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Will NATO become a 'paper tiger'?

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently said during a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels that the military operation against the Libyan government has exposed the alliance's two major shortcomings: the lack of military capabilities and weak political will. NATO failed to achieve an overwhelming advantage in Libya like it had expected, which has repeatedly prolonged the war in Libya. Earlier, Gates also criticized European countries on several occasions for insufficient military spending and putting NATO in danger of becoming a "paper tiger."

NATO unexpectedly embarked on the road of constant expansion after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the end of the Cold War, expanding its members from 16 at the end of the Cold War to the current 28. NATO has also continued to expand its operation beyond its defense areas to such an extent that some have questioned, "What NATO really wants to do?" However, the cohesion of NATO has been declining in the process of the expansion of defense area and influence.

NATO served as a major tool during the Cold War to play significant roles in the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, but its performance during the past 20 years has made the United States, its "initiator" and "big boss," disappointed. Gates said that if Europe wants to have a strong partnership with the United States, it should "realize that the drift of the last 20 years cannot continue." This shows that NATO faces visible and invisible crises in terms such as politics, economy and military.

Politically, disputes have never stopped emerging regarding NATO's orientation and the direction of its development after the Cold War. Especially, regarding the issue of taking military actions beyond NATO's defense area, different member countries or different parties within a member country all have different opinions. Only a part of the member countries participated in most of NATO's military operations, such as the interference in the civil war between Bosnia and Herzegovina, air strikes in Iraq, sending troops to Afghanistan and the military operation in Libya in 2011.

This lack of participation has been especially evident during this military action in Libya. Since member countries have different views regarding the issues of establishing a no-fly zone and air striking Libya, only less than a half of the member countries participated in the action. Only eight of them, less than one-third, participated in the air strike. Even several member countries that are taking part in the air strike have expressed that they would withdraw because of domestic pressure.

Therefore, Gates had to call on Germany and Poland, who had refused to participate in the Libya action, to make contributions, and call on Spain, Turkey and Holland, who had not participated in the Libya air strike, to play more important roles.

NATO is also facing serious economic challenges. Gates said that inadequate military spending is a major contributor to the organization's serious military capability gaps. Total European defense spending declined by nearly 15 percent in the past decade, and only five of the 28 NATO member states, namely the United States, United Kingdom, France, Greece, and Albania, exceeded the agreed 2 percent of GDP spending on defense. Certain members have enjoyed NATO's security guarantee but failed to take their share of responsibility in common defense.

Furthermore, the international financial crisis and European sovereign debt crisis have inevitably forced NATO countries to cut military spending. NATO recently announced that in order to cut costs, it would reduce the number of its major bases from 11 to seven, the number of its agencies responsible for specific areas from 14 to three, and the number of headquarters posts from 13,000 to 8,800. Although it said the purpose of the reforms was to make the organization "leaner and more flexible," the fact that the untimely announcement was made in the midst of extended air strikes in Libya has proven the embarrassing and helpless situation facing NATO.

The divergence in political views and economic weakness will be naturally reflected in the military. Norway announced on June 10 that it would reduce the number of its aircraft in the air strikes on Libya from six to four and would withdraw from all military action by Aug. 1. Canada is also preparing to withdraw from the airborne warning and control system of NATO, which is responsible for monitoring and guiding aircraft to fly to specified targets, in order to cut the government's budget deficit.

Although these examples are far smaller than the impact of France's exit from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966, which "was a blow at the heart of the alliance," the crisis and problems it reflects need to be seriously addressed by NATO. Otherwise, the United States would not repeatedly put pressure on its allies.

NATO, as the world's largest political and military group, faces a crisis that is far from a matter of life and death, and the criticism and accusations of the United States are only aimed at making NATO more consistent with its own global strategic interests. However, the crisis is indeed a wake-up call for the future of NATO and how it will deal with the crisis and how the situation will change remains to be seen.