

By Dr Robert Crowcroft, Senior Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

The United Nations-sanctioned military intervention in Libya is only a few days old, but already its execution is looking cack-handed. Listening to the news, every politician or military officer has their own perspective. Usually this contradicts what someone else has said just an hour before. 'Message' indiscipline is rife; no single narrative unifies the mission. Nor is there much in the way of strategic vision either. At the moment there seems to be a worrying lack of clarity as to what we are doing in Libya in the first place, how we are going to do it, and how we are going to get out. The Daily Telegraph rightly called it 'an unedifying muddle'. Such interventions require conceptual clarity, and in the campaign to bludgeon Colonel Gaddafi this is sorely lacking. Considering that the operation has only just begun, this raises serious issues about the effectiveness of our political leadership.

Some preliminary questions:

[1] Why are we there?

For the last month, David Cameron has been spoiling to launch military strikes against Gaddafi. To be sure, when he was slapped down by the United States the prime minister had to row back for a little while. But Cameron has pushed for the intervention more than any other leader, with the possible exception of Sarkozy. This is odd, because there is no obvious British national interest in Libya and military action in the Islamic world generates all kind of political headaches.

If we were being cynical, we might recall that prior to the outbreak of civil war in Libya, the British press were, for the first time, starting to land really heavy blows on the government about 'cuts'. Then, when the Libyan crisis began, Cameron leapt into it with a rather baffling eagerness. The prime minister would, without question, have recognised the domestic advantages of deflecting media attention abroad; and what better way to do that than engaging in a 'moral' military campaign against a tin-pot tyrant? Mr Cameron has spent the last month playing the role of 'international statesman', 'good liberal', and 'defender of human rights'. Politically speaking, this is far more appealing than being 'the man who freed the criminals' or 'the man who cut the police'. I know which I'd prefer.

There is a long tradition of British politicians using foreign affairs as a pawn in domestic calculation (most obviously Lord Palmerston, for whom being the scourge of Johnny Foreigner was a recurrent ticket to political success at home). It would be naïve to think that such manoeuvring is not at work here. The problem, however, is that while a month ago it seemed plausible that the Gaddafi regime would fall (and hence a few airstrikes in assistance would represent an easy political win for Cameron) now it looks likely that Gaddafi will survive in some shape or form. Launching an intervention when the rebellion has been pushed back to a small enclave is arguably a grave error; we should either have gone in much earlier, or not at all. Yet Mr Cameron remained eager to drive the policy forward, despite the fundamental changes on the ground. If the mission is now disconnected from easily achievable strategic goals, then serious questions must be asked about his leadership.

[2] Joined-up government

Sir Peter Ricketts, the National Security Adviser, should be awarded an Academy Award. Time and again he informs us that the National Security Council is the best thing since sliced bread, that the NSC is now bridging gaps across Whitehall, and that policy is more co-ordinated as a result. Unfortunately, in the two big tests the NSC has faced since its inception, it has failed to produce anything resembling joined-up government, let alone coherent policy. The SDSR process last autumn was a rushed exercise driven by the Treasury, and in which crucial strategic decisions were blatantly avoided. And now, in Libya, the lack of leadership and grip at the heart of government has been exposed. Cameron and Liam Fox (unlikely allies it must be said) are at loggerheads with General Sir David Richards over whether or not Gadaffi himself is a legitimate target for airstrikes. Fox said that targeting Gadaffi was 'potentially a possibility'. When the question was put to Richards, however, he declared 'absolutely not' and added that 'It is not allowed under the UN mandate'. Downing Street responded by asserting that Richards was 'wrong'. In the House of Commons, Cameron then said that the UN resolution 'does not provide legal authority' to get rid of Gadaffi, but then qualified this by stating that 'there is no decent future' for Libya under the current ruler. I shall translate his statement: 'We want rid of Gadaffi but couldn't get that idea past the UN'. Political leadership in war is supposed to inspire confidence. Can anyone say they have confidence in the British government at the moment?

More worryingly, there is a lack of clarity over whether we should simply be enforcing a no-fly zone, or interpreting the UN resolution in such a way as to pursue regime change on the cheap. Are we there to ensure Gadaffi's planes don't fly, that he doesn't attack civilians (and how is this to be done from the air in urban areas), or to get him out of power? The discord is already building.

This lack of leadership is just as clear in the case of President Obama. He has suggested that the US is going to 'tone down' its role in the coming days, which could simply mean a ceremonial transfer of control to NATO. But it might also mean that the coalition collapses into ineffectiveness without US leadership to drive it forward. Any attempt to toss the problem to the Europeans is unlikely to produce a positive result. Such an outcome would be far, far worse politically than not having become involved in Libya at all. In both foreign and domestic policy, Obama has repeatedly displayed a worrying inability to take any decisions. Don't bet against the same thing happening here.

[3] What is the exit strategy?

If Gadaffi holds on to power, the most likely outcome is a stalemate and the effective fracturing of Libya into two entities. In such circumstances, how long do we have to remain in Libya for? It is probably impractical to do a no-fly zone over the long term, given the logistical constraints. But how do we get out without losing face? Is the West putting itself in a position where it assumes a duty to protect the rebel enclave indefinitely?

Moreover, how do we know that the rebel leaders are any better than Gadaffi? If this is essentially a civil war between the regions of Libya, then it seems unlikely that the rebel leaders are good Guardian-reading liberals in disguise. The incident at the weekend, when the rebels

shot down one of their own jets and tried to depict it as a Gadaffi violation of the ceasefire, should make us deeply cautious about them.

There is no clear exit strategy from Libya and so, given the likelihood of a stalemate on the ground, there is much potential for embarrassment. After the British failure in Basra, which saw the US forced to ride to the rescue, the UK cannot afford another blow to its military credibility.

[4] The indulgence of left-wing dogmas

Cameron has shot himself in the foot here. He has stressed repeatedly how the international community 'has given its permission' for the military action. The problem is this: what happens in six months if British, or Western interests, mandate action elsewhere that is not rubber-stamped by the UN? Without this 'permission', can we not defend our national interests? Everyone with common sense knows that the UN is not a collection of virtuous do-gooders but individual states (usually led by gangsters and criminals) looking out for themselves. In the long-term, employing such left-wing language in justifying military conflict is simply self-defeating. The fact that the UN is driven by power-politics was demonstrated vividly in 2003. So why should sovereign democracies permit it such importance? On BBC Radio 4, William Hague stressed that the UN is the world's 'highest moral authority'. Don't make me laugh. The UN refused to sanction the Kosovo war. Should we have stood aside?

Pretending that international politics functions in this way is a feckless thing for politicians to do. If they are so stupid, they deserve their fate.

[5] The duplicity of the Arab states

Long-time observers of the Middle East will know that Arab states are about as trustworthy as a convicted conman. The support of the Arab League for military action was a positive sign. But the League's lapse into ambiguity once the airstrikes actually began was entirely predictable. The narrative which will be spun in mosques across the Middle East is of 'Crusaders' killing Muslims for oil. Arab leaders, hard pressed with their own internal problems, will no doubt make enthusiastic appeals for national unity on the grounds that civil strife opens the door to the Jews and Christians.

So, in conclusion, there is cause for serious concern about the quality of political leadership currently on display, particularly in London. It is, of course, plausible that secret intelligence reports indicate the Gadaffi regime is on the verge of collapse. It would be sensible for the government to keep quiet about this. But as far as we can detect in public, at any rate, the big story is the lack of clarity about the campaign. Imposing discipline on Whitehall would be a start. Mr Cameron needs to come up with some answers – and quickly.