With the future of NATO’s war in Afghanistan looking increasingly bleak, the alliance needed a win to shore up its morale, sense of purpose and credibility. With Moammar Gadhafi’s death in Libya, which marked the liberation of the country and soon the end of NATO’s seven-month air war, it has found one.

Make no mistake, although the rebels have claimed the victory, and rightly so, it could not have been achieved without NATO. The liberal reading of the United Nations Security Council resolution that authorized NATO to use force enabled it to do much more than “protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack.” The 26,323 air sorties that NATO warplanes carried out under the auspices of Operation Unified Protector, not to mention the covert arms, training and intelligence provided by western intelligence agencies and special operations forces, drastically downgraded the capabilities of the Gadhafi military machine, making the rebel victory inevitable.

While the win in Libya may reassure some of NATO’s critics and embolden its advocates, if you think it will pave a road to Damascus, think again. A unique alignment of conditions made intervention possible in Libya that is not present in Syria.

First, the clear and present danger that Gadhafi presented to his people, promising “rivers of blood” for all who opposed him, made it difficult for even the most reluctant permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China, to oppose military action. With Gadhafi having announced his plans for mass murder to the world, and with his forces surrounding the beleaguered rebel stronghold of Benghazi, western powers were compelled to act.

While the Assad regime in Syria has carried out a brutal crackdown on civilian protesters, killing more than 3,000 civilians according to the UN and human rights groups, the regime has avoided Gadhafi-style displays and rhetoric and deftly controlled the outflow of information and images that could inflame international opinion and possibly force the hand of the UN Security Council. As a result, western powers have been unable even to pass tough economic sanctions on Syria in the Security Council, running into Russian and Chinese opposition, let alone the authorization of force.

Second, the NATO operation in Libya received Arab League support, even though many members would later backtrack when the bombs began to drop, and the main Libyan opposition group, the National Transitional Council, explicitly requested NATO engagement. While the Arab League has talked about censuring Syria, serious action has yet to be taken and some authoritarian Arab regimes, eager to halt the advance of the Arab Spring to their shores, have stood by Bashar Assad. Syrian activists have expressed mixed opinions about western engagement with most rejecting overt military intervention.

Third, the strategic environment in Libya was favourable for a NATO military intervention. The alliance had the regional military capabilities to act, with NATO Mediterranean assets in striking distance. Moreover, the Libyan security system and particularly its air defences did not present a significant threat. The Syrian military is more than eight times the size of its Libyan counterpart, with greater numbers of combat aircraft and air defence systems. The prospects of rapid success with limited casualties present in Libya are absent in Syria.

Finally, major NATO states have significant interests at stake in Libya. While Libya accounts for only 2 per cent of the world’s oil production, it represents 10 per cent of EU imports, with countries like Italy and Spain heavily reliant on Libyan crude. Volatility in oil prices since the beginning of the anti-Gadhafi uprising and the rush of European and North American governments and corporations to secure oil contracts and concessions before the shooting had even stopped demonstrate the importance of Libya to western energy security. European states, the initial driving force behind the intervention, were also motivated by the concern that continued fighting and even mass killings in Libya could trigger a wave of illegal migration to Europe, exacerbating the already strained refugee system and escalating tensions between EU member states on what is a controversial issue for them. While Syria is a key Arab state politically, due to its strategic location and ongoing conflict with Israel, NATO states don’t have the urgent interests in the country that could drive them to intervene.

Simply speaking, the international consensus, local demand, strategic logic and urgent western interests that facilitated the Libyan intervention are not present in Syria.

Even in Libya, the death of Gadhafi does not guarantee a stable democratic transition. As UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has aptly stated,
this is “only the end of the beginning” for Libya. As we have already seen in Egypt, post-authoritarian transitions to democracy are long, fractious and messy. The removal of the common enemy that united the array of armed groups that comprised the rebels may spark new regional, tribal and sectarian tensions.

There is a lot of work left to do and while the NATO air mission will come to a close in the weeks ahead, it will have to provide support in other ways, most importantly in the reconstruction of the country’s security apparatus. Even with the job unfinished, NATO will want to savour this win in Libya. The last thing the alliance and its member states want at this time is to take on a new and much riskier engagement where the possibility of failure is very real.

Mark Sedra is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and teaches at the University of Waterloo.