



Challenges Facing NATO in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq

By John Duke Anthony

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Editorial Note: *The following essay by Dr. John Duke Anthony is a longer version than one that was written earlier for the website of the Abu Dhabi-based Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR; <http://www.ecssr.ac.ae>). The ECSSR is one of the GCC countries' oldest and most productive think tanks and research institutes on public policy issues. The essay's shorter version can be accessed on the ECSSR's website at: <http://bit.ly/oQzeAV>.*

The implications of NATO's role in helping end an era of governance in Libya, the continued drawdown of American armed forces in Iraq, and the simultaneous marking of the tenth anniversary of the NATO-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan -- the longest war in American history -- are momentous. As such, the meaning and the kinds of dilemmas they pose for Afghans, Iraqis, Libyans, NATO, and the United States merit examination. The clouded uncertainties of what may follow in the wake of these events will be analyzed and assessed for some time yet to come.

This is as it should be. However, the process of doing so will be remiss if it fails to focus on a set of interrelated challenges linking what NATO has and has not done in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq to what is likely to be the impact upon these countries, NATO, and the United States in the immediately foreseeable future.



French Mirage 2000Ds participating in NATO's Operation Unified Protector (Libya).

That the crises in security, stability, governance, material well being, and much else in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq have heavily pressured the Afghan, Libyan, and Iraqi people, as well as NATO and its members, are self-evident. Of the three countries in which NATO has intervened that are examined here, Afghanistan, in contrast to Libya and Iraq, clearly represents a larger number and more complex array of challenges. Not surprisingly as a result, it is hardly a secret that Britain and France, representing the two largest and strongest military powers among the coalition's European members, have sought to bring their countries' presence and role there to an expeditious end.

Apples versus Oranges

The importance of Libya -- and, of course, Iraq, about which volumes have been written and need not



Libya.

be examined at length here -- is of an altogether different nature. It is a maritime neighbor of France and other southern European nations. It is a huge country whose hydrocarbon energy resources are presently of great importance to Europe's battered economies. In addition, with its small population, immense expanse of territory, and the longest unspoiled coastline of any Mediterranean country, its future economic potential is enormous. In addition, since the end of World War II, Libya's geopolitical assets have at times been, and could yet again prove to be, of far greater importance to neighboring NATO than distant Afghanistan.

If nothing else, NATO's intrusion in Libya has compelled many observers to revisit a seeming consensus dating from the end of the Cold War. The consensus was that, having succeeded in its goal of containing the Soviet Union dating from when NATO was established in 1949, perhaps the time had come for the

organization to disband. Yet the past several months clearly indicate that France and Great Britain, along with Denmark, Italy, Norway, and the United States, are disinclined to write the organization's obituary.

Consensus Frayed or Re-Forged?

The reality of this newly-minted consensus is sobering. After all, a case can be made that NATO member states voted to support the United States in Afghanistan in a moment of international solidarity following the shock of September 11, 2001. Indeed, French president Jacques Chirac, whose country was not a member of NATO at the time and who would denounce the American-led Iraq War in 2003, sent troops to Afghanistan, as did Germany. Yet in Libya, the alacrity and commitment with which France, Britain, Spain and Italy have taken up the NATO banner is noteworthy.

However, NATO's interventions in these two countries (and the intervention of numerous among its members in Iraq) have brought to the fore two challenges for which no definitive answers are as yet in sight. The first challenge is the perceived lack of clarity regarding what the actual end game is, and the second is the American and European economic and financial crises.



NATO Defence Ministers meet in Brussels in June 2011.

As for the prospects of a successful end game/massive foreign troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is little reason to believe that either the process or the concluding result will resemble the hubristic

predictions and forecasts of the media representatives of various NATO commanders' public affairs officers and other foreign military leaders on the ground.

Significantly heightened domestic political pressures and demands to withdraw NATO countries' armed forces from Afghanistan and Libya are already taking place sooner than many had expected or believed would occur. Against this steady drumbeat of difficult-to-answer questions by people from all walks of life within and among NATO member countries, many in the realm of public affairs argue that it is appropriate to ask, "Why are we still there?" "For how much longer?" "And at what costs?"

Certainly little in the modern history of Western troop withdrawals from other countries bears resemblance to the declared timelines of most occupying government's communications representatives. America's exit from Vietnam, for example, was driven less by Washington officialdom's preferred dates and goals than by the relentless and ultimately effective demands and objectives of Vietnam's national, provincial, and local guerrillas. Their strategic goal: to drive the invading occupying alien power from their midst.



