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Libya: Why Are We Involved

A Policy Update Paper

By

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Mr. Burney headed the Transition team for Prime Minister Harper from January to March, 2006. He was President and Chief Executive Officer of CAE Inc. from October 1999 until August 2004. Prior to joining CAE, Mr. Burney was Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Bell Canada International Inc. (1993-1999).

From 1989-1993, Mr. Burney served as Canada's Ambassador to the United States. This assignment culminated a distinguished thirty-year career in the Canadian Foreign Service, during which he completed a variety of assignments at home and abroad, including a period as a Deputy Minister of External Affairs.

From March 1987 to January 1989, Mr. Burney served as Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister. He was directly involved in the negotiation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. He was the Prime Minister's personal representative (Sherpa) in the preparations for the Houston (1990), London (1991) and Munich (1992) G-7 Economic Summits.

In February 1992, Mr. Burney was awarded the Public Service of Canada's Outstanding Achievement Award.

In July 1993, he was named an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Mr. Burney was conferred Honorary Doctor of Laws degrees from Lakehead University, Queen's University, Wilfrid Laurier University, Carleton University and the University of Windsor.

His memoir of government service - *Getting it Done* - was published by McGill-Queen's in 2005.

Mr. Burney was born in Fort William (now Thunder Bay), Ontario, and was educated at Queen's University, where he received an Honours B.A. and M.A. He is married to Joan (Peden) and has four sons.

We have jumped into Libya with our eyes wide open but does anyone know where it will lead or why Canada is so directly engaged? The emotions and humanitarian instincts to do “something” are understandable but so, too, are arguments advocating prudence.

After weeks of deliberation, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution sanctioning a “No-Fly” zone and all necessary means to “protect civilians” – a fine euphemism that, at least initially, gained the endorsement of the Arab League. But for how long?

While everyone knows the US is in the lead implementing the “No-Fly” zone, the Americans are labouring mightily to drive from the back seat. No wonder. The Administration seemed divided over the wisdom of military engagement in a third Moslem country. The US military is already severely stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan and the US’ fiscal situation leaves little room for yet another costly and vaguely defined military adventure. Especially, as Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, contended persuasively, in a country like Libya where, unlike Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the US has no overriding strategic reason to get involved. Besides, argues Haass, a “No-Fly” zone would “not be decisive given that aircraft and helicopters are not central to the regime’s military advantages. The only way to level the playing field would be to put trainers, advisers and special forces on the ground.”

Even when a “No-Fly” zone was deployed in Iraq after Saddam Hussein began to attack his own people, much more was needed to evict him from power. Furthermore, argues Haass, neither the US nor anyone else really knows much about who the West is supporting militarily in Libya, let alone where that support will lead. Richard Lugar, the venerable Republican minority leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is also expressing reservations. Lugar has stated, “I believe it is a civil war and the US should not intervene in a civil war. After the war, the US and other nations will have to make determinations as to how we treat whoever the winners may be.” Lugar added that those concerned about civilian casualties will only be more concerned when increased military action, abetted by the US, causes greater damage to civilians.

For whatever reason, French President Sarkozy and UK Prime Minister Cameron led the charge in initiating military engagement. The French have gone so far as recognizing the rebel force as the legitimate representative of Libya. And, while much is being said about direct support from nearby Arab countries, little of anything has materialized.

The five abstentions at the UNSC are not insignificant. Reservations from China and Russia had been anticipated but the fact that Brazil, India and Germany joined in abstaining must have surprised the key proponents. The Emerging Powers are learning how to hedge rather than engage. If nothing else, that protects their interests, no matter what evolves.

There is every reason to deplore Gadhafi’s conduct and use sanctions, arms embargos and the threat of International Court prosecution to deter him from further outrages against his own people. But why should the onus for military action fall exclusively on the West, especially when the consequences of action – the end game – belie easy analysis. And why Canada? We are already doing much of the heavy-lifting in Afghanistan whereas several NATO allies have taken a pass. Is it because we were snubbed for a Security Council seat and want to re-establish our credentials for “peace-keeping”? Is it because we regard ourselves as an architect of the Responsibility to Protect concept adopted by the UN? If so, where will it lead – to Iran? Zimbabwe? North Korea? There is a long waiting list.

If military force was essential, it would have been more logical and more appropriate for the Arab League and/or the Organization of African Unity to have taken the lead. After all, despite its current turmoil, Egypt has the military muscle and is right next door. Saudi Arabia has the money and a very modern air force. Nigeria is also well-equipped.

As history eloquently illustrates, getting in is just the easy part. We are now at war and no-one really knows for how long, or to what end.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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