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On Libya and the Unfolding Crises

Noam Chomsky

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What are U.S. motives in international relations most broadly? That is, what are the over arching motives and themes one can pretty much always find informing U.S. policy choices, no matter where in the world we are discussing? What are the somewhat more specific but still over arching motives and themes for U.S. policy in Middle East and the Arab world? Finally, what do you think are the more proximate aims of U.S. policy in the current situation in Libya?

A useful way to approach the question is to ask what U.S. motives are NOT. There are some good ways to find out. One is to read the professional literature on international relations: quite commonly, its account of policy is what policy is not, an interesting topic that I won't pursue.

Another method, quite relevant now, is to listen to political leaders and commentators. Suppose they say that the motive for a military action is humanitarian. In itself, that carries no information: virtually every resort to force is justified in those terms, even by the worst monsters – who may, irrelevantly, even convince themselves of the truth of what they are saying.

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Hitler, for example, may have believed that he was taking over parts of Czechoslovakia to end ethnic conflict and bring its people the benefits of an advanced civilization, and that he invaded Poland to end the “wild terror” of the Poles. Japanese fascists rampaging in China probably did believe that they were selflessly laboring to create an “earthly paradise” and to protect the suffering population from “Chinese bandits.” Even Obama may have believed what he said in his presidential address on March 28 about the humanitarian motives for the Libyan intervention. Same holds of commentators.

There is, however, a very simple test to determine whether the professions of noble intent can be taken seriously: do the authors call for humanitarian intervention and “responsibility to protect” to defend the victims of their own crimes, or those of their clients? Did Obama, for example, call for a no-fly zone during the murderous and destructive US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, with no credible pretext? Or did he, rather, boast proudly during his presidential campaign that he had co-sponsored a Senate resolution supporting the invasion and calling for punishment of Iran and Syria for impeding it? End of discussion. In fact, virtually the entire literature of humanitarian intervention and right to protect, written and spoken, disappears under this simple and appropriate test.

In contrast, what motives actually ARE is rarely discussed, and one has to look at the documentary and historical record to unearth them, in the case of any state.

What then are U.S. motives? At a very general level, the evidence seems to me to show that they have not changed much since the high-level planning studies undertaken during World War II. Wartime planners took for granted that the US would emerge from the war in a position of overwhelming dominance, and called for the establishment of a Grand Area in which the US would maintain “unquestioned power,” with “military and economic supremacy,” while ensuring the “limitation of any exercise of sovereignty” by states that might interfere with its

global designs. The Grand Area was to include the Western hemisphere, the Far East, the British empire (which included the Middle East energy reserves), and as much of Eurasia as possible, at least its industrial and commercial center in Western Europe. It is quite clear from the documentary record that “President Roosevelt was aiming at United States hegemony in the postwar world,” to quote the accurate assessment of the (justly) respected British diplomatic historian Geoffrey Warner. And more significant, the careful wartime plans were soon implemented, as we read in declassified documents of the following years, and observe in practice. Circumstances of course have changed, and tactics adjusted accordingly, but basic principles are quite stable, to the present.

With regard to the Middle East – the “most strategically important region of the world,” in Eisenhower’s phrase -- the primary concern has been, and remains, its incomparable energy reserves. Control of these would yield “substantial control of the world,” as observed early on by the influential liberal adviser A.A. Berle. These concerns are rarely far in the background in affairs concerning this region.

In Iraq, for example, as the dimensions of the US defeat could no longer be concealed, pretty rhetoric was displaced by honest announcement of policy goals. In November 2007 the White House issued a Declaration of Principles insisting that Iraq must grant US military forces indefinite access and must privilege American investors. Two months later the president informed Congress that he would ignore legislation that might limit the permanent stationing of US Armed Forces in Iraq or “United States control of the oil resources of Iraq” – demands that the US had to abandon shortly after in the face of Iraqi resistance, just as it had to abandon earlier goals.

While control over oil is not the sole factor in Middle East policy, it provides fairly good guidelines, right now as well. In an oil-rich country, a reliable dictator is granted virtual free rein. In recent weeks, for example, there was no reaction when

the Saudi dictatorship used massive force to prevent any sign of protest. Same in Kuwait, when small demonstrations were instantly crushed. And in Bahrain, when Saudi-led forces intervened to protect the minority Sunni monarch from calls for reform on the part of the repressed Shiite population. Government forces not only smashed the tent city in Pearl Square – Bahrain’s Tahrir Square -- but even demolished the Pearl statue that was Bahrain’s symbol, and had been appropriated by the protestors. Bahrain is a particularly sensitive case because it hosts the US Fifth fleet, by far the most powerful military force in the region, and because eastern Saudi Arabia, right across the causeway, is also largely Shiite, and has most of the Kingdom’s oil reserves. By a curious accident of geography and history, the world’s largest hydrocarbon concentrations surround the northern Gulf, in mostly Shiite regions. The possibility of a tacit Shiite alliance has been a nightmare for planners for a long time.

