

RESPONSIBILITY AND LEADERSHIP

If an Obama doctrine exists, it is not about the use of force. This president is too pragmatic and too smart to lay down any 1-size-fits-all rule about something as weighty as the use of force in a world as complex as this one. To the extent it exists, in the sense of a clearly articulated position toward other nations, the Obama doctrine is about power and leadership. Great powers in the 21st century must earn their status by demonstrating their willingness to take “their share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges.” That was the language of Obama’s first address to the U.N. General Assembly in 2009. He continued: “Nothing is easier than blaming others for our troubles, and absolving ourselves of responsibility for our choices and our actions. Anybody can do that. Responsibility and leadership in the 21st century demand more.”

Obama sounded the same theme in his speech to American public about why he decided to intervene in Libya. “To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and - more profoundly - our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are,” he declared. That global responsibility also underpinned the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, which “reiterat[ed] the responsibility of the Libyan authorities to protect the Libyan population.” Even a nation as small as Qatar explained its decision to join the coalition enforcing no-fly-zone in these terms: “We are [a] physically small country,” Qatari Air Force Chief of staff Gen. Mubarak al-Khayanin acknowledged, “but with leadership comes responsibility. Certain countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt haven’t taken leadership for the last three years. So we wanted to step up and express ourselves, and see if others will follow.”

That is a leadership test that Germany failed in abstaining on Resolution 1973. Nothing in the resolution required those nations voting for it to participate in military action. Indeed, the responsibility to protect doctrine itself is couched in terms of permission rather than duty. The resolution that the Security Council passed in 2006 proclaimed that all governments have a responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and grave and systematic war crimes. If they fail in that responsibility the international community has the right to intervene, but not the obligation. The critical issue with regard to Libya was for the international community to make clear that the international community will not stand by and allow governments to slaughter their own people in the 21st century as it did in the 20th. For a nation like Germany, with its dual history of genocide and subsequent exemplary international citizenship, this vote was an opportunity to demonstrate what kind of a permanent Security Council member it would be. The result was not encouraging.

But now we are two weeks into the intervention; Gaddafi’s air defenses and much of his heavy armor have been destroyed; NATO has taken over command from the U.S.; opposition forces and Gaddafi’s army appear to have reached something of a stalemate on the ground. What next? In the meantime, scale and brutality of the killing in the Ivory Coast is rising rapidly, raising the question why the international community is intervening north of the Sahara but not south.

The answer in Libya is intense diplomacy. Force can win wars but not make peace. That is the lasting lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan, one the U.S. military understands very well. It is the great German military strategist Carl von Clausewitz who said that war is politics carried out by other means. Perhaps, but war cannot end until politics takes over again.

Libya will not be resolved militarily. Gaddafi can't win, precisely because he succeeded in remaining in power only through the tyranny of brutality and fear. That means killing all those who opposed him, as he threatened to do in Benghazi and undoubtedly did in Misurata and in Tripoli itself after the first wave of opposition. But NATO's mandate to protect civilians largely deprives him of those tools. He might be able to surround towns, but he will not be able to take them.

On the opposition side, evidence from the battlefield thus far is not encouraging. In theory, if Gaddafi really has no support other than from mercenaries he pays and conscripts he forces to fight by threatening their families and other such techniques, mass defections from his army should start occurring as it becomes clear that his cash and credibility are running out, just as defections are mounting from his inner circle. Then the rebels will not have to fight their way into towns, but simply surround them and encourage residents to rise up. That is what appeared to happen at the outset of the conflict. But if not, then the only hope of peace is a bargain in which Gaddafi leaves power and leaves the country and some representative council – including Gaddafi supporters if not a member of his family – manages a transition to a new government.

Here is the point at which “the West” must resist the temptation to expand the UN mission to include regime change. The Libyans themselves have said from the beginning that they wanted help to level the playing field, but that this was their fight. They are right. The history of revolutions in Europe and in the Americas predicts that the road to stable liberal democracy is unlikely to run smooth. Much will go wrong. And when it does, it is vital that the Libyans have to take responsibility for and learn from their failures as well as their successes.

Regarding other interventions, the criteria that had to be met before the U.S. would vote for Resolution 1973 – a request by the Libyan opposition and endorsement of a no-fly-zone by the Arab League. Each layer of approval is essentially a proxy for the magnitude of the atrocities being committed. The brutality of a government's actions must shock the conscience of its region for the regional organization to be willing to take action. If a regional organization is willing to ask the UN to act against one of its members, then the UN is likely to respond affirmatively. In those cases where a regional organization will not act, then the actual or threatened crimes must be of a magnitude sufficient to shock the conscience of the world sufficiently for nations outside the region to act notwithstanding a different regional consensus.

That is a cold calculation, one that sadly guarantees that countless atrocities will go unheeded and unpunished by the international community. But it is the answer to the argument that to intervene in

one country will require intervention everywhere. The scales are still tipped sharply against individuals at the point of their governments' guns.

But with all our hesitation, inconsistency, and uncertainty, intervening in Libya was the right thing to do. Tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of Benghazians are alive as a result. That does not compensate for the thousands and indeed millions of people dying from Chechnya to the Congo. It does not necessarily offer a path to peace in Libya. It is likely to mean more invocations of the responsibility to protect by potential victims in many future conflicts. But it will also stand as a collective exercise of global power not only on behalf of international peace and security, the language of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, but also on behalf of individual citizens against a murderous government. The responsibility to protect is an unavoidable part of the responsibility of global leadership.