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Fragmentation of Peacemaking in Libya: Reality and Perception

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Abstract

After ousting Colonel Moammar Gadhafi from power in 2011 with the aid of a NATO bombing campaign, the Libyan rebel groups that fought the autocrat turned on each other in a struggle to fill the country's power vacuum. This led to several bouts of civil war, a proliferation of armed groups, and additional foreign military interventions.

This paper focuses on the engagements of countries that have recently had the most sizable role and the most assertive posture in the Libyan crisis—namely Russia, Turkey, and the UAE. The latest political analysis, media reports, and original interviews with Libyan and foreign stakeholders allow us to empirically substantiate how local actors interpret the role and effect of non-Western actors that are involved in Libya, and permit us to sketch out possible future scenarios.

Interviewees view the competing interests between foreign powers as exacerbating existing tensions in Libya. Those interviewees' responses exhibit a highly polarised range of perceptions about foreign actors that corresponds to the deeply fractured character of Libya's political landscape. Unlike Russia, Turkey, and the UAE, China has so far avoided becoming entangled in the conflict, preferring instead to watch for opportunities to achieve economic penetration by means of low-key diplomacy.

In general, Libyan elites perceive foreign powers' ability to mobilise economic assets and expertise in Libya's reconstruction as positive: a platform through which novel forms of dialogue and communication can be fostered. Indeed, all Libyans interviewed for this essay believe that such a new economy-centred approach could and should be leveraged for peace-promotion purposes.

Since June 2020, Libya has experienced a precarious peace across most of its territory. However, there is great uncertainty about its immediate future. A relapse into "hot" conflict isn't inevitable, as Libya may still manage to avoid further polarisation. But after months of relative quiet, the overall trend in 2022 has presented a return towards greater dysfunction and instability, particularly in the economic realm. Amid this domestic deterioration, foreign states remain almost as divided as before, despite some differences in attitude. They include the primary interferers of Turkey and Russia who may no longer be satisfied with the post-June 2020 status quo and, for that reason, may resume supporting war efforts in Libya. Additionally, Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine has increased the probability of potential military action in Libya by Great Britain, Italy, Turkey, and the United States in support of Libyan efforts to expel Russian forces from the North African country.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Drawing on the latest political analysis, media reports and interviews with Libyan and foreign stakeholders, this report has uncovered some key findings:

- ▶ The interference and competing interests of foreign powers – both Western and non-Western – active in Libya, have exacerbated existing tensions and fuelled conflict.
- ▶ The ambivalent posture and deep divides of Western powers since the 2011 NATO intervention have paved the way for deeper engagement in Libya by non-Western states.
- ▶ Russia, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, the UAE are currently the primary “meddlers” in the Libyan crisis.
- ▶ Recognising the conflict’s unpredictability, China has avoided taking risks. Instead of becoming entangled in the conflict, it has focused on economic penetration and low-key diplomacy. It has also kept channels open with both the Tripoli government and its HoR-aligned rival.
- ▶ Russia’s war in Ukraine has had a noticeable effect on the transnational dynamics affecting Libya, increasing the probability of actions by Western countries and Turkey aimed at weakening Russia’s presence in the North African country.
- ▶ Libya’s fractured political environment is characterised by a highly polarised range of perceptions. Every foreign state involved in the country appears as the most constructive peacemaker in the view of some interviewees—and as a deleterious interferer and warmonger according to others.
- ▶ Even the interviewees displaying the most pronounced political bias regarding foreign powers expressed a potential willingness to allow those nations, with which they bitterly disagree, to play a greater economic role in Libya.
- ▶ The current peace in Libya is precarious. Libyans are not waging war against each other, but neither are they agreeing to a national election, nor truly reconciling.

- ▶ Avoiding a relapse into war will primarily depend on the following factors: a continued entente between Turkey and Russia; the UAE's continued willingness to avoid the level of bellicosity that it displayed in 2014-2019; and, crucially, a willingness amongst the most influential Libyan parties to entertain temporary arrangements, including financial ones, instead of reverting to economic sabotage and armed violence.

The relative calm that characterised the Libyan political landscape during 2021 should not be taken for granted. We suggest that international efforts should focus on maintaining an equilibrium on both a political and an economic level between the main sides, Libyan and foreign alike. As underscored in our research, economic considerations—especially those around promoting the country's reconstruction and creating opportunities for economic growth—are of key importance when it comes to consolidating peace in Libya in 2022 and beyond.

Introduction

Background

Libya's decade-long crisis started with the Arab uprisings of 2011. The rebel factions that toppled Colonel Moammar Gadhafi with the military assistance of NATO and some non-NATO Arab nations then turned against each other in a fight to fill the country's power vacuum. This led to several bouts of civil war, a proliferation of armed groups, as well as protracted foreign interference and intervention. Overall, the crisis in Libya has seen tens of thousands of casualties since 2011, as well as the intermittent disruption of Libya's economically crucial oil industry, as key facilities were sometimes blockaded by armed factions for months at a time.

With a population of only 6.7 million, Libya has vast natural resources and a littoral with immense potential for development. This, according to a former UN Special Envoy, helps explain why six to ten countries have interfered in Libya's internal affairs. Each one of these foreign meddlers is driven by a unique combination of motivations, some of which are not economic in nature ([Salamé, 2019](#); [Harchaoui, 2021](#)).

