

No-fly zone must have an objective

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With UN-sanctioned airstrikes set to rain down on Muammar Gaddafi's army, we should pause to ask whether this is really such a good idea.

In less than a fortnight, Libya's jubilant rebellion has been reduced to a rag-tag force holed-up in Benghazi. Fully aware of the bloodshed, most Western leaders were paralysed by indecision and self-interest -- issuing little more than sanctions, travel restrictions and a handful of tough words. No one, it seemed, would risk blood, treasure and political reputation for a north African people's war of no strategic value.

Then, as if by magic, these pragmatic considerations vanished. Overnight, someone in the Obama administration was kissed by the human rights fairy. And the world is now at war with the "Mad Dog" of Libya. Of course, this is a good thing, right?

In reality, the use of armed force for humanitarian purposes is a messy, gut-wrenching and often futile affair. The moral imperative to "do something" is complicated by murky assessments of political will, military capability and the unknown intentions of those we seek to help. It's a debate full of emotion arising from our desire to protect civilians from slaughter and compounded by collective guilt over atrocities we've failed to prevent.

But it's not a decision to be taken lightly. Anger and passion rarely lead to sound foreign policy. And no-fly zones have a habit of slipping into full-scale interventions that require at least some boots on the ground.

Our track record is not great. In 1991, dawn of a so-called New World Order, Western forces let thousands die before erecting a no-fly zone to protect Iraqi Kurds from Saddam's bombardment. In 1992, the UN Security Council took more than six months to authorise military force for a no-fly zone above Bosnia and Herzegovina. The US's intervention in Somalia ended ingloriously when the brutalised bodies of US rangers were dragged through Mogadishu's war-torn streets -- terminating the UN mission and deepening that country's enduring anarchy.

Today, Western troops are absent from the UN's biggest missions in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where more than five million have perished since the late 1990s. Even the notion of a "responsibility to protect" has been undermined by decade-long debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a long list of missed opportunities in Rwanda, Liberia and Zimbabwe. So why all these failures to do what is right? What makes the intervention dilemma such a tough one to solve?

It seems the primary requirement for even half-baked interventions is a satisfactory grade on the national-interest test. To put it bluntly: where Western powers lack strategic motives, humanitarian rhetoric will not translate into robust military action.

This isn't an indictment of our liberal democracies. Indeed, it may be better to do nothing

when uncontrollable factors such as force availability, public support and political will prohibit policymakers from fully committing to a foreign incursion.

As the sagas in Somalia, Rwanda and Afghanistan showed, a half-hearted and time-limited intervention only instills false hope and prolongs the conflict -- failing to tilt the domestic power-balance in favour of "our side". The longer a civil war drags on -- nourished by military assistance or inspired by an illusion that the West will ultimately do what it takes -- the more

civilians get killed in the crossfire. It sounds harsh, but if we're not in it to win, then why should we go?

Fickle public opinion makes matters worse. The "CNN effect" propels humanitarian tragedies into middle-class homes, tugging at heart-strings and enticing us to pressure our governments into stopping the bloodshed. But it cuts both ways. When no-fly zones fail and body bags pile up, it is we the people who demand our troops come home. This is why, despite ongoing slaughter, former president Bill Clinton withdrew US forces from Somalia. And it explains the reluctance to risk soldiers in Rwanda.

So as our media gaze drifts from New Zealand's earthquake to the Libyan uprising and onwards to Japan's nuclear-tsunami nightmare, can we expect public opinion to stay determined to defeat Gaddafi? We may shed tears for the outgunned and embrace UN action, but are we willing to support what might be another long-term involvement abroad?

This raises the question of what we hope to achieve when we do decide to act. Arguably, the greatest failure in Iraq and Afghanistan was the lack of a well-defined exit-strategy from day one. Were we intervening to topple a regime? Dismantle WMD programs and terrorist enclaves? Or graft democratic institutions on to a seed-bed of autocracy? Our inability to set reasonable goals led to defective deployments and unrealistic expectations.

The 11th-hour push to save Libya's rebels risks repeating these costly mistakes. What are our motives and how far will we go? Will we simply shoot down Gaddafi's planes and wish the rebels good luck? When airpower proves unable to reinvigorate the revolution, are we prepared to send troops or arm and train the resistance? And if Gaddafi does fall, who will fill the geopolitical vacuum? No matter how noble our motives, we should not jump into seemingly straightforward interventions without a goal, a plan and a willingness to commit.

Despite all these good reasons for being sceptical about intervention, it's still hard not to applaud airstrikes against Gaddafi. A sense of responsibility and shame overwhelms our colder rationality. We're compelled to ignore mundane problems of political will and submit to our more ethical impulses.

Yet we do so blindly, reactively and perhaps not for the better.

Morality and foreign policy can be difficult bedfellows. The tension between what's possible and what's just is etched on the pages of world politics. On balance, we're getting better at doing what's right. But knowing where, how and when intervention may be warranted remains a complex cost-benefit analysis.

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