

# The New York Times

## France and Britain Lead Military Push on Libya

By STEVEN ERLANGER, 18 March 2011



Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Britain's Royal Air Force plans to deploy Typhoon warplanes like these in Coningsby to help enforce a no-fly zone over Libya.

PARIS — France and Britain continued to press their hawkish position on [Libya](#) on Friday, saying they intend to take the lead in enforcing a no-flight zone.

Both countries, the most adamant backers of the [United Nations Security Council](#) resolution to authorize military action in Libya, also pointed to the passage of the measure on Thursday as an important — if rare — example of European resolve.

“Despite all negative comments, Libya shows that there is a political and diplomatic dynamic of European construction and an active European voice in world affairs,” said Bernard Valero, the spokesman for the French Foreign Ministry.

President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France, perhaps still wary after he and other senior French officials were criticized as having [too cozy a relationship](#) with the now-toppled Tunisian government of President [Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali](#), met with leaders of the Libyan opposition on March 10, and announced that France had [recognized an inchoate opposition group](#) as Libya’s legitimate government. France’s foreign minister, Alain Juppé, spoke openly this week of his unhappiness with Washington’s slowness and difficulty in defining its position, before the Security Council voted for a no-fly zone.

France and Britain had been calling for a no-fly zone for two weeks, he said Wednesday, but other nations dragged their feet. “It often happens in our recent history that the weakness of democracies gives dictators free rein,” he said. “It’s not too late to break with this rule.” He added that it was not enough just to call on Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#) to quit, as leaders in the United States and other nations had done.

The day before, he vented to the French Parliament: “Never mind that there’s European impotence, but what about American power? What about Russian power? Russia is evolving, and the Americans haven’t yet defined their position.”

The French-British forcefulness on Libya did not make all Europeans happy, either. Germany abstained in the vote at the [United Nations](#) and said it would not take part in military action. [Italy, more dependent than others](#) on Libyan natural gas and oil, reluctantly decided to allow its military bases to be used to enforce a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians, despite a 2008 friendship treaty with Libya. Rome has “de facto suspended” that treaty, in the words of the Italian foreign minister, Franco Frattini.

The British prime minister, [David Cameron](#), has been almost as outspoken as the French about the need to use force against Colonel Qaddafi, despite the large cuts Mr. Cameron has made in [military spending](#).

On Friday, after the [Libyan government announced a cease-fire](#), both countries said they mistrusted Colonel Qaddafi and his promises. Britain started moving aircraft into place.

Mr. Sarkozy reiterated that France would convene an urgent meeting on Saturday of European, African and Arab leaders to make decisions about Libya. French officials said those taking part would include Mr. Cameron; Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) of Germany; the head of the [Arab League, Amr Moussa](#); and the United Nations secretary general, [Ban Ki-moon](#). President Obama said Friday that he would send Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) to the meeting.

Mr. Juppé said that a meaningful cease-fire would have to cover the entire country, “and not only Benghazi.” He said the issue would be discussed on Saturday at the meeting. Military measures are ready, he said.

A French official who spoke on condition of anonymity said that possible targets for airstrikes would include the Qaddafi forces’ airfields and the long supply line running from Tripoli to the loyalist forces pressing toward Benghazi. “The threat is there, which is why we want to act fast,” the official said. “Libyan troops are only 150 kilometers from Benghazi,” or about 93 miles. A naval blockade was also a possibility.

The official said that establishing a no-fly zone was not a major military problem because Libya had few operational fighter jets or helicopters.

Mr. Valero, the French Foreign Ministry spokesman, said that Colonel Qaddafi “begins to be afraid, but on the ground, the threat hasn’t changed.”

He added, “We have to be very cautious.”

Mr. Cameron said of Colonel Qaddafi, “We will judge him by his actions, not his words.”

In an interview with the [BBC](#), Mr. Cameron added: “What is absolutely clear is the U.N. Security Council resolution said he must stop what he is doing, brutalizing his people. If not, all necessary measures can follow to make him stop. That is what we agreed last night, that is what we are preparing for and we’ll judge him by what he does.”

Mr. Cameron told the House of Commons that the British Air Force would deploy Tornado and Typhoon warplanes, “as well as air-to-air refueling and surveillance aircraft.” Spain, Norway and Denmark have said they will participate in imposing a no-fly zone.

German officials infuriated the French government with their opposition to such a zone, articulated by the foreign minister, [Guido Westerwelle](#) of the Free Democratic Party.

Italy, the closest large European nation to Libya, has vast economic interests there. Libya is a former Italian colony that now supplies 23 percent of Italy’s natural gas and 13 percent of its oil. The major Italian energy company, Eni, which is partly state-owned, is

the largest foreign oil company in Libya. Colonel Qaddafi has threatened to end all contracts with countries supporting intervention.

Paolo Scaroni, the chairman of Eni, criticized Western leaders for imposing sanctions against Libya, saying that Europe was “shooting itself in the foot.”

In recent interviews in Italian newspapers, both Colonel Qaddafi and his son [Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi](#) said they felt “betrayed” by Prime Minister [Silvio Berlusconi](#).

Italy has also been reluctant to freeze Libyan assets, and Italian officials have warned of a new wave of refugees and immigrants from Libya.

*Rachel Donadio contributed reporting from Paris, Julie Werdigier from London, and Gaia Pianigiani from Rome.*