

SPOILER ALERT: HOW EUROPE CAN SAVE DIPLOMACY IN LIBYA

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SUMMARY

- Key European states need to make Libya a shared foreign policy priority, and to overcome their competing approaches to the country.
- Europeans must reinvigorate the UN political track and use it to reinforce a unified national structure rather than entrench competing administrations.
- They should focus on protecting Europe's core interests in Libya: sustainably ending the conflict, creating a reliable local partner, and preserving European influence.
- To make the UN process work, Europeans should take a more hands-on approach to blocking and isolating domestic and international spoilers, refocusing the political track on unifying objectives, and supporting security sector reform.
- Europeans should also provide stabilisation, technical, and diplomatic support to strengthen Libya's governance and accountability mechanisms, which are needed to ensure a new government can successfully hold elections in December 2021.

INTRODUCTION

On 23 October 2020, military delegations from Libya's two warring parties announced a formal ceasefire, officially ending a conflict that began on 4 April 2019. The event showcased the Jekyll and Hyde nature of the UN political process in the country. For the European, US, and UN diplomats who had worked hard behind the scenes since hostilities informally ended in June, this was a remarkable triumph. They had helped pull Libya back from the brink and demonstrated how sustained international political pressure on the combatants could lead to tangible progress towards peace. However, Libya's political elites and the states that have long intervened in support of the competing sides appeared, once again, to be using this lean peace process to prepare for war. This is a familiar game in Libya. And the current round of diplomacy bears an unsettling resemblance to the 2015 Skhirat Process, in which some of the same actors involved in today's UN political track tried to end an earlier iteration of the same war.

Many observers now fear that the current lull in the fighting is only a prelude to further conflict. The risk is that the UN process – led by a mission that is determined but lacks resources and is under external pressure – is prioritising the semblance of progress over a deal that addresses the main obstacles to lasting stability. UN efforts, which are prioritising drawing in the country's elites over working towards a comprehensive political framework, threaten to only deepen Libya's divisions.

Still, while the current diplomatic process is largely guided by the same group of actors behaving in much the same way as they did in 2015, this does not mean that it is doomed to failure. The current pressure on Libyan leaders – from both international actors fearing the consequences of further escalation and Libyan citizens who are weary of war, the political stalemate, and the loss of public services – has created a fleeting but real opportunity for substantive progress. The challenge confronting Libyans and external players is in ensuring that the desire for peace overcomes the all-or-nothing ambitions of the incumbent Libyan elite and their foreign backers. To achieve this, the UN needs to acknowledge the lessons of past failures by shaping a more unifying and substantive track, and Europeans need to pressure key spoilers and those vested in the success of the UN track to stop disrupting the diplomatic process.

Here, Europeans are well placed to support the beleaguered North African state as it tries to put its political transition back on track, especially given their central role in the Berlin Process, the German-led diplomatic initiative that unfolded last year in support of the UN's political efforts. To address the weaknesses of the current approach, Europe will need to invest considerably more political capital in

Libya. This could produce much-needed geopolitical dividends that protect key European interests in its increasingly fractious southern neighbourhood.

If they are to end the vicious cycle in Libya's transition and address the primary challenges of the current process, Europeans will need to finally act in a more strategic and assertive fashion. This will require the three European states that are most active in Libya – France, Germany, and Italy – to build a ministerial-level coalition around their shared strategic goals: ending the conflict, creating a reliable local partner, and sustaining European influence.

So far, the differences in these states' worldviews and long-term aspirations for Libya have led them to compete with one another – resulting in their marginalisation by more coherent and concerted interventions from actors such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Russia. To achieve their strategic goals in Libya, Europeans need to stop relying on others to do the heavy lifting – be they Libyan proxies or the beleaguered UN mission – and implement a European agenda. This means significantly increasing coordinated efforts to follow a UN road map refocused on strengthening Libya's national unity rather than continuing to deepen the divides between competing centres of power. And it means doing far more to defend this process against spoilers – namely, a Libyan political elite that is more interested in self-enrichment than political progress, and foreign states prioritising their geopolitical interest over Libyan stability.

