

Russia in Libya and the Mediterranean. A brief Essay.

There are several myths about Soviet/Russian involvement in Libya in particular and the Mediterranean in general. Unfortunately, those "political stories" have a solid foundation in the traditions of the Cold War and the post-soviet period of geopolitical fog.

The first Myth that affects all the analytical efforts is that Qaddafi was a staunch ally to the Kremlin. This misreading of the Colonel has been the reason for many a failure in describing the past and the present of Russia's movements in Libya and beyond. Qaddafi was a dedicated enemy of everything communist and used Russian connection as a proverbial "stick" in his troubled relations with Americans. In this, he was far from original, following the path of many Middle Eastern politicians, who blackmailed the West with the threat of "going Soviet."

The second Myth is that Moscow has been through history trying to convert the North Africa/Eastern Mediterranean to the "main proletarian confession." This particular narrative goes back to the early decades after the 1917 coup when a bunch of idealistic amateurs dreamed of the "world revolution." Fortunately for the Soviet Union, this romantic dream died long before WWII, and unfortunately for the hypothetical West, attitude remained unchanged.

The third Myth is that Russia has no business to be anywhere outside of its borders. On the practical plane, this is not a Myth, as it is an attitude spread by Washington among its allies in Europe through a NATO doctrine. The gist of it is that "we are here because we are good" and "we are good because we say so," and they should not be here "because they are bad" and "they are bad because we say so." The keywords here are "because we say so."

Now, these are the Myths. And what could be said about the reality?

Russia first cast a close look at the Med during the time of Katherine the Great. At that time, the understanding was clear - if we want to a) secure the southern border and b) free trade with the world, we had to have access to warm high seas, and for that to happen, Moscow had to project power. Those were the days when power projection was the key to trade success. Not that much has changed.

Paul the First went a little farther as he tried to establish a Russian naval base in Malta. He was stopped by the oldest trick - repeated blows to the head.

But the idea was clear - the Mediterranean and North Africa were something to pay attention to. And Soviet leadership was nothing if not the excellent history students. Ditto, particular attention to the area. For the most part all the Soviet Mideastern discourse could not and should not be taken separate from the Eastern Mediterranean track. And of course, Libya was ideally positioned for the effort to project political, military, and ideological power to the Eastern Mediterranean. One must pay particular

attention to the ideological factor. It has always been in the offering and is still there albeit under the disguise of “traditional values”. It is worth stressing that this new packaging for the old adage has an undisputed success with the traditionalist elites in the North Africa and the Middle East.

The history of the Moscow - Tripoli relations was never smooth. One might say that if not for the American posture towards Qaddafi, Moscow would not have been able to get inside the Jamahiriya at all. But, Washington somehow served the cards in favor of the Kremlin, and Qaddafi signed a considerable package with Russia in the early 1970s. However, even this package came with a pinch of salt when Russian specialists and advisors after arrival to Libya for months were not allowed to visit workplaces in the military units. It was an enigma at the time, but after years, it became more than clear that Qaddafi kept the door open for the retreat from the relations with Moscow if the situation with the West (meaning the US) changed to the positive.

Something like that happened during 2004 - 2006. By time the Soviet Union was long gone, Qaddafi made loud concessions, and Washington started afresh with Tripoli. Immediately, the contractual policies of Qaddafi shifted in favor of the Western options, like signing tremendous contracts with Italy. That was a clear sign of the times, together with the same old “game of options”: several meetings between Qaddafi and the new Russian leaders and a few agreements signed, served as source of optimism in the Kremlin. Especially, that at the time started reassessing its position in the ME and the Med and was in the process of defining who's who vis a vis Moscow's newly found ambitions. New agreements signed between Moscow and Tripoli were perceived in Russia as a manifestation of the newly found rapport with the rich North African country. Probably this period, more than anything else, gave life to speculations about the “eternal friendship” between Qaddafi and Russia.

However, the enthusiasm was waning as it became more and more evident that Qaddafi was more interested in the newly acceptance from the United States and that Libya transited from the *Enfant Terrible* of the world politics to the country welcome in the diplomatic chambers of Europe and America. Evidently, by the time of the Security Council resolution of 2011 on Libya, Moscow's political elite became disinterested in Libya as a possible partner, and that was the reason why Russia abstained from its right of Veto.

