

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on Military Intervention in Libya
Senator Richard G. Lugar
April 6, 2011

I thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing and join him in welcoming our distinguished witnesses.

The Libyan civil war continues with little prospect that the opposition will be able to defeat the Qadhafi regime's forces in the near term, even with the backing of coalition air strikes. The President and members of his team have stated that the removal of Qadhafi is a diplomatic goal of the United States, but not a military goal. The Administration has not addressed specifically what its plans are for supporting the rebels or how the conflict might be concluded. The President has been silent on what our responsibilities may be for rebuilding a post-Qadhafi Libya. We are left with a major commitment of U.S. military and diplomatic resources to an open-ended conflict backing rebels whose identity is not fully illuminated. This lack of definition increases the likelihood of mission creep and alliance fracture.

The President has not made the case that the Libya intervention is in the vital interests of the United States. Calculations of our vital interests must include the impact of any elective military operation on our \$14 trillion national debt and on an armed forces strained by long deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beyond these resource considerations, the application of American power in Libya is misplaced given what is happening or may happen elsewhere in the Islamic world. When measured against other regional contingencies, Libya appears as a military conflict in which we have let events determine our involvement, instead of our vital interests.

The sustained security problems presented by Iran, which is aggressively pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, and Pakistan, which already has one, are magnitudes greater than the problems posed by Libya.

Clearly, with a combined 145,000 American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and years of American effort invested in both, those countries have to be considered a far higher priority than Libya.

Although Qadhafi could conceivably lash out with a terrorist attack, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and Yemen, which is the epicenter of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, pose the most intense threats of a significant terrorist attack in the near term.

Politically, the outcome of changes in Egypt, which has a population thirteen times greater than Libya's and is a cultural and military power within the Arab world, will have far more impact on the strategic calculations of other nations than Libya, with its tribal conflicts and idiosyncratic politics driven by Qadhafi and his sons.

Meanwhile the Arab-Israeli peace process is going nowhere, with additional uncertainties in the region being created by the popular upheavals in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and other nations.

In this context, a rational strategic assessment would never devote sizable military, diplomatic, economic, and alliance resources to a civil war in Libya.

The President has attempted to link U.S. humanitarian intervention in Libya to strategic interests in the broader Middle East, but this link is extremely tenuous. In his March 28 speech, the President stated that if Qadhafi succeeded in violently repressing his people: “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.”

But leaders in the region, as well as ordinary citizens, are making calculated decisions based on local circumstances, not what happens in Libya. It is not apparent that any government has taken a softer line on protestors because we have bombed Libya. In fact, Governments and populations in the region recognize that a coalition intervention on behalf of citizen’s movements is less likely because forces are committed to Libya and because the strategic rationale for intervention depended on coalition and Arab League support. There will be no Arab League request to support the protesters in southern Syria or the Shia in Bahrain, for example.

The White House has emphasized the role being played by allies. I applaud any burden sharing that is achieved. But in a revealing development earlier this week, the coalition called on the United States to continue air strikes during a period of bad weather, because our capability exceeded that of other nations. Even if allies do assume most of the burden for air operations, the longer these operations extend, the more help from the United States is likely to be required.

Nor should we assume that missions performed over Libya by Britain, France and other NATO allies are necessarily cost free to the United States. The commitments of our allies in Libya leave NATO with less capacity for responding to other contingencies. We need to know, for example, whether the Libyan intervention will make it even harder to sustain allied contributions to operations in Afghanistan. Will allies say “we are dealing with the Libyan problem, as you asked, but we can’t continue to do this without reducing our military commitments elsewhere?”

Most troubling, we don’t know what will be required of the United States if there is an unanticipated escalation in the war or an outcome that leads to U.S. participation in the reconstruction of Libya. At our hearing last week with Deputy Secretary Steinberg, many Senators raised concerns about these scenarios. The last ten years have illuminated clearly that initiating wars and killing the enemy is far easier than achieving political stability and rebuilding a country when the fighting is over. The American people are concerned about potential commitments that would leave the United States with a large bill for nation building in a post-civil war Libya.

The President must establish U.S. goals and strategies with much greater clarity. He has not stated whether the United States would accept a long-term stalemate in the civil war. If we do not accept a stalemate, what is our strategy for either ending Qadhafi’s rule or exiting the coalition? Without a defined endgame, Congress and the American people must assume U.S. participation in the coalition may continue indefinitely, with all the costs and risks that come with such a commitment.

I look forward to the insights of our witnesses.

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