The surprise resignation in December 2020 of the UN special envoy-designate to Libya, Nikolay Mladenov, should inject new urgency into this European push. His shock withdrawal could spark a crisis of UN authority in Libya despite a replacement being rushed in. If Europeans do not step in to prop up the UN process, address its shortcomings, and drive it forward, European interests will be swept aside as intervening states replace the initiative with bilateral horse-trading intended to further marginalise Europe. In a positive turn, the election of Joe Biden as US president may mean that the United States will become a more engaged partner willing to push in the same direction as Europe. But, given Europe's vulnerability to developments in Libya, this should be an issue on which Europeans stand up and take responsibility rather than wait for US leadership that may not materialise.

THE LIBYA-GO-ROUND

The October 2020 ceasefire agreement, subsequent security talks, and the Libyan Political Dialogue

Forum (LPDF) – which created a new road map to elections scheduled for December 2021 – are the product of months of diplomacy by the UN, European countries, and the US. The agreement was designed to avert a showdown between Turkey, Egypt, and Russia that seemed likely to follow the failed 14-month assault on Tripoli by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). That offensive collapsed in spectacular fashion last June, following a Turkish-orchestrated counterattack by forces aligned with Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA).

The nature of Haftar’s defeat, in which he lost his command and control capability as his forces scattered, stunned the international alliance that backed him – especially given his self-appointed role as the arbiter of political and military affairs in the east and, increasingly, the rest of the country.

In support of Haftar, Russian jets deployed to the central Libyan city of Sirte, 450km east of Tripoli. This allowed Haftar’s forces to regroup there, while Russian mercenaries secured oil installations across the country. Nonetheless, his military collapse has transformed the dynamics of the conflict. Haftar’s rise formed part of a carefully calibrated project initiated by Abu Dhabi and Cairo in 2013 to install a Libyan version of Egypt’s general-turned-president, Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. As the strongman project gathered pace, it gained further international support – most notably from France and Russia.

But Haftar’s dramatic collapse has forced his backers to shift their positions. Rather than seeking total victory, they now share an interest in maintaining a Libyan opposition that divides the country, both to protect their perceived interests and to highlight the domestic rather than international drivers of the conflict – thereby absolving them of responsibility for the crisis. They have taken several different approaches to achieve this end.

Seeking to work around a discredited Haftar, Egypt has encouraged the emergence of Aguileh Saleh – the speaker of Libya’s House of Representatives – as the political head of eastern Libya. As part of this, Cairo passed in July 2020 legislation to permit the deployment of Egyptian troops in Libya, in a bid to strengthen the position of Saleh, and the Cyrenaican tribes who back him, relative to Haftar and the GNA.

Meanwhile, Russia has pivoted to cultivating former Qaddafi-era elites, while leveraging its influence over the LAAF to control key military and oil installations. Russia also aims to replace the UN process with a bilateral diplomatic track with Turkey that could shut out Europe and the US, much as it did in Syria.

Only the UAE, with some support from France, appears to be continuing to bank on a Haftar revival

as the best hope of countering growing Turkish influence in Libya. Abu Dhabi and Paris both view Ankara as their key strategic rival and ending Turkish influence in Libya as their key strategic goal. Although he has lost the support of some tribes, Haftar retains the backing of a core of former army personnel, well-equipped brigades headed by his sons and Salafist militias. The UAE seems to hope that, if it supports this combined force with enough weapons and foreign mercenaries, Haftar will regain his political relevance.

The Turkish-delivered victory over Haftar has also shaken up the dynamics of western Libya, whose power structures are fracturing in a similar fashion to those in the east. Exploiting the distraction created by the war against Haftar, GNA President Fayeze al-Sarraj sought to build up his political base by appointing close confidants to key positions and sacking those who challenged his decisions. For their part, Turkey's main partners in the GNA, Defence Minister Salah el-din al-Namroush and Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, are trying to build up formal security services as a new power base. Meanwhile, Tripoli's militia cartels are fighting to maintain control of state resources; revolutionary groups continue to demand retribution for Haftar's war crimes; and the president of the High State Council, Khaled al-Mishri, is working to secure his own role.

