Russia in Libya: From Authoritarian Stability to Consensus Settlement

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Abstract: With the conflict in Libya proving to be hard to resolve through U.N. mediation, outside powers, including Russia, see an opportunity to facilitate the settlement of the crisis and serve their own interests by doing so. Libya has historically been one of Russia’s staunchest allies in the MENA region, leading to strong ties across domains from energy to the military that have largely persevered despite the ongoing war. Seeing an opportunity to facilitate the resolution of the conflict, Moscow hopes to achieve a number of goals that include boosting its arms trade portfolio in North Africa, grabbing lucrative energy and construction contracts as well as checking NATO’s expanding influence in the Mediterranean. However, despite its traditional focus on the notion of authoritarian stability in the Middle East, Russia has made a notable departure from this policy in Libya by hedging its bets across the political spectrum. Unlike Syria, where Russia is constrained in its modus operandi, it enjoys more leeway to act in Libya, which is why Khalifa Haftar, commonly described as Vladimir Putin’s point-man in Libya, is seen by Moscow as only one of the elements necessary for the resolution of this crisis.

The debate over Russia’s return to the Middle East and goals that Moscow is pursuing in the region has intensified as the country has begun indicating its interest in playing an active role in the resolution of the Libyan crisis. With its focus previously being exclusively on Syria, the Russian foreign policy agenda towards the region seemed highly securitized to observers, with the military and security circles playing the leading role. Despite the wide range of goals that Moscow pursues in Syria, the distinct focus on security issues has raised fears that Russia is seeking a military foothold in the Middle East. In this context, Russia’s overtures to Libya, which began in 2016 and were accompanied by rumors of illicit arms supplies to General Haftar, have been interpreted as a step towards solidifying the country’s military presence in the region. However, after more than a year of active involvement in Libya, Russia’s role can hardly be described as a military intervention; rather, it has employed a balanced mix of muscle flexing and diplomacy.

It was largely under the influence of the Libyan coup that Russia’s policy towards the MENA region was finally defined. The country’s recent foreign policy strategy reflects the importance of the region for the first time and clearly states that its instability directly affects Russia. The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi deeply influenced policymakers in the Kremlin, who interpreted the chain of successful Arab Spring protests as an externally-orchestrated campaign that would eventually target Russia. In this context, Libya served as a trigger that motivated Moscow to seek a stronger influence in the region and to a large extent predetermined its military involvement in the Syrian crisis.
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What has Russia got to Lose in Libya?
The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya left Russia bereft of one of the strongest allies that it had ever had in the region. For more than four decades, Tripoli was one of the key channels that allowed the Soviet Union and later Russia to project influence both into the Middle East and Africa, as well as the wider Muslim world. This arrangement between the two countries was inextricably linked with Muammar Gaddafi’s rise to power in 1969. The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize his regime when he overthrew King Idris I. A skillful juggling of political ideas allowed Gaddafi to become a pole of influence in between the U.S. and USSR without acceding to either of the camps. However, the accession to power in Egypt of the pro-American Anwar al-Sadat and his rapprochement with Israel prompted Gaddafi to accept the socialist path and, as a consequence, establish closer relations with the Soviet Union. It was the growing influence of the United States in the Middle East that served as an impulse for Gaddafi to draw closer to Moscow and seek protection from the USSR, primarily by relying heavily on Soviet military assistance.

The Soviet-Libyan relationship was focused on aspects of military cooperation, simply because the USSR considered it to be the most effective tool for establishing and maintaining strong alliances. The first arms deal between the two was signed in 1974, and today the Libyan army almost entirely relies on Soviet weaponry. For 20 years from 1973 to 1992, a total of around 11,000 Soviet troops were stationed in Libya as military advisers to the government of Muammar Gaddafi, and in some cases they directly participated in the fighting alongside the Libyan army. Since up to 80 percent of Libyan cadres did not have the necessary experience, many of them, including the top military leadership, were trained in the USSR. Russia in many respects repeated the Soviet experience of providing training and upgrading the skills of the Libyan military from 2004 until the revolution of 2011.

Libya used to be one of the few countries on the Russian portfolio of arms importers that, due to its abundant oil reserves, was able to pay hard cash for Russian weapons. In 2008, Moscow cancelled $4.5 billion of Libyan debt to the Soviet Union in exchange for signing a number of arms deals that by 2011 were estimated at being worth between $5 –10 billion. These deals were suspended under the U.N. arms embargo after Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow, and Moscow has yet to see the country deliver on these contracts. Russia strongly believes that regardless of the political leaning of the future government in Tripoli, Libya will keep coming back to Moscow to purchase new arms and upgrade old ones due to its historic reliance on Soviet weaponry. In this context, what is important for the Russian government is to make sure that there is a stable government in the first place, and secondly that this government will prioritize defense expenses over other things.

