

NATO in Libya: The Search for Alternative Strategies

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

13 August 2011

Nineteen weeks into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military campaign against the Gaddafi regime and its military forces – a campaign that has involved nearly 19 000 aerial sorties, about 7 500 of which were ground attacks – the closest we have to a description of the campaign’s status is the comment at a Washington media briefing by US Chief of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, on 25 July 2011, that NATO has ‘dramatically attired [Gaddafi’s] forces’, that is, his major forces. That said, there are still numerous challenges associated with the regime forces which have adjusted to their opposition’s tactics. According to Mullen, ‘We are generally in a stalemate.’ He added that, over time, NATO strikes are succeeding in reducing Gaddafi’s forces, and ‘additional pressure has been brought’ to bear on the Libyan leader. ‘In the long run, I think it’s a strategy which will work with respect to the removal of Gaddafi from power,’ concluded Mullen.

The stalemate that Mullen referred to is the expected result of a limited military intervention which adopted a gradual approach based on the use of the smallest amount of military effort possible to achieve the desired effects on the ground over a prolonged period of time. The decision to use this approach is largely based on the unavailability, or non-allocation, of adequate resources to accomplish the political goals of the operation: the ouster of the regime and the protection of civilians. The disadvantages of the gradual approach are twofold. First is the negative impact of such an approach on the military effectiveness required for the performance of troops in the field? Second, that the essence of military intervention for humanitarian purposes involves ensuring that the suffering of those civilians whom the intervention aims to protect is minimised, something that becomes increasingly difficult to ensure as the duration of military action increases, because the opponent can continue to inflict human and material losses on the civilian population over time. This applies even if there is a great possibility for military success over the long term.

The gradual approach was previously used by NATO in its 1999 Kosovo campaign, albeit with less intensity than the current Libyan campaign. (Over the seventy-eight days of the air campaign in Kosovo, NATO allocated 1 100 fighter and support planes that carried out a total of 37 004 sorties, while in the first 133 days of air operations over Libya, NATO allocated 250 fighter and support aircraft that carried out nearly 19 000 sorties.) The operational environment in the Libyan operation also seems to be more forgiving because

- the topography is of a flat open desert;
- Gaddafi’s air defence systems were severely weakened after they were laid to waste in the early days of the campaign; and
- most of the targets are located in narrow coastal urban belts on the shores of an expansive desert hinterland.

Current operational view: A gradual tightening of the noose

On the whole, cumulative attrition – however slow – of the regime’s forces and its military infrastructure caused by the NATO aerial campaign over the first twenty weeks resulted in a significant strategic shift in the military situation on the ground in favour of the rebels. They now have the advantage on the three major fronts (in the east of the country; around Zlitan – east of the capital Tripoli; and in the Nafusa Mountains in the west of the country. This advantage, however, is not a decisive one due to the slow rate of aerial operations, the regime’s forces’ ability to adapt, and, finally, the limited combat capabilities of the insurgents and the reluctance of the international community to provide them with serious armament systems necessary to counter the regime’s fire-power advantage.

Regime forces: Loss of the initiative

The regime had the manoeuvrability momentum which gave it a clear advantage in the early weeks of the operation. This was due to successive aerial bombardments by NATO aircraft that produced a state of cumulative attrition of the regime's equipment and a severe loosening of its command and control systems. Consequently, in recent weeks the regime's forces have resorted to a disruptive defence stance, limiting their use of fire-power to tactical fire against populated urban areas controlled by the rebels.

NATO's gradual approach has afforded the regime an opportunity to take the time to absorb the shock of the intensive NATO air and missile strikes carried out in the first phase of the campaign led by the United States, as well as to modify its operational methods to adapt to a situation in which NATO has superiority in the air by minimising the movement of columns of heavy armoured vehicles. The regime's forces have also taken to using light trucks equipped with heavy weapons that allow for initiative, speed and the ability to camouflage themselves. In adapting to NATO's aerial superiority, the regime's forces have also begun to use independent army groups backed by mortars and multiple rocket launchers that provide identical operational and moral effects as heavy artillery assaults on rebel controlled urban centres.

Despite the regime's forces having been removed from the urban centres controlled by the rebels, and the heavy losses incurred by the regime in terms of equipment and qualified military personnel as a result of NATO and rebel operations, the regime's forces have not yet reached the point of collapse as a fighting force. It does not appear that the regime has the ability to avoid this inevitability due to the nature of a regime that does appreciate the magnitude of both the material and moral attrition and deterioration suffered by its forces, and because of its awareness of the impending prosecution of its leader through the International Criminal Court.

Rebel forces: Lack of arms and training

The advantage has shifted to the rebel forces, despite their incapability to affect a decisive victory on the ground.