The eight-year period — starting in 2014, when the first post-2011 civil war erupted in Libya — can be summarised as: (a) several phases of intensive fighting, in which various foreign states interfered aggressively while depicting themselves as both neutral and committed to peace in the context of U.N. talks; and (b) several periods of quiet, which no peace process succeeded in transforming into a lasting form of stability with unified governance. In other words, Libya has been in the grips of two levels of antagonism. First, the nation's own elites have failed to achieve coordination domestically, preferring to deploy armed violence and economic sabotage to advance their agendas. Additionally, on an international level, foreign states have also failed to work together. This divisiveness exists not only among regional players such as Turkey and Egypt, but also among Western powers, such as Italy, France, and the UK.

In such a doubly fractured environment, there has been only one formal peace process since the 2011 war, which was officially spearheaded by the U.N. and often shaped by unilateral action from the U.S. or other member states, such as the UK, the UAE, Egypt, Germany, and Italy. For example, when Paris took the initiative to organise its July 2017 peace conference in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, it portrayed it as an attempt to assist the U.N. even as it excluded Italy ([Chesnot and Malbrunot, 2022](#)).

Moreover, several recent instances have seen non-Western rivals interfere in Libya by pursuing sustained diplomatic talks amongst themselves without consulting the U.N. One significant peace process pursued independently from the U.N. has been the informal Libya-related dialogue between Turkey and Russia, a somewhat close coordination that first began manifesting in the last days of 2019.

Within Libya itself, although the main fault line has been more complex and more versatile than a binary east-west divide, the country has had two principal competing poles of power since 2014: one in Tripoli and Misrata in the western region; and another in Benghazi and Tobruk in the east.

At the onset of the 2011 Arab uprisings, Khalifa Haftar — formerly a high-ranking Libyan colonel who, after a period of estrangement from Gadhafi, had lived in the United States for years — returned to Libya to fight the regime. By May 2014, Haftar and his sons had started to consolidate power in the eastern province's Benghazi area. This was achieved by leading an informal armed coalition dubbed the Libyan National Army (LNA) and waging a long, often indiscriminately brutal, military campaign against a diverse range of political opponents. The Haftar-led effort, driven by a combination of genuine counterterrorism and aggressive political ambition, contributed to the emergence of the eastern-Libyan centre of opposition to Tripoli and Misrata. Cyrenaica, Libya's eastern half, is in great part dominated by the loose political alliance between Aguila Saleh—the president of the UN-recognised parliament or House of Representatives (HoR)—and Haftar, while northwestern Libya has been in great part dominated by the Tripoli-based government and various armed groups more or less aligned with it. The Tripoli executive, from 2016 until 2021, was the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). In March 2021, the GNA dissolved and was replaced by a new UN-recognised executive called the Government of National Unity (GNU), while the main authorities in the East largely stuck to most of their previous defiance vis-à-vis Tripoli.

The Libyan conflict can by no means be attributed to external interference. It nevertheless is important to note that, since 2011, various foreign states have never ceased to interfere militarily, economically, politically, and diplomatically in Libya. Even at the time of writing, amid a polarised and fractured political environment, numerous foreign powers continue working through local proxies and/or intervening directly in Libya ([Wehrey, 2020](#)).

With no open warfare unfolding at present, Libya is experiencing a precarious lull across most of its territory. This imperfect calm has held since June 2020, when forces aligned with the Tripoli government and backed primarily by Turkey defeated the troops of General Haftar in western Libya, putting an end to his fourteen-month-long offensive on the capital. In the wake of Haftar's debacle in western Libya, the UAE, his main sponsor, relocated its personnel and military assets—such as armed drones—to western Egypt. By contrast, Turkish and Russian military personnel and hardware have stayed in Libya. Since the war stopped in mid-2020, Haftar's armed coalition, despite its military defeat in north-western Libya, has survived for the most part in the rest of the country, due to Russia's continued military protection.

The lull since June 2020 owes less to genuine reconciliation amongst Libyan factions or to the UN peace process than it does to the entente between Turkey and Russia. The two financially motivated Eurasian powers, after intervening on opposite sides in Libya, have deepened their respective military encroachment while also maintaining a restraint intended to let the rich North African nation pour billions into infrastructure development and imports. Both main intruders hoped that such a period of quiet would be more beneficial to them than prolonged war. In effect, the military missions of Turkey and Russia — in north-western and central Libya, respectively — helped achieve a rough balance of power between the two main rival Libyan camps.

The UN used this opportunity to promote formal ceasefire declarations and, in late autumn 2020, to initiate the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. This later resulted in a new Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli led by interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. The latter received a vote of confidence from the Tobruk parliament in March 2021, only to lose it six months later.

As part of the UN-sponsored peace process, presidential and legislative elections were expected to be held in December 2021. However, due to disagreements over the country's election "laws", tensions surrounding several controversial candidacies and, ultimately, the inability to finalise an official list of candidates, no elections took place in 2021. This failure reignited tensions and fragmentation within almost all state institutions.

The Tripoli-based GNU, which enjoyed the UN's full recognition for nine months in 2021, refused to relinquish power at the end of its official mandate, invoking the absence of elections in December 2021. The GNU's leader, Prime Minister Dbeibah, relies primarily on Libyan armed groups. He receives a degree of support from Italy, Qatar, Britain, and, more importantly, Turkey. The GNU's main rival, dubbed the Government of National Stability (GNS) and led by Prime Minister Fathi Bachagha, was designated in March 2022 by the House of Representatives (HoR) based in the eastern city of Tobruk. The GNS is backed by Egypt, France, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. The UAE, for several years the most consequential interferer in Libya, became significantly more subdued during 2021. As a result of a deliberate restraint, Abu Dhabi's influence was minor in Libya for approximately a year until it staged a comeback as a key mediator in May 2022 ([Bwaba al-Wasat, 2022](#)).

