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Clinton's Brave New Doctrine Prevails in Libya - but Only Just

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One of the most compelling stories behind the US's decision to intervene in Libya earlier this year was the role Hillary Clinton played in persuading President Obama and his defence chiefs to act decisively in the face of Cnl Gaddafi's indiscriminate aggression. Deeply affected by the way her husband's administration dealt with genocide, the Secretary of State allied with two other national security officials, UN Ambassador Susan Rice and former academic Samantha Power to help end slaughter. Analysts saw the emergence of a new kind of foreign policy, a break with the United States' traditional resistance to using force as a means of preventing mass killing.

Four months later, and the efforts Clinton spearheaded can now be declared a success. A massacre was prevented in Benghazi, and the Libyan leader's regime has collapsed in the face of rebel advances. But the military campaign has taken far longer than expected, raising questions about the ability of the US and other nations to mount a similar operation again. This, however, is less the fault of the three advisers in question than the very people they had to convince to instigate action in the first place.

The behaviour of American defence officials did much to hamstring the intervention Clinton and others advocated, with leading military figures sceptical of the mission complicating attempts to hobble the Libyan leader. As outgoing Defence Secretary Robert Gates attacked his counterparts at State for promoting 'wars of

choice', officers under his command failed to hit the backbone of Gaddafi's troops engaged in mass killing. Instead of making early efforts to knock the regime's access to oil supplies or stop mercenaries moving through the Southern hub of Sabha, they preferred to launch 'shock and awe' airstrikes on Gaddafi's command structure in Tripoli. These were for a long period ineffective in aiding moves to lift the siege of Misrata and halt the dictator's efforts to stir an insurgency in the East. The Pentagon's antipathy also resulted in little practical support for rebel forces fighting Gaddafi in the field. It fell to Arab nations like Qatar and Tunisia - a nation beset by domestic problems - to provide much of the military assistance.

At the same time, mistakes on the part of the White House sapped support for military action. In particular, the President's refusal to spell out the linkage between intervening on humanitarian grounds and strategic imperatives impeded popular backing for the mission. Barack Obama's key address on the war did not communicate how widespread killing in Libya would affect American and European interests in the Mediterranean. And although he noted the country's proximity to neighbours undergoing significant upheaval, he did not explain in sufficient detail how genocide in Libya would alter the transformation of Egypt or what this would mean for the wider Middle East. An opportunity to demonstrate how preventing mass slaughter is almost always connected to a nation's self-interest was lost in a meandering speech that dealt in generalities about freedom and avoided the issues at hand.

Alongside these difficulties, faltering resolve on the part of America's allies almost impelled operations. Despite a broad recognition that action needed to be taken urgently, political problems ended up precluding countries from protecting civilians by all means necessary. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who would have had to handle an exodus of migrants if Gaddafi entered Benghazi, raced for the exit as his governing coalition fell apart. His British counterpart David Cameron, while initially keen on a mission that brought his foreign policy coherence looked to bail out as the cost of intervention came under scrutiny. French President Nicholas Sarkozy was an early proponent of intervention, but came to advocate action as a result of popular blowback over his relations with discredited Arab regimes and might well have changed his mind if French voters had grown impatient. Such fragile dedication suggests that a re-run of Bosnia - where the US abandoned efforts to prevent mass killing in the face of popular scepticism - has only narrowly been averted.

Clinton and her colleagues can look with satisfaction on developments now unfolding in Libya. But their work was almost fatally undermined by the contempt of US military officials, the inability of a President to justify a cause he once embraced and the fecklessness of European partners concerned with pressures back home. Bucking what Power once damned America's "consistent policy of non-intervention in the face of genocide" has not become any easier.

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