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Where Russia does see its interests threatened in Libya is the lucrative economic sector. As a result of Haftar’s Libyan National Army gains,
Oil production has surged in the country from 300,000 barrels per day in September 2016 to over 700,000 barrels per day in January 2017, and production is projected to reach 1 million barrels a day later this year. Russia’s oil giant Rosneft signed an investment and crude purchasing agreement with Libya’s National Oil Corporation (NOC) in February 2017, indicating a revival of Russian interest in doing business in the country despite the ongoing crisis. Rosneft is only one of many companies that are making steps to return to the country, but it has achieved remarkable success in doing so. Khalifa Haftar, who now controls the bulk of Libya’s oil resources, facilitated Rosneft’s return to the country himself. Without high-profile support like this, Russian business would struggle to get priority treatment in Libya, since it cannot match the scope of investment and technology that its Western counterparts can provide as a buy-in. Building its relationship with its Libyan counterparts, the Russian government is prioritizing the resumption of projects to make up for the lost profits on deals once signed with the Gaddafi government ($150 million in construction, up to $3.5 billion in the oil and gas industry) and to provide financial returns in the long run.

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Russia’s proactive role in Libya should be seen in the context of a wider presence in the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Russia’s participation in the Syrian conflict and decision to turn the Soviet-era Tartus facility into a fully-functional naval base as well as increase investment in Russia’s Black Sea fleet, which is based in Crimea, indicates Russia’s expanding ambitions in the region. The USSR’s attempts to gain a foothold in the Mediterranean saw the creation of the 5th Mediterranean squadron of warships, but ultimately failed in 1992 with its disbandment due to a lack of permanent naval bases as well as effective resupply facilities in the region. In 2013 the Russian government made a decision to reassemble the squadron to match NATO’s expanding capabilities in the region. Syria’s Tartus, however, is not enough to transform the Russian Navy into a potent force in the Mediterranean. In order to maintain operational flexibility in the region, the Russian Navy needs to establish bases along the Mediterranean and North Africa that can provide ample opportunities for that given Russian access to both Libyan and Egyptian ports.

Muammar Gaddafi first offered a permanent naval base to Russia in 2008, during his first post-Soviet-era trip to Moscow. While the former Libyan leader never delivered on his offer, Russia’s active diplomatic role in the Libyan crisis led to new discussions about access to facilities, including naval bases, for its military in both Egypt and Libya. It is no coincidence that Russia’s only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, made a port call in Libya and hosted General Haftar in January 2017 after its months-long mission off the Syrian coast. Kuznetsov is the flagship of the Mediterranean squadron and a symbol of the country’s growing ambitions in the Mediterranean. The Russian government has reportedly sent a special forces unit to the Sidi Barrani base in western Egypt near the Libyan border. The Sidi Barrani naval base also famously hosted Soviet warships until 1972, which is why speculations about Russia seeking a return to bases in North Africa, that Soviets used, are not at all groundless.

The purpose of a comeback to the Mediterranean, as well as the focus of Russia’s strategy in the region, is not entirely clear at
the moment. However, Russia’s naval doctrine provides some insights into what exactly Moscow is looking to achieve there. Among other things, the doctrine states that Russia seeks “sufficient military-naval presence in the Mediterranean on a permanent basis” and stresses the need to create conditions for the uninterrupted presence of the Russian navy there. The Mediterranean, however, is seen in Moscow as a source of threats to the country’s security, especially given NATO’s growing presence there. In this context, bases in Syria and prospective facilities in Libya and Egypt are seen as the first line of defense against possible future threats emanating from the alliance’s naval assets and directed at Russia’s Black Sea fleet.

Russia’s Options in Libya

Despite its support for the Libyan Political Agreement at the U.N. Security Council in December 2015, soon after the arrival of the U.N.-backed government in Tripoli in March 2016, Russia has been actively supporting forces in the Libyan conflict that are working to undermine the new government. It is hard to explain why Moscow would opt for such an incoherent strategy towards Libya, but the author’s discussions with Russian policymakers reveal that the Kremlin likely did not initially prioritize a settlement of the crisis in Libya. This is evidenced by the fact that up until summer 2016 the Russian government did not actively pursue contacts with any party to the Libyan conflict, be it the newly appointed government in Tripoli, the Government of National Congress or the House of Representatives.

It wasn’t until June 2016 that Moscow finally hosted General Haftar, who is now considered by many Russia’s point man in Libya. The reception that he got in Russia was unusually high-profile for a controversial and divisive figure like him. Haftar was received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defense, but most importantly by Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council, considered a key decision-making body close to the president. The reasons why Moscow decided to intensify its efforts in Libya are likely to do with the opportunity that appeared due to the failure of the U.N.-backed government to solidify its political presence, the emergence of terrorist groups, as well as a willingness to use the country’s membership in OPEC to influence that group’s stance in talks on oil production cuts that were happening at that time.