The third section will discuss the divisions and contradictory character of Western engagement, and following this is an overview of involvement by non-Western actors. Later, the paper will examine the prospects of the entente between Russia and Turkey, followed by an analysis of China's engagement in Libya. A review of key perceptions and insights into non-Western approaches to peacemaking will be discussed in the penultimate section, while the last piece of discussion offers some final conclusions.

Methodology

The authors used a mixed methodology to produce this report. A literature review of secondary sources related to Libya's political analysis and security situation, including international media reports and specialist publications, was combined with primary-source data acquired through six semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with two Libyan senior politicians, one Libyan high-ranking military officer, one Libyan former ambassador, one Libyan political advisor and one senior Western diplomat. The semi-directive interviews focused upon how local actors and Western policy experts perceive both the current and prospective contributions of the non-Western countries that have maintained the most assertive posture in the Libyan crisis—namely Russia, Turkey and the UAE. Although secondary and limited by comparison, the balancing act pursued thus far in Libya by China was also discussed. The data collected was used to update and complement the ongoing, day-to-day discussions held by one of the authors with his on-the-ground networks in Libya spanning government and military authorities, civil societies, and communities. In line with the approved ethics protocols of the project, we withheld the names of the interviewees to stimulate free and candid discussions and to protect confidentiality.

Western Divisions and Ambiguities

Before addressing the motivations behind non-Western interference in Libya, the ambivalent posture and deep divides of Western powers since the start of 2011's NATO intervention must be reviewed ([Salacanian, 2020](#); [Winer, 2020](#)). The U.S.-led military intervention of 2011 was intended to demonstrate that Western nations can intervene efficaciously without "boots on the ground" (Karmi, 2011; AP, 2011). Starting in the immediate wake of Moammar Gadhafi's demise, the main Western powers—namely the U.S., France, and Great Britain—revealed themselves to be increasingly aloof regarding Libya, particularly in contrast to the 2011 war against the autocrat's regime. After the killing of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens in September 2012, Western commitment to the North-African nation became even more tenuous and risk-averse. By the mid-2010s, Western attitude towards Libya was dominated by three main concerns, which had little to do with promoting peace amongst Libyans. These three focus areas of Western-led efforts can be described as follows: (a) containing the Islamic State terror organization, (b) minimizing the flow of irregular migrants into Sicily, and (c) encouraging Libyans to refrain from imposing oil-and-gas blockades ([Harchaoui, 2018](#)). In 2016, when non-military action was required against the Islamic State enclave in Sirte, the U.S., the U.K. and Italy enacted the majority of efforts. The latter was also a particularly active interferer in northwestern Libya during 2017, in pursuit of Rome's goal to reduce the number of irregular migrants reaching Sicily ([Micallef & Reitano, 2018](#); Minniti, 2018). This culminated in the 2017 signing of a controversial memorandum of understanding between the Italian government and the Libyan GNA, intended to strengthen their cooperation in the field of migration ([Palm, 2017](#); [Wintour, 2017](#)).

The superficial and often contradictory character of Western engagement with Libyan factions has made it possible for non-Western states to take bolder action, with stark effects on the North African crisis — diplomatically, politically, militarily, and economically. Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, and Russia have all benefited from the de-facto passivity of the main Western nations. France and Italy, for example, largely agreed with the actions taken in Libya by the Emirates and Turkey respectively. This “outsourcing” mentality informed much of Western diplomacy in Libya during the second half of the 2010s and contributed to the outbreak of the civil war of 2019-2020 ([Harchaoui, 2019](#)). Western nations' lack of assertiveness can further be ascertained in the EU's failure to make a firm contribution to denouncing violators of the UN's arms embargo in 2020. The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation “Iridi” that officially started in March 2020 was politically biased ([Bharucha, 2020](#)), concentrating primarily on maritime transfers of weapons by Turkey, while placing much less emphasis on the numerous aerial transfers of weapons by the UAE and Russia. Resultantly, illegal arms deliveries continued unabated. In July 2022, Operation Iridi intercepted a weapons shipment bound for Libya ([Operation Iridi, 2022](#)), an occurrence which was among only a small handful of successful seizures performed in more than two years. The substantial number of large-scale weapons deliveries carried out by Russia, the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt after Iridi was instituted have been neither affected nor denounced publicly by Iridi.

The relative quiet that characterised the year 2021 in Libya was an opportunity for Western powers to restore their credibility by actively supporting elections, which they promoted rhetorically as part of the UN's comprehensive peacebuilding roadmap. However, that chance was not seized; once again Washington and the other Western capitals proved unwilling to exercise their full diplomatic capacity to contain the Libyan and foreign forces committed to ensuring elections do not take place ([Harchaoui, 2022](#)). Such Western ambiguity was partly responsible for the failure to hold elections in December 2021. Since 2011, Western states have exerted modest influence on the Libyan crisis because of their reluctance to either deploy military assets directly on the ground, or to engage their full diplomatic capabilities in support of one specific goal pertaining to the core of the Libyan conflict. In contrast, the UAE, Russia and Turkey were far less hesitant to take such risks.

