

The Obama Doctrine and multilateral 'legitimacy'

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Staunch supporters of the international community's intervention in Libya continue to praise the operation as a textbook illustration of how to construct a truly multilateral coalition. This particular approach to multilateralism obtained combined endorsements from the Arab League, United Nations Security Council and NATO.

Unlike the Iraq war coalition, as senior officials in the Obama administration argue, their multilateral coalition established a much higher measure of "legitimacy" essential to maintaining public and international support.

The key piece of Obama's new multilateralism is the endorsement from the Arab League — a historical precedent highlighted by the White House and consistently repeated by every member of Obama's national security team whenever they comment on the ongoing operation.

No honest observer of the evolving crisis could reasonably conclude that the no-fly-zone resolution (UNSCR 1973) was a mistake, or that it produced a worse outcome when compared with doing nothing — the population of Benghazi was on the verge of being attacked. But the more important question is whether the kind of multilateralism crafted to resolve the Libya crisis will ultimately reinforce or diminish the prospects for peace, stability and democratic reform beyond Libya. The outlook is not promising. There are obvious costs to Obama's rigid commitment to this kind of multilateral consensus that will undermine the capacity of Western leaders to facilitate meaningful change and transformation in the region moving forward.

Analysts have failed so far to give serious thought to why the Arab League enthusiastically endorsed the UN's no-fly-zone resolution. What do these leaders stand to gain, and how do their specific interests and values mesh with those expressed by Obama and European allies?

Does anyone honestly believe Arab League members are motivated by a sudden epiphany regarding the wisdom of democratization, or driven by a new imperative to protect the rights and freedoms of Libyan rebels (or citizens of their own countries)? Like any other leader on the planet, these officials are motivated by self-interest and self-preservation.

Obama's pre-condition of obtaining Arab League endorsement prior to moving forward with negotiations for UN Resolution 1973 sets a very risky precedent: It essentially establishes an Arab League veto over future humanitarian, no-fly-zone or military interventions in, for example, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain or any of the other 22 members of the League. The same folks responsible for suppressing their own citizens in similar battles for regime change and democratic reforms now hold the "legitimacy" prerequisite at the heart of the West's willingness to stop them.

Given Obama's ringing endorsement of (and reliance on) Arab League support for his Libya strategy, any decision by Obama to bypass Arab League support to address the next crisis in the region will now be viewed as an illegitimate, unilateralist flip-flop, regardless of the atrocities committed against reformers in these states. The evolving crises in Syria and Bahrain, and ongoing challenges in Egypt, are the clearest illustrations of this emerging dilemma.

Welcome to the Obama Doctrine.

Multilateralism certainly has its benefits, but observers should challenge simplistic (idealistic) notions that a rigid commitment to multilateral consensus produces only benefits. Multilateral consensus carries a great deal of surface appeal, which is why the administration continues to repeat the fact that the Arab League is onside. But the subtext to this kind of legitimacy should be understood: Obama is now reliant on support from Arab leaders who are committing the same crimes against their own citizens, for the same reasons.

If Arab League members continue to take issue with NATO's expanding interpretation of acceptable targets stipulated in UNSCR 1973, or if NATO officials decide in the context of the current stalemate to arm rebels, the League is likely to back out of the coalition. The question is whether Obama will remain committed to a weak interpretation of "legitimacy" grounded in Arab League support or revise the Obama Doctrine accordingly.

Those touting Obama's multilateralism as the best way forward in North Africa and the Middle East should consider: It was the international community's rigid commitment to multilateral consensus that prevented anyone from intervening in Rwanda in 1994, and in Darfur today. The same narrow interpretation of multilateral "legitimacy" is now creating identical barriers, at a time when so many in the Middle East are pleading for help.

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