Afghanistan.

| NATO OTAN | | International Security Assistance Force | | | | | | ISAF |
|----------------------------|----------------------|---|--|-------------------|-------|--|---|----------------|
| Troop Contributing Nations | | | | | | | | |
| | Albania | 286 | | Germany | 4,998 | | Poland | 2,580 |
| | Armenia | 126 | | Greece | 158 | | Portugal | 140 |
| | Australia | 1,550 | | Hungary | 433 | | Romania | 1,948 |
| | Austria | 3 | | Iceland | 4 | | Singapore | 38 |
| | Azerbaijan | 94 | | Ireland | 7 | | Slovakia | 309 |
| | Belgium | 521 | | Italy | 3,918 | | Slovenia | 78 |
| | Bosnia & Herzegovina | 55 | | Jordan | 0 | | Spain | 1,523 |
| | Bulgaria | 602 | | Republic of Korea | 350 | | Sweden | 500 |
| | Canada* | 520 | | Latvia | 173 | | The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** | 163 |
| | Croatia | 317 | | Lithuania | 235 | | Tonga | 55 |
| | Czech Republic | 622 | | Luxembourg | 10 | | Turkey | 1,840 |
| | Denmark | 750 | | Malaysia | 46 | | Ukraine | 23 |
| | El Salvador | 24 | | Mongolia | 114 | | United Arab Emirates | 35 |
| | Estonia | 159 | | Montenegro | 36 | | United Kingdom | 9,500 |
| | Finland | 156 | | Netherlands | 183 | | United States | 90,000 |
| | France | 3,935 | | New Zealand | 188 | | | |
| | Georgia | 937 | | Norway | 428 | | | |
| | | | | | | | Total | 130,670 |

In Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop contributing nations as of September 9, 2011.

Economic, Financial, and Fiscal Policies

Parallel to the dwindling support among NATO countries for continuing the Afghanistan intervention is



President Barack Obama and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan deliver remarks at the White House in Washington, D.C. in 2010.

the second fundamental challenge noted above: namely, money. In this regard, focusing on matters of finance in the case of Afghanistan (and also of Iraq and Libya) has virtue. Consider, for example, that the U.S. debt currently exceeds 100% of its gross domestic product, the highest it has been since 1947. This is more than alarming: it is ominous.

Besides, there is no doubt that anemic economic growth in much of Europe, coupled with the expanding debt crisis and challenges to the near-term viability of the Euro, threaten the material well-being of all 27 EU states. For these reasons, both naysayers and those with a more positive outlook regarding the prospects for what may be possible in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq agree that the costs for these wars is staggering. For example, as I write, the United

States has spent \$444 billion on the war in Afghanistan. If the Fiscal Year 2012 allocation is adopted by the Congress, that figure will rise to \$557 billion -- on top of nearly \$800 billion spent since 2003 in Iraq, \$6.6 billion of which cannot be accounted for.

For lenders and borrowers alike then, there can be little doubt that the lingering effects of the recession that commenced in late 2007 remain in place in late 2011. The extraordinary list of ongoing employment, financial, economic, debt, liquidity, credit, and housing crises with global reach that surfaced in its wake cannot be swept under the rug.

Mission Accomplishable?

Libya, too, needs to be examined with regard to its possible future implications for NATO actions. To begin with, NATO leaders in general were appalled and repulsed by the thought that large scale atrocity could possibly occur only a few hundred miles across the Mediterranean from Western Europe. In addition, economic and financial analysts speculated that the inevitable international sanctions to punish and isolate Libya, if they did not intervene, could put Libyan oil production and exports off limits -- something the struggling European economies could ill afford.

A further factor was the perceived need, advanced by advocates of ethical principles and elemental respect for basic morality and human dignity, to accommodate the political and human rights demands of the many protesters within the NATO countries who shared wholeheartedly the Libyan rebels' stated goals.



Libyan rebels at the main checkpoint near the strategic oil town of Brega.

Bearable Risks?

Yet NATO intervention in Libya has hardly been a unified affair. Indeed, there have been naysayers within NATO's ranks. Officials from NATO member-states Germany and Poland, for example, have openly challenged the utility of combat operations. They have also voiced reservations regarding the absence thus far of any agreement about the mission's long-term goals.