On this backdrop, Russia entered 2014 -2015 and the escalated presence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

It is habitually said that starting this time threshold Russia became overly aggressive in its foreign policy, creating a vacuum around itself and fostering many hostile elements in the West with crippling sanctions from the former "partners" "displeased" by Russia's modus operandi. Well, this is one way of looking at the whole situation. But let's try to take a different approach and use something closer to Moscow's optics.

It all started basically in Ukraine and Crimea. After the Euromaidan of 2013 and toppling of Yanukovitch there was a well-founded apprehension about Sevastopol's fate and ill-disguised intentions of the new political elite in Kyiv to turn this naval base to the NATO. Anybody who was somebody in international politics understood that this was a huge red line for Russia. With Sevastopol, Russia was losing its ability to

operate in the Med and project its intentions to the Middle East. Strange that this aspect is basically lost from the Western (and sometimes Eastern) discourse. Or, maybe, not so strange.

This fact was exacerbated by the intense anti-Russian campaign in the former Soviet Republics on the Western border. It genuinely hurt Russian feelings. We all remember unbelievable amounts of money Russia, then part of the Soviet Union, invested in these same republics, and this "post-factum animosity" went against all beliefs of the Russian people. We are talking about the grassroots reactions to which political elites in Moscow had to really pay attention.

There was also the crisis of Yugoslavia which raised the principal question: when "they" do it, it is the struggle for democracy, and half Europe could be bombed away with happy dancing around the "equality campfire," and when "we" do it they call it transgression, annexation and you name what. Unjust. Definitely unjust. And what is more, denying Russia its right of influence and its freedom of presence in the regions which Moscow considers its areas of interest while hailing America for doing the same? Discrimination. Definitely discrimination.

Hence the go-alone (China is not counted here) trajectory in the Middle East and beyond. And a genuine belief that "our cause is just and we will prevail." Actually not so different from the American discourse. Maybe the intensity of confrontation between two countries is the result of similarity.

A lot is being said about the "ring of enemies" and the "motherland under siege" narrative, which allegedly mirrors the Kremlin's international policies and influences its Middle Eastern discourse. This is a dangerous misreading of the situation. This is not a Kremlin narrative. This is an American narrative, and as any counterproductive policy leads to Moscow exploiting this pressure and having a good response from the grassroots level. All attempts at depicting it otherwise are dangerous delusions and lead to mistakes in formulating strategies.

When we are talking about 140 mil people living in Russia, we are talking about nearly total support of the political course of the Kremlin. And this is what matters to decision-makers. Maybe the situation is changing gradually now, but the inertia is still strong.

Now, if we put all this together as a basis for the analytical attempt, we might be able to better understand the Russian political model for Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean as a crucial part of the Southern Track.

As mentioned above, Russia lost interest in Libya for all practical reasons. The country, for an extended period, was considered a Western Fiasco. As such, it was demonstrably left for the West to deal with. Especially that starting 2015, Syria has stolen all the available effort. Syrian file presented a lot of food for speculation. Many "specialists" posited that Russia entered Syria to make itself indispensable as a party to the regional mediation process and, much more exotic, to alleviate the Crimea fallout. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Reasons for such argumentation are clear - there was a need to project the success of the sanctions policies of the US. To show that the courageous stance of Washington et al. against the Russian threat to the civilized world

was a success. The result of this narrative was more than misleading. In fact, the Russian political elite, oriented mainly on the internal reaction of the population (remember the beginning of the support for the PLO in the 1970s)¹ as Moscow was not intimidated at all by Western activism. Contrary to the plan, Moscow used the anti-Russian campaign to its own ends successfully, openly accusing former "partners" of inadequacy.

The decision to engage in the Syrian file was based on several factors, and none of them was as perceived by the West. The first and the most important was terrorism. For Russia, Syria was too close to the borders for comfort to allow terrorist activities to go unimpeded. It was imperative to not just put an end to groups like ISIS and JN but to physically eliminate the most active terrorists so that they would not be able to return to their homeland. And after the disaster of the 2003 Iraq invasion, America was not trusted to do good. The second reason was no doubt the support of the regime. Not in the sense that "we like Assad, let him stay." But in the sense of discouraging the forceful replacement of political rulers per se. The old adage that "what was done by force would be undone by greater force" was at the forefront of the reasoning. The third factor was, of course, the military presence in the Mediterranean. Losing naval facilities to operate in the area was absolutely unacceptable, especially that the reasoning seemed sound - if the Americans have the right, then we also have the right. Hard to argue. Then there was also the show of loyalty to the long-time ally and the necessity of defending the Orthodox Christian population, bearing in mind that the Orthodox discourse has been occupying a significant part of the internal political narrative.

