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Inter Press Service

Neocon Hawks Take Flight Over Libya

Posted By Jim Lobe

February 25, 2011

In a distinct echo of the tactics they pursued to encourage U.S. intervention in the Balkans and Iraq, a familiar clutch of neoconservatives appealed Friday for the United States and NATO to "immediately" prepare military action to help bring down the regime of Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi and end the violence that is believed to have killed well over a thousand people in the past week.

The appeal, which came in the form of a letter signed by 40 policy analysts, including more than a dozen former senior officials who served under President George W. Bush, was organized and released by the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), a two-year-old neoconservative group that is widely seen as the successor to the more-famous — or infamous — Project for the New American Century (PNAC).

Warning that Libya stood "on the threshold of a moral and humanitarian catastrophe," the letter, which was addressed to President Barack Obama, called for specific immediate steps involving military action, in addition to the imposition of a number of diplomatic and economic sanctions to bring "an end to the murderous Libyan regime".

In particular, it called for Washington to press NATO to "develop operational plans to urgently deploy warplanes to prevent the regime from using fighter jets and helicopter gunships against civilians and carry out other missions as required; (and) move naval assets into Libyan waters" to "aid evacuation efforts and prepare for possible

contingencies;" as well as "(e)stablish the capability to disable Libyan naval vessels used to attack civilians."

Among the letter's signers were former Bush deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz; Bush's top global democracy and Middle East adviser; Elliott Abrams; former Bush speechwriters Marc Thiessen and Peter Wehner; Vice President Dick Cheney's former deputy national security adviser, John Hannah, as well as FPI's four directors: Weekly Standard editor William Kristol; Brookings Institution fellow Robert Kagan; former Iraq Coalition Provisional Authority spokesman Dan Senor; and former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and Ambassador to Turkey, Eric Edelman.

It was Kagan and Kristol who co-founded and directed PNAC in its heyday from 1997 to the end of Bush's term in 2005.

The letter comes amid growing pressure on Obama, including from liberal hawks, to take stronger action against Gadhafi.

Two prominent senators whose foreign policy views often reflect neoconservative thinking, Republican John McCain and Independent Democrat Joseph Lieberman, called Friday in Tel Aviv for Washington to supply Libyan rebels with arms, among other steps, including establishing a no-fly zone over the country.

On Wednesday, Obama said his staff was preparing a "full range of options" for action. He also announced that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet fly to Geneva Monday for a foreign ministers' meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council to discuss possible multilateral actions.

"They want to keep open the idea that there's a mix of capabilities they can deploy — whether it's a no-fly zone, freezing foreign assets of Gadhafi's family, doing something to prevent the transport of mercenaries (hired by Gadhafi) to Libya, targeting sanctions against some of his supporters to persuade them to abandon him," said Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation, who took part in a meeting of independent foreign policy analysts, including Abrams, with senior National Security Council staff at the White House Thursday.

During the 1990s, neoconservatives consistently lobbied for military pressure to be deployed against so-called "rogue states," especially in the Middle East.

After the 1991 Gulf War, for example, many "neocons" expressed bitter disappointment that U.S. troops stopped at the Kuwaiti border instead of marching to Baghdad and overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein.

When the Iraqi president then unleashed his forces against Kurdish rebels in the north and Shia insurgents in the south, they — along with many liberal interventionist allies — pressed President George H.W. Bush to impose "no-fly zones" over both regions and take

additional actions — much as they are now proposing for Libya — designed to weaken the regime's military repressive capacity.

Those actions set the pattern for the 1990s. To the end of the decade, neoconservatives, often operating under the auspices of a so-called "letterhead organization," such as PNAC, worked — often with the help of some liberal internationalists eager to establish a right of humanitarian intervention — to press President Bill Clinton to take military action against adversaries in the Balkans — in Bosnia and then Kosovo — as well as Iraq.

Within days of 9/11, for example, PNAC issued a letter signed by 41 prominent individuals — almost all neoconservatives, including 10 of the Libya letter's signers — that called for military action to "remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq," as well as retaliation against Iran and Syria if they did not immediately end their support for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

PNAC and its associates subsequently worked closely with neoconservatives inside the Bush administration, including Abrams, Wolfowitz, and Edelman, to achieve those aims.

While neoconservatives were among the first to call for military action against Gadhafi in the past week, some prominent liberals and rights activists have rallied to the call, including three of the letter's signatories: Neil Hicks of Human Rights First; Bill Clinton's human rights chief, John Shattuck; and Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic*, who also signed the PNAC Iraq letter 10 years ago.

In addition, Anne-Marie Slaughter, until last month the influential director of the State Department's Policy Planning office, cited the U.S.-NATO Kosovo campaign as a possible precedent. "The international community cannot stand by and watch the massacre of Libyan protesters," she wrote on Twitter. "In Rwanda we watched. In Kosovo we acted."

Such comments evoked strong reactions from some military experts, however.

"I'm horrified to read liberal interventionists continue to suggest the ease with which humanitarian crises and regional conflicts can be solved by the application of military power," wrote Andrew Exum, a counter-insurgency specialist at the Center for a New American Security, whose Abu Muqawama blog is widely read here. "To speak so glibly of such things reflects a very immature understanding of the limits of force and the difficulties and complexities of contemporary military operations."

Other commentators noted that a renewed coalition of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists would be much harder to put together now than during the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

"We now have Iraq and Afghanistan as warning signs, as well as our fiscal crisis, so I don't think there's an enormous appetite on Capitol Hill or among the public for yet

another military engagement," said Charles Kupchan, a foreign policy specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

"I support diplomatic and economic sanctions, but I would stop well short of advocating military action, including the imposition of a no-fly zone," he added, noting, in any event, that most of the killing in Libya this week has been carried out by mercenaries and paramilitaries on foot or from vehicles.

"There may be some things we can do — such as airlifting humanitarian supplies to border regions where there are growing number of refugees, but I would do so only with the full support of the Arab League and African Union, if not the U.N.," said Clemons.

"(The neoconservatives) are essentially pro-intervention, pro-war, without regard to the costs to the country," he told IPS. "They don't recognize that we're incredibly over-extended and that the kinds of things they want us to do actually further weaken our already-eroded stock of American power."