In states lacking major hydrocarbon reserves, tactics vary, typically keeping to a standard game plan when a favored dictator is in trouble: support him as long as possible, and when that cannot be done, issue ringing declarations of love of democracy and human rights -- and then try to salvage as much of the regime as possible.

The scenario is boringly familiar: Marcos, Duvalier, Chun, Ceasescu, Mobutu, Suharto, and many others. And today, Tunisia and Egypt. Syria is a tough nut to crack and there is no clear alternative to the dictatorship that would support U.S. goals. Yemen is a morass where direct intervention would probably create even greater problems for Washington. So there state violence elicits only pious declarations.

Libya is a different case. Libya is rich in oil, and though the US and UK have often given quite remarkable support to its cruel dictator, right to the present, he is not reliable. They would much prefer a more obedient client. Furthermore, the vast territory of Libya is mostly unexplored, and oil specialists

the West and very similar to the Gulf’s emirate states.” Or the Western-backed rebellion might proceed all the way to eliminate the irritating dictator.

Those concerned for peace, justice, freedom and democracy should try to find ways to lend support and assistance to Libyans who seek to shape their own future, free from constraints imposed by external powers. We can have hopes about the directions they should pursue, but their future should be in their hands.

The noble Kosovo intervention provided it, and the fiction must be zealously guarded.

Returning to the question, there is an analogy between the self-serving depictions of Kosovo and Libya, both interventions animated by noble intent in the fictionalized version. The unacceptable real world suggests rather different analogies.

Similarly, many people see an analogy between the on-going Iraq intervention and the current intervention in Libya. In this case too, can you explain both the similarities, and differences?

I don't see meaningful analogies here either, except that two of the same states are involved. In the case of Iraq, the goals were those that were finally conceded. In the case of Libya, it is likely that the goal is similar in at least one respect: the hope that a reliable client regime will reliably supported Western goals and provide Western investors with privileged access to Libya's rich oil wealth – which, as noted, may go well beyond what is currently known.

What do you expect, in coming weeks, to see happening in Libya and, in that context, what do you think ought to be the aims of an anti interventionist and anti war movement in the U.S. regarding U.S. policies?

It is of course uncertain, but the likely prospects now (March 29) are either a break-up of Libya into an oil-rich Eastern region heavily dependent on the Western imperial powers and an impoverished West under the control of a brutal tyrant with fading capacity, or a victory by the Western-backed forces. In either case, so the triumvirate presumably hopes, a less troublesome and more dependent regime will be in place. The likely outcome is described fairly accurately, I think by the London-based Arab journal *al-Quds al-Arabi* (March 28). While recognizing the uncertainty of prediction, it anticipates that the intervention may leave Libya with “two states, a rebel-held oil-rich East and a poverty-stricken, Qadhafi-led West... Given that the oil wells have been secured, we may find ourselves facing a new Libyan oil emirate, sparsely inhabited, protected by

believe it may have rich untapped resources, which a more dependable government might open to Western exploitation.

When a non-violent uprising began, Qaddafi crushed it violently, and a rebellion broke out that liberated Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, and seemed about to move on to Qaddafi's stronghold in the West. His forces, however, reversed the course of the conflict and were at the gates of Benghazi. A slaughter in Benghazi was likely, and as Obama's Middle East adviser Dennis Ross pointed out, “everyone would blame us for it.” That would be unacceptable, as would a Qaddafi military victory enhancing his power and independence. The US then joined in UN Security Council resolution 1973 calling for a no-fly zone, to be implemented by France, the UK, and the US, with the US supposed to move to a supporting role.

There was no effort to limit action to instituting a no-fly zone, or even to keep within the broader mandate of resolution 1973.

The triumvirate at once interpreted the resolution as authorizing direct participation on the side of the rebels. A ceasefire was imposed by force on Qaddafi's forces, but not on the rebels. On the contrary, they were given military support as they advanced to the West, soon securing the major sources of Libya's oil production, and poised to move on.

The blatant disregard of UN 1973, from the start began to cause some difficulties for the press as it became too glaring to ignore. In the NYT, for example, Karim Fahim and David Kirkpatrick (March 29) wondered “how the allies could justify airstrikes on Colonel Qaddafi's forces around [his tribal center] Surt if, as seems to be the case, they enjoy widespread support in the city and pose no threat to civilians.” Another technical difficulty is that UNSC 1973 “called for an arms embargo that applies to the entire territory of Libya, which means that any outside supply of arms to the opposition would have to be covert” (but otherwise unproblematic).

