

Divisions at European Union Summit on Libyan Intervention

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The European Union's Luxembourg summit on Libya was dogged by conflicting great power interests even before it officially met.

The United Nations had rejected the EU offer to deploy its proposed naval and military mission, EUFOR Libya, to relieve the besieged city of Misrata. EUFOR, set up April 1, is a 7.9 million-euro operation to be based in Rome and led by Italian Rear Admiral Claudio Gaudiosi. Though wrapped in pledges that there are to be no soldiers on the ground, the mission is aimed at an initial mobilisation of the EU's two battle groups, made up of 1,500 troops.

The leading player in the proposed operation is Germany, which contributes 990 troops. The government of Angela Merkel last Friday offered to participate in any "humanitarian mission" asked of it by the UN.

This is a reversal of Berlin's opposition to the US-French-UK-led operation, prompted by a fear of being excluded by its rivals from influence in Libya and the oil-rich regions of North Africa and the Middle East more generally.

EUFOR's mobilisation is legally dependent on an appeal from the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). But EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton's offer to mount a naval convoy to Misrata was rejected, except "as a last resort," according to Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger, recounting a conversation with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The UN stance was denounced as "an ideological opposition which clashes with reality" by one unnamed EU diplomat, speaking to the German Press Agency.

Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb complained, "OCHA very often sees humanitarian aid as black and white, (it doesn't) want any military involvement, where sometimes as we know there is need for military assistance to get aid in."

Spain's minister for EU affairs, Diego Lopez Garrido, said that the Luxembourg summit meeting would still "approve the military operation concept to protect the humanitarian work that the UN is carrying out in Libya."

There has so far been no official statement from the United States on either the proposed mission or the UN's refusal to give the go-ahead. But there are indications from the UK and France that they were not happy with the attempt by Germany to assume such a prominent role within an EU force.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague stated, "Naturally, assistance is being delivered to Libya, including Misrata. So far, this has not required the deployment of military support."

Both London and Paris want greater EU military involvement, but on their terms and not as a German-led force. The US too is keen that the European powers shoulder more of the cost of the Libyan offensive. Having transferred operational control to NATO, it has cut its naval presence from eleven to three warships and the number of its planes involved from 170 to 90. These planes also generally operate outside of NATO's command structures.

France and the UK spent the run-up to the summit denouncing their European partners for not pulling their weight militarily within NATO. Referring obliquely to the other European powers, French Foreign Secretary Alain Juppé insisted, "NATO must fully play its role, and it is not doing so sufficiently... It wanted to take the operational lead, we accepted that." But currently, he added, the intensity of the air campaign was "not enough."

Hague said, "We must maintain and intensify our efforts in NATO. That is why the United Kingdom has in the last week supplied additional aircraft capable of striking ground targets threatening the civilian population of Libya. Of course it would be welcome if other countries also do the same."

Hague reiterated the UK-US demand that "to have any viable peaceful future for Libya, Colonel Gaddafi needs to leave."

These criticisms come despite a dramatic stepping up of the air campaign by the NATO alliance since Saturday, and solicited a rebuttal by NATO.

"NATO is conducting its military operations in Libya with vigour within the current mandate. The pace of the operations is determined by the need to protect the population," it said in a statement.

With the public support of the US, UK and Italy, Libya's opposition Transitional National Council (TNC) on Sunday rejected ceasefire proposals agreed between the African Union and Gaddafi, demanding that he and his sons leave the country.

The EU summit, meant as an assertion of European power and influence, instead once again became an occasion for divisions and recriminations between the European powers. Spain rejected the criticisms of France and the UK and their demands for greater military commitments. "NATO's action is proceeding well. There is nothing to revise for now," said State Secretary for European Affairs Diego Lopez Garrido.

During discussions on the concept of operations (CONOPS) for EUFOR Libya, Sweden reportedly voiced reservations about the move. Finnish Foreign Minister Stubb warned of the development of a "stalemate" producing "more of a Kosovo situation, I would argue, and Kosovo lasted 78 days."

Invoking NATO control is entirely self-serving on the part of France and the UK and is seen by Washington as a means of maintaining its own de-facto leading role.

It will not stop any of their own attempts to secure controlling influence over events through other channels. Possible military intervention on the ground under a humanitarian cover is by no means off the agenda. Instead, there a competition for the franchise under which it

will proceed.

Today, Britain and Qatar are hosting a meeting in Doha of the Libya Contact Group, where plans for international humanitarian relief for Misrata and other besieged cities will be discussed. Around 20 countries will be represented by foreign ministers.

The informal group was set up at the March 29 London conference on Libya and was initially France's choice to lead the military campaign, not NATO as demanded by the US and UK. It was agreed that it would "provide leadership and overall political direction to the international effort, in close coordination with the UN, AU (African Union), Arab League, OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) and EU (European Union) to support Libya."

The Libyan opposition TNC will directly address the contact group in Qatar, as opposed to its less prominent role in London, at which time only France had recognized it as the official government of Libya. Since then, the TNC has been recognised by Italy and Qatar.

French Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero was euphoric. "Not only will they be there, but-and this should be checked with the Qataris-unlike London, where they were on the sidelines, they will appear before the contact group."

The TNC has been allowed to set up Libya TV by Qatar, which is the most fulsome supporter of the US-led offensive against Gaddafi.

Britain is seeking to establish its leadership role through the prominent Libyan defector Moussa Koussa. Formerly Gaddafi's intelligence chief and foreign minister, he has since been identified by some sources as a long-time MI6 agent.

He was allowed to leave Britain on Tuesday, despite being formally questioned over possible involvement in the Lockerbie bombing. A spokeswoman for the British Foreign Office, speaking in return for anonymity under departmental rules, said on Tuesday that Mr. Koussa had been able to leave because he was "a free individual, who can travel to and from Britain as he wishes."

Koussa would "share his insights" on the inner workings of the Gaddafi regime, another spokesman said.

Before leaving, Koussa issued a statement in Arabic asking "everybody to avoid taking Libya into a civil war. This would lead to so much blood and Libya would be a new Somalia."

"The solution in Libya will come from the Libyans themselves, and through discussion and democratic dialogue," he said.

The New York Times speculated that his remarks "may have indicated that he was seeking to position himself for a position in a successor government in Libya." But they were not welcomed by the TNC, with media spokesman Mustafa Gheriani replying, "We don't have ethnic groups waging war against each other. We don't have political parties waging war against each other. There are two fronts. There are the people of the country, the Libyan people, and Colonel Gaddafi and his regime and his kids."

Tomorrow, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is expected to chair yet another international conference on Libya in Cairo, "to ensure close coordination between the United Nations, the African Union, the League of Arab States, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the

European Union.”

That same day, the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), are also meeting. All abstained on the UN resolution sanctioning the military assault on Libya. Yesterday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned that the situation in Libya “has already spun out of control.”

Indulging in schadenfreude, he said the NATO operation was beset with conflicts: “[E]veryone has different plans in this regard. The Europeans say one thing, the Americans says another thing, one day ‘we will participate,’ another day ‘we will not participate.’”

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