The initial lack of coherence in Russian policy towards Libya was revealed through its attempts to apply strategy patterns that were first tested in Syria, meaning that the policy was again securitized. Russia’s stance on supplying weapons to the country, which has been under a U.N. arms embargo since 2011, is evidence of that. As early as 2015, Russia mulled deliveries of weapons to Libya’s official government to help it fight terrorism in the country. In February 2015, Vladimir Churkin, the head of Russia’s mission to the U.N., told journalists that Moscow was considering backing the official government in Tobruq with weapons and if necessary imposing a naval blockade of Libya to prevent the delivery of weapons to jihadists by sea. During Haftar’s first visit to Moscow in June 2016, the Russian Ambassador to Libya, Ivan Molotkov, revealed that the parties had discussed a possible delivery of Russian weapons to the government in Tobruk. These signals that the Kremlin was sending to Haftar as well as to his adversaries, emboldened the general and prompted him to voice his ambition of retaking all Libya by force. Later, however,
Moscow took a far more nuanced stance on the issue, explicitly telling General Haftar that "unless the Security Council lifts or at least eases the embargo there can be no talk of Russian weapons’ deliveries to Libya," as per Ambassador Molotov.⁴⁶

Arguably the Russian understanding of the Libyan context has become significantly more nuanced since it started actively engaging various Libyan stakeholders in talks. As a result, it would be inaccurate to say that at the moment Moscow sees General Haftar as the only possible partner able to help resolve the crisis. The two merely enjoy a mutually beneficial marriage of convenience. The wannabe Gaddafi benefits from the international diplomatic cover that Moscow provides, which has helped him position himself as a powerful alternative to the Tripoli government in the eyes of European powers. By partnering with Haftar, Russia accomplishes a number of its own goals, from expanding its influence in the Mediterranean and building a close alliance with Egypt over cooperation over Libya, to acquiring another lever against its western counterparts.

While Russia purposefully built a strong relationship with Haftar, the question is how committed Moscow is to this alliance and to what lengths it is prepared to go to ensure the General's emergence as a new Gaddafi. After all, Haftar resided in the United States for many years due to being at odds with Mummer Gaddafi, and he allegedly worked with American intelligence agencies at that time,⁷ which makes him an unlikely partner for Moscow. Having initially made the mistake of giving Haftar a false impression of unequivocal backing, the Russian government has notably avoided discussions about its involvement in the Libyan crisis, resorting to general statements about the need for national reconciliation. In fact, the U.N.-imposed arms embargo serves as a good excuse not to deliver weapons to Haftar, avoiding the risk of getting drawn into another quagmire in the region. Despite publicly supporting the general’s militaristic bravado, which is largely directed at the West, the Kremlin is overseeing Haftar’s transformation from a warlord into a politician, which signifies the evolution of Russia’s view of Libya and its methods of settling conflicts.

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The Libyan Political Agreement essentially marginalized General Haftar. Essentially, there is a disconnection between the hard power he projects and the agreement’s scope that excludes him from a future arrangement in Libya. No doubt, the Russian government envisions a leading role for Haftar, but the lesson that it has learned in Syria is that even a strong authoritarian leader is hardly capable of stitching society back together. In the complex context that is Libya, this means that a new social contract needs to appear to be inclusive and sustainable in the long run. In the context of the emergence of several poles of gravity in the country, of which the U.N.-backed Head of the Presidential Council Fayez al-Serraj is arguably the weakest, Moscow has opted for hedging its bets in the Libyan crisis with the goal of bringing all parties, whether they are backed by military power or an international mandate, to the negotiating table by acting as a powerbroker.

The Russian government has intensified efforts to reach out to the Tripoli government and other stakeholders, such as the Misrata
Brigades and the GNC. In 2016, Moscow established an inter-ministerial "Contact Group for Libya Reconciliation," comprising diplomats as well as Members of Parliament, including from Chechnya in Russia, who have been tasked with restoring old ties and developing a network of new contacts in Libya. This has resulted in a flurry of meetings between Russian officials and the al-Serraj government as well as representatives of militant groups. Moscow realizes that few world powers see Fayez al-Serraj as a leader who can unite the country, and as the Libyan Political Agreement is set to expire in late 2017 unless amended to embrace a wider spectrum of political actors, Russia spies an opportunity to make al-Serraj part of its own political design for Libya. This strategy also allows Russia to put more pressure on the unruly Haftar and make its support for him conditional on his participation in transition talks.

The fall of Mummer Gaddafi undeniably delivered a blow to Russia’s interests in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It also demonstrated that the country is an important ally for Moscow in at least three ways: As a partner on matters concerning the regulation of the global energy market, a client for Russia’s defense industry and, linked to that, as a geopolitical actor, just as Mummer Gaddafi was an informal ambassador for Soviet and later Russian interests in the MENA region and the Mediterranean. Arguably, today the Kremlin is looking to restore the role of Libya in its foreign policy equation, although doing so by military means does not serve Russia’s long-term interests.

Russia’s approach to the Libyan crisis has revealed that the country does not see Syria and Libya as similar contexts that call for same responses, despite the fact that both are attributed to the Arab Spring. Libya is undoubtedly of less importance to Russia than Syria, simply due to its geographic remoteness. This also means, however, that Moscow enjoys more flexibility to explore alternative solutions to the Libyan crisis and does not see it as a context in which a military settlement is possible. It seems that by this stage, Russia has come to the conclusion that a consensus settlement to the Libyan crisis would produce a more lasting outcome than recreating a Gaddafi-type regime.
Endnotes

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