

# While the UK and Europe can be proud of their role in Libya, there was a dependence on US support and this cannot be relied upon in future conflicts.

*With an endgame in Libya now in sight, **Chris Brown** writes that while European forces have made a significant contribution to the campaign, they would have been unable to do so without the support of the US. This kind of American willingness to assist in similar campaigns in the future cannot be guaranteed; further cuts to UK defence spending will therefore undermine our ability to participate in any future independent European military actions.*

Although the Colonel and the more poisonous of his sons seem determined to make a last ditch stand somewhere outside of Tripoli, the Libyan campaign has progressed to the point that an immediate post-mortem makes sense, even if a full autopsy will not be possible for some time to come. So, where are we now?



The first thing that must be said is simply that the NATO campaign, with Britain as a prime mover, has succeeded. NATO's air power probably prevented a massacre back in March of this year, and certainly provided a shield behind which forces loyal to the National Transition Council, or NTC, (a.k.a. 'the rebels') could organise. That it took 150 days for the regime to fall is a reflection of the poor state of the rebel 'army', a motley force which contained very few professional soldiers and which is still heavily dependent on external air support. Remarkably, the close air-support that was provided caused no NATO, and very few Libyan civilian casualties.

Moreover, and perhaps most significantly for the long term, it produced very little in the way of infrastructural damage. NATO has been instrumental in helping the people of Libya to get rid of a vicious gangster regime which both terrorised its own population and exported terror to the rest of the world. Whatever happens next, and whatever reservations one may have about some aspects of '[Operation Unified Protector](#)', this is cause for great satisfaction and the British government, and Britain's Navy, RAF and Special Forces can take pride in having played a leading role in bringing about such a positive outcome.

Still, a more ambiguous picture about the current state of NATO, and its likely future development has been painted by the actual course of the Libyan campaign. The latter began with a large-scale assault on Gaddafi's air-defences by American cruise missiles, but thereafter the US tried to step back and leave the subsequent bombing and air-support campaign to the European members of NATO, which in effect meant Britain and France, with limited support from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and (non-NATO) Sweden.

This has been trumpeted in some quarters in the US as a well-thought through policy of 'leading from behind' and obliging the Europeans to live up to their responsibilities. But things have not been that simple – in practice the Europeans ran out of crucial munitions very early on, and had to be resupplied by the US. More important, they simply did not possess the command-and-control and electronic warfare facilities needed to run an operation of this complexity, nor the pilotless drones necessary for effective surveillance. In effect, Europe flew the planes and attack helicopters, but most of the time they were firing US munitions at targets identified by the US in operations co-ordinated by US technology.



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This continued American dominance is particularly interesting because this operation was European in conception – it was Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy who pressured the US into taking action. If, as [Robert Kagan has suggested](#), Americans are metaphorically from Mars and Europeans from Venus, then this was a thoroughly Venusian operation (albeit without the involvement of the ultra-Venusian Germans), which makes it all the more embarrassing that it was so heavily dependent for its success on the Martian military.

The European members of NATO represent countries with a collective GNP greater than that of the US, but they spend half as much on defence and, moreover, their military spend is much less effectively deployed than in America, with too little co-ordination of procurement decisions, inter-operability of weapon-systems and so on. Europeans collectively punch well below their weight. Robert Gates, former US Defence Secretary rather angrily drew attention to this during the campaign and accused the Europeans of free-riding on American power – clearly true, but actually a rational, if somewhat ignoble, strategy, always assuming that the US will bail Europe out when the chips are down, as it did on this occasion.

The problem is that an American willingness to allow European free-riding cannot be guaranteed in the future; Washington's understandable concern about the development of Chinese military capacity is causing the US to turn its attention away from Europe. Next time – if there is a next time – the US may be unwilling to pull Europe's chestnuts from the fire.

Meanwhile, on the day that the 'Friends of Libya' are conferring with the NTC in Paris at a meeting co-chaired by David Cameron, 2,000 redundancy notices are being sent out to members of the British armed forces, indicating that the cuts that were announced last year are still on-track. The Government has said that these cuts will not make impossible a future Libyan-sized operation, and this is probably right, especially once the withdrawal from Afghanistan is complete – but then, as noted above, the British involvement in Libya was entirely dependent on US support almost from day one, so this is a somewhat empty boast.

More to the point is the fact that these cuts will undermine Britain's capacity to contribute to – much less lead – a genuinely independent European operation in the future. Given that the French military are in more or less the same condition, what this suggests is that at the very time that the US is increasingly looking towards the Pacific and expecting Europe to handle its own defences, the Europeans are collectively making it unlikely this expectation will be met.

Since at least the 1980s Europe/Venus has argued that America/Mars was too dependent on military force and that the European approach of, in [Robert Cooper's](#) phrase, speaking softly and carrying a large chequebook made more sense in today's world. Martians such as Robert Kagan have argued that this policy was only viable because American military power shielded Europe from those whose enmity could not be bought off in this way. As the America shield becomes more and more uncertain while the Europeans continue to rely on the increasingly implausible power of the Euro, we may have occasion to find out whether he was right.