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An 'Etroika' to Advance Europe's Policy on Libya

Europe must seize the opportunity provided by a local shift in the military balance to develop a more coherent and unified position on the Libyan conflict. Failure to do so could leave it sidelined by Turkey and Russia.

By Lisa Watanabe

The conflict in Libya is at a critical turning point. Recent weeks have seen a shift in the military balance in the country. The yearlong offensive led by General Khalifa Haftar against the internationally recognized government in Tripoli (Government of National Accord, GNA) is now over. Turkey's military assistance to the GNA was decisive in turning the tide. Haftar's forces, along with the Russian mercenaries fighting alongside them, have now retreated from western Libya. The end of the battle for Tripoli is a relief to European states concerned about the potential fall of the capital. At the same time, Turkey and Russia's support for opposing sides in the conflict has left them poised to play a key role in shaping Libya's future. Should they establish spheres of influence or launch a mediation format that does not feed into the UN peace process, Europe could be sidelined in a country whose stability is critical to its migration, counter-terrorism, energy, and geopolitical interests.

Yet, the change in the local military balance could also offer Europe an opportunity to develop a more concerted and unified approach towards Libya. Germany, Italy, and France should create a new format – a so-called 'Etroika' – and work together to improve the implementation of the Berlin Process – a German initiative launched in early 2020 to sup-

port a return to the UN-led peace process – and to boost the EU's contribution to it. They should also make the most of heightened concerns in the US about Russia's increased involvement in Libya, and persuade Washington to vigorously support their initiative as well as press the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt to cease military assistance to Haftar. The EU should also use sanctions to increase the cost of propping up Haftar. Moreover, violations of the arms embargo should be monitored more

Key Points

- Germany, France, and Italy should create a new format – a so-called 'Etroika' – to advance a more unified European position on Libya, as well as a more robust EU contribution to the implementation of the Berlin Process.
- The Etroika should use its influence with the local conflict parties, Turkey, and Russia to lay the foundations for both a permanent ceasefire and an EU contribution to a UN-led ceasefire monitoring mission in Libya.
- Germany's presidency of the EU Council should be capitalized on to advance (i) an EU contribution to a UN-led ceasefire monitoring mission, (ii) a better use of sanctions to punish illegal oil exports from Libya, and (iii) a more even-handed monitoring of breaches of the arms embargo, as well as sanctions to punish those violating it.

thoroughly and more even-handedly. The current focus should be broadened beyond monitoring maritime violations through EUNAVFOR MED Operation IRINI to include those breaches occurring via land routes. In addition, the EU should work with the US to sanction those parties that repeatedly violate the arms embargo.

Turkey and Russia to Center Stage

Foreign power involvement in the Libyan conflict is not new. Since its outbreak in mid-2014, several countries have provided arms and equipment to either of the warring parties. Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan have violated the arms embargo on Libya by supplying weaponry and equipment to armed groups backing the more Islamist-leaning government and parliament that existed there prior to the 2015 UN-brokered peace deal that established the GNA. Qatar and Turkey have subsequently supplied the GNA with armaments and military equipment. Russia, the UAE, Egypt, and France have all provided some form of military assistance to Haftar's eastern-based forces.

However, recent events have propelled Turkey and Russia to center stage. The battle for Tripoli, launched by Haftar in April 2019, has deepened both powers' military involvement in the conflict. During the course of the offensive, forces under Haftar's command – the Libyan National Army (LNA) – have been reinforced by Moscow's indirect, as well as covert, assistance. Some 2,000 Russian mercenaries from the now notorious Wagner Group, with close ties to the Kremlin, were deployed to reinforce the LNA. This assistance, along with drones and air defense systems, provided by the UAE,¹ enabled the LNA to capture a number of strategic areas in western Libya, jeopardizing the position of the GNA in Tripolitania.

In contrast to Russia's involvement, Ankara has openly assisted GNA forces. In November 2019, Turkey

signed several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with the GNA – one demarcating maritime boundaries between the two countries that granted Turkey the right to explore and exploit oil and natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, and another on military cooperation. Together, they provided an added incentive for Ankara to increase its military support for the GNA, and served as the basis for Turkey to intervene in the conflict at the request of an internationally recognized government.

