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Gates Warns of Risks of a No-Flight Zone

By **DAVID E. SANGER** and **THOM SHANKER**

WASHINGTON — With rebels in [Libya](#) calling for Western airstrikes on forces supporting Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#), Secretary of Defense [Robert M. Gates](#) warned Congress on Wednesday that even a more modest effort to establish a no-flight zone over Libya would have to begin with an attack on the country's air defenses and would require "a big operation in a big country."

Mr. Gates's caution illustrates the chasm between what the rebels and some leading members of Congress are calling for and what [President Obama](#) appears willing to do in Libya. Mr. Obama and his aides have argued that it is not yet clear that the insurgents need the help — and they have warned that the use of American airpower could fuel the arguments of those in the Middle East who see a Washington conspiracy behind homegrown uprisings.

But even some members of the president's own party sounded unconvinced on Wednesday. Senator [John Kerry](#), the Massachusetts Democrat who is the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and one of the president's chief foreign policy allies in Congress, argued that "a no-fly zone is not a long-term proposition" and warned that other nations and [NATO](#) should not be "on the sidelines" as Colonel Qaddafi's jets begin to attack the antigovernment insurgents.

"We ought to be considering a wide range of responses, and a no-fly zone ought to be an option," Mr. Kerry said late Wednesday. "We have a number of tools, and we should not remove any of them from the table."

Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#), a Connecticut independent, who along with Senator [John McCain](#), Republican of Arizona, has been calling for a no-flight zone, said Wednesday after Mr. Gates' testimony: "Is it complicated? Yeah. Can we do it? Of course." He noted that "we did it for a long time and quite successfully in Iraq."

But over the past day or two, American military officials, even while positioning ships off Libya, have warned that a no-flight zone would not be as antiseptic as it sounded, and that the diplomatic and international political hurdles would be difficult to overcome. It is unclear if it would require an authorization from Congress to use force, the first since the authorization to use force against Iraq passed nearly a decade ago, or authorization by the [United Nations](#).

Such authorization is missing from the [United Nations Security Council](#) resolution passed last week, and so far there is no movement in the Council to toughen that resolution.

Mr. Gates, the most prominent Republican in the administration, was even blunter than usual as he approaches the end of his time in office. His testimony came days after he gave a speech warning that America should avoid another big, intractable land war like those under way in Iraq and Afghanistan. His testimony on Wednesday before the House Appropriations Committee was given just as Libyan forces loyal to Colonel Qaddafi bombed insurgents outside of Tripoli.

“Let’s just call a spade a spade,” Mr. Gates said. “A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses. That’s the way you do a no-fly zone. And then you can fly planes around the country and not worry about our guys being shot down. But that’s the way it starts.”

Rebels in Benghazi, the Libyan city held by opponents of Colonel Qaddafi, made it clear on Wednesday that they were looking for more than just a no-flight zone. Shortly after forming an “interim national government council” led by Colonel Qaddafi’s former justice minister, Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, they called on Western powers to conduct airstrikes against the “strongholds of the mercenaries” and any equipment “used against civilians and people,” according to The Associated Press.

Their call seems to indicate that the rebels, while effective so far in holding off attacks from Colonel Qaddafi’s loyalists, do not believe they can dislodge the colonel from his Tripoli redoubt.

Now the White House finds itself caught between Mr. Obama’s own sense of caution, and critics on both the left and the right who believe that the president should be more forceful in aiding the rebels, protecting the population and helping engineer Colonel Qaddafi’s ouster. His aides have said that any overt American military intervention could play into Colonel Qaddafi’s narrative that the uprising is a Western-led plot to occupy Libya and seize its oil.

“There’s a great temptation to stand up and say, ‘We’ll help you rid the country of a dictator,’ ” one senior administration official said, insisting on anonymity because of the delicacy of the discussions. “But the president has been clear that what’s sweeping across the Middle East is organic to the region, and as soon as we become a military player, we’re at risk of falling into the old trap that Americans are stage-managing events for their own benefit.”

Thus, the administration has relied on more indirect steps — freezing \$30 billion in Libyan assets, barring Libyan officials from travel and calling for Colonel Qaddafi to resign. None of those steps, White House officials concede, are likely to significantly change the situation.

A no-flight zone might greatly weaken the Libyan leader by grounding his air power. But Mr. Gates noted on Wednesday that any operation to enforce a no-flight zone would have to be large, given Libya’s size. It would require more aircraft than are aboard a single aircraft carrier, he said, and other officials noted that with American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, a prolonged commitment to Libya, even from the air, would stretch resources thin.

“We’re just not there yet,” one senior administration official said on Tuesday, warning that China and Russia, along with some non-permanent members of the Security Council, would object unless Colonel Qaddafi began using his air force to attack large numbers of Libyans. China has historically voted against anything that might seem like what it calls “interference” in a country’s internal affairs.

The divisions in Congress on the issue are significant as well. Senator [Jim Webb](#), Democrat of Virginia, said Wednesday that he was “very conscious of the unpredictability of history in this part of the world,” noting that revolutions went go off course, “Iran being the classic example.”

There are military considerations as well.

Officials interviewed said they believed that Colonel Qaddafi — who has been defiant during the crisis — would actively oppose a no-flight zone, perhaps even firing on American or other Western aircraft. That would force the West to respond with attacks on Libya’s surface-to-air missile sites, air defense radars and combat aircraft. The whole operation would require hundreds of aircraft, based on American aircraft carriers and perhaps neighboring NATO countries. Even though Libya’s air force would be no match for American piloting skills and warplanes, Libya’s Soviet-designed surface-to-air missiles present a significant risk. During the 1986 bombing of Tripoli, at least one American plane was shot down.

American air patrols to impose no-flight zones over northern and southern Iraq, and across the former Yugoslavia, have proved effective at preventing dictators from using warplanes to bomb civilian populations. Yet doing what the rebels asked for — a bombing campaign — would be even more complex, with the possibility of significant civilian casualties.

Mona El-Naggar contributed reporting from Cairo.