Involvement by Non-Western Actors

Unlike the UAE, Russia was not instrumental in precipitating Haftar's April 2019 aggression against the Libyan capital, although it provided material support for Haftar's offensive against Tripoli starting in September 2019. This included the deployment of up to 3,000 private military contractors (PMCs) from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organisation ([Rondeaux, 2019](#); [Dreyfus, 2021](#)), as well as the delivery by the Russian Air Force of supplies and lethal equipment to the Wagner Group ([Solomon, 2020](#); [Bermudez, 2020](#)). Russia seized the opportunities afforded by its support of Haftar to present itself as a diplomatic arbiter, burnish its regional status, and secure hydrocarbon businesses ([Ramani, 2020](#)). In 2011, Russia witnessed the U.S.-led and U.N.-mandated intervention against the Gadhafi regime render uncertain the prospect of approximately \$6.5 billion worth of signed or verbally promised contracts. Since 2013, Moscow has been interested in reviving its business fortunes in Libya through energy contracts, infrastructure projects, arms deals, and sales of agricultural goods. On a geostrategic level, Moscow also seeks to exert greater control over the flow of hydrocarbons entering southern Europe. Lastly, military entrenchment in Libya gives Russia a valuable passageway into sub-Saharan Africa and, at the same time, a strategic position on the southern flank of NATO, which Russia perceives as a hostile entity.

Russia's involvement with Haftar does not reflect a belief that the rebel commander possesses the capabilities to unite Libya under his rule. Rather, Russia exploited the weaknesses of Haftar's 2019 offensive on Tripoli to achieve greater influence in Libyan affairs. By assisting the LNA militarily—and by supplying it with unauthorised Russian-printed dinar banknotes amid a persistent liquidity crisis—Moscow's clandestine mission in Libya succeeded in acquiring strategic bases and physical access to oil facilities held by Haftar's forces ([Winer, 2019](#); [Faucon, 2020](#)). It remains intent on using these sources of leverage as a means of influence over all main poles of Libyan power.

Partly due to Russia's scepticism about Haftar's leadership capabilities, Moscow increased its arbitration role in Libya in 2020, cultivating a diplomatic channel with the Tripoli authorities. This was with the aim of obtaining energy concessions and construction contracts similar to the pre-2011 project involving a \$2 billion Benghazi-to-Sirte railway line ([Ramani, 2020](#)). As early as January 2020, Russia hosted diplomatic negotiations on Libya. However, these talks failed when Haftar left Moscow without signing a ceasefire agreement.

Despite the setback, Moscow—in coordination with Ankara—was able to impose a lull in the fighting in May 2020 by withdrawing Russian forces, paramilitary and regular alike, from the Tripoli area (Harchaoui, 2021). The move, which caused the collapse of Haftar's offensive in Western Libya the following month, turned Moscow and Ankara into de facto key guarantors of peace. In the subsequent months, the UN, the US, and European nations engaged with Moscow on the Libyan peace process. Notwithstanding Russia's armed presence in Libya, the period between mid-2020 and mid-2021, approximately, showed Moscow's potential in the way of conflict resolution. Beginning in the second half of 2021, profound disagreements with Western powers resurfaced on several topics, including the modalities of Libyan elections. Moscow believes Saif al-Islam, the son of Moammar Gadhafi, must be allowed to run for the presidential elections, while the United States does not ([Lavrilleux, 2022](#); [Meyer & Magdy, 2021](#); [Grossman, Ramali, & DiResta, 2020](#)).

Turkey's agenda in Libya bears some similarity to that of Russia. Ankara is interested in recouping the \$20 billion of pre-2011 energy, construction and engineering deals that it held with Gadhafi's regime. Geopolitically, it also sees its growing military presence in the Maghreb country as a stepping-stone for expanding Turkish influence into sub-Saharan Africa. Crucially, Ankara's maritime ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea require it to guarantee — mainly by military means — the survival of a pro-Turkish government in Tripoli.

Ankara believes that an as-yet-unratified memorandum of understanding, signed in 2019 with Tripoli, can help justify its expansionism and sea exploration activities until Greece accepts a redrawing of the maritime jurisdiction zones between the two countries ([Yüksel, 2021](#)). For instance, at a more sustained pace in 2020, Turkish seismic survey ships, accompanied by navy frigates, made explorations for natural gas close to Greece's territorial waters ([Hope, 2020](#)). Ankara maintains that these waters should be part of Turkey's own exclusive economic zone. Within that framework, Ankara uses its memorandum with Tripoli as a legitimising argument.

For the UAE, economic and geostrategic considerations matter, however, its primary preoccupation regarding Libya has been its ideology and mode of governance. Indeed, the North African country's wealth and structural advantages, including a small demography with no sectarian divide, a strategic location, and vast natural resources result in the close monitoring of its fate by political constituencies and factions across the rest of the region.

If a form of government that grants a degree of influence to political Islam holds onto power in Tripoli in a peaceful context, Abu Dhabi worries that neighbouring Sunni-majority countries might be inspired by the precedent set in Libya. The Emirati state fears a domino effect across North Africa that could extend into the Arabian Peninsula and, ultimately, jeopardise its own survival. Because it wishes to prevent this "political contagion" from starting in the first place, the UAE is committed to eradicating any mode of governance that may accept or defend the Muslim Brotherhood, or a similar faction, as a legitimate political strand in Tripoli. An inevitable corollary of these threat perceptions is that Abu Dhabi will not cease its attempts to influence the political orientation of the Tripoli government. Lastly, although Abu Dhabi is aware that Moscow regards Ankara as a partner in certain circumstances, it has itself sought strategic ties with Russia. Abu Dhabi views Russian influence in the Arab world as a desirable, stabilising factor. This Emirati conundrum has significant ramifications for Libya, where Abu Dhabi may again become tempted to derail Turkey's plans in the hope that Moscow will adopt a less conciliatory stance vis-à-vis Ankara. If such Emirati activism against Turkey is absent, Moscow and Ankara may work out a durable arrangement whereby the two Eurasian powers would coexist in Libya and share the spoils—an outcome that Abu Dhabi prefers to avert because it would mean losing all influence on the prized North African nation.

