

# Ground troops would make victory less likely in Libya

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Despite temporary victories by rebel fighters in Misurata, Libya, NATO's strategy of relying exclusively on air strikes in the conflict is facing a new round of criticism. U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, is worried the crisis is now "moving toward stalemate."

In the midst of ongoing rebel losses in many parts of the country, reports of cluster bombs being used by Moammar Gadhafi's military, and condemnation by French officials frustrated with NATO's (and Washington's) reluctance to attack more targets, everyone is now engaged in crafting what they believe to be a "better" solution. The "no-ground-troops" strategy, many argue, is just not working.

If the NATO alliance is serious about regime change, critics are pointing out, then its members should be prepared to consider any and all military options, including the deployment of ground troops. This common view is informed by a straightforward strategic principle: Never take a military option off the table, including implicit or explicit threats of a ground war. When an option is removed from the list it should be done in a way that retains enough ambiguity to keep opponents guessing.

But critics who recommend keeping the ground war threat on the table should consider the key lesson from the most relevant recent case -the 1999 Kosovo air campaign. The Kosovo crisis provides a clear illustration of why the introduction of a NATO ground war threat today will run the risk of prolonging rather than shortening the war in Libya.

During the 1999 Kosovo air campaign, officials in Washington and other NATO capitals believed air strikes and precision guided munitions would win the war on NATO's terms, and they were right. The legitimacy of the military operation and, by extension, alliance cohesion and success depended almost entirely on attacking targets that raised the military and political costs incurred by Serb leaders without increasing civilian or NATO military casualties. A ground attack by NATO troops in 1999 would almost certainly have produced a much higher number of casualties.

Slobodan Milosevic, like most NATO officials at the time, understood that a ground invasion through Albania (the only option NATO seriously considered) would be very messy -consisting of anywhere from 50,000 to 75,000 troops deployed in difficult terrain, positioned between Serb military units engaged in fighting Kosovar rebels, all in the midst of a mass exodus of Kosovar civilians.

Denying Milosevic the opportunity to turn NATO's virtual war into a real one was essential to the coalition's success. The relevant historical point critics of the current Libya strategy are missing is this: Taking the ground war option off the table and repeating that strong preference as often as possible is a strategy that should never be excluded from consideration. In the end, Milosevic conceded to NATO's demands (after 78 days of increasingly costly attacks on high-value targets in Belgrade) not because he was worried about a ground war, but because he couldn't afford to wait for the ground war to begin. NATO provided no credible indication that such an opportunity was forthcoming and, in the absence of NATO losses, the political and military costs to Milosevic (and his Russian allies) were simply too high to sustain.

High numbers of military and civilian casualties in Kosovo or Libya risk increasing domestic pressure in western capitals to exit legitimate interventions prematurely, but they also convince the losing side to stick around in hopes that widespread public opposition will kick in sooner or later. NATO's strategy worked because it denied Serbian leaders any sign of success.

Denying Gadhafi any opportunity to turn NATO's virtual war into a real one is the right strategy at this point in time. In addition to protecting, training and arming rebel fighters, the coalition should expand the target list to include a larger number of high-value military and political assets in Tripoli. A renewed commitment from Washington to launch additional strikes using cruise missiles and armed Predator drones is essential. NATO is capable of targeting government buildings and military equipment in urban centres while minimizing collateral damage.

A little mission creep is not always a bad thing, especially when it re-engages a reluctant superpower. An aggressive and sustained application of the current strategy, not a NATO ground war, holds the best chance of convincing Gadhafi's supporters that regime change is their safest option.

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