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ESSAYS

Strategizing Toward Irrelevance in Libya

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The Libyan conflict is marred by competing interests, and is where the Mediterranean's major players all hope to come out on top.

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U.N. Envoy for Libya Ghassan Salame, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas attend a news conference after the Libya summit in Berlin, Jan. 19, 2020. *Axel Schmidt/Pool/Reuters*

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, European policies toward post-Gaddafi Libya had been criticized for their ineffectiveness and structural deficiencies. When in early March the European Union (EU) became the epicenter of contagion, the credibility of its security and foreign policy further eroded. Although the coronavirus emergency had the potential to spur European countries toward renewed solidarity and greater coordination, what emerged instead was a tendency to turn inward, forcing uncoordinated national responses to the crisis. This transformation risks speeding up some dynamics already underway, such as contracting European political support for external assistance programs—especially regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—in the face of the pandemic's domestic socioeconomic consequences. Indeed, in the medium and long terms, the political dynamics and mechanisms of alliance that have governed the international system to date risk being among COVID-19's victims. In particular, this could have serious repercussions in crises such as the six-year devastating civil war raging in Libya, where Europe has already been called upon to intervene to stabilize the country.

In the face of today's multiple global security challenges, the EU's internal coherence seems eroded to the point that the union is unable to find a common voice and convergence. This was highlighted in "Westlessness", the report that opened the Munich Security Conference held in February 2019, intended to stimulate reflections on the failure of Europe as a united geopolitical actor. Traditionally, Western countries have tried to maintain a unity of purpose and some shared distinguishing principles and values, such as the concepts of liberal democracy, human rights, and international cooperation within multilateral institutions.

Since its creation, the EU has attempted to overcome its inherently fragmented nature as a global actor by enhancing its strategic sovereignty and strengthening its "geopolitical" position with the ambition of defending its collective interests and values in a context of great-power competition. However, compared to the decade immediately following the Cold War, the West now appears more fragmented, paralyzed by the reluctance of its members to give up their own sovereignty and delegate decision-making power to Brussels. The 2008 economic crisis; the rise of the so-called sovranist movements, which strongly oppose any Euro-Mediterranean policy; the migration problem; and the terrorist attacks of the last two decades, which consolidated the idea that Europe should became a closed fortress, all enervated the EU and reduced its power to deal with global issues. Moreover, European countries seem to have progressively abandoned multilateral debate given the stances of non-Western actors who have grown increasingly aggressive. The biggest challenge had been from Russia which returned to the Mediterranean following the Syrian and Libyan crises. In addition, regional countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are becoming more active in the Mediterranean, and China is growing its geo-economic presence with its Belt and Road Initiative.

Historic internal divisions and an increasingly inward-looking nature have prevented the creation of internal European agreement on the mentioned key issues, constantly undermining the EU's efficacy.The result is an accelerating loss of its global political ambitions, especially concerning the resolution of serious international conflicts. In particular, in its focus on stabilizing the "arc of instability" in execution of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) —which was designed to manage the EU's affairs with its southern and eastern neighbors—the EU has nevertheless remained a bystander in the interlinked crises that characterize the MENA region.

The migration crisis and the Libyan civil war, with the consequences of jihadist infiltration and human trafficking along Libya's out-of-control southern borders, progressively led the EU to converge its efforts only on security cooperation for counterterrorism and limiting migration. Because of this tunnel vision, the EU failed to address the real drivers of regional instability and instead opened the door in the Middle East to the emergence of players such as Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE,which are also taking on a growing role within the international system. This also happened during the Syrian crisis, when the EU appeared extremely intimidated by the rivalry between Russia and the United States or by the bold hostility of medium Middle Eastern powers.

By trapping European governments in a context of rising power competition—where the decrease of the northern shore of the Mediterranean Basin's influence corresponds to the increase of China's—and diverting attention toward the immediate health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates these pre-existing dynamics. This perfect storm risks dooming fundamental EU policy areas, such as the Common Security and Defense Policy and the "European agenda" toward migration in the Mediterranean, to fail.

The EU Torn From Within

A sort of "requiem for the European dream"—and for the Mediterranean wing of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—is now being sung due to the European institutional failure to effect change in the crises skirting its southern sea. However, it is essential for Europe to rediscover its strategic stabilizing role, especially with regard to the *Mare nostrum* (the Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea), or, as it has been nicknamed, the "Nightmare Nostrum".

The need to reaffirm a decisive posture is acutely present in the Libyan crisis, which has direct implications for Europe's core interests. Since the 2015 Skhirat Agreement, the EU has openly given its support to the government of Tripoli, the Government of National Accord (GNA), by adopting the UN-led political roadmap. However, this backing did not materialize in a strategy for the launch of a concrete national stabilization process through the building of strong local governance structures, despite the GNA's demand for tangible support at the international level and from Italy in particular. Europe continued to focus its attention on migration and terrorism, failing even to enforce the UN arms embargo and allowing arms deliveries from regional powers allied with the various factions to continue with impunity.