Emirati leaders have been less aggressive in Libya since 2021, with one Libyan senior politician interviewed for this paper mentioning visits to Ankara by the UAE National Security Advisor, Sheikh Tahnun Bin Zayed, in September 2021 and Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed in November 2021 (Interview 1). Further examples of such a *détente* are the facilitation of negotiations between the LNA and political leaders who are aligned with Turkey, and a visit to Abu Dhabi in December 2021 by the Libyan interim Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Turkey's and Qatar's favoured candidate in the planned Libyan Presidential election (*ibid*). This overall *détente* effort with Turkey has been one of the reasons why the UAE has significantly reduced its support for the LNA.

Although not identical, Egyptian motivations in Libya resemble those of the Emirates. The poor Arab nation of 102 million believes its wealthy neighbour to the west, with a population fifteen times smaller, should be governed by politicians aligned with Cairo and pursue an economic policy friendly to its own interests. For instance, Egypt wishes to see its companies win more business in Libya and see more Egyptian workers find long-term employment in Libya ([Saied, 2021](#)).

Future Prospects for the Russo-Turkish Entente

Russia and Turkey's commitment to maintaining an informal entente with one another has been significant to Libya's fate since 2020. Broadly speaking, Russia — unlike Europe — has shown a patient willingness to accept and, to some extent, accommodate Turkey's aspirations to become a full-blown regional power. Ankara and Moscow are often on opposing sides of regional disputes, such as in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Armenia-Azerbaijan, amongst others. Despite this, Moscow attempts to remain pragmatic and amenable to dialogue due to the convenience of partnership between Russia and Turkey. Although a rupture may occur at any time, Moscow has so far valued the option of striking temporary arrangements with Ankara. Those arrangements are useful in helping Russia avoid costly, prolonged episodes of unnecessary conflict. Moreover, Moscow is interested in maintaining its semi-partnership with Turkey, an important member of NATO, partly because the existence of that relationship exacerbates tensions and erodes cohesion within NATO. When Turkey purchased the S-400 missile defence system from Russia, for example, Washington and other major NATO members deemed Ankara's move a threat to Western tactical aviation ([Stein, 2021](#)). More recently, Washington and other Western capitals were alarmed at the deepening ties between Turkey and Russia, to the point of contemplating punitive retaliation against the NATO member as it helps Moscow avoid sanctions ([Pitel et al., 2022](#)).

After Russian-Turkish tensions over Syria decreased in 2020, the verbal sparring between Russian and Turkish officials regarding Libya also came to a quasi-halt. Despite this de-escalation, the two countries disagree on Haftar's place in Libya's political future. In Turkey, Haftar is widely viewed as a rogue warlord who depends on external military support for survival and lacks the popular legitimacy to rule Tripoli. However, senior Russian officials, such as Alexei Yerkhov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, argue that Haftar cannot be ignored because he controls too large a part of Libya while the Tripoli government has lost legitimacy by aligning with Islamist militias ([Ramani, 2020](#)). More recently however, Russia has made efforts to work with Tripoli to reopen its embassy there, while an assiduous dialog now exists between Ankara and Haftar's sons (Interview 6).

If the US remains ambiguous towards the Libyan crisis while European powers continue to entertain conflicting agendas, Russia and Turkey may use the opportunity to marginalise Western powers through cooperation on a substantive peace settlement in Libya. The persistence of the Astana talks on Syria, despite continued strategic competition between Russia and Turkey, provides a model for this form of diplomatic cohabitation. Turkish officials welcomed the 8 January 2020 Putin–Erdogan ceasefire negotiations on Libya as a noteworthy illustration of Turkey's great-power status. Because a majority of Turks oppose Erdogan's deployment of forces to Libya and the Russian public's focus is on socioeconomic challenges at home, Erdogan and Putin could maintain pressure on the main Libyan protagonists to preserve the current *modus vivendi* (Soylu, 2020). Due to the dearth of genuine reconciliation initiatives amongst Libyan factions thus far, as well as a wide array of other transnational dynamics still affecting Libya, this Russo-Turkish entente may not be sufficient to ensure continued peace in Libya however.

In that regard, the greater Tripoli area has become significantly more tense and divided since June 2020. Foreign interferers—including Turkey, which is militarily implanted in that particular territory—cannot prevent conflicts from erupting in such populous urban settings. The war that Russia initiated in Ukraine in February 2022 has also had a noticeable effect on the transnational dynamics affecting Libya. Notably, it has rendered several NATO powers more likely to intervene against Russian forces in the North African country. Russia's war on Ukraine has made the environment more uncertain for its main Libyan partner, Haftar, who can no longer attempt large-scale offensives similar to his past campaigns without exposing his coalition to major risks, such as a Western-backed Libyan campaign aimed at seizing strategic territories from the field marshal. Indeed, if Haftar undertakes a direct armed attack in addition to the oil blockade he imposed in April–July 2022, Britain and Italy — with help from the United States — may support a Libyan counteroffensive against both his and Russia's brigades (Harchaoui and Lechner, 2022). In such a scenario, Turkey may work more closely together with its three fellow NATO members in their bid to weaken Russia's presence in Libya. The Russo-Turkish entente, therefore, should not be seen as a resilient peace process capable of preventing Libya from relapsing in war.