Some argue that oil cannot be a motive because Western companies were granted access to the prize under Qaddafi. That misconstrues US concerns. The same could have been said about Iraq under Saddam, or Iran and Cuba for many years, still today. What Washington seeks is what Bush announced: control, or at least dependable clients. US and British internal documents stress that “the virus of nationalism” is their greatest fear, not just in the Middle East but everywhere. Nationalist regimes might conduct illegitimate exercises of sovereignty, violating Grand Area principles. And they might seek to direct resources to popular needs, as Nasser sometimes threatened.

It is worth noting that the three traditional imperial powers – France, UK, US – are almost isolated in carrying out these operations. The two major states in the region, Turkey and Egypt, could probably have imposed a no-fly zone but are at most offering tepid support to the triumvirate military campaign. The Gulf dictatorships would be happy to see the erratic Libyan dictator disappear, but although loaded with advanced military hardware (poured in by the US and UK to recycle petrodollars and ensure obedience), they are willing to offer no more than token participation (by Qatar).

While supporting UNSC 1973, Africa -- apart from US ally Rwanda -- is generally opposed to the way it was instantly interpreted by the triumvirate, in some cases strongly so. For review of policies of individual states, see Charles Onyango-Obbo in the Kenyan journal *East African* (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201103280142.html>).

Beyond the region there is little support. Like Russia and China, Brazil abstained from UNSC 1973, calling instead for a full cease-fire and dialogue. India too abstained from the UN resolution on grounds that the proposed measures were likely to “exacerbate an already difficult situation for the people of Libya,” and also called for political measures rather than use of force. Even Germany abstained from the resolution.

strated remarkable restraint and discipline. The clear and often cited goal of the Serbian administration was to observe the Milosevic-Holbrooke Agreement [of October 1998] to the letter so not to provide any excuse to the international community to intervene. ... There were huge ‘discrepancies in perception’ between what the missions in Kosovo have been reporting to their respective governments and capitals, and what the latter thereafter released to the media and the public. This discrepancy can only be viewed as input to long-term preparation for war against Yugoslavia. Until the time I left Kosovo, there never happened what the media and, with no less intensity the politicians, were relentlessly claiming. Accordingly, until 20 March 1999 there was no reason for military intervention, which renders illegitimate measures undertaken thereafter by the international community. The collective behavior of EU Member States prior to, and after the war broke out, gives rise to serious concerns, because the truth was killed, and the EU lost reliability.”

History is not quantum physics, and there is always ample room for doubt. But it is rare for conclusions to be so firmly backed as they are in this case. Very revealingly, it is all totally irrelevant. The prevailing doctrine is that NATO intervened to stop ethnic cleansing – though supporters of the bombing who tolerate at least a nod to the rich factual evidence qualify their support by saying the bombing was necessary to stop potential atrocities: we must therefore act to elicit large-scale atrocities to stop ones that might occur if we do not bomb. And there are even more shocking justifications.

The reasons for this virtual unanimity and passion are fairly clear. The bombing came after a virtual orgy of self-glorification and awe of power that might have impressed Kim il-Sung. I’ve reviewed it elsewhere, and this remarkable moment of intellectual history should not be allowed to remain in the oblivion to which it has been consigned. After this performance, there simply had to be a glorious denouement.

authorities (Britain was the most hawkish member of the alliance). The major atrocities in Kosovo were not the cause of the NATO bombing of Serbia, but rather its consequence, and a fully anticipated consequence. NATO commander General Wesley Clark had informed the White House weeks before the bombing that it would elicit a brutal response by Serbian forces on the ground, and as the bombing began, told the press that such a response was “predictable.”

The first UN-registered refugees outside Kosovo were well after the bombing began. The indictment of Milosevic during the bombing, based largely on US-UK intelligence, confined itself to crimes after the bombing, with one exception, which we know could not be taken seriously by US-UK leaders, who at the same moment were actively supporting even worse crimes. Furthermore, there was good reason to believe that a diplomatic solution might have been in reach: in fact, the UN resolution imposed after 78 days of bombing was pretty much a compromise between the Serbian and NATO position as it began.

All of this, including these impeccable western sources, is reviewed in some detail in my book *A New Generation Draws the Line*. Corroborating information has appeared since. Thus Diana Johnstone reports a letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel on October 26, 2007 by Dietmar Hartwig, who had been head of the European mission in Kosovo before it was withdrawn on March 20 as the bombing was announced, and was in a very good position to know what was happening. He wrote:

“Not a single report submitted in the period from late November 1998 up to the evacuation on the eve of the war mentioned that Serbs had committed any major or systematic crimes against Albanians, nor there was a single case referring to genocide or genocide-like incidents or crimes. Quite the opposite, in my reports I have repeatedly informed that, considering the increasingly more frequent KLA attacks against the Serbian executive, their law enforcement demon-

Italy too was reluctant, in part presumably because it is highly dependent on its oil contracts with Qaddafi – and we may recall that the first post-World War I genocide was conducted by Italy, in Eastern Libya, now liberated, and perhaps retaining some memories.