However, the Syrian engagement served as a catalyst for the change of status towards Libya.

During the Syrian crisis and as a result of military successes (with occasional fiascos, for sure), the outlook on the Middle Eastern paradigm became more and more "militarized" in the sense that it started to look as though "in this neck of the woods" we can achieve by force more than we can achieve by word. Thus, the military started replacing diplomats in a lot of venues. The argument was clear – there is still a lot of terrorist activity, so we need to be proactive.

With the tangible results in Syria, the Libyan option started looking more and more doable. However, there still was reluctance to engage on the state level. The position of the Kremlin was clear – we do not know what will come as a result of Libyan kaleidoscope, so we will hedge our risks by talking to everybody without engaging on the part of anybody. But, if there was a private initiative, we would not interfere. Plausible deniability, which in the fall of 2019 turned out to be not so convincing, as world news agencies readily tied the so-called Wagner to the Russian Government. Still, it is not a state endeavor and should not be considered as such in all seriousness.

¹ The Palestine Liberation Organization was considered a terrorist group, but for the Soviet people, they were freedom fighters worthy of internationalist support. This legitimized the Kremlin decision to start cooperating with Arafat. A similar thing was happening now

It might be looked upon with a blind eye, and considered as a future option in case... But at the end it is definitely private and not very impressive.

During the initial period of official engagement in Syria and an unofficial one in Libya, Russia faced several challenges that it learned to cope with, except Turkey. Ankara became active in the Middle East some time ago and in the Eastern Mediterranean recently. This was probably something new for the "front-line" European Mediterranean countries, but not for Russia. Russia was dealing with Turkey through all its recorded history. Nothing changed in principle. It is still the interests of one country vs. the interests of the other. However, the construct is different. Now, Turkey is a member of NATO and as such enjoys the support of its member-states². On the other hand, both countries enjoy certain levels of economic cooperation and are reluctant to sacrifice it, at least for now. There are even "optimistic" voices in Russia saying that Turkey is ready to leave NATO and cut relations with the US to foster a new alliance with Russia. This is an interesting albeit unrealistic opinion.

In reality, the two countries have been dancing in close military proximity in Syria and now have to adjust to each other again over the frontline in Libya. Both countries are influencing American involvement to the negative effect in Syria (playing hoax on Kurds and seeding discord in the tribal structure of the Levant) and to the positive effect in Libya, facilitating new possible track to solution, however improbable it may look.

Still Moscow is evidently taking a very cautious approach to the GNU and the new circumstances of Haftar. The closeness of Abdelhamid Dbeiba to Ankara is not a secret and the reluctance of Haftar to seed his domain to anybody is also known. That is, it looks like Moscow is waiting for the outcome and not overly optimistic of the election's prospects. And if there are no elections, then the unity of the country is questionable and who is to say where the balance goes? The remark of Vershinin on the margins of the Berlin 2.0 that evacuation of foreign fighters from Libya should be approached cautiously, is telling.

Moscow's approach to the Eastern Mediterranean is also based on the new contextual reality. It is perceived that Mediterranean is transiting from the Eurocentric to the Mideastern character. Recently, the leading Gulf states are taking keen interest in what is happening in the region. From the Moscow's perspective it means that the "liberal democratic" construct of the Mediterranean will be increasingly subjected to the stress-test by the "desert warrior" political routine. And in this context Russia feels more comfortable as a historically proven all-road political vehicle capable of navigating traditional waters of the man's land of Middle Eastern theatre. It might be too optimistic but definitely not without merit. The region is changing and Russia, which exchanged the shackles of socialist ideology of the past for the potent weapon of traditional values, feels itself capable of not only participating but also of drafting this change.

² The position of NATO in 2012 and 2013 towards Turkish incursions into the Syrian territory, where Rasmussen depicted Turkey as a suffering party.