China's Prudent Strategy

Over the last two or three decades, China has tended to approach the African continent primarily and directly through sub-Saharan Africa, where it has built a large economic footprint. The same can be said of Algeria and Egypt. Because of this existing footprint as well as the size of its own economy, Beijing can afford to patiently strategise on Libya. In that regard, China's situation is notably different from that of Russia or Turkey, for whom Libya is a vital, urgently needed passageway into sub-Saharan Africa.

China has so far acquired a modest degree of influence in post-2011 Libya by prioritising economic penetration and low-key diplomacy ([Wehrey & Alkoutami, 2020](#)). Undergirding its "economic stakes first" approach is the conjunction of China's commercial ambitions on the one hand, and its profound reluctance towards military involvement on the other. While avoiding being too visibly associated with one particular Libyan faction, China has monitored the politics surrounding the Central Bank of Libya as well as North African nation's sovereign wealth fund, which, according to the valuation conducted in 2021, is worth about \$68 billion ([Zaptia, 2021a](#)). Access to the nation's significant financial resources is what enables Libyan decision-makers to award contracts to foreign, including Chinese, entities. As per mercantile logic, the Libyan faction with the greatest influence over the country's financial resources is poised to elicit Beijing's solicitude. Throughout its 2016-2021 tenure, the GNA enjoyed Beijing's official recognition: Chinese diplomats met with GNA officials nine times between 2016 and 2020. The most significant meeting occurred in mid-2018, when the GNA Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Taha Siala, attended a ministerial meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in China and met with State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The two signed a memorandum of understanding meant to bring China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Libya ([Chaziza, 2020](#)). Amid talk of Libya joining the BRI, the GNA welcomed Chinese businesses back to Libya. By 2019, bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to \$6.2 billion, primarily due to rebounding Libyan oil exports to China. For its part, the GNA sought Chinese engagement, especially in areas like upgrading and rebuilding of Libya's infrastructure—an essential long-term concern for Tripoli authorities.

Still, China's policy regarding Libya throughout 2016-2020 remained somewhat ambiguous, owing to three main reasons. Libya was at war during that time, which meant that not only was the victor still unknown but also that reconstruction could not commence. Further, the GNA never received the full support of the Central Bank of Libya, a political disagreement that hampered Tripoli's ability to deploy funds, sign contracts, and transfer capital to foreign partners, all of which are necessary for any viable interlocutor to Beijing. Finally, Russia—which China tends to follow when it comes to ideological preferences and geopolitical orientation in the MENA region—had not yet struck its *modus vivendi* arrangement with Turkey, a vital backer of Tripoli. In 2021, these parameters changed: Dbeibah, the prime minister of the GNU, received the firm political support of the governor of the Central Bank; moreover, the Russo-Turkish entente was now in place.

During the first nine months of its tenure, the Tripoli-based GNU enjoyed its status as sole government in Libya to launch numerous economic initiatives, including facing China. For instance, Prime Minister Dbeibah installed a new chief at the helm of the state-controlled telecom holding entity called Libyan Post Telecommunications & Information Technology Company (LPTIC). The latter then announced that it would give an important digitisation project to a Chinese group after rescinding a previous agreement with an Italian group. In parallel, U.S. telecom company Infinera, with support from the State Department, signed a 5G contract with Hatif, a company owned by the Libyan state ([Zaptia, 2021b](#)). These developments illustrate well the competition between China and Western nations when it comes to Libya's telecom and data market, especially in circumstances wherein Libya has only one government enjoying the backing of the Central Bank of Libya.

Yet, after December 2021's elections failed to materialise, the Central Bank of Libya changed its attitude towards the GNU, making its access to public funds more difficult. Dbeibah remained in office in 2022 but his legitimacy was diminished by the emergence of the GNS, the rival government designated by the HoR. As a result, diplomatic and business dealings with the Chinese became less frequent.

If and when one single Libyan government emerges, China will likely become more economically active again in Libya. Speaking to Beijing's propensity to adapt and display strong stamina in Libya, a Western diplomat interviewed for this report underscored Chinese companies' resilience in uncertain environments, as well as their willingness to have their workers operate in harsh conditions. The interviewee also noted that "the Chinese definitely know how to participate in [Libya's corruption and kickback] system" — illicit practices that Western companies are often required to stay away from (Interview 5).

Owing to the conflict's unpredictability, China has been cautious, avoiding entanglement in Libyan feuds and, instead, positioning itself to reap benefits regardless of the conflict's ultimate outcome. Crucial to this strategy is keeping channels open with both Tripoli authorities and the parallel authorities in the East. However, unlike Russia and the UAE, which have provided substantial military aid to the Haftar camp, China's direct relationship with the East is strictly diplomatic—although Chinese-made Wing Loong drones, purchased and piloted by the United Arab Emirates, were an important part of Haftar's various military campaigns (Interview 5). In 2016, China approved the announcement by the eastern-Libyan authorities of a Chinese-built Tobruk-Sudan railway project. Although the latter almost certainly will not be funded in the foreseeable future, China still lent its name to the project for diplomatic reasons, knowing that eastern Libya may, in the future, achieve financial autonomy from Tripoli.

China's neutrality and economic clout make it an attractive prospect for both Tripoli and the eastern faction. For now, it is unlikely that either side will push back on China's nonalignment policy in Libya. As signatories of a BRI Memorandum of Understanding in 2018, Beijing and the Tripoli-based GNA authorities laid the foundations of a future economic partnership. In parallel, China's CNPC and subsidiary oil corporations may engage with an increasingly autonomous East, which hosts a large portion of Libya's oil assets.