But Sarraj's position is weakening – as seen when he tried and failed to fire Bashagha to distract from the confused and violent response to protests by Tripoli-based militias last August. Sarraj responded to the mounting pressure he was under by disingenuously offering to resign if a revived UN political process created a legitimate new government. But, while this bought him some breathing room, it exacerbated internal divisions. Saleh and Mishri, worried that a new political agreement might displace them, quickly began horse-trading in a bid to control financial institutions and state-owned companies – which essentially hold the keys to state funds.

Russia has since brokered a deal between Haftar and Ahmed Maitiq, deputy prime minister of the GNA, to end Haftar's oil embargo – which he imposed in January 2020 to demonstrate his supremacy over the GNA, in the build-up to the Berlin Conference that month. No one else was party to the deal or even agreed that Haftar and Maitiq had the authority to reach the wide-ranging agreement – which sought to lift restrictions on eastern Libyan banks, allowing them to raise new debt and create a new mechanism to govern oil-revenue spending. But the desperate need for funding stifled objections. Although Libya's oil exports have resumed, there is no binding agreement on how to divide the revenues from them. Moscow's role in paving the way to further economic agreements between eastern and western Libya displayed its growing influence in the country, as did the end of the oil embargo. But these agreements are only deepening the divide between Tripoli and the east, essentially forcing Tripoli to take on debts accrued by Haftar in attacking the capital without receiving any

political concession in exchange.

The emergence of a new political track

This fragmentation across all lines of the conflict, the possibility of a new war around Sirte (which could drag Turkey and Egypt into a direct confrontation with each other), and Russian entrenchment in Libya have had one positive effect: they have re-energised a moribund diplomatic process, reinvigorating the UN-led track.

The renewed focus on the UN process was also boosted by the sudden emergence of nationwide protests. In late August, Libyans took to the streets across the country – on both sides of the east-west divide – to express their frustration with state failure and the corrupt political elite.

The resulting UN track has been based around a multilayered process that, in principle, seeks to build a unified political and security establishment, while also demilitarising Sirte to reduce the risk of international conflict. The process has sought to co-opt influential external states such as Turkey and Egypt, and to isolate those that depend on conflict to strengthen their position, such as Russia. (The latter outcome has particular appeal for the US, which has recently become more engaged with the process.)

This combination of local and international pressure created a sense among Libya's political elite that a new settlement was coming, forcing them and their international backers to consider how to engage with the new negotiating framework. The Joint Military Commission (JMC), a UN-created body that brings together five officers each from the GNA's military apparatus and the LAAF, is the initial vehicle for negotiations on security issues. The commission forged the October 2020 ceasefire agreement by focusing on areas in which there was room for a consensus – such as high-level principles – before initiating confidence-building exercises and exploring steps to demilitarise Sirte.

A frail process

While the ceasefire agreement was welcome, it has key weaknesses that have been clear from the outset. Most importantly, there is considerable doubt about the parties' commitment to the agreement. Both Haftar and Russia appear to be using the JMC as cover to strengthen their positions. For his part, Haftar seems uninterested in demilitarisation, given that ending the conflict would mean giving up his ambition to rule. Indeed, Libyans across the political spectrum do not trust him to abide

by any settlement. Since the signing of the ceasefire agreement, an influx of mercenaries and Salafist militias has reinforced his defensive positions around Sirte, while he has also sought to strengthen his position in southern Libya.

At the same time, Russian mercenaries that control Sirte's Ghardabiya airport prevented the GNA delegation from landing there to participate in the JMC meeting. This was widely seen as a power play by Russia, and an indication that the country would continue to prioritise its own interests without paying heed to Libyans or any political process – as it has at other strategically important sites, such as Sirte's naval port and Jufra's military airbase.

In this context, the ceasefire agreement's language on the primacy of Libyan sovereignty appears to be hollow, at best. The agreement was also damaged by its unrealistic headline pledges to relocate all local forces away from the frontlines and to send all foreign forces back home within three months.

These problems have led to a renewed focus on the political track as a means of establishing a broader vision that political, security, and international actors can buy into – something that is particularly important given that there are some indications that Turkey and Egypt, at least, want to prevent further escalation. Following the Sirte ceasefire, the UN convened the LPDF as a lightweight version of the National Conference format, which aimed to forge a Libyan consensus on the way forward but which Haftar scuppered last year by attacking Tripoli days before the conference was due to start. The LPDF sought to simultaneously secure the support of the Libyan political elite and wider popular legitimacy, countering the perception that Libya's future was being shaped by corrupt political horse-trading behind closed doors.

