India, and Brazil – that is all of the so-called BRICS except for South Africa, who voted in favour, along with the other two African members of the Council, Nigeria and Gabon. These BRIC abstentions are significant, first because they weren’t actually the predicted ‘no’ votes (it seems to be the case that the

African members of the Council were crucial in influencing China at least to abstain) but, more ominously for the future of R2P and liberal internationalism, also because they come from powers whose influence on world affairs can only grow over the next decades. If China and India are indeed emerging superpowers, their scepticism about the role of the UN in international human rights protection – expressed also in their opposition to the International Criminal Court – is likely to become more significant as time passes.

1973 was proposed by Britain, France and Lebanon, the latter representing the Arab League – and that points to another very interesting feature of the vote, the fact that the US was not the leading voice calling for intervention. In fact, opinion in the US, and in the administration, was [divided](#) on the

issue, with Robert Gates at Defence leading the internal sceptics, and Susan Rice at the UN, with the support of Hillary Clinton at State, leading the interveners. In the upshot, President Obama gave his support to intervention, with US cruise missiles and bombers destroying Gaddafi's air defences on the first two days of the campaign – but he has now (since the 5th of April) withdrawn US warplanes from active patrolling, leaving the job to other NATO allies, in particular France and the UK.

This, I think, is significant. Twenty years ago, in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War, the (first) Bush administration took the view that European problems should be handled by Europeans, but the failure of 'Europe' to address effectively the Balkan crises of the 1990s meant that the US actually found itself taking the lead in the campaigns of the period. Ten years ago the second George Bush came to office with a similar limited view of the potential role of the US in the world, but was knocked off course by 9/11 and the US took the lead in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now in 2011, Barack Obama is delivering on the position George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker set out 20 years ago; he is saying to the Europeans (and to allies such as Egypt): *the Mediterranean is your inner sea, not ours – we will help you with the things you can't do (hence the first wave of bombing) but we won't do the things that you can do for yourselves*. Obama has been attacked from all sides in the US for this position, but it seems to me to both wholly reasonable in its own terms, and completely consistent with the US national interest.

What of events in Libya itself? Here we see some of the limits of the UN Resolution, and indeed some of the general problems with the notion of intervention in support of human rights. UNSC 1973 allows for 'all measures necessary' to protect the civilian population – but does that include protecting/assisting a civilian militia which is on the offensive against Gaddafi's regular forces? Does 'all means necessary' include regime change? The Anglo-French position is that there will be no peace until Gaddafi goes, but that isn't what UNSC 1973 said – and it wouldn't have passed if it had said that. It is clear both (i) that Cameron and Sarkozy are correct on the substance of the matter (Gaddafi cannot be left to plot revenge), and (ii) that as soon as military action to bring about regime change comes on the agenda, the consensus in support of intervention collapses.

There is, I think, a wider point here. R2P and other consensus-oriented interventionist notions come up against this kind of contradiction because they are attempts to find non-political solutions to problems that are, in their very essence, political. 'Protecting civilians' sounds like a non-political idea we can all subscribe to, but when civilians are being attacked (as they certainly were in Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya) they are being attacked for a political reason, and, if you protect them, you are, whether you like it or not, intervening in local politics. Neo-conservatives have the advantage of a clear argument here – they know they are acting politically in support of regime change and believe this to be perfectly legitimate, because they think that the kind of politics they want to install are unambiguously better than all alternatives. Liberal interventionists, on the other hand, find themselves mired in ambiguity – they want to see human rights defended and liberal values protected, but they want everyone to agree both that this is a desirable goal and with the way it is to be achieved, which, unfortunately, they don't. Moreover (and here we go back to the abstentions in the UNSC) those who do not support the wider liberal programme are likely to have more influence in the future.

In short, there are lots of issues at stake in the turmoil in Libya – which, as well as deciding the future of that troubled country, may also turn into the issue that determines the fate of liberal interventionism.

This article first appeared on the [International Affairs at LSE blog on 8 April](#).

See [here](#) and [here](#) for other blogs by Professor Brown on Libya.