The short-term future will likely reveal if Washington is willing to allow Russia to remain entrenched in Libya and carry on expanding its role there. If the United States turns out to be permissive, China will likely infer that it, too, can pursue a more active agenda in Libya. In the view of one senior HoR policy maker, Beijing is well placed to act as a peacemaker in Libya, given its "equidistance vis-à-vis Libyan warring parties" (Interview 1) and the "credibility it enjoys in Libya" (ibid). Alternative scenarios exist, however, including one wherein war resumes in Libya. In such an eventuality, China will be unlikely to increase its visibility or activity. Moreover, should the political leaders in eastern Libya be able to establish their own hard-currency accounts, China would likely bolster its relationship with them while maintaining ties with Tripoli.

Perceptions of Non-Western Approaches to Peacemaking

Interviewees see the competing interests between foreign powers engaged in Libya as a challenge because they exacerbate existing tensions. There is also a highly polarised range of perceptions about these foreign actors. Every foreign state involved in Libya may appear as the most constructive peacemaker in the eyes of some interviewees—and as a deleterious interferer according to others. This divergence is a testament to the deeply fractured character of Libya's political landscape.

One senior politician, formerly with the eastern-based government, sees the UAE and Russia as having potential to be at the “forefront of actions aimed at re-establishing peace and stability in Libya” (Interview 1). However, he also points out that any future Russian peacebuilding role in Libya “hinges on the withdrawal of the Wagner army from the country”, something that, in his opinion, the Russian leadership should seriously consider (ibid). LNA military commanders praise the role of the UAE, which is perceived as a benevolent country that “has reached out to and tried to help the Libyan people” (Interview 2), and with a governance system — “a strong state, with a solid authority, a true vertical of power” (ibid) — that is very compatible with Libya's need to restore law and order. The Emirati economy, which has been able to diversify away from the traditional oil sector, is also seen as a model for Libya to aspire to (ibid). Finally, one interviewee argues that given that the UAE is a largely tribal society, “Abu Dhabi can and should mediate between Libya's tribes. They can also act as mediators between rival cities and rival armed groups. The Emirati can talk to the various actors” (ibid). Views of Turkey's role in Libya among LNA supporters are unsurprisingly negative. They see Ankara's “Islamist type governance model” as having a “destabilizing influence in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa region” (ibid). According to this view, letting Turkey influence Libya's diplomatic, political, or military affairs would be tantamount to allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to take control of Libya's institutions and the governance system (ibid). Under such a scenario, argues one interviewee, “me along with everybody else in the military are going to be in danger. Just look at what Erdogan did to his own armed forces after the failed coup of July 2016: he went ahead and threw a lot of military officers in jail” (ibid). Similar, if not worse, are LNA supporters' perception of Qatar, which is seen as a destabilising actor that is “actively against the emergence of a strong military in Libya” (Interview 1) and has instead supported terrorist organisations in cities like Benghazi (ibid). Although such criticism is hyperbolic, Doha has supported some hard-line groups in Libya between 2011 and 2016, including the armed group Benghazi Defense Brigade, which was formed by Libyan Islamist Ismail al-Sallabi in May 2016 thanks to Qatari money ([Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2017](#); [ICG, 2016](#)).

Supporters of the Tripoli government often hold diametrically opposing points of view. Among them, there is, for example, deep mistrust of the UAE, which is perceived as wanting to impose an authoritarian type of governance that concentrates power in the hands of one leader or small elite, without any truly democratic institutions (Interview, 3). According to one interviewee, through its malign influence, the UAE is poised to "destroy Libya's existing capabilities and assets, particularly oil ports and other hydrocarbon assets, as well as Libya's maritime transport" (ibid). He accuses the UAE of having committed serious crimes in Libya, "such as the July 2019 airstrike on the Tajura migrant centre or the January 2020 airstrike on the Hadhba military academy" (ibid), referring to the military-academy attack of January 2020, documented by the BBC (BBC, 2020). Like the UAE, Russia's intervention in Libya finds many critics among GNU supporters. In their view, Russia's aim in Libya is not to promote peace or help with state building, but rather to control Libya's gas and oil production to exert pressure on Europe. On the contrary, they consider Turkey and Qatar forces of peace that "do not seek to promote a governance model based on militarism" (Interview 3). Turkey is seen as having intervened in Libya mainly to secure its own economic interests, but they believe that a strategic relationship and cooperation with Turkey will help with reconstruction across all sectors of the economy, including energy, transport and infrastructure.

Among LNA supporters, views of China tend to be positive. According to one interviewee, Libyans "can and should cultivate diplomatic economic ties with China" (Interview 2). In this view, letting in more Chinese workers, who are renowned for their work ethic and cheap labour, would be a win-win for Chinese corporations investing in Libya and also for the Libyan people who would benefit from the quick delivery of well-executed projects, especially in the fields of engineering and construction (ibid). China's economic role in Algeria, including the deep-water port project in Cherchell, is given as an example of such a partnership. As a major world power, "that has had almost nothing to do with the Libyan conflict since 2011" (ibid), China is also perceived as a potential "compelling mediator", in contrast, for example, to Russia, which is seen, even among some LNA members, as taking sides in the conflict and as unable to act as an honest broker or peacemaker (ibid). However, China's image is often not positive in the eyes of Libyans supporting Tripoli. They are sceptical about the viability of any Chinese peacemaking role in Libya, due to what they perceive as a lack of effective peacemaking by China elsewhere, a lack of popular support in Libya, and opposition by Western countries, which "would be furious if China played any significant diplomatic role in Libya" (Interview 3).