The LPDF met on 9 November, convening a mixture of representatives of the elite, low-level politicians, and members of civil society. The process was intended to secure backing for a new road map and create a unified executive that would ratify a new constitution and hold elections. This executive authority would be made up of two institutions – a Presidency Council that had representation from each of Libya's three regions, and a unity government whose prime minister would be appointed by the LPDF.

But the UN's apparent desperation for a deal contributed to a chaotic process over which it quickly lost control. As the road map's objectives lacked substance, the political elite quickly felt emboldened to push for greater control, using their representatives to gum up the process through bribery and intimidation. Eventually, a battle over the internal voting mechanism for filling the top political positions caused the process to break down. On 13 January – more than two months after the opening

of the LPDF, and following the failure of several online meetings intended to end this dispute – the UN convened a slimmed-down, 15-member advisory committee in Geneva. The hope was that this could finally overcome this unexpected obstacle, allowing the LPDF to resume the highly controversial job of appointing figures to the top positions.

Despite the UN's triumphal early announcements about securing a consensus on the road map and the election schedule, the process teeters on the brink of collapse or, worse still, irrelevance. Much as with the JMC, an agreement on high-level principles belies a lack of operational detail or a consensus on substantive issues around sharing power, stabilising the country, and holding free and fair elections. The intense difficulties in obtaining an agreement on the internal voting mechanism laid bare the flaws of the process and sapped it of momentum and local credibility.

The underwhelming reality of the LPDF has made many Libyans even more cynical about the political process. This sentiment was exacerbated by the dysfunction of the forum, including the credible allegations of bribery in the votes on presidential and prime ministerial candidates – allegations that have triggered a formal investigation. Russian and Emirati disinformation networks have fed further discord, ramping up their media campaigns to discredit the talks, its participants, and the UN's work more generally.

Overall, the current situation is strongly reminiscent of the aftermath of the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in 2015. Back then, under pressure to secure a deal between Libya's warring factions, the UN finalised a deal that was based on the lowest common denominator and that did nothing but set the stage for Libya's corrupt elite to engage in ruthless competition with one another for control of state resources. The LPA's failure to clearly outline a viable power-sharing model or clarify the responsibilities of different offices disincentivised factions from working together. It encouraged them to try to monopolise power, resulting in widespread acrimony, boycotts, and governmental collapse.

In 2015 both the UN and Libyan parties were unwilling to resolve the core issue – Libya's unity – and instead sought to create new institutions to ensure that everyone retained a piece of the pie. This only deepened the division between east and west, exacerbating the country's core problems. The lack of a clear mandate for the government or any accountability mechanisms meant that those in power only looted the state while public services atrophied. Armed groups and their international backers were able to ignore the LPA, imposing their own reality on Saleh's parliament in the east and Sarraj's GNA in the west.

Today, there is a risk that history will repeat itself as everyone jostles for power rather than focusing on the structural problems driving ongoing division and conflict. Saleh approached the LPDF under the assumption that he was entitled to become president as payment for his role in marginalising Haftar (who, nonetheless, still seeks power). In response to the LPDF's failure to immediately help him fulfil his ambitions, he has since begun a rapprochement with the field marshal. Meanwhile, two Misratans – the Turkish-backed Bashagha and the Russian-backed Maitiq – are engaged in a political melee for the office of prime minister. As such, the leadership of the two institutions of what was intended to be a unifying executive authority was cleanly divided between east and west from the start. This has only heightened the risk that the country will become more divided – as has Saleh's widely acknowledged intentions to relocate the seat of the presidency to eastern Libya.

The creation of two executive institutions that are divided and that have an ambiguous delineation of responsibilities will only further complicate Libya's messy landscape. And these divides will create new avenues through which external actors can gain further influence. Here, powerful foreign states are doing little to indicate a true commitment to the political process. Just as Russia and the UAE have used the current pause in fighting to cement their positions, so Turkey and Qatar have signed new military agreements with the GNA in Tripoli. Egypt is pushing to host its own security and diplomatic meetings in an attempt to cannibalise the process. Ultimately, little effort seems to have been made by the UN, the US, or European states to secure pronounced commitments to the diplomatic process from these key external actors.