Germany, in keeping with its longstanding policy of military restraint, has been famously reticent to condone military missions of any kind anywhere, much less participate in them. And Poland, one of NATO's newest members, has yet to demonstrate a capacity to persuade a majority of the organization's other members to adopt its point of view in matters such as these.

Even if rhetorical declared support is counted as positive and a form of "in-kind" participation -- in keeping perhaps with a variant of Churchill's famous dictum, "They also serve who only stand and cheer" -- no more than half of NATO's 27 members have taken part in the operation. Of these, only seven have participated in air strikes.

And, even among these seven, most were embarrassed that their aircraft and other forces ran out of ammunition so quickly and had to be re-supplied by the United States. Others could not deny that their missions would have been far less effective had it not been for the United States providing aerial surveillance and drone-assisted target guidance.

Non-Arab NATO Members' Roles: A Definable Difference?

What is more, what has happened with regard to Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, and other regional hotspots has occurred in a year when many have viewed nearly the entire Arab world through the prism of their domestic situations and challenges. For example, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE played leading roles in helping to restore order and stability in Bahrain, site of the United States Fifth Fleet, the forward deployed arm of American, NATO and allied countries' interests in Arabia, the Gulf, and beyond.



A building in Tripoli destroyed by a NATO strike.

In addition, Qatar, UAE, and Jordanian forces, operating from Crete and elsewhere near Libya, joined with NATO contingents to provide, among other things, important logistical, surveillance, and cost-free refueling supplies in support of NATO-targeted air sorties against regime loyalist strongholds. They did so with a view to ensuring that the

legitimately-feared possible massacre of Libyans in the vast province of Benghazi and elsewhere in the country did not occur.



A group of women demonstrate in support of the rebels outside Benghazi's main courthouse.

However, such support for NATO operations by non-member states -- increasingly vital to the stressed finances of Western governments -- is, in this instance as it has been on other occasions, the product of complex national and regional interests and cannot be taken for granted in any future operations.

Be Careful What One Asks For?

And then there is the United States. Before leaving office, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates gave a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels in which he warned members that the United States is increasingly less willing to be NATO's primary financial benefactor when the record reveals that Europeans have contributed comparatively so little to the organization's costs. Gates' successor, former Congressman and CIA Director Leon Palletta, said much the same thing in the first week of October.

Over the past ten years, the U.S. share of NATO's costs has risen from 50% to 75%. For context, only Britain, France and Greece spend as much as two percent of their respective GDPs on defense (compared to America's five percent). Germany, with Europe's largest economy, spends barely more than one percent of GDP on defense.



U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates speaking at a press conference in Brussels in June 2011.

Yet Gates' and Panetta's implied admonition to the NATO countries to assume more of the financial burden of covering the cost of NATO's operations was not received by all U.S. armed forces planners without reservation. For example, some American military strategists fear that if various European NATO countries were to pay a larger share of NATO's expenses, the act of their doing so would hardly come cost-free.

Certainly logic and notions of elemental equity, burden-sharing, and a more well-defined division of labor among the participating countries would likely produce their own effects. Not least among them is that these countries would rightly demand an increased role in NATO decision making, thereby potentially vitiating not only overall U.S. dominance and control but possibly the nature and focus of various foreign policy objectives as well.



The President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen sign a declaration on Enduring Partnership in Lisbon in November 2010.

In addition, there is no guarantee that the Libyan campaign will deliver dividends following Gadhafi's removal. The murder of prominent Libyans is but one example that the country's opposition groups are divided by tribal and ideological differences. As the American-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, this raises the fear about what all too frequently follows the collapse or significant diminution

of governmental effectiveness is violent and protracted civil war.

It is with a view to exploring the possibility of preventing such a disastrous outcome in the case of Libya that the representatives of some 60 nations gathered in Paris early in September of this year to discuss and deliberate the options.

Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that the United States and Western Europe -- after a decade of debilitating armed conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq and being awash in a perceived tsunami of economic woes -- can still muster the will and means to fight in Libya, if far less in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It says a great deal, too, about the popularity of NATO in Europe and about the United States' continued ability to lead the organization. Whether that will prove to be a boon or a curse for the people of Afghanistan and Libya, to which one must also add the people of Iraq, and what lasting if any discernibly significant effect it will have upon NATO and its members, remains to be seen.

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Additional Publications from Dr. Anthony can be found on the National Council's website www.ncusar.org.

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Pictures on page 5 (of Libyan rebels in Brega) and 6 (women in Benghazi) courtesy of the Al Jazeera English Flickr Photostream: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/aljazeeraenglish/>