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## Libya and the Australian Defence Force

Western politicians and military leaders need to understand very clearly that the defeat of the Gaddafi regime in Libya represents a major achievement for advanced air power. NATO's campaign deserves careful study.

It is true that, ultimately, revolutionary soldiers from Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) had to capture urban centres through close-up, street-by-street, house-by-house combat. That the Libyan people won the final victory was as it should be. If any one message has been spelled out loud and clear from the West's disastrous invasions of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, it is that political and social change cannot be engineered by occupying (foreign) armies – it must be brought about in its own good time by the local population.

Three important observations regarding advanced air power can be drawn from the Libyan campaign. First, in the early days, air power alone saved the NTC's fighters from defeat; after which it made their eventual victory a near-certainty. Second, the conflict demonstrated once again that a motivated force of irregulars can defeat a well-armed professional army – as long as the irregulars are backed by the keys to modern warfare, namely, control of the air, airborne ISR, and precision strike. And third, many Western defence forces, including the ADF, risk losing their way because of their misplaced emphasis on land invasions and so-called 'counter-insurgency' warfare.

According to the UK's then-defence minister Liam Fox, when the UN-endorsed no-fly zone came into effect on 19 March, Libya was only 'forty-eight hours away' from a humanitarian disaster. Gaddafi's well-equipped, professional army had raced across the country from Tripoli to the outskirts of Benghazi, the centre of the popular uprising. British prime minister David Cameron feared a massacre similar to the one in Srebrenica in 1995, when 8000 Muslim civilians were slaughtered. Instead, air and missile strikes stopped Gaddafi's army in its tracks. Within hours, it became untenable for Gaddafi's soldiers to mass, because they were detected by airborne ISR and then devastated by airborne precision strikes. Similarly, the dictator's tanks, artillery, trucks, etc, became targets every time they were used.

Once it became apparent that NATO would hold its nerve and maintain the no-fly zone until the job was done, and that the NTC's irregular fighters had the courage of their convictions, the rebels' ultimate victory was almost assured. It is noteworthy, incidentally, that while the NTC irregulars received advice from NATO special force soldiers, they were largely untrained and under-equipped. The difference, of course, was that they had air, and Gaddafi's professional army did not. It is also noteworthy that Mr Cameron was told by a range of military 'experts' that Libya could not be saved by an air campaign, but he 'stuck to his guns'.

Which leads to the question of capability development in advanced defence forces in general and the ADF in particular. The UK provides an instructive case-study.

British strategic thinking, like that in most Western countries, has been dominated in recent years by an obsession with the cult of counter-insurgency warfare. Consequently, helicopter numbers have proliferated, while those of strike/fighters (Tornadoes, Harriers, Typhoons) and ISR platforms (Nimrods) have been drastically reduced. Yet in Libya it was precisely the latter types that were most needed. In a further irony, the political demand to cut defence outlays has seen thousands of soldiers paid-off from the British Army, which means that the service now has scores of helicopters - but nothing for them to do.

For all that – and this is a key point for the ADF – the (British) Royal Air Force performed superbly in Libya. It is to the RAF's credit that, despite extreme pressure to cut training dollars, it has not compromised on critical skills. While other leading air forces have reduced their investment in such vital

areas as fighter combat instructors and weapons specialists, the RAF has insisted on maintaining standards. Furthermore, like the RAAF, but unlike some other Western air forces, RAF pilots are not afraid to bring their bombs back if they believe a target does not meet stringent law of armed conflict criteria. The result? British foreign minister William Hague was 'stunned' by the precision of the RAF's attacks, which were 'measured in inches' and which underwrote a policy of, in effect, zero collateral damage. The RAF's approach explains why the war in Libya was saved, and then won.

Recently the Williams Foundation held a conference on the ADF's planned acquisition of two amphibious assault ships (*Australian Aviation*, October 2011). It is clear that a great deal of thinking needs to be done to establish exactly how these ships and their embarked soldiers and helicopters might fit in to a rational warfighting concept of operations for Australia. It would be a mistake of the first order if their mere existence were to promote an intellectual replication of the counterinsurgency fad, and to divert attention and resources from the ADF's core capabilities.

*By Alan Stephens*