Many hoped that the introduction of Mladenov as special envoy could turn the corner and extract the necessary agreements on a lasting compromise: he had long regional experience and a mandate more empowering than that of the former special representative of the UN secretary-general. Alas – following a diplomatic campaign to accuse him of being too close to the UAE and Egypt, and efforts to slander him across Libyan media networks – he resigned from the position on 22 December. Although UN Secretary-General António Guterres quickly moved to nominate a career diplomat, Jan Kubis, to try to steady the ship, the UN's authority in Libya has been severely undermined at a critical juncture and those who spoil the process with impunity have been emboldened.

A LIBYAN KEY TO A GEOPOLITICAL EUROPE

The increasingly apparent vulnerabilities of the UN track are likely to cause consternation among Europeans – and not just because of the considerable support it has received from Germany, Italy,

and the EU. Given the many similarities between the current situation and that in 2015, there is little to inspire confidence that Libya will escape the same devastating trends this time around. In the last five years, the conflict in the country has sparked a migration crisis, incubated terrorists, and opened the door for some of Europe's biggest strategic rivals – Russia, Turkey, and the UAE – to expand their influence on its doorstep. Libya's crisis destabilises Tunisia (the region's only democracy); fuels conflict in the already-insecure Sahel region; and inflames inter-state hostility in the eastern Mediterranean.

As Europeans seek to strengthen their strategic autonomy amid an ever more competitive global order, the manner in which they operate in Libya is of great interest to friend and foe alike.

There is a very real possibility that Russia will use Libya as a platform to directly undermine European security. Russia's autonomy in Libya – which stems from the fact that Haftar needs Moscow far more than it needs him – has allowed it to lay claim to Sirte's port, airport, and a major military airbase in Jufra. The US Africa Command has already raised the alarm over the potential impact of an embedded Russian presence in this strategically important location. If Russia installs anti-access/area denial air-defence systems at Jura or Sirte, it could directly target aircraft accessing NATO's Sicily airbase. Moreover, if Russia establishes a naval base in Sirte, this would extend its reach in the Mediterranean.

For its part, Turkey has shown just how powerful migration can be as a source of leverage over Europe. And the country is already deploying this in Libya. Last May, it leaned on Malta to withdraw its support for the EU's Operation Irini – a naval mission that is designed to prevent arms flows to Libya, and that Ankara regards as unfairly focused on its role. Turkey is now encouraging its western Libyan partners to use the migration issue to build special relationships with Malta and Italy, the European states most concerned about the topic in relation to Libya.

Despite having these significant interests in Libya, Europe has been progressively marginalised in the country in recent years. Key European capitals have worked at cross purposes in the unilateral pursuit of short-term goals, leaving them unable to address the core drivers of Libya's war. In fact, some of them have reinforced the trends that have left Europeans stranded.

There is no more glaring example of this than French policy. Since 2014, France has primarily allowed its defence concerns to guide its approach to Libya – while working in alignment with its preferred regional partner, the UAE, largely at the expense of European partnerships. This dynamic began with a French counter-terrorism mission in Libya that involved the deployment of military assistance and

special forces teams to aid Haftar in his war in Benghazi, at a time when Italy, the United Kingdom, and the US supported a coalition of western Libyan forces under the GNA that sought to drive the Islamic State group out of Sirte. When the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for LAAF Major Mahmoud al-Werfalli on charges of war crimes in August 2017, France led the diplomatic push for the LAAF to pursue its own investigation, fatally undermining international accountability efforts.

In 2018, when the new special representative of the UN secretary-general, Ghassan Salamé, tried to institute a ‘big-tent’ approach to Libyan diplomacy, the Élysée Palace directly intervened by hosting a conference at La Celle-Saint-Cloud that reduced the big tent to a bilateral process between Sarraj and Haftar. This track was progressively skewed in Haftar’s favour. Even when Haftar scuttled that same process by attacking Tripoli, France remained the odd one out of the Western coalition, providing diplomatic cover for the Emirati proxy’s devastating actions. GNA forces later discovered French weapons in LAAF weapons caches. The result of this policy has been a devastated and destabilised Libya, and a war that facilitated the entrenchment of two of France’s key rivals in the country, Turkey and Russia.

