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NATO's Teachable Moment

The hunt for Muammar el-Qaddafi goes on, but his tyrannical 42-year rule over Libya is finished. The Libyan people bore the brunt of the fighting and dying that brought him down. But NATO air power played an important role. Airstrikes in March stopped Colonel Qaddafi's forces from storming Benghazi and slaughtering its inhabitants. Continued pounding degraded the regime's firepower, giving the rebels time to organize and train. NATO's refusal to back away — and its decision to bring the fight to the skies over Tripoli — helped push Qaddafi cronies to switch sides.

The Western allies, especially the British and French forces backed up by the United States, can be justly proud. So can Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and President Obama, who ignored the naysayers who claimed that Libya was a quagmire and the battle not worth fighting.

But it would be a mistake to deny the serious problems revealed by the six-month campaign. This was NATO's first attempt at sustained combat operations with the United States playing a support role. Europe's military capabilities fell far short of what was needed, even for such a limited fight.

President Obama, who pressed hard for NATO involvement, rightly insisted that Europe, along with Canada, take the lead. It is reasonable to expect the wealthy nations of Europe to easily handle a limited mission in their own backyard that involved no commitment of ground troops. Reasonable, but, as it turned out, not realistic.

Shortfalls of specialized aircraft, bombs and targeting specialists plagued NATO operations. The effects would have been even more damaging if Washington had not stepped in to help plug some of these critical gaps.

Apart from Britain and France, most European militaries have failed to keep up with technological advances in battlefield management and communications. They train their forces to defend largely unthreatened borders at home, leaving them unwilling and unprepared to defend common interests abroad, from Afghanistan to Libya.

Even Britain and France have skimped on munitions and targeters, making it hard for them to carry out multiple missions (both are also fighting in Afghanistan). Now, Britain and France are planning force and equipment cuts that threaten their capacity to take part in future extended foreign operations.

For decades, European nations have counted on a free-spending Pentagon to provide the needed capabilities they failed to provide themselves. The Pentagon is now under intense and legitimate pressure to meet America's security needs more economically. It can no longer afford to provide affluent allies with a free ride.

In June, Defense Secretary Robert Gates pointedly told European NATO allies that they risked becoming militarily irrelevant unless they stepped up investment in their forces and equipment. His successor, Leon Panetta, needs to drive that message home.

European leaders need to ask themselves a fundamental question: If it was this hard taking on a ragtag army like Qaddafi's, what would it be like to have to fight a real enemy?