Turkey's military support for GNA-aligned forces, which also includes drones and air defense systems, the deployment of Syrian mercenaries, as well as intelligence provision and coordination on the ground,² enabled GNA-backed forces to drive the LNA and Russian mercenaries out of western Libya and into defensive positions. Following the withdrawal of Russian mercenaries to central Libya, a strategically critical area for the control of the country, Moscow allegedly deployed several Russian military aircraft (camouflaged to disguise their origin) to this zone from Syria, signaling that it will not allow GNA-aligned forces to push too far into LNA-controlled areas.³

Despite this move, GNA-aligned forces, buoyed by their successes and robust assistance from Turkey, are now attempting to capture Sirte from Haftar's forces, which is located in Libya's oil crescent. They could also attempt to take Jufra in central Libya, which would allow them to occupy a strategically important position. What remains unclear is how Russia will respond and where its red lines lie. How Turkey will react as a result also remains to be seen.

The two powers will likely avoid direct confrontation with each other in Libya. Ankara will want to ensure that its rights to oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean remain unscathed. The political forces it backs must, therefore, remain influential and financially viable. This would require them to either capture the oil crescent or reach an

agreement with Haftar to lift the blockade on legal oil exports from areas under his control. Russia would likely prevent the former from happening. At the same time, the long-term viability of the eastern forces it backs relies on them being able to receive revenues from legally exported oil. This suggests that Russia could have an interest in peace talks, which may be reinforced by the desire to profit from the reconstruction of Libya. If Ankara and Moscow are not included in a multi-lateral peace process, they could launch their own mediation format similar to the Astana process linked to the Syrian conflict.⁴ Such a development could, however, be disastrous for Europe. It would likely leave it unable to influence developments in Libya, despite the direct impact the Libyan conflict has on the continent.

Further Reading

Wolfram Lacher, **"How Can Europe Help Prevent the Carving-up of Libya,"** in: *Qantara.de*, 15.6.2020.

This article argues that Europe must use sanctions more effectively to help prevent the division of Libya.

Rani Alaaldin / Emadeddin Badi, **"Libya's Proxy Sponsors Face a Dilemma,"** *Brookings*, 15.6.20.

This piece examines what the US could do to prevent Turkey and Russia from deepening their footprint in Libya.

Arturo Varelli / Tarek Megerisi, **"Italy's Chance in Libya,"** *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, 16.6.2020.

The authors of this article call for Italy to seize the opportunity to lead European states in assembling a new approach towards Libya.

A New Conjuncture

Yet, the situation may not be as bleak as it may seem. Europe, which has struggled to develop a coherent line on Libya, now has a chance of finding greater unity. In the past, France often adopted a position at odds with other European states and the EU. Despite official French support for the 2015 UN-brokered peace deal and thus the GNA, Paris has played a double-game in Libya. It has provided military assistance, albeit on a low level, to Haftar's forces, and even as Haftar launched his offensive against Tripoli last year, Paris refused to condemn his campaign. France's pro-Haftar stance was linked to his counter-terrorism rhetoric that correlated with French preoccupations following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. Haftar also seemed to be viewed as a figure that could bring the whole of Libya under his control, and thereby serve as a useful interlocutor for advancing French energy interests in the country.

A lack of coordination, and even competition, has also thwarted a unified European position on Libya. France and Italy, in particular, have often appeared to be competing with each other. As one of the 'frontline states' in the European migration crisis, Italy has not surprisingly been primarily concerned with promoting its migration interests in Libya. It has led the EU effort in this regard, working with the GNA to curb migrant smuggling and strengthen the Libyan coast guard. Rome has therefore invested heavily in cultivating its relations with the GNA, and considers itself the leading actor on the Libyan dossier. Hence, French efforts to use high-powered diplomacy to relaunch peace talks in 2017 could not fail to arouse the ire of Italy, not least because Paris failed to coordinate with Rome, as well as other European capitals, and appeared to be advancing Haftar's position, and – by default – its own interests.

However, recent events may lead to a closer alignment between the French and Italian positions. Haftar's failure to capture Tripoli could prompt France to rethink where it stands. Paris now has an interest in working in a coordinated manner with other European states, given that only a stronger and united European policy on Libya has any chance of clawing back the diplomatic initiative in the face of increased Russian and Turkish influence in the country. Failing to act in a concerted way now would amount to a monumental failure of European foreign and security policy at a time when French President Emmanuel Macron is calling for Europe to act more autonomously and to think geopolitically.

Italy also has reason to reassess its stance. Turkey's support for the GNA could endanger Italy's relations with the latter, and reduce the degree to which Italy can further



A member of the Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by Khalifa Haftar, heads out of Benghazi to reinforce the troops advancing to Tripoli. *Esam Omran Al-Fetori / Reuters*

its migration and energy interests in the country. Indeed, should Turkey's relations with the GNA deepen, Italy, as well as wider Europe, could find itself having to rely on Ankara to control migrant and refugee departures from Libyan shores. Italy is also dependent on Libya for part of its energy mix. At present, most oil resources are under the control of Haftar. Yet, because the National Oil Company is the only institution that can legally export oil, these resources can only be sold on the black market. It would therefore be in Italy's interest to support a broader European effort to bring Libyan factions back to the UN peace process.

