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## LIBYAN CRISIS: A CALL FOR EUROPE COHESION

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## Libyan crisis: a call for Europe cohesion

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More than ten years have passed since the outbreak of protests against the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and since the beginning of the so-called Libyan crisis – an endemic spiral which has become more and more tangled throughout the years, and whose effective solution still seems neither predictable nor too close. From its very beginning, the Libyan crisis has been characterized by the decisive influence of external actors: first, NATO and Arab countries played a fundamental role in support of the revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow Gaddafi's regime. Secondly, once Gaddafi's regime had fallen, the external powers began to divide over who should have ruled the "new Libya": in this endeavor, regional and international actors started supporting different forces on the ground, in accordance with their strategic interests and their own vision for the future of the country.

Therefore, Libya rapidly became the theatre of a proxy war, further exacerbated by the *de facto* division of the country under two different authorities – on one side, the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), issued by the 2015 Skhirat agreement and under the leadership of Fayeze al-Sarraj; on the other, Field Marshall's Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA), which after having conquered wider and wider portions of Eastern Libya, in April 2019 launched an offensive to conquer Tripoli from the GNA. While Qatar and especially Turkey backed Al-Sarraj government, actors such as Egypt, the EAU and later Russia supported Haftar, to whom also France blinked more than once.

The influence and impact of those external actors evolved and changed throughout the years, thus making it difficult to identify the real game-changer in Libya. In parallel, and despite its strategic interests in the North African country, between 2015 and 2020 Europe was progressively marginalized on the Libyan scenario; the EU lacked unity and strategy on the Libyan dossier, which was in fact progressively hijacked by the above-mentioned actors.

### **The Berlin Process: A renewed role for Europe?**

In this gloomy scenario for Libya – and for Europe –, the so-called Berlin process represented only a partial game changer. This diplomatic initiative targeting the future of Libya lasted four months and was concluded by a conference organized in January 2020 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which gathered representatives from all the States most involved and interested in the Libyan crisis – among which Egypt, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, Russia, USA, UK, Algeria – as well as institutions such as the European Union, the African Union, and the Arab League. The aim of this convening was the creation of a renewed international alignment towards a solution of the Libyan crisis, at a time where the situation was degenerating because of the actions of foreign actors, while Europe was nowhere to be seen.<sup>1</sup> In a moment when Turkey and Russia were acquiring increasing and

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<sup>1</sup>M. Ciulla, T. Megerisi, A. Varvelli, R. Wildangel, "Views from the capitals: The Libya conference in Berlin", *ECFR- View from the capitals*, 23 January 2020.

[https://ecfr.eu/article/vfc\\_views\\_from\\_the\\_capitals\\_the\\_libya\\_conference\\_in\\_berlin/](https://ecfr.eu/article/vfc_views_from_the_capitals_the_libya_conference_in_berlin/)

relevance on opposite sides of the Libyan conundrum, the conference managed to capitalize on a declared Russian-Turkish truce, whose actual breaking did not have any consequence on the holding of the conference. The core, original principle of the Berlin process was to build peace in Libya from the outside-in; hence, it represented a radical change from the inside-out approach, which had dominated peace negotiations until that moment.

The conclusion of the conference seemed a good omen for the future of Libya: paradoxically enough, some of those same foreign actors who had been meddling in Libya, arming the different sides of the conflict and promoting escalations, re-affirmed their “strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Libya. Only a Libyan-led and Libyan owned political process can end the conflict and bring lasting peace”.<sup>2</sup> Despite such proclamations, in practice the meddling of external actors knew no halt, with the risk of exploiting the situation on the ground to mold it and impose their preferred political framework for the country in an extremely delicate phase.

