



The west's humanitarian intervention in Libya is a sham

Martin Suchanek Fri, 18/03/2011 - 20:21

Martin Suchanek

The first internationally co-ordinated western military action since Iraq in 2003 is about to start, writes Martin Suchanek. The west's motives aren't humanitarian, let alone a wish to see the forces of Libyan democracy through to victory, they want to ensure their control over the oil rich state in the years and decades ahead.

With 10 votes in favour and five abstentions, the UN Security Council decided to impose a no-fly zone and other sanctions on Libya on 17 March. Although the mandate prohibits the occupation, it allows the three major Western protagonists – France, Britain and the US – along with their Arab allies, to make air attacks on the basis of their own interpretation of the situation and maybe to use special forces on the ground.

The UN resolution is thus much stronger than was widely anticipated. Although it rules out ground forces, it calls for 'all necessary action' short of ground attacks to stop attacks by Gaddafi on the rebel forces, which in effect means that western fighter jets will be free to carry out offensive bombing raids on Libyan army positions, not just patrol the skies.

Gaddafi's regime responded by declaring a fake ceasefire, yet stepped up its attack on Benghazi with air attacks, tank and artillery attempting to get his forces inside the city before the French or British planes could attack him.

Imperialism today ? showing its teeth again

The strong wording of the UN resolution represents a victory for the most aggressive states in the European Union, particularly France and Britain who had lobbied hard for action.

The former colonial overlords of the Middle East and most of Africa still to this day think they have some kind of divine right to impose their will on the continent.

But they could never have pulled off the UN resolution on their own.

It was only with the support of the United States – still the world's pre-eminent power and by far the most influential force within the United Nations – that they were able to get a series of opposing states to abstain on the resolution vote, including Germany, China and Russia.

The whole affair is a worked example of modern imperialism: the system of capitalism we live under that keeps whole regions poor and underdeveloped all so a tiny number of great wealthy powers can dominate the international order. The manoeuvring between the different powers – Germany, Russia and China abstained on the resolution - the jostling for influence and hypocritical actions, are what the United Nations are all about. Even those states who opposed the action did so not out of humanitarian concern, but because it didn't fit with their own interests.

Why the US, France and Britain wanted air strikes

Ostensibly, the purpose is to prevent Gaddafi and his militias from massacring their own people.

But even recently Britain and France had close links with Libya. As long as the regime in Tripoli was stable, and ensured the flow of oil and obstructed the flow of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa into the European Union the Libyan dictator was a close friend of President Sarkozy and Britain's prime ministers, as he himself has plaintively pointed out. He and his sons repeatedly claim that the rebels are Al Qaeda terrorists, in a vain hope to mollify his

former friends in Paris and London.

He not only secured the interests of French and British oil companies, supported the NATO-led war against Iraq and showed no scruples in blocking thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of African refugees from reaching Europe. In return he received technological investment, was allowed to pitch his hallmark Bedouin tent in Paris and dined at the Élysée Palace.

The sheer hypocrisy of the "human rights" argument can also be seen from the situation in Bahrain where Saudi troops have supported the reactionary Al Khalifa monarch in cracking down on the democracy movement with bloodshed and violence, with but the mildest reproofs and a call for dialogue from Hilary Clinton.

Perhaps this is the price Clinton paid for getting Saudi support in achieving Arab League endorsement of the UN resolution.

Gaddafi's former ally and imperialist gendarme, like Mubarak shortly before him, only became "unacceptable" when he lost control of his country. Unacceptable, that is, because he could no longer defend imperialist interests and keep order in his country.

That France, Britain and the USA are in the front line with their attacks is because these imperialist states have direct political influence to lose in the Middle East and North Africa.

France sees North Africa as its traditional sphere of influence and one of the few where it can still play an influential role. The USA and its main ally, Britain, are the most closely bound up with the existing imperialist order in the entire region. Both France and Britain like to play the role of being more sympathetic to the concerns of the Arab countries, than the USA can because of its near-total attachment to the apartheid state of Israel.

