

Libya and the law of unintended consequences

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In the abstract, the term "no-fly zone" sounds benign, almost peaceful, like a schoolyard peacemaker stepping between two fists-drawn belligerents. All so easy.

No, the world's civilized governments could not watch idly as Moammar Gadhafi's military, on the ground and in the air, indiscriminately murdered thousands of his own country's civilians, any more than we could have observed from the sidelines if Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (does he now regret stepping aside?) ordered his military to attack those in Tahrir Square. In an age of instantaneous messaging, where foreign and military policy seems another reality television show, this would have somehow been too much to bear.

Darfur, not so much; Bahrain, our "interests" -- oil, hospitality to our troops, perhaps another Mubarak-like "solution" -- override our humanitarianism.

Gadhafi is no Mubarak, the former publicly swearing that "no mercy" would be demonstrated to Libyans who innocently stood in the way, let alone ragtag rebels who bravely, if somewhat naively, seek his head. For several weeks the world looked to the United States: Would we, the indispensable power, intervene?

We have seen this before: first, for half a century, as a dueling Cold War belligerent in a bipolar world, today as the world's lone superpower. As a matter of "optics" (one of Washington's new favorite words), it was wise for President Obama to allow others, particularly France, Britain and the Arab League, to take the lead. Still, we all know who alone possesses the muscle to call the shots.

It has been so for a long time.

Sixty years ago, in 1953, it was Iran, where we toppled a democratically-elected government and restored the young shah to his phony throne. The consequences of that action continue to be played out throughout the region today. We may forget; the belligerents don't.

So successful with our Persian Gulf coup, and enamored with the success of covert action, the United States acted in 1954 to overturn the election of Guatemala's president, deemed too sympathetic to the communists. Here too, a half decade before Castro's rise, the unforeseen implications would play out for decades.

Fifty years ago this November, we quietly directed the deposition of that scoundrel Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, an action leading to a host of unintended consequences, victory not among them.

The list is lengthy: the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic (we never found the communists we were looking for); the 1973 coup in Chile; the arming of the Taliban following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the U.S.-funded Central American proxy wars of the 1980s; and the 1989 invasion of Panama (our former friend Manuel Noriega spent 17 years in a U.S. prison and now sits in a French prison cell).

All this (and much more) culminated in the oil wars of the last two decades -- Iraq I and Iraq II.

And now Libya, where the president promises a short engagement, as precise as a \$1 million Tomahawk missile, one that will be "handed off" like a football to our allies in "days, not weeks."

Don't count on it.

In the run-up to the Iraq II War, Secretary of State Colin Powell supposedly (he later denied using the phrase, if not the sentiment) announced the "Pottery Barn" doctrine: You break it, you own it. As the first Cruise Missiles flew into Tripoli, we -- the United States and not necessarily our allies -- took "ownership" of Libya.

Whether we live up to that responsibility is, of course, another question. Our historical record of default is long, as Iraq's Shiites learned in 1991 when, encouraged by President George H.W. Bush, they faced slaughter at Saddam Hussein's hands -- in part because we did not enact a "no-fly zone" to protect them.

Protecting Libyan civilians and those who took up arms against the crazed dictator is to be applauded. That it was done with the imprimatur of the United Nations and the Arab League (if not the U.S. Congress) is a sign, however weak, of maturity over Cold War jingoism.

But who will succeed Gadhafi? From a grander geopolitical standpoint, will we live to regret what we have brought about? The law of unintended consequences does not disappear with good intentions.

"The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars," Obama said in his June 2009 speech, "A New Beginning," in Cairo, just six months into his presidency.

"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition," said the president. "Instead, they overlap, and share common principles -- principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."

The realities of history, the conflicting burdens of world leadership, the power of the presidency, it seems, intrude upon even the highest of intentions.

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