The offensive on Tripoli, launched by Haftar on April 9, 2019, has paved the way for greater interference by external players, definitively placing the EU in the shadows. The Moscow meetingorganized in January by Russia and Turkey with the aim of negotiating a ceasefire between Haftar and the internationally recognized Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj took place without any European participation, underlining the extent to which the EU has been marginalized.

In the same way, although it gave temporary momentum to EU action, the Berlin Conference on Libya in January was soon frozen at the international level and unable to evolve into a coherent, assertive, and effective common policy. Only a few days after the ceasefire agreement, the fragile truce was violated by the rival factions, thereby highlighting the inability of international institutions to decipher realities on the ground and to act accordingly. Clearly, the conference produced more of a reactive policy than a proactive one. It was but a fragile response to Turkish and Russian involvement in Libya, highlighting that the game in the country is played mostly outside its borders—certainly not in Europe or in its most involved countries, like Italy and France.

The destructive rivalry between Italy and France has, until recently, hampered the construction of all possible long-term policies and is one of the main reasons for the European failure to resolve the Libyan conflict. Indeed, competing Italian and French nationalistic stances have reverberated in an extremely negative way on the cooperative management of this issue. France for years, in an attempt to tighten its grip on the country, adopted an ambivalent and ambiguous posture toward the Libyan crisis, ostensibly supporting the UN-mediated peace process but at the same time preferring unilateral action in MENA affairs. France looked to Haftar as a useful political pawn and a partner against terrorism along the Sahel belt, and therefore provided him (illegal) military assistance and diplomatic cover.

Italy, on the contrary, suffered from a lack of presence in its most important regional problem. Italy is the only country that strongly wishes to preserve a united Libya, in line with historic, economic, and energy interests and the need for a centralized government to deal with facing its maritime borders. Rome maintains a strong military, political, economic, and diplomatic presence in Libya; there is an

Italian military hospital, for instance, in Misrata. However, Italian action has been weakened for years by Italy's domestic political and economic crises and by fragile governments with hardly any foreign policy experience and interest.

For Rome, it is a strategic priority to maintain and protect Libyan integrity; yet, despite its support for the Al-Sarraj government, Italy has remained extremely passive both with regard to his ineffectual administrative performance and active military confrontation with Haftar. Italy has also been too passive in supporting the UN peace effort, and has not devised alternative policies or adapted its policy to the evolving scenarios—except for the intelligence sector, which created unofficial links with the Haftar camp.

For a long time, immigration has been the sole priority in domestic and foreign policy, a perception which has left Italy few resources to support its vision of heavy geopolitical, energy, and economic cooperation between Libya and the UN, its neighborhood par excellence, in international forums and alienated many Libyan sympathies.

Italy tried to lead the process of Libyan stabilization, and requested the informal support of the United States, but lacked resources, determination, and clear political will. Recent months have, however, presented Italy with a new chance to have a say in the Libyan conundrum: the EU creation of a new naval military mission, supervision of which has been entrusted to Rome.

In fact, the European Council decision taken at the end of March to replace the 2015 Operation Sophia with a new maritime one called "Irini" should revitalize the European Common Security and Defence Policy. Unlike the Sophia mission, which operated with the aim of disrupting human trafficking across the Mediterranean, Irini's primary task is to implement the largely ignored arms embargo on Libya(which was imposed by the UN Security Council through Resolution 1970 in 2011 and further enforced through Resolution 2292 in 2016) by patrolling eastward along the Libyan coast, and thuscreate the conditions for a permanent ceasefire.

Yet, despite the good intentions, some technical and legal criticalities are left unfulfilled. The Irini mission will focus only on illegal trade via water, intercepting, as Ankara claims, Turkey (which transfers weapons in support of the GNA mainly along this route) without impacting the illegal land or air traffic routes through which many arms continue to be delivered in support of General Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army (LNA). In June 2020, there was also a naval incident between France and Turkey connected with the Irini mission, which strained their relationship and created a crisis inside NATO. Moreover, the Irini operation lacks clear legislation on penalties for violators; evaluating the effectiveness of the embargo alone as a possible resolution to the Libyan war is useless, especially in light of the recent developments on the ground.

The Balance of Power Changes

Recently, external powers have rapidly rearmed the competing Libyan coalitions, consequently escalating the conflict. After a long stalemate in Haftar's attacks on Tripoli, the arrival of Russian mercenaries in support of the LNA in September and Syrian militias alongside GNA-allied Turkish troops in January have reactivated the civil war, which now sees new actors as the main game-changers at the expense of traditional players like Europe and the Arab countries. Turkey and Russia have filled the gap left by the disarticulated and hesitant Euro-Atlantic response and the disengagement of the United States, reminding us of how the Berlin Conference failed in its main objective: making external players converge on common decisions. On the contrary, the strengthening of the Russian and Turkish positions within the Libyan crisis has provoked a profound change in the balance of forces on the ground.

