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Attack on Libya: the barbarism of buffoons

The bombings confirm that there is now an utter disconnect between the West's geopolitical interests and its geopolitical behaviour.

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The grotesque competition between Britain, France and America to see who can fire the most missiles at Libya confirms the emergence of a new form of Western militarism. This is not the return of the politics of Empire or a re-flourishing of Western colonialism in north Africa, as some have claimed. Rather it is the barbarism of buffoons. This is an act of violence driven not by clear geopolitical interests, but by the utter failure of modern Western governments to work out what their geopolitical interests are and to act accordingly. In the rubble of various compounds and airfields in Libya, we can spy the incoherence of the Western political elites, and their elevation of the reckless, narcissistic politics of short-term gain over anything resembling a strategy or aim.

The Libya venture shines a light on one of the key characteristics of global politics today: the disassociation of geopolitical interests from diplomatic behaviour and international actions. Commentators are searching for a big political motive behind the West's sudden bombardment of Libya. Some claim that Western governments are exploiting current Arab instability in order to reassert their long-lost control over north Africa. Others say Washington wants to conquer Libya in order to keep an eye on, and conservatively influence, political developments in Libya's more important neighbour, Egypt. In truth, the attack on Libya confirms that what is in Western governments' interests and what Western governments do on the international stage are now two

very different things, injecting global politics with an increasingly arbitrary, dangerous and unpredictable dynamic.

The idea that the attack on Libya is a unified assertion of Western authority - more akin to the massive, US-led attack on Iraq in 1991 than to the shaky 'coalition' invasion of Iraq in 2003 - is shot to pieces by reports of how this overnight anti-Libya initiative was formed. Far from being an American-led crusade, [insiders report](#) that Washington was initially distanced from the proposed military action in Libya as 'part of the process of building support for the UN resolution' - that is, with 'the shadow of Iraq ever present', it was decided that governments would be more likely to support action if it didn't appear US-led. Moreover, UK prime minister David Cameron and others considered it important to get Arab nations on side, so that ['this did not look like a Western initiative'](#). The formation of this anti-Libya mission-of-sorts reveals a shamefacedness about Western action today, and that American authority is far more problematic now than it was during the Cold War and in that last flash of American leadership in the first Gulf War of the early 1990s.

Likewise, the idea that the attack on Libya signals a Western desire to recolonise north Africa is exploded by what seems to be the overriding concern of the assault: the question of how to minimise risks and costs to Western governments. Far from wanting to conquer and control, the only serious debate within Western official circles seems to be how best to strike Libya without incurring Western casualties or too much controversial political blowback. [As one report says](#), inter-governmental discussions on Libya have been driven by a 'risk-free, cost-free analysis'. The firing of Tomahawk missiles from submarines and the dropping of bombs from British fighter planes that then return safely to their bases in Norfolk speaks to a West that primarily, and cynically, wants to send a message through its assault on Libya, to say something about itself, to advertise some quality or other, rather than one thirsting for a return to old colonial ways.

The newness and arbitrariness of the attack on Libya is also exposed in the fact that it is being spearheaded, not by seasoned foreign policy hawks or serious diplomats, but by a new breed of rank amateur who knows next to nothing about geopolitical reality. Cameron has made himself spokesman for the military mission, yet this is a politician who has an utterly dysfunctional relationship with international diplomacy. In less than a year as British PM, he has [isolated Islamabad and irritated the Israelis](#) through his clueless, emotionally incontinent style of international politicking, which seems unanchored by anything so old-fashioned as a carefully worked-out geopolitical plan. He has also overseen a bizarre and hapless SAS venture in the very country - Libya - that he now claims to be saving. In France, [two-bob philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy](#) apparently played a key role in coaxing President Nicolas Sarkozy to take action in Libya, while in America former author of turgid tomes on genocide turned national security adviser, [Samantha Power](#), was a key agitator for an attack. Never in the history of mankind has such a collection of know-nothings and narcissists led a military excursion into a sovereign state's affairs.

The almost overnight formation of a Western 'coalition' against Libya does not spring from lingering colonialist instincts in Washington, London or Paris. Rather it speaks to a new and extremely dangerous reality. It reveals the incoherence and self-doubt at the heart of the West, to

the extent that Western governments will go to quite extraordinary lengths to give the impression that their attack is not a Western initiative. It shows that foreign offices across the West are now staffed by people with little or no grasp of geopolitical reality. It has exposed the inability of the Western powers to drum up serious support or international consensus even for a relatively small-scale military operation: the Arab League, so keenly held up by Cameron as a moral fig leaf for the attack, expressed its concerns after just one night of bombings, while much of the Western media is warning about the possibility of 'mission creep' and getting bogged down, once again, in the unpredictable terrains of Africa.

Most of all, it speaks to the now almost complete rupture between Western political interests and Western political behaviour. We now have Western governments so incoherent, so shaken by crises of authority, so incapable of working out what their geopolitical aims should be and how they might pursue them, that they take military action that potentially runs counter to their long-term political interests. For the past decade or more, Libya was actually an area of relative stability in Western foreign-policy eyes, which explains Tony Blair's and other mainstream Western politicians' and thinkers' relationship-building with the Gaddafi regime. Yet now, in a matter of days, Western observers have decreed that Gaddafi is evil and destructive and must go. The changeability of Western governments' attitude to Libya is not driven by their sudden discovery of political principle or commitment to democracy in the Arab world, as some hawkish fantasists in the commentariat claim. Obama and Cameron's ongoing support for the brutal suppression of the protests in Bahrain should put paid to that myth. Rather the changeability reveals the emergence of an interests-lite, unpredictable foreign policy that increasingly mirrors the flightiness and shallow PR sensibilities of the domestic realm - only it has far more dire consequences.

What we end up with is a Coalition of the Confused, a supposed union of Western governments which in reality are competing to see who can most speedily make short-term, self-serving political gains through dropping a few bombs on Libya. The French are desperate to be seen to be making amends for their serious mistakes in north Africa, including their offering of military assistance to the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia when it was challenged by the first Arab uprising in January. Cameron wants to demonstrate, in the wake of various international blunders, that he is actually statesman material. And Washington is hoping for a swift military triumph that might divert attention from the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan. Driven more by short-term desperation than the 'long view', more by a desire for quick and painless political pay-offs than by a careful weighing up of interests and consequences, Western governments have turned Libya into a stage for a politically shallow yet deeply destructive form of moral posturing.

It is bad enough when people like Cameron empty out the education system or harm healthcare through their elevation of a desire for short-term, PR gain over political depth. At least that kind of action is containable. But when they effectively expand their political instability into the international sphere, visiting their incoherence on to already unstable countries, then that really is a recipe for disaster. However unpredictable world affairs may have become, one thing we can be certain of is that the attack on Libya will be bad for the Libyan people and for global stability, zapping the democratic initiative from the Libyan people's uprising and warping the dynamic in the unstable Arab world more broadly. This vain military venture must end. Now.