

## **Flight ban a perilous gamble for the West**

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Once again the West is contemplating a military intervention. Once again most of the debate is about the legality of what is proposed. And once again too little attention is being paid to military practicalities. We need to ask whether a flight ban over Libya will work, and what happens if it doesn't. I think it probably won't work, and if it goes ahead the West will be drawn in much deeper when it fails.

We have made this kind of mistake before. Remember 2003? Before the invasion of Iraq, most of us debated endlessly about the need for United Nations backing to make the invasion legal, and we paid too little attention to whether it would work and what would happen on the ground.

Now the same thing is happening about Libya. It matters, of course, whether a flight ban would be legal and could get Security Council backing. But it also matters whether it would achieve the specific political and strategic results intended. Before anyone decides whether to implement a flight-exclusion zone in Libya, it would be a good idea to make sure they know what results they want, and whether such a ban is likely to achieve them.

Let's assume that the aim is either to stop Muammar Gaddafi's forces attacking rebel-held areas, or allow the rebel forces to take the areas still under Gaddafi's control. In other words, either to stop the rebels being defeated, or to help them win. These objectives themselves raise a lot of questions, such as: who are the rebels and what would their victory mean for Libya? But the more immediate question is whether a flight ban would by itself achieve them.

The evidence so far suggests that Gaddafi is using aircraft in his operations against the rebels, so a flight ban would be a setback for his forces. But to achieve the intended objectives, it would need to be a decisive setback — one that changed the balance of forces sufficiently to allow the rebels to win or at least avoid losing.

Whether a successful flight ban would achieve that depends on whether Gaddafi would still have a preponderance of combat forces once he was deprived of the use of his air force. I'm not sure of the answer, but my hunch is that he would. In that case, a flight-exclusion zone would simply make Gaddafi's victory slower and harder, but would do nothing decisive to prevent it.

That would leave the interveners in a very awkward position. It would be quite untenable to establish and enforce a flight ban and then stand back and watch Gaddafi's troops overrun the rebels anyway. The interveners — the West, in other words — would have little choice but to escalate their intervention.

So the real question is: what kind of operations would be necessary to stop Gaddafi's forces and swing the balance in favour of the rebels? There are two possibilities.

An optimist would argue that it would be sufficient for the intervening forces to go beyond enforcing a flight ban and use their air power to attack pro-Gaddafi forces on the ground. We cannot assume this would work. After all, this is exactly what NATO air forces were trying to do against Serbian ground forces in Kosovo in 1999 with very little success.

The same kind of operation would arguably be easier in Libya because there are fewer trees and therefore less cover: air power works well in deserts. Even so, the risk of losses of Western aircraft from ground fire would be much higher in this kind of campaign than with just a flight-exclusion zone.

And even this might not work. A prudent pessimist would argue that a successful ground-attack campaign against pro-Gaddafi forces might not be sufficient to avoid the defeat of the rebels or bring them victory. Air power can be effective against conventional ground forces because they are easy to spot from a plane. But the risk is that a successful ground-attack campaign might simply force Gaddafi's supporters to revert to guerilla-style operations that would be much harder to identify and interdict from the air.

I do not know whether Gaddafi's forces would be large enough, skilled enough and motivated enough to prosecute such a campaign, but if they were, then the only option would be a major ground intervention to support the rebels.

That is not unthinkable, but it is much less appealing than a flight ban. We should be under no illusion that it would be quick or easy. It would be unwise to assume that any intervention on the ground to topple Gaddafi would not evolve into a sustained stabilisation mission. That need not be as daunting as Iraq or Afghanistan — Libya has a relatively small population of 6.5 million, whereas Afghanistan has nearly 30 million — but it could still mean a commitment of 15,000 or 20,000 troops for several years.

Perhaps Libya is worth that. But it would be a cardinal error for Western leaders to launch a flight-exclusion zone there unless they had clearly recognised the possibility — indeed the probability — that it would fail and they would be drawn in much deeper.

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