In addition to closing the gap between European positions, developments on the ground could also prompt other external actors to reconsider their support for Haftar. There may even be a chance that the US could adopt a firmer position on Libya. US engagement has thus far been minimal outside of counter-terrorism assistance to the GNA. US President Donald Trump has even spoken out in favor of Haftar, thereby undermining the UN peace process and moving the US position further away from that of the majority of its European counterparts. With the US security community now expressing alarm about increased Russian involvement in Libya, Washington could be encouraged to again favor a return to a UN-facilitated peace process.

Several key regional states could modify their approach as well. Egypt, which has staunchly supported Haftar, allowing arms financed by the UAE to be transported across its land border with Libya, appears now to be lending support to other actors, such as Aguila Saleh, the president of Libya's legitimate parliament located in the East who is calling for reconciliation with the GNA. The UAE might also reconsider its options. A division of the country into Turkish and Russian spheres of influence is

unlikely to be in its interest. Greater Russian influence in eastern Libya could weaken its own. In addition, rising Turkish influence in the West could strengthen political Islam in the country, which the UAE is vehemently against.

A Chance for European Diplomacy

Europe should make the most of this new conjuncture. Germany, which has been neutral in the conflict, must once again take the lead, working with Italy and France to forge the basis for a new initiative that strengthens the Berlin Process. The latter aimed to support a ceasefire and commit external powers involved in the conflict to respecting the arms embargo, both of which were necessary conditions for a return to the UN peace process. The German-led initiative was undermined, however, by the collapse of the ceasefire and the subsequent escalation of foreign involvement.

Germany, Italy, and France have previously demonstrated their ability to develop common positions on other issue areas in order to encourage the EU to go down a particular path. They have led on sanctions against North Korea, for example. They should now form an 'Etroika' to work towards establishing a common stance on Libya – one that is based on their shared interest in a return to the UN-led peace process – and use it to advance a more robust EU contribution to the Berlin Process. It is vital, therefore, that the trio coordinate closely with the High Representative of the EU, Josep Borrell, as well as the UN's Acting Special Representative in Libya, Stephanie Turco Williams. Regular consultations with the US will also be essential to give weight to the Etroika's proposals.

The Etroika should leverage its members' relations with the conflicting parties, as well as with Russia and Turkey, to encourage the former to agree to a truce. They should then call for a meeting of the International Follow-Up Committee of the Berlin Conference to further discuss a UN-led ceasefire monitoring mission in Libya, and the concrete contributions that the EU and other international organizations could make. The Etroika should also use Germany's upcoming presidency of the EU Council to unite Member States around the idea of an EU contribution to such a monitoring mission. Furthermore, they should push for a wider application and use of EU sanctions to punish violations of the existing oil em-

bargo, thereby pinching the financial viability of Haftar, as well as potentially increasing the foreign costs of proping him up.⁵

The Etroika should also advocate for a more even-handed approach to monitoring the arms embargo. The GNA and Turkey accuse the EU's IRINI, which was originally created to help implement the Berlin Process' role in enforcing the arms embargo, as being biased towards Haftar, whose arms and equipment mostly arrive across land. The focus of IRINI is, however, on the maritime dimension, particularly the inspection of vessels suspected of carrying arms off the coast of Libya. Moreover, as it stands today, the EU does not have the necessary aerial assets to monitor violations in the air, and an EU ground mission to detect and confiscate arms arriving by land has thus far not been favored by Member States. Improved surveillance through satellite imagery could help detect and prevent breaches occurring via land-routes. Enforcement of the arms embargo was also missing from the Berlin Process. The EU, together with Washington, should help in this regard by sanctioning those involved in repeated transfers of weaponry and equipment to Libya.⁶ In short, only by adopting a more unified and concerted approach towards Libya can Europe avoid being eclipsed.

Selected sources

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2. "The Battle for Libya: Russia's and Turkey's Intervention, Haftar's Retreat, and Prospects for Peace," Jamestown Foundation webinar, 16.6.2020.
3. Andrew England / Henry Foy, "US Military Accuses Russia of Sending Fighters Jets to Libyan War," *Financial Times*, 26.5.2020.
4. "Intractable War in Libya Risks Becoming the Next Syria: French Foreign Minister," *Al-Monitor*, 27.5.2020.
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