The memorandum of understanding on security cooperation signed with Tripoli in December 2019 and the corresponding maritime demarcation agreement—which would allow Ankara to drill for energy resources in Mediterranean areas contested by Greece and Cyprus—are two examples of recent

Turkish power plays. The maritime agreement's language on the borders of exclusive economic zones violates international rules on the delimitation of national waters. But it can also be read as a reaction to the Egyptian, Cypriot, Greek, Israeli, and Italian strategy of excluding Ankara from hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean, which has been done by establishing the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in July 2019 and containing Turkey's strategic and economic influence in the Mediterranean and broader Middle East.

Ankara needs to send a powerful signal to actors seeking to marginalize Turkey as well as safeguard its control over energy resources in the Levantine Basin. In fact, although the country is at the center of the oil and gas exports bound for Europe from Russia and the Caspian Sea countries, it imports about 75 percent of its energy needs, mainly from Russia, Iraq, and Iran. These are the necessities that led Turkey to enter the game in Libya, supplying the Al-Serraj government with shiploads of weapons, military equipment, officers, and militias moved out from Syria. Military presence on the ground, moreover, could assure further benefit for Turkish consumer goods and construction companies on the Libyan market and act as a guarantee for its ideological ambition of reigniting Islamic political activism, which is obsessively feared by Haftar's backers in the Gulf.

To counterbalance the Turkish presence, Russia—already siding with the LNA alongside Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—has strengthened the presence of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a shadowy paramilitary organization which is fighting with Haftar's front, by sending military fighter aircraft to support it. Like Turkey, Russia wishes to reestablish its pre-Gaddafi commercial ties with Libya and regain geopolitical prominence in the region.

On March 26, 2020, the GNA, in response to continuous attacks by the LNA, launched the "Peace Storm" counteroffensive, which in a short time was able to repel Haftar's forces from the western coast. Turkish air defense systems and a drone assisted by targeting Haftar's bases and supply lines, destroying the project to conquer Tripoli. The project succeeded in capturing the city of Tarhuna, the last stronghold of the LNA. Additionally, the GNA forces took control of the al-Watiya airbase, ninety miles southwest of the capital. Its conquest has high strategic value due to its proximity to the capital and to the city of Zintan, which has always been pro-Haftar and remained steadfastly in the hands of his forces since August 2014. Moreover, its capture will allow the GNA's troops to repel Haftar's fighters in southern Tripoli. For Turkey, control of this airbase could be an opportunity to establish a permanent military presence in the area.

Now, the GNA's sights are set on the reconquest of the city of Sirte. However, they do so at the expense of conflict with Egypt; on July 20, just two days after GNA troops left for Sirte from Misrata, the Egyptian parliament authorized direct military action in defense of the city.

An Exit Strategy?

At the moment, everything leads one to think that there is room only for "army diplomacy"; Moscow would like to avoid becoming more entrenched in the conflict, yet a complete defeat of the general would hamper its multifaceted regional aspirations. The Kremlin's strategy is to achieve the upper hand in mediating from a position of strength for a possible future comprehensive agreement with Turkey; therefore, Haftar might represent a negotiating pawn beyond Libya's internal dynamics.

In turn, Ankara could accept the carving of Libya into spheres of influence within a "grand bargain," with Russia involving Syria and the strategic and economic relations between the two countries. From this perspective, the future of Libya could be shaped at the expense of the other actors, Europeans above all. Maintaining the chaos in Libya could fuel the irregular migration problem, which threatens the EU domestically; additionally, the moving of Islamist fighters provides Turkey with a tool to fragment the EU from within.

In a situation of humanitarian crisis, according to Human Rights Watch, around two hundred thousand civilians in western Libya have already been displaced from their homes; Libyans who have not lost their homes have been locked down to prevent the spread of COVID-19; all live under continuous military attacks, even against clinics and hospitals; and all this while the country falls into a heavy economic crisis. According to the National Oil Corporation, Libya's cumulative losses from the oil blockade imposed by Haftar-allied forces since January 19 have neared $5 billion, enough to bring the country to its knees and render it unable to cover even 10 percent of salaries.

How can the EU rise from the ashes of the pandemic while avoiding moving toward geopolitical irrelevance? One priority could be to re-engage with Libya, despite these difficult times, with a serious political, economic, and—if necessary—military commitment.

The current crisis has revealed the inadequacy of existing mechanisms, instead requiring renewed coordination and cooperation among the EU member states. First of all, the EU should think about fostering a new collective policy, defending and promoting its role as global actor, and adapting its geopolitical agenda to the post-pandemic scenario. Strengthening multilateral cooperation through a single framework of action for the EU's external response, together with the relaunch of bilateral engagement, could represent the first necessary step.

Regarding the Libyan crisis, the EU should pursue a comprehensive strategy: enhancing multilateral initiatives and bilateral engagements with the regional states directly involved in that country while trying to change the belief that Libya is a zero-sum game into a more collaborative perspective. This implies that Europe must first rediscover its internal solidarity, putting aside the miserable rivalry that has fragmented and disfigured the original values of the union. But there is also a need for greater military engagement: that is, to reinforce the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and provide the Irini mission with real sanction mechanisms. Though this is an extremely ambitious—perhaps even an unlikely—task, looking at the internal state of the union, it is the only credible path if the EU wants to avoid becoming irrelevant in the Mediterranean.