Italy’s policy in Libya has had a similar dynamic, with a core policy goal focused on maintaining strong ties with Tripoli to reduce migration and retain privileged access to key Libyan political and commercial actors, even when doing so damaged multilateral initiatives. This was exemplified by the ‘Minniti doctrine’ – named after Italy’s then minister of interior, who arranged financial deals with Libyan militias to detain would-be migrants to Europe. The UN Panel of Experts stated that this doctrine fomented instability and violence in north-western Libya, while also undermining the GNA’s hopes of controlling its security sector. In the aftermath of Haftar’s offensive on Tripoli, Italy has focused on rebuilding a strong relationship with the GNA. This began with assisting de-mining efforts in Tripoli’s suburbs, before extending to business delegations. And Italy recently shielded western Libyans from potential EU sanctions to preserve key relationships (while France tried to do the same for eastern Libyans), collectively blunting the EU’s ability to deploy sanctions as a coercive tool to help the UN process. It was an event that encapsulated how unilateral policies focused on ring-fencing tactical interests have left Europeans ineffectual at a strategic level.

Ultimately, Europe’s competing policies on Libya have resulted in its mismanagement of the conflict, contributed to an acute crisis in its neighbourhood, and created an image of European incoherence and weakness.

A EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR LIBYA

If Europeans want to end the damaging trends in the Libyan conflict rather than merely temper their worst effects, they need to act more strategically. This means identifying key European aims in Libya – namely, ending the conflict, protecting Europe’s influence, and creating a reliable partner with whom it can work on migratory, security, energy, and economic issues.

These goals will only be achievable if France, Italy, and other engaged actors – such as Germany – work in concert, especially given that the EU requires unanimity to deploy its most powerful foreign policy tools. Designing and maintaining a coherent strategy that can accomplish these goals will require support from the top of European governments and a ministerial-level working coalition that can implement a shared policy while also accommodating key national interests. The Berlin Process demonstrated its value in 2020 by helping prevent a free fall into a nationwide conflict following the collapse of Haftar’s offensive on Tripoli. And both France and Italy have, at times, used their political relationships to broker deals or obtain concessions from key actors. But Europe will have to combine such efforts into a common push if it is to achieve its core strategic goals in Libya.

Towards this end, Europeans should now take a more hands-on approach to strengthening the UN process by addressing its core deficiencies and defending it from domestic and foreign spoilers. Despite the weakness of the current UN process, it still offers the best way forward and must be protected, especially given that its full collapse would result in the emergence of other processes that would further marginalise Europe. Moreover, the current ceasefire – combined with internal protests against the political elite, the decline in Haftar’s stature, and widespread fears of a new war – provides the best opportunity in five years for progress.

This dynamic may now be strengthened by the possibility of increased US support for diplomacy and a UN-led multilateral process. Biden’s election as president and bipartisan congressional support for the Libya Stabilisation Act – which created a legal framework for supporting diplomacy on Libya – suggest that the US could now provide valuable backing to a reinvented UN track.

On this basis, Europeans need to finally agree on a clear and shared strategic endgame for their Libya policy. France and Italy should abandon their support for one side or another and align on a more inclusive and comprehensive UN-led approach that focuses on the bigger picture. This effort should centre on shepherding Libya towards a permanent constitution, elections, and a new government. It

should do so by corralling competing parties into a unified political track and protecting the process from outside spoilers. If Europeans are to come together to address this crisis, they will first need to bargain with one another on certain issues – particularly that of Turkey. Berlin will likely be the broker in this. It should seek to convince Paris that a European alliance that accepts the need for a diplomatic accommodation with Ankara is the smartest way to contain Turkish influence in Libya. As part of this, Berlin should raise the prospect of a harder German line on Turkey if Ankara does not play a constructive role. For France to become more ‘German’ on Libya, Germany may need to become more ‘French’ in other aspects of its policy on Turkey. Berlin will also need to convince Rome that a European alliance will not undermine Italian influence in Tripoli.