Can an anti-interventionist who believes in self determination of nations and people ever legitimately support an intervention, either by the U.N. or particular countries?

There are two cases to consider: (1) UN intervention and (2) intervention without UN authorization. Unless we believe that states are sacrosanct in the form that has been established in the modern world (typically by extreme violence), with rights that override all other imaginable considerations, then the answer is the same in both cases: Yes, in principle at least. I see no point in discussing that belief, so will dismiss it.

With regard to the first case, the Charter and subsequent resolutions grant the Security Council considerable latitude for intervention, and it has been undertaken, with regard to South Africa, for example. That of course does not entail that every Security Council decision should be approved by “an anti-interventionist who believes in self-determination”; other considerations enter in individual cases, but again, unless contemporary states are assigned the status of virtually holy entities, the principle is the same.

As for the second case – the one that arises with regard to the triumvirate interpretation of UN 1973, and many other examples – then the answer is again Yes, in principle at least, unless we take the global state system to be sacrosanct in the form established in the UN Charter and other treaties.

There is, of course, always a very heavy burden of proof that must be met to justify forceful intervention, or any use of force. The burden is particularly high in case (2), in violation of the Charter, at least for states that profess to be law-abiding. We should bear in mind, however, that the global hegemon rejects that stance, and is self-exempted from the UN and OAS Char-

ters, and other international treaties. In accepting ICJ jurisdiction when the Court was established (under US initiative) in 1946, Washington excluded itself from charges of violation of international treaties, and later ratified the Genocide Convention with similar reservations – all positions that have been upheld by international tribunals, since their procedures require acceptance of jurisdiction. More generally, US practice is to add crucial reservations to the international treaties it ratifies, effectively exempting itself.

Can the burden of proof be met? There is little point in abstract discussion, but there are some real cases that might qualify. In the post-World War II period, there are two cases of resort to force which – though not qualifying as humanitarian intervention – might legitimately be supported: India's invasion of East Pakistan in 1971, and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, in both cases, ending massive atrocities. These examples, however, do not enter the Western canon of "humanitarian intervention" because they suffer from the fallacy of wrong agency: they were not carried out by the West. What is more, the US bitterly opposed them and severely punished the miscreants who ended the slaughters in today's Bangladesh and who drove Pol Pot out of Cambodia just as his atrocities were peaking. Vietnam was not only bitterly condemned but also punished by a US-supported Chinese invasion, and by US-UK military and diplomatic support for the Khmer Rouge attacking Cambodia from Thai bases.

While the burden of proof might be met in these cases, it is not easy to think of others. In the case of intervention by the triumvirate of imperial powers that are currently violating UN 1973 in Libya, the burden is particularly heavy, given their horrifying records. Nonetheless, it would be too strong to hold that it can never be satisfied in principle – unless, of course, we regard nation-states in their current form as essentially holy.

Preventing a likely massacre in Benghazi is no small matter, whatever one thinks of the motives.

Can a person concerned that a country's dissidents not be massacred so they remain able to seek self determination ever legitimately oppose an intervention that is intended, whatever else it intends, to avert such a massacre?

Even accepting, for the sake of argument, that the intent is genuine, meeting the simple criterion I mentioned at the outset, I don't see how to answer at this level of abstraction: it depends on circumstances. Intervention might be opposed, for example, if it is likely to lead to a much worse massacre. Suppose, for example, that US leaders genuinely and honestly intended to avert a slaughter in Hungary in 1956 by bombing Moscow. Or that the Kremlin genuinely and honestly intended to avert a slaughter in El Salvador in the 1980s by bombing the US. Given the predictable consequences, we would all agree that those (inconceivable) actions could be legitimately opposed.

Many people see an analogy between the Kosovo intervention of 1999 and the current intervention in Libya. Can you explain both the significant similarities, first, and then the major differences, second?

Many people do indeed see such an analogy, a tribute to the incredible power of the Western propaganda systems. The background for the Kosovo intervention happens to be unusually well documented. That includes two detailed State Department compilations, extensive reports from the ground by Kosovo Verification Mission (western) monitors, rich sources from NATO and the UN, a British Parliamentary Inquiry, and much else. The reports and studies coincide very closely on the facts.

In brief, there had been no substantial change on the ground in the months prior to the bombing. Atrocities were committed both by Serbian forces and by the KLA guerrillas mostly attacking from neighboring Albania – primarily the latter during the relevant period, at least according to high British