Nevertheless, on the European side, the Berlin conference represented a sort of window of opportunity for interested EU member states – Germany, Italy, and France ahead – to show the renewed diplomatic weight of Europe and to demonstrate the solid character of their engagement in Libya. To tell the truth, the conference of Berlin was not the first best for all the actors involved – it surely was not for Rome, which despite its major interests in the Libyan crisis somehow had to stay a step behind Berlin and Paris. Nevertheless, it was an important initiative for Europe to regain a centrality in Libyan crisis management, averting the major risk of irretrievably leaving the conflict in the hands of Turkey and Russia while also avoiding spoiling European interests in a fundamental geopolitical scenario, extending from North Africa to the Sahel.<sup>3</sup>

All things considered, Europe’s central role in the Berlin process has provided it with more dividends to play a positive role in Libya, namely given that the January 2020 conference sparked a new phase for the country. At an operational level, the Berlin process prevented an overt fall into a nationwide conflict following the collapse of Haftar’s fourteen-months offensive on Tripoli<sup>4</sup>. This went hand in hand with the launch of a new multi-track negotiation aimed at considering and targeting the different dimensions of the crisis to better address them on the path to conflict resolution. The interruption of fighting in June 2020 was later certified by a ceasefire in October, while the launch of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), strongly encouraged by Stephanie Williams, an American diplomat then serving as Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Libya and Deputy head of UNSMIL, opened the path to the formation of a new interim government – the Government of National Unity (GNU) – in March 2021, and to the scheduling of national elections for the end of 2021.

### **New patterns of cooperation on Libya**

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<sup>2</sup> “The Berlin Conference on Libya - Conference Conclusions”, 19 January 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/berlin-conference-libya-conference-conclusions-19-january-2020>

<sup>3</sup> M. Ciulla, T. Megerisi, A. Varvelli, R. Wildangel, “Views from the capitals: The Libya conference in Berlin”, art.cit.

<sup>4</sup> T. Megerisi, “Spoiler alert: How Europe can save diplomacy in Libya”, *ECFR- Policy brief*, 22 January 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/spoiler-alert-how-europe-can-save-diplomacy-in-libya/>

By capitalizing on its meaningful participation in this process of political transition, sparked by the Berlin conference, Europe could regain significant influence in Libya. However, in order to succeed, Europe will need to invest way more political capital in the North African country, being careful to address the root causes of the crisis and not limiting its approach to the superficial ones, as it has already mistakenly done in the past. What European countries need to understand as soon as possible is that their goal should be the definition and implementation of a common strategy for Libya that combines and merge their efforts towards the same goal<sup>5</sup>. After all, the Libyan conundrum has extensively pointed out the counterproductive effect of playing zero-sum games instead of choosing coordination, especially inside the European household. This was widely demonstrated by the rivalry played out until recently between Rome and Paris on the Libyan scenario, where the two European actors formally cooperated within the EU multilateral framework while also competing through their individual initiatives, driven by their interests and objectives and by the colliding strategies chosen to pursue them.<sup>6</sup>

Achieving a common European track for Libya would also be beneficial for Europe's overall reputation in its Southern Neighbourhood, thus somehow recovering ground after years of European disunity and partial marginalisation, when Europe surely has not played to its full potential. Indeed, Libya could be together a test and an ambition for a more geopolitical Europe, based on what Italian President Mario Draghi has recently defined as "European shared sovereignty": in this perspective, Libya should be a common foreign policy priority instead of the ground for intra-European struggle.

In light of this, the visit held by Italian, French, and German ministers of Foreign Affairs to Libya in March 2021 was positively welcomed by several analysts as a first step towards a new European coordination on the Libyan dossier. This direction was confirmed by the recent rapprochement between Italy and France, with President Draghi announcing having taken a new important step towards cooperation with France in North Africa and in Sahel, namely (but not exclusively) in the domain of migration, thus overcoming past rivalries with Paris.<sup>7</sup> After all, Macron and Draghi have shown that they know how to work well together on many dossiers, namely on economic ones, and there seems to be room to expand the areas of cooperation between France and Italy on foreign policy issues. In this framework, Italy has demonstrated to be ready to make concessions and to support French security vision – as well exemplified by Rome's participation in the TAKUBA task force under French command. On the other hand, France should be ready to abandon its unilateral approach – on the Libyan dossier as elsewhere – and to really distance itself from Haftar. Anyhow, the fact that Paris has re-established its relations with Tripoli by opening its Embassy in the Libyan capital demonstrates French commitment towards the unity of Libya and towards the new government.