If they can achieve such unity, EU actors should quickly embrace an approach based on the following areas.

1. Countering international spoilers

Europeans need to undertake significant diplomatic work to bring in states that seem open to a settlement – such as Turkey and Egypt – and to defend the political process from the inevitable onslaught from a maximalist UAE and a highly cynical Russia. Without support from key external states that sponsor actors in Libya, no political process will truly bear fruit. Yet, at the moment, various foreign powers are hardening the military positions – and spoiling capacity – of key local actors even as the political process unfolds.

An effective European strategy will have to blend the German approach of crafting a mutually acceptable multilateral agreement – to bind all relevant states into a rules-based system – with the French and Italian impulse for more assertive *realpolitik*. It will need to involve compromises that give Turkey and Egypt a stake in the deal and protect their core security and economic interests – by, for example, formalising their roles in reconstruction and security sector reform. The strategy should also involve the threat of EU sanctions if these countries continue arms transfers to Libya. Europe could also use broader relationships with these states to create incentives and disincentives on trade and energy.

Alongside this, Europe will need to implement special measures to discourage Russia and the UAE from spoiling the process. Given that the UAE carefully curates its image in the West, Europeans should use EU and UN forums to condemn the country’s alleged war crimes in Libya, including the press-ganging of Sudanese men into military deployments and weapons deliveries in violation of the

UN Security Council arms embargo. The EU should also highlight how, according to the Pentagon, the UAE is funding Russian deployments in Libya that pose a strategic threat to Europe. And EU member states should condition any future arms sales on the curtailment of this funding.

A collective push by France, Germany, and Italy – in line with the efforts of several US senators to block the sale of F-35s and other military equipment to the UAE for the same reason – could make Abu Dhabi's interference in Libya too politically expensive for it to sustain. Ending the UAE's military support for Haftar, along with its financing of Russian mercenaries, would significantly reduce his capacity to act as a spoiler. Meanwhile, a focus on decentralising state funding and service provision, and on building a unified Libyan military, could weaken Russian influence by undermining Haftar and addressing the grievances of Libyan groups that Moscow is currently seeking to cultivate.

This combined approach would allow European states to draw on the EU's geopolitical power and its bilateral relationships with key intervening states. European states should make clear that developments in Libya affect core European interests and that third countries' efforts to destabilise the situation there would damage bilateral ties.

As part of this international approach, Europeans should seek a UNSC resolution in support of the ceasefire agreement and the LPDF road map. Despite the clear weaknesses of the current approach that Europeans need to help address, a UNSC resolution would increase pressure on international spoilers, including by providing a legal basis for important tasks such as the removal of foreign mercenaries. Here it will be critical to monitor violations of UNSC resolutions – with EU countries working alongside like-minded states, such as the US and the UK, and being willing to sanction individuals or companies that disrupt the political process.

2. Reinforcing national unity in the political track

The key vulnerability of the UN process is its reinforcement of Libya's de facto partition. For Libyan politicians, retreating to parallel institutions that they exclusively control and blaming their rivals for the lack of effective governance is easier than working towards a shared system. For the international parties to the conflict, divided institutions provide an array of opportunities to increase their influence. This approach to governance also polarises Libyan society, creating conflict and social dysfunction. Overall, Libya's de facto partition continues to be the single largest structural obstacle to efforts to reinforce a stabilising political process. Any political agreement that does not resolve this

problem will fail.

Europe should prioritise efforts to end this polarisation. In the short term, it should press UNSMIL to enhance the LPDF road map to more comprehensively reinforce Libya's unity, mandating the closure of parallel institutions and working to prevent the two parts of the executive from independently governing each half of the country. Simply put, Europeans should discourage the UN from focusing on the who instead of the how. This requires a greater focus on developing the mandate and governance system of the new authority, cleanly dividing up responsibilities within this system, and forcing rivals to work together – instead of creating competing executives to secure the backing of rival groups, an approach that does too little to incentivise these elites to work together.

