

"For too many years the Africans have turned a blind eye to Libya's antics and plotting"

Anschluss in the Sahara

BY JULIAN CRANDALL HOLLICK

Three thousand years ago the Cheshnuk dynasty of Libyan nomadic tribesmen ruled over a vast North African empire stretching from Morocco to the Red Sea. With his recent annexation of neighboring Chad, openly claimed as part of Libya's "vital living space," Colonel Qaddafi has taken the first successful step toward his much-publicized aim of recreating that empire. If his seizure of Chad is consummated by the planned political union between the two states, Qaddafi at last will be able to strut around as a latter-day *duce*, lord and master of four million people and an arid mass of sand and mountain the size of Western Europe.

Undoubtedly the colonel has a problem. Libya is a vast country, rich in oil, but with a population of only a million and a half—scarcely adequate for a would-be successor to Gamal Abdul Nasser or the Cheshnuk emperors. Qaddafi has courted many Arab states—Egypt (twice), Sudan, Tunisia, and now Syria—but none went to the altar with him. Jilted, Qaddafi took out his bitterness on the former objects of his ardor. Presidents Nimeiry, Sadat, and Bourguiba—all have been the targets of coups fomented from Tripoli. Even tiny Malta recently deserted Libya's embrace for a less constrictive relationship with Italy.

No wonder Qaddafi turned his gaze south. The poor, hungry nomads of the Sahel seemed to offer him a better chance for translating into reality his dreams of an empire of the Sahara, which would include all or parts of nearly every North African state. To accomplish this the Libyan leader reportedly is trying to build up an army of 45,000, pressganged from the millions of illiterate and unemployed of the region and trained and equipped by the Soviet Union and East Germany. Most of the sub-Saharan states are ripe for subversion. Qaddafi's idiosyncratic brand of Islamic socialism plays well in these poverty-stricken areas, where Islamic fundamentalism can seem a viable alternative to Western-style development.

The Libyan invasion of Chad just before Christmas, and the proposed merger announced with great fanfare in Tripoli on January 6, cannot be dismissed as simply the mad antics of a would-be "fuehrer." Chad's strategic

attractions are obvious. It is the gateway to Black Africa. Whoever controls Chad threatens the surrounding fragile states such as Mali, Niger, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and the Upper Nile Valley, vital to both Egypt and the Sudan. Significantly, Libya is building, with Soviet help, two all-weather air bases on the Libyan-Chad border, which could serve to launch attacks on either the Sudan or West Africa.

There is also the matter of oil and uranium. Both Chad and the Central African Republic reportedly are sitting on vast oil fields, while Chad and Niger have important uranium reserves. Niger's Arlit mines supply France with two-thirds of the uranium used in its ambitious civil nuclear program. In neither instance can the West afford to let Qaddafi control this wealth.

THE COMMON DEFENSE

Chad itself has been almost forgotten in this tale of empire and ambition. Since its independence from France in 1960 it has been the victim of continuous civil war between northern Arabs on the one hand and southern Christian and animist Africans on the other. In 1978 the "Saras" in the south went on the rampage and massacred ten thousand Arabs.

Libya's involvement really begins only in 1973, when Libyan troops moved into the northernmost part of Chad, the Aozou Strip, and annexed it to Libya. Qaddafi claimed it by virtue of an unratified treaty signed by those paragons of international morality, Pierre Laval and Benito Mussolini.

French troops held on until last summer, when they finally obeyed an Organization of African Unity (OAU) resolution calling for the withdrawal of all "foreign" (i.e., French) troops. After the French departed, Libya moved to take immediate advantage of the vacuum and of the OAU's inertia. It responded to the pleas of Chad's embattled and provisional president, Goukouni Oueddei, who was facing defeat by his rival, defense minister Hissen Habré, and sent in troops and tanks. Only two years previously Oueddei had been fighting the Libyans alongside Habré in the name of Chadian independence. He had declared then that "It is the sacred duty of every Chadian to fight against Libya." Now he rules amidst the ruins of his capital, Ndjamena, surrounded by Libyan armor and Chadian quislings who are waiting for international indignation and interest to subside before carving up the spoils.

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The Africans are scared, but they have only themselves to blame. For too many years they turned a blind eye to Libyan antics and plotting lest they antagonize Qaddafi. This appeasement often took the predictable form of lambasting the West in general, and France in particular, for alleged imperialist designs on African independence. It was obvious to most Africans that only the continued presence of French troops in Chad would allow the various factions of that country's civil war to work out some form of national unity while keeping the Libyans at bay. Yet the OAU asked the French to withdraw, even while Libya was consolidating its hold on the Aozou Strip. Now the OAU wants the Libyans to withdraw. Will Qaddafi prove as understanding?