1. The rebel forces surround the vital oil installation city of Brega in eastern Libya, advancing slowly into the city's environs due to the heavy and indiscriminate mines strewn by the regime's forces.
2. Rebel forces are approaching the outskirts of Zlitan, 130 kilometres east of Tripoli, where they are also suffering from enemy minefields.
3. The third front, that of the Nafusa Mountains, has seen the greatest successes of the rebels who now control an area of 355 kilometres from west to east, leaving only twenty-five kilometres to be won before they reach the strategic city of Gharyan that controls the supply lines from the south and south-west of Libya to Tripoli.

The rebel forces suffer from three negative factors that hinder their combat ability from achieving rapid and decisive operational victories in the face of an opponent that is relatively better organised – despite it having suffered enormous physical and moral attrition. These are:

1. Deficiencies in training and organisation, the lack of adequate field experience and an inefficient command and control system. These deficiencies can be

understood considering that the rebel forces are the outcome of a recent transformation of a peaceful popular movement into an armed insurrection against a professional regular force into which a great deal of time and resources have been invested.

2. The reluctance of the international community, thus far, to provide the weapons systems necessary to ensure minimum levels of self-defence for the rebel forces (except for certain exceptions, such as the French air drop of weapons to the rebels in the Nafusa Mountains in mid-June, and continual Qatari efforts to provide arms and logistical support).
3. Insufficient and inefficient close air support provided by NATO aircraft to the rebels engaged in direct confrontation. The response times for air support requests from rebel forces suffer from long lag times and an absence of sufficient forward air controllers. Furthermore, the air forces allocated to this operation are limited as a result of the reservations of many European NATO members to offer such forces. Only six European states, out of twenty-six European NATO members, provide such forces.

NATO forces: Resource austerity

NATO's gradual approach has depended on the use of the least possible effort over an extended period of time, a function of the limited air resources dedicated to the campaign. The cost of this approach is great human and material suffering in the Libyan civilian population – which the campaign was designed to protect. This gradual strategy may be understood in light of several considerations, including:

1. The nature of the military campaign in Libya, which is a humanitarian military intervention not linked to threats to the national security or national interests of participating states. Such threats would result in the mobilisation of larger resources and acceptance of higher material and human cost.
2. For the first time in trans-Atlantic relations, the United States has declined to take military command of NATO operations. This was due to several factors, foremost among them being the raging financial crisis, the national mood in the US that rejects new protracted wars in the Middle East and the Islamic world, and the growing awareness of Washington's political and military elite that there is a lack of serious European allies with whom to share the burdens of such military interventions.
3. The successive cuts in defence spending by European NATO members that have had negative effects on the structures of military power and military capabilities both in terms of quantity and quality. (A decade ago, the United States was responsible for fifty percent of the total defence spending of NATO countries; this ratio has risen to seventy-five percent, at a time when the combined GNP of European NATO members adds up to 127 percent of the US GNP, while only four of these twenty-six countries meet the agreed upon minimum of two percent of GNP on defence spending.) This prompted British defence secretary and former NATO Secretary General, Lord George Robertson, to declare: 'When nations put national interests and primitive rivalries before collective security and collective action, NATO becomes a paper tiger in an increasingly complex and dangerous international jungle.' Elsewhere, Robertson said, 'We do not have sufficient forces available for foreign deployment, nor do we have the maritime resources to sustain an effective bombing campaign, nor do we have the appropriate number of

aircraft with accurate bombing capabilities... All we have is outdated Cold War equipment, and yet we claim that Europe is well-armed because we spend 300 billion dollars annually on defence.'

Libya: A sharp turning point for NATO

This review of the nature of the impasse in NATO's Libya campaign results in the conclusion that NATO is faced with two options.

1. To continue with the current gradualist approach while accepting a limited victory (one that allows Gaddafi to maintain his hold on power for a period after military operations, as happened with the Milosevic regime in Serbia after the 1999 Kosovo campaign).
 2. To effect a decisive victory. This would require a departure from the gradualist approach in favour of an expansion and intensification of military operations to force the Libyan regime to give up power simultaneously with the cessation of these operations.
1. The preference for the latter option has led several western parties to call on the United States to resume its leadership role in the campaign, and to bring its substantial and unique combat capabilities back to the Libyan theatre, in addition to expanding the list of bombing targets to include figures in Gaddafi's inner circle – including Gaddafi himself. This is in addition to calls for engaging in ground operations and preparing for the deployment of ground troops – even if they are not intended to be used – to force the Libyan regime seriously to rethink its own destiny under the pressure of an expected decisive traditional defeat.

NATO is now engaged in a gradual war that may achieve success in the long term. However, the cost of such a war in terms of time and the massive loss of human lives from among the innocent civilian population ignores the spirit of the just war for which the time is ripe. The international community should inject into the notion of humanitarian military intervention a new strategy based on the provision of adequate military resources and a reduction of the time required for the final task of this intervention to be achieved.