The reality of Libyan politics is that elites feed off one another to maintain a stagnant environment that is as lucrative for them as it is debilitating for everyone else. By pressing the UN to develop a unifying executive, Europe will increase its chances of success and will also make it easier to punish attempts to spoil the process. Europe should link this effort to the mechanism for distributing oil revenue, tying access to state funds to participation in the unified government and progress on the road map.

As a subsequent step, the EU should only recognise Libyan institutions that are affiliated with the legitimate national authorities resulting from the UN process, which would limit the potential to retain a parallel army, bank, and oil corporation. Existing European Council decisions and UNSC resolutions could act as a foundation for sanctioning entities such as the eastern National Oil Company if it continued to unilaterally trade or subvert Libya's energy exports. This approach would help Europe incentivise the unification of competing institutions. It would likely meet with opposition from key stakeholders on the ground. But Europe should clearly outline the benefits of European political legitimisation, stabilisation support, and technical expertise that would accompany the successful adoption of a national project.

3. Increased engagement on the ground

A key component of this unifying approach will be working to replace the two separate military institutions – which are now being cannibalised by Turkey and Qatar on one side, and Egypt, Russia, and the UAE on the other – into a single body that actually provides security (rather than acting as a political vehicle). Unifying the security sector is a necessary step towards ending the war, reducing Haftar's spoiling capacity, and diluting Russian influence. This will be a difficult, long-term project.

And it will require the establishment of a new government or political authority, as well as engagement from actors such as the Europeans.

To help the JMC build up a national security institution, demilitarise Sirte, and side-line militias and foreign forces, Europeans should be willing to play the role of guarantors. This will necessitate the creation of a new body given that Operation Irini has a limited mandate and is perceived as biased by western Libyans; NATO is viewed with suspicion by Libyans who are wary of Turkey; and the EU Border Assistance Mission to Libya is incapable of performing the task. This new body could be a joint Italian-French-German vehicle – with Italy using its ties in western Libya, France building on its relationships with eastern military groups, and Germany harnessing its status as a widely respected neutral country to gain the backing of various Libyan actors and intervening states.

A European technical mission could help design demilitarisation protocols, build a shared security institution, integrate or demobilise militias, and monitor the implementation of reforms. This would give the JMC's work wider resonance on Libya's pressing security issues and improve its chances of success. The mission could also help Libyans negotiate with Ankara and Cairo over Turkish and Egyptian involvement in Libya, offering them official roles in building elements of the unified institution – which could preserve the influence and security requirements of both – in exchange for constructive engagement. This process would also allow Europeans to build relations with the bodies they will need to work closely with to manage migration and counter-terrorism operations in the future.

Europeans should simultaneously widen and deepen their stabilisation and governance assistance on the ground. This will help increase popular support for the new political track. Through the Stabilisation Facility for Libya, Europeans should launch development projects to repair key infrastructure. European missions could develop direct partnerships with actors such as the national electric and oil companies to enhance Libya's energy exports and electricity supply, which is a source of widespread popular discontent.

As part of their support for the new unity government, Europeans should help implement key aspects of the road map. For instance, they could provide technical assistance to municipalities that take on greater responsibility for the provision of services. Improved, decentralised public services would ensure that the Libyan public shared in the benefits of – and, therefore, supported – the political track. Additionally, Europeans could increase their support for the electoral commission, including by expanding civic education campaigns and working to ensure fair and transparent election processes. By working alongside Libyan civil society organisations, Europeans can help monitor the

government's activities. This could involve support for local and international accountability mechanisms. Such support would help buttress an important but often overlooked part of the road map: a transitional justice and reconciliation programme. Here, Europeans should use financial sanctions and travel bans to coerce individual actors into behaving more constructively.

CONCLUSION

There is a fleeting opportunity to finally end Libya's downward spiral. If the current political track fails and Libya returns to war, the country will become more unstable and intervening states will only increase their presence there – to the detriment of European interests.

The reality is that it is long past time for Europeans to stop working at cross purposes and to recognise their shared interest in stabilising Libya. Europeans can achieve this by directly addressing the shortcomings of the UN process and working to protect it from foreign and domestic spoilers. This approach will require a major effort by a powerful European coalition. But the potential dividends of the investment – a stable Libya, a bulwark against strategic rivals in North Africa, and a boost to Europe's geopolitical credentials – should make it a no-brainer.

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