In a similar vein, the reason China and Russia abstained in the vote on the Security Council was their long term unwillingness to set precedents for UN interventions. The butchers of Tiananmen Square, Tibet and Chechnya are wary that such mandates could be threatened against them when they carry out their next atrocities. Germany has pushed its own public opinion to the limits with its involvement in Afghanistan.

In this situation, and with the US declining economically in its role as global hegemon, they would have boosted their own prestige, and put themselves in a stronger position as alternatives to the US in the future.

Logic of intervention

So, what are the objectives set out in the resolution? It doesn't go as far as supporting the rebels against Gaddafi or stipulating regime change as an objective. And this is important, because it represents a compromise between forces who want to impose a ceasefire and a de facto division within the country. And those who want to see Gaddafi overthrown.

If the aim is the overthrow of Gaddafi then there is certainly guarantee air strikes will achieve this and that creates a "logic of intervention" to escalate until such time as the military objective is reached. If not, then there must be a new compromise, a new division of power between the leaders of the insurrection and the Gaddafi family clique (with or without Muammar himself).

Here too, as with any division of the country, this would only be possible if the revolutionary masses of Libya can be demobilised because it would necessarily mean sacrificing their struggle for their political and social hopes, which are bound up with the struggle against the regime. Most seriously now the west has intervened it give them the role of king makers within any settlement and not the Libyan people themselves.

Whatever the outcome, there will be pressure for a long-term Western-military presence in the country to "police" any settlement.

The USA, Britain and France have only one thing in common: their war aims are "pacification and stabilisation" for their oil companies, not democracy.

Their objective is to achieve the greatest possible influence on the reordering of the country; there is no common idea

of what the new political order in the country will look like.

The reaction of the Arab masses

Today the no-fly zone and the possibility of aerial attacks on Gaddafi's militias meets with the approval of the Arab masses. Like the insurgents in Benghazi, they interpret the UN resolution as support for their struggle. But this is a tragic illusion, strengthened by the support given by the 'Arab League'.

The reason it's imperative to continue to fight for the victory of the Libyan Revolution as well as opposing the UN intervention, is because this is only set of tactics that can result in the freedom of Libya from the yoke of imperial control.

By supporting and calling for western intervention, whilst understandable in the face of a major military offensive by Gaddafi's forces, the revolutionary forces have sacrificed their long term interests for short term gains.

The United Nation is not a neutral arbiter on all this. Although it self identifies as the embodiment of the international community, it is dominated by the world's richest imperial nations, notably the United States. It will only intervene when it perceives a direct threat to the world order which it draws together.

The attack by the USA, France and Britain must thus be disguised as a 'humanitarian' mandate. But coming at a time of democratic ferment it has gained unusually wide support among the Arab masses. Suddenly these powers, whose sole concern was 'order' and 'dialogue' with the tyrants up to the last few days in Tunisia and Egypt, came to realise this would undermine their influence on a new order in the region. Using Gaddafi's apparent imminent fall they executed a flying leap into the camp of 'democracy'.

The no fly zone will probably foster these illusions but just as inevitably, they will be shattered by the harsh reality and the cynicism of imperialist policy. Look at Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen where as a quid pro quo for endorsing the UN mandate little has been said and nothing will be done to protect the peaceful demonstrators against their brutal oppressors.

In Libya, too, intervention by the great powers will unavoidably lead to a situation in which the social relations within the country; monopoly control over raw materials by the big corporations alongside a few crumbs for their Libyan allies, increasing social inequality, the perpetuation of reactionary social relationships such as the oppression of women and the role of the so-called 'tribes', will not be overcome but rather strengthened.

The decisive question is the following: will the Libyan, and more generally the masses in the Arab world, overcome these illusions before they become a noose round their own necks which allows, the restabilisation of imperial domination of the region.