One former Libyan minister is wary of the risks of “debt trap diplomacy” when dealing with China and adds that “a diplomatically assertive Beijing would put Libya in the crosshairs of global rivalries, which frankly we could do without at this stage. We Libyans must bear in mind that if China enters our country’s affairs through the door of reconstruction, it will inevitably enter all other fields, including politics, geostrategy and ideology” (Interview 4).

Even the Libyan interviewees with the most pronounced political bias regarding foreign meddlers expressed a potential willingness to allow those nations, with which they bitterly disagree, to play a greater economic role in Libya. A former minister, who condemned the role played by the UAE during the 2019-2020 war, noted that “the possible ascendancy of the UAE as a neutral mediator in Libyan politics and Libyan affairs necessitates a profound change in the Emirati government’s strategy and way of thinking towards Libya” (Interview 4). Stated differently, if such economic cooperation enables Libyans to rebuild their country and, while doing so, acquire new skills by interacting with foreign partners, many Libyans would be prepared to turn the page on the bellicose behaviour that foreign interferers demonstrated during the past decade. By raising the economic stakes through construction efforts across all Libyan provinces, this dynamic would incentivise various factions to adopt a less rigid, warlike attitude.

It is noteworthy that, at present, some major players in the Libyan conflict—such as the UAE—fulfil only a minor role in Libya’s ongoing economic reconstruction efforts. In July 2022, Abu Dhabi was instrumental in precipitating a change in the leadership of the National Oil Corporation, a key economic institution responsible for almost all of Libya’s income ([Elhennawy, 2022](#)). But it still remains to be seen whether the UAE will inject capital or send some of its talent in Libya. Separately, questions persist as to whether or not Egypt will contribute to Libya’s reconstruction. One senior Western diplomat underscored the great potential of Egyptian companies when it comes to participating in the recovery, noting that Libya’s eastern neighbour “has superb workers at a variety of different levels and sectors who were working in Libya before, including Egyptian Copts, who used to work safely in Libya before” (Interview 5). Cairo is deeply interested in increasing the number of Egyptian workers residing in Libya.

Conclusion

Foreign interference in Libya by Western and non-Western countries alike over the past decade has exacerbated the divisions and antagonisms within the country.

Senior Libyan figures interviewed for this paper have emphasised that, despite regional and great-power competition, there is still room for all foreign states engaged in Libya to play a positive role in the country's reconstruction and help create opportunities for economic growth. The concrete ability of foreign powers to mobilise non-military assets and expertise to assist Libya in rebuilding itself, as well as to help it manage its economy efficiently, is perceived as a natural platform through which novel forms of dialogue and new channels of communications should be cultivated. Libyan interviewees believe that such a new economy-centred approach could also be leveraged for political and mediation purposes. This is a meaningful finding because it points to potential avenues for reconciliation. Indeed, responses from the elites interviewed for this report highlight reconstruction as an area upon which foreign states that have been responsible for exacerbating Libya's crisis during the past decade might decide to concentrate their efforts. By doing so, they would acquire a more positive image in the eyes of Libyans.

However, there is a great deal of uncertainty about Libya's short-term future. At the time of writing, Libyans were not waging war against each other, but neither were they agreeing to an election or any other unification effort. Nor were they truly reconciling. Fault-lines have been shifting amid higher tensions, which points to more volatility ahead compared to the recent calm. In addition to the Libyans' own unwillingness to end their crisis in a durable manner, the activism of some external players may further reduce the probability of Libya's rival factions achieving de-escalation.

The year 2021 offered an approximate preview of what a less violent Libya could resemble: the GNU avoided war and attached great importance to economic revival and infrastructure reconstruction. But the dynamics on display during 2021 could not be sustained. There is a risk of relapsing into war, involving physical destruction, armed violence and a deterioration of Libya's already-fractured institutional landscape, including in the economic realm. In such a scenario, the "economic reconstruction" incentive will lose its potency among foreign meddlers while economic sabotage, political fait accompli and military coercion may become once again their primary tools of influence.

Another possible path for 2022 is one wherein Libya could manage to avoid further polarisation as well as a relapse into war. In that case, foreign states whose behaviour in Libya has thus far been either exceedingly aloof or too bellicose, may still embrace a more constructive, peacemaking role, which would further their economic interests while creating new dialogue opportunities vis-à-vis a wide array of Libyan interlocutors. For Libya to avoid conflict relapse, two necessary conditions must be fulfilled: (a) no foreign state involved in Libya should encourage or seek frontal clashes; (b) no meaningful Libyan group should do so, either.

Three types of phenomena may endanger the fragile equilibrium above. The current status quo may be deemed unsatisfactory in the view of Ankara or Moscow. Such an assessment would push one of the two Eurasian powers to deliberately upset the balance of power in Libya using force or economic sabotage. Moreover, the broader geopolitical context, such as the war in Ukraine, may also jeopardise the current restraint between Russia and NATO members, such as Turkey, Britain, or Italy, on the Libyan file. Finally, other players, whether Libyan or foreign, may choose to disrupt the precarious equilibrium that has prevailed since June 2020.

In all cases, international diplomats must not take the calm that characterised 2021 for granted. They should help maintain a balance on both a political and an economic level between the main sides, Libyan and foreign alike. Although rapid reconstruction cannot substitute for the solid promotion of transitional political and security frameworks, economic considerations are of paramount importance when it comes to consolidating Libyan peace in 2022 and beyond.

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