In the final analysis Libyan withdrawal depends upon whether the Africans are prepared to support their brave words with firm action. After the military annexation of Chad, the OAU subcommittee on Chad met in Lagos. The meeting was a failure. None of the Africans dared to call the Libyan move by its true name and Libya walked away from the conference unscathed. After the announcement of the planned merger the same OAU subcommittee was startled into an uncharacteristic burst of energy that resulted in a meeting in the Togolese capital of Lomé. It ordered the Libyan troops to be withdrawn, declared the merger illegal, which it undoubtedly was, and the OAU announced its intention of sending in a peacekeeping force to take over from the Libyans. Qaddafi was suitably unimpressed and dismissed the Lomé communiqué as a mere "scrap of paper." Calling the OAU's bluff, he sent in reinforcements against an imaginary French invasion.

Ironically, and predictably, many of the weaker African states have now asked the French to return. French troop reinforcements have been duly dispatched to the Central African Republic, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Cameroon. President Sadat of Egypt has given the loser in Chad's civil war, Hissen Habré, arms and a base from which to launch guerrilla attacks against the Libyan occupation forces. Sadat calls Qaddafi a "mental case" but knows well that the Libyan leader is a very real threat to both Egypt and neighboring Sudan. The Darfur region in western Sudan is particularly vulnerable to Libyan subversion. Home to two million Chadian refugees, cut off from the rest of the country by poor communication, Darfur was the site of an uprising against the government in Khartoum at the end of last year. Prudently, both Egypt and the Sudan have reaffirmed their determination to come to each other's defense in the event of Libyan subversion.

Nigeria, the most populous African state, often supported Libya within Africa and opposed French intervention to prop up conservative regimes in Mauritania, Zaire, and, of course, Chad. The recent violence in the northern Nigerian city of Kano—where clashes between Nigerians and Islamic fundamentalist refugees from Chad, backed by Libyan money, led to as many as seven thousand deaths last December—finally awakened the Lagos government to the real danger to its own and the continent's security. Two Nigerian divisions were rushed to the border with Chad, which was then sealed off. The so-called Libyan "People's Embassy" was

expelled, and Nigeria's foreign minister pledged logistic support for the proposed OAU peacekeeping force.

A NEW MUNICH?

The big loser, apart from poor Chad, is France, which has long regarded this part of Africa as its own special preserve. If the French had shown the same determination to halt Libyan infiltration in Chad as it had to prevent the destabilization of Mauritania by the (Libyan-backed) Polisario or the collapse of Zaire three years ago or the disintegration of the Central African Republic under the bloodthirsty Emperor Bokassa, Chad would not have fallen under Libyan control.

French opinion asks why the government, with its history of decisive intervention, failed to take any action before the Libyan invasion, putting out instead an ineffectual and vague warning to Tripoli on the eve of the fall of Ndjamená in mid-December. This lends credibility to the widespread suspicion that France was prepared to sacrifice Chad for a few barrels of Libyan crude or a lucrative arms contract. (At the very moment Libyan troops were launching their final assault on Habré's positions in Ndjamená, a senior Foreign Office official was engaged in negotiations in Tripoli, and was followed several days later by the head of the state-owned oil company seeking new exploration contracts.)

At the heart of French inaction lies the illusion that France can remain on good terms with Qaddafi while obstructing Libya's expansionist objectives in North Africa. For a decade France supplied Qaddafi with the most sophisticated weaponry, turning a blind eye to its possible use—notably during the 1973 Yom Kippur war. In early February it was discovered that France was still supplying Libya with tank transporters of the type used to ferry the Libyan invasion force across the desert into Chad last December.

Qaddafi flattered French egos by suggesting he could be wooed away from Moscow at the right price. France fell for it. No amount of rhetoric from the Elysée Palace can disguise the fact that, in the words of former Prime Minister Pierre Messmer, "France has experienced its worst setback in Africa in the past twenty years."

Going the rounds in Paris is another interpretation, equally disturbing and less honorable, for why the French failed to do anything. It holds that in the summer of 1978, France and Libya may have agreed to divide up Chad into rival spheres of influence, a sort of African "Yalta." The Elysée denies the charges, but there remain enough disturbing coincidences to lend them verisimilitude.

It is the Africans themselves who must recognize the danger and do something about it. As the weekly *Jeune Afrique* warns: "Imperialism remains imperialism, wherever it comes from." Open comparisons are made in African papers between Hitler and Qaddafi, inferring that the time for appeasement is past unless Africa wants to follow Europe into a similar maelstrom of war and destruction to halt one man's ambition.

Whether or not Chadian resistance, aided by African and French arms and money, can chase the Libyans out of Chad, the international community has been reminded that aggression and ambition should be resisted at once, no matter what the source. **WV**