Therefore, workers and all the oppressed of the whole world must reject and struggle against any intervention by the USA, Britain, France and their allies, even under a UN mandate. The victory of the Libyan Revolution cannot be achieved by the aerial attacks and the new political order of the imperialists, which would reduce it to their political instrument and decapitate it. What is needed to support the uprising is volunteers from the Arab states together with personnel and material support from these countries.

An imperialist intervention means that the USA, France and Britain will ultimately be the arbitrators in the civil war in Libya. Their strikes could be the precursors to a land invasion and occupation of the country. In the worst-case, which is certainly still very distant, the insurgents could degenerate into being the ground troops of the imperialists. In any event, it would mean that the western great powers would effectively decide over the political order in the country and be able to greatly increase their control over its raw materials. Lastly, alongside all the humanitarian talk, they will prevent the escape of refugees to Europe.

There is only one possible way to prevent such a scenario: explanation and exposure of the real political objectives of the imperialists and a revolutionary struggle against the Gaddafi regime and the other Arab despots, from Bahrain to Riyadh. The insurgents must not allow themselves to become the plaything of the USA, France, Britain, the UN or

NATO. That means, first, that the leadership of the rebellion in Benghazi, that is the heterogeneous "national transition council" must itself be controlled by the masses. It must arm them; all important meetings, decisions and other negotiations must be opened to those who made the revolution, above all to the workers and the youth of Benghazi and other "rebel cities".

For this, the formation of democratic, council structures and the creation of a militia under their control are urgently necessary.

At the same time, these are also the best way of defending against any attack by Gaddafi's troops and to organise their own struggle.

However, what will be decisive is that the rebels not only build council-style fighting organisations and institutions that can exercise power. At the same time, it is also necessary to build a revolutionary workers' party in close alliance with the Egyptian Tunisian revolutions as a political alternative to the existing leadership in the resistance Council.

This party must fight for an alternative programme of permanent revolution that expresses the interests of the working class and all the other oppressed and exploited sections of the Libyan people.

Where now for the Arab revolutions?

The revolution in Libya is at a turning point. We must oppose military attacks by the US, France and Britain with all the means available to us.

In the imperialist states, above all in France, Britain and the USA, the trade unions and the working class parties must show active solidarity with the Arab revolution, but at the same time organise demonstrations against the imperialist attacks calling for the stopping of military intervention.

The threat of aerial attacks and the strengthened imperialist intervention does not, however, mean that the People's Revolution in Libya, itself an integral part of the revolution in the Middle East and North Africa, has lost its progressive character. Any attempt by Gaddafi (or his friend Hugo Chavez) to dress up as some sort of anti-imperialist is a sick joke.

We oppose the imperialist intervention not because Gaddafi has turned into an "anti-imperialist" as a result of the UN decision. His assault on his own people - including his attack on Benghazi - has provided the pretext for imperialist intervention.

Rather, we fight it because the main aim of imperialist intervention is to prevent a revolutionary development in Libya and across the whole Arab region.

There is clearly a powerful re-cementing of relations between the imperialists and the Egyptian Army Council, the Saudis, and the Gulf States. Their common purpose is to prevent any revolutionary "contagion" to the main oil producing states of the peninsula.

What they also fear like the plague is the uniting of the masses of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and a similar radical revolution in Algeria; which has been helping Gaddafi. By the same token, creating just such an organized political alliance should be the masses' highest priority.

The present wave of counter-revolutionary events will doubtlessly exhaust itself, especially if the Egyptian masses press forward their democratic and social demands and if the youth and worker militant take a clear anti-imperialist and class independent stance. An international conference of revolutionary forces in Cairo would be a big step in this direction.

Frederick Engels words about the counter-revolution in 1848-9 and its role in forging a revolutionary party are worth remembering:

"The revolution made progress, not by its immediate tragicomic achievements but by the creation of a powerful, united counter-revolution, an opponent in combat with whom the party of overthrow ripened into a really revolutionary party."