For what concerns Rome, under Draghi's leadership Italy appears more willing and ready to advocate for its national interests: Italian foreign policy seems to be moving from a *wait-and-see* approach to a

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<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> M. Ilardo, "The Rivalry between France and Italy over Libya and its Southwest Theatre", *Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES)*, Focus 5/2018. [https://www.aies.at/download/2018/AIES-Fokus\\_2018-05.pdf](https://www.aies.at/download/2018/AIES-Fokus_2018-05.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> D. Prestigiacomo, "Draghi 'fa pace' con i francesi: "In Libia lavoreremo insieme, basta conflitto", *Europa Today*, 25 May 2021 <https://europa.today.it/attualita/italia-francia-libia-pace.html>; "Libia: gioco di sponda", *ISPI*, 26 May 2021. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/libia-gioco-di-sponda-30606>

more proactive one,<sup>8</sup> which aims at highlighting the renewed presence of Rome at the negotiation table. This also applies to Libya, where Draghi is trying to build up Italian presence while always promoting a multilateral framework and moving within its borders.

In Libya, a broader multilateral endeavour also calls for deeper Euro-Atlantic cooperation: Biden's America, with its return to multilateralism, could be a good partner for Europe to support and encourage Libyan transition and direct the country towards truly unifying goals, far from internal and international divergences and fractures. On the Libyan dossier, Europe could seize the important chance to define the lines of American engagement; once again, this would be possible only if Europe acts as a unified actor, and if it managed to enact its geopolitical nature and to project its strategic sovereignty in a constructive way.

### **From the withdrawal of foreign forces to SSR: priorities on the Libyan scenario**

From an operative point of view, a unified and coordinated EU effort should first of all translate into containing Russian and Turkish presence in Libya; Russia especially is a source of concern for European countries, which are afraid that, given the high degree of authority reached in the country throughout the last years, Moscow could potentially turn Libya into a platform from which to threaten European security. In this endeavour, the above-discussed European *entente* with Washington can be useful, given that Biden's administration seems more inclined than the previous one to watch out for Russian growing influence in the area. From a more general point of view, countering international spoilers in Libya would also mean weakening any sort of external military support to factions as to ensure that Cyrenaica and Tripolitania actors respect the agreements, and that the country can embark a serious Security Sector Reform (SSR).

Ousting foreign fighters from Libya – namely Russian *Wagner Group's* contractors and Syrian mercenaries linked to Turkey – is also one of the priorities emerged from the Second Berlin Conference about Libya, which was held on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. This issue is deeply intertwined with the legitimacy of the institutions running the country: only an authoritative, legitimate, accountable and thoroughly recognized government will have the necessary strength to free Libya from the deeply rooted foreign forces acting on its ground. For this reason, it is important to foster the political process leading to fair, free and transparent elections at the end of this year.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the recent meeting between Biden and Putin in Geneva could provide a chance for a renewed – even if still cautious and tense – dialogue between the West and Russia, with some possible benefits in the Libyan crisis.

In this complex framework, serious consideration should also be given to the possibility of setting up a European technical mission to turn the EU into a sort of guarantor for already existing agreements, while at the same time also playing a role in the SSR of a country whose society has grown to be increasingly and worryingly militarized. This would enable Europeans to build constructive and

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. T. Coratella, A. Varvelli, "Rome's moment: Draghi, multilateralism, and Italy's new strategy", *ECFR- Policy brief*, 20th May 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/romes-moment-draghi-multilateralism-and-italys-new-strategy/>

<sup>9</sup> G. Belardelli, "Ue chiama Usa, ci sono due elefanti da allontanare dalla Libia", *Huffington Post*, 23 June 2021. [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/ue-chiama-usa-ci-sono-due-elefanti-da-allontanare-dalla-libia\\_it\\_60d37a66e4b00bad2be301d7?ncid=other\\_twitter\\_coo09wqtham&utm\\_campaign=share\\_twitter](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/ue-chiama-usa-ci-sono-due-elefanti-da-allontanare-dalla-libia_it_60d37a66e4b00bad2be301d7?ncid=other_twitter_coo09wqtham&utm_campaign=share_twitter)

transparent relations with the new Libyan institutions, namely in the priority areas of migration flows and counterterrorism, while keeping their eyes wide open on the respect of EU's founding values.