

# No-fly zone logically leads to war

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In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Responsibility to Protect principle. R2P calls upon the international community to intervene to protect a population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity -- a situation currently present in Libya.

On this basis, pressures have grown for the international community, NATO, or a coalition to protect the threatened population of Libya, which has revolted against the oppressive and dictatorial Gadhafi regime. This pressure has coalesced around the idea of imposing a no-fly zone over Libya as a practical means to protect the population and support the people fighting to remove the regime.

The no-fly proposal is portrayed as a politically viable, simple and effective response to the current situation in Libya. It has the support of the rebel forces, who have rejected direct military intervention.

Superior, high-technology Western air power can easily enforce a no-fly zone, without the likely loss of planes or pilots. Indeed, this superiority may well deter the Libyan air force from taking to the skies. Their commanders and pilots know full well that if they fly, they will die. If the Libyans are bold enough to try to employ their Russian air-defence system, it too will be quickly destroyed.

Finally, removing Libya's air force from the equation, it is assumed, will tip the military balance in favour of the rebels, leading to the collapse of the regime. At relatively low cost, the international community and the West will support the establishment of a new democratic government in Libya. It will also send a message to other brutal regimes around the world that R2P is not a meaningless principle.

Mounting an effective round-the-clock no-fly zone is not as simple and easy as portrayed in the press. It is a complicated military operation, demanding the allocation and deployment of significant military assets, including obtaining access to airbases in the region. It is highly unlikely such an operation could be sustained from U.S., French and/or British carriers in the Mediterranean.

This is not, however, a real obstacle to moving forward. Rather, hesitation, with or without international approval via the UN Security Council, is a product of other political-military considerations. First of all, a no-fly zone is an act of war. For the nations involved, it means the explicit recognition of the rebel movement as a provisional government and ally. It also means either a commitment to a rebel victory, or the abandonment of a defeated ally.

In other words, if the no-fly zone is ineffective in shifting the military balance in favour of the rebels, then the pressures to escalate will be immense, and the rebels are likely to request more assistance.

The no-fly zone may need to be enlarged beyond jet fighter-bombers to include Gadhafi's ground-attack helicopter forces. If this is not enough, pressures will arise to strike the regimes's mechanized ground forces.

Co-ordinating air strikes against ground targets, in turn, will require military personnel on the ground to enable allied planes to identify targets and distinguish friend from foe. These, in turn, would likely require troops for their protection.

With or without escalation, once militarily, and thus politically, committed to the rebels, the rationale for providing arms to their forces exists. Providing arms will require trainers and advisers. In the current military situation, the provision of more sophisticated anti-air and anti-armour weapons, along with military advisers, may well be a more effective response than a no-fly zone, if the goal is to shift the military balance in favour of the rebels and ensure their victory.

One should also not expect the Gadhafi regime to sit idly by. With life and death at stake, the regime is likely to attempt to strike at Western forces and raise the costs of intervention, no matter how futile the effort may be. The regime also possesses Scud-B short-range missiles with a range of roughly 300 kilometres. As such, military logic dictates a much wider pre-emptive strike at Libyan air and missile capabilities prior to the establishment of a no-fly zone.

This raises another political complication. Despite unspoken beliefs a no-fly zone will be bloodless, and air strikes, if necessary, surgical and precise, the opposite will be true. In particular, air strikes will result in unintended civilian casualties. When they do, many of the proponents of a no-fly zone will recoil in horror.

In the end, the idea of a no-fly zone is attractive. However, the reality is much more complicated and dangerous. Regardless of the decision, if the Gadhafi regime wins the civil war, retribution will be bloody and brutal, and render the principle of R2P politically meaningless.

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