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## From American Exceptionalism to Overstretch

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By Prof. Erik Jones.

"I'm the quintessential believer in American exceptionalism. I believe we are different than everybody else. I do believe we are the indispensable nation. But for all those reasons, we can walk a little lighter." [Robert Gates, 27 June 2011](#)



President Barack Obama's decision to intervene in Libya marks a turning point in the United States' relations with its NATO allies. Rather than insisting on playing a leading role or allowing the Europeans to go it alone (albeit perhaps with access to US military assets), the Obama administration chose to 'lead from behind', as [one administration adviser](#) put it – or, in the [president's own words](#) during his address to the nation on 28 March, to create 'the conditions and coalitions for others to step up . . . ; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and humanity are upheld by all.'

The logic behind this position rests on a normative commitment to the 'right to protect'. As [Defense Secretary Robert Gates](#) explained during a tour of Sunday talk shows on the day before the President's address: 'I don't think it's [Libya is] a vital interest of the United States, but we clearly have an interest there.' That interest is to support European countries like France and Great Britain in the pursuit of their own vital national interests, it is to prevent the senseless slaughter of Libyan civilians, and it is to show that the United States can remain true to its founding principles.

There is significant merit to this position. The cost of the Libyan intervention is limited when compared to actions in Afghanistan and Iraq; the potential for violence in Libya to spill over onto neighbouring countries is considerable; and the conditions for invoking the 'right to protect' are [more favourable there than just about anywhere else](#).

Nevertheless, the U.S. policy leaves two hostages to fortune. One is whether the Europeans have the political will and the military capability to act on the interests that the United States has recognized on their behalf. This is the concern that Gates addressed when he spoke in [Brussels on 10 June](#). The frustration he expressed at 'the very real possibility' for Europe's 'collective military irrelevance' was a recurring theme throughout the speech. Should Europeans choose to realize that possibility, Gates warned, future American leaders may cease to take their interests into account.

The other hostage to fortune is that the situation on the ground will change in a way that forces the administration to invest more deeply in securing stability for Libya and the surrounding region than it can afford. The direct commitments are low at the moment in terms of money and personnel. But they could rise significantly if the conflict drags on, accidents happen, or events take a turn for the worse.

These points are both obvious and interrelated; should the European effort in Libya collapse the Obama administration could find itself holding the bag. Leading from behind looks a lot like going it alone when there is no-one left to follow the leader. It would not be impossible for the Obama Administration to escape this trap – just as Ronald Reagan withdrew from Lebanon and Bill Clinton withdrew from Somalia. Nevertheless, it would be a painful reversal for any American president, and particularly for one heading toward reelection.

Obama's decision to intervene in Libya was fraught with risk; his decision to lead from behind made the risks even greater. Therefore, it is worth considering how commitment to American exceptionalism influenced both aspects of the policy. [For Obama](#), any failure to intervene 'would have been a betrayal of who we are'. [For Gates](#), 'when you're the world's sole remaining superpower, even if you're in economic trouble, you don't have to be tough'. The causal connection between belief in American exceptionalism and the threat of American overstretch lies at the juxtaposition of these views. It is a conditional causality that operates only in the event that the conflict worsens, the Europeans fail, and the Obama administration refuses to withdraw from Libya – but it is clear to see nonetheless.

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