

U.S. Mideast policy strains NATO

Americans are now revelling in an orgy of mindless chauvinism over Monday's attack on Libya. Most Europeans, by contrast, have a starkly different view of Ronald Reagan's dive-bomber diplomacy.

Among all America's NATO allies, Reagan could coerce only Britain into allowing its bases to be used for air strikes against Libya. Britain, now dependent on U.S. financial and technical aid to replace its aging nuclear forces, had to bow to heavy American pressure. In doing so, Margaret Thatcher may have signed her own political death warrant. The opposition has been given a large club with which to beat her about the head. Once-proud Britain looked last week rather like a Latin banana republic.

None of America's other European allies would give more than mild lip service to the new crusade against Libya. France and Spain refused overflight rights; both strongly denounced the raids. Across Europe, violent anti-American demonstrations occurred, many focused against U.S. and NATO military bases.

Put simply, Europeans — who have a much better understanding of the Mideast than North Americans — just don't buy the simplistic U.S. view that Libya is the Vatican of terror, that terrorism is an isolated phenomenon that can be expunged by bombs. Europeans see terrorism as a symptom of the sickness afflicting Lebanon, the Palestinians and the Gulf. Terrorism is a scourge, to be sure, but hardly a reason for open war. Europeans, after all, have been dealing with all sorts of terrorism for years, long before "terrorism" became a fashionable political buzzword in the U.S.

In Europe, one frequently hears the view expressed

Spain almost pulled out of NATO this spring because of deep-seated public fears that U.S. bases there would be used to drag Spain into an unwanted war that had nothing to do with Spanish self-interest. Libya was the perfect illustration and has now caused another massive groundswell of anti-American opinion in Spain.

Italy, America's most important Mediterranean ally, also managed to withstand U.S. pressure to join the anti-Libyan operations. Italy has cordial relations with all Arab states and had no interest in joining the latest crusade against the "Mohammedans." The entire Italian left has found a new issue in opposing the basing of "aggressive" U.S. forces in the country.

The Soviets will, of course, have a field day. A blundering, ham-fisted Reagan administration has presented them with a perfect wedge to use in opening cracks in NATO. They will promote the view that NATO bases serve only the needs of American and Israeli imperialism in the Mideast. Clumsy American pressure on Europe to follow its fatuous Mideastern policy has reinforced those Europeans calling for more independence from U.S. policy.

Of course, the Californians making U.S. foreign policy, men whose knowledge of the world comes only from TV, whose record in the Mideast is one of unremitting failure and disaster, will remain largely unaware that American interests in Europe have been seriously damaged. They will not understand that their self-created mania over pipsqueak Khadafy is going to convince a lot of thoughtful Europeans that a media-frenzied, bombastic America may be as great a danger as the surly but quiet Soviets.



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that America has lost its objectivity and sense of reason in the Mideast. American policy there, many Europeans believe, is completely in the hands of pro-Israeli groups. A common remark in Europe is that the last U.S. president who was free to make Mideastern policy was Dwight Eisenhower. An overly simple view no doubt, but Europeans are determined to maintain an independent Mideastern policy of economic and political self-interest.

Over the past month the U.S. has brought enormous pressure on its NATO allies to move against Libya. This pressure, the result of America's manic obsession with Khadafy, has caused new and potentially serious cracks to open in the NATO alliance. In its tantrum over pipsqueak Libya, Washington has aroused latent European fears over their close military alliance with the U.S.

The French, with long experience in opposing Khadafy, rightly refused to see their important position in the Mideast jeopardized by America's Rambomania. U.S. sabre-rattling in the Mediterranean only reinforced France's independent policy from NATO. Spain, having just elected to remain in NATO's political alliance, also refused use of its bases or airspace.