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Not since the start of the Cold War has there been such public hand-wringing over Russian intentions in Libya and the Mediterranean: a spate of recent articles warns that Russia's moves in Libya are evidence of an aggressive, expansionistic policy, of a piece with Russian military actions in Ukraine and Crimea. But this is hyperbole: while Russia has taken advantage of US risk aversion during the Arab Spring to strengthen its position on numerous fronts – most notably Syria – its approach toward the greater Middle East is selective and opportunistic. Russia is interested primarily in maintaining and augmenting its geopolitical status, generating influence it can apply to interests closer to home, and assuring itself a piece of economic dividends from any future settlement. It has neither the resources, nor the desire to incur responsibility for a country that may prove to be a mess for a long time to come.

The roots of Western-Russian competition in Libya

When Idris Al Senussi became Libya's first post-independence sovereign in 1951, most Libyans viewed the United States and the United Nations as benevolent actors who helped save them from the ills of European colonialism – and partition. Libya hosted the United States' only military base in Africa, which took advantage of Libya's strategic geography to project forces elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa. But the United States viewed Libya as something of a sideshow to Egypt, which the US was determined to keep from the Soviet sphere of influence (this was before American oil companies discovered oil in Libya in commercial amounts in 1959).

In 1957, then Libyan Prime Minister Mustafa Benhalim successfully pled Libya's case for development assistance with US President Eisenhower. But in the following years, promised levels of assistance were not forthcoming (in part due to budgetary objections from the US Congress), and Benhalim resorted to playing the Soviet card. Western passivity contributed, in part, to the rise of Muammar Gaddafi, who ruled Libya for more than 41 years – and developed long-term military supply

relationships with the Soviets, some of which carried over to Russia and other former Soviet states. The relationship with Russia included a multi-billion-dollar arms deal in 2009, prior to the beginning of the Arab Spring in late 2010.

When Gaddafi set out to attack Benghazi in March 2011, following protests that marked the start of the Libyan revolution, the Obama administration asked Russia not to veto UN Security Council resolution 1973, authorising “all necessary means” to protect civilians. Russia abstained, based on what its diplomats later claimed were firm US assurances that there would be no move towards regime change.

After Gaddafi’s fall, the Russians accused Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of subterfuge, and even outright deception (Clinton later remarked that the Russians were sophisticated enough to understand what “all necessary means” meant). Russian indignation at being left out of the decision-making process on Libya reinforced its determination to secure its already critical strategic interests in Syria at the United States’ and Europe’s expense. In 2012 President Vladimir Putin strongly came to Syrian leader Bashar Al Assad’s aid, in the process edging the United States out of a previously assumed lead role in negotiating an end to the Syrian conflict.

Russia’s interests in the Mediterranean

The Russians had many strong reasons to play hardball over Syria. A factor in the closeness of the Putin-Assad relationship was Assad’s willingness to block the efforts of the Gulf emirate of Qatar to build a natural gas pipeline through the country to supply Europe – which would have undermined Russia’s market power in Europe, and weakened Russian leverage over Europe when defending its actions in Ukraine, for example.

The Russians maintain two military access points in Syria: a supply and maintenance facility at the northern Syrian port of Tartus, and part of a Syrian airbase in Latakia, 84 kilometres to the north. Latakia has been the locus of Russia’s bombing campaigns within Syria against those who oppose Assad, and against the Islamic State (ISIS). Both Tartus and Latakia are practically and symbolically important, as a means to project Russian forces in the Mediterranean. For one, Russia’s access at Tartus extends the length of time Russian vessels can leave their bases in the Black Sea. Russia received a dividend in January of this year when Assad agreed to upgrade the Russian presence to include sovereignty over part of the facility and expansion rights.²

Some of the same strategic issues at play in Syria exist in Libya, but to a much lesser degree. Libya supplies Europe with natural gas from large offshore deposits through the GreenStream pipeline, which has a capacity of 11 billion cubic metres (bcm) per year. Qatar tried for years to get Muammar Gaddafi to agree to its investment in Libya’s gas industry so it could undercut the Russian position in the European energy market. But Gaddafi, like Assad, said no. Further, Russia signed contracts with Gaddafi for arms, oil and infrastructure to the tune of tens of billions of dollars, and would certainly like to recoup or at least partially offset the losses brought by Gaddafi’s ouster.

2. See: <http://tass.com/defense/926348>.

Russia watched as the Western intervention in Libya led to (what it saw as predictable) further chaos and the rise of extremism in North Africa and the Sahel, for which it blamed a bungled US-NATO-led intervention. As of early 2016, there were an estimated 4,800 Russian speakers within ISIS's ranks. Russia knows these fighters will inevitably return and attempt to fortify radicalism within its borders, notably in the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan (Nocetti, 2016). The downing of a Russian passenger plane with 224 people on board by ISIS in Sinai on October 31 2015 underscored the Russian vulnerability to regional terror.³

Economic constraints

Notwithstanding Putin's desire to remain visible and flex Russian muscles, the country's economic conditions do not support an expansionist policy. Russia's economy, which is somewhere between the size of those of Italy and California, has experienced a severe deceleration in recent years due to falling oil and gas prices,⁴ and does not have the resources or the desire to rebuild regional economies, or participate in expensive peacekeeping or cleanup operations.

Russia is acutely aware of the financial costs of its intervention in Syria, and its regional weak points. Escalated tensions with Turkey following the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet in late 2015 underscored Russia's vulnerability with respect to access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea – If Turkey shuts the Bosphorus to Russian shipping, the Russian navy is forced to go around Europe through the Straits of Gibraltar, which are controlled by NATO forces.⁵ While Russia would surely love to develop military provisioning facilities in the southern Mediterranean as a hedge against unforeseen developments in Syria and Turkey, it would require, above all, reasonably stable commercial deals to justify that move. And that requires a stable government, and a semi-functioning Libyan economy.

Russia and Hefatar

In 2014, a weakened elected government in Tripoli was confronted with two prospective coups – one announced by General Khalifa Hefatar, which did not materialise, and another by an Islamist-Misurata alliance, which did. Those who lost the election created a competing government, based in Tripoli, while the elected government was pushed to Tobruk and Al Beida in Libya's east. Hefatar then set out to build up a more formal army, based in part on members of Gaddafi's hollowed-out military. Over more than three years, Hefatar took back Libya's eastern Oil Crescent (the rich zone of oil deposits and downstream facilities), and then most of Benghazi, from Al Qaeda and ISIS-backed elements, which had overrun the city in the wake of the attack on the US mission in September 2012. Hefatar's blunt approach to the Islamist problem – which made no distinction between self-professed "moderate" and "extreme" Islamists, and relied on a "shoot first and ask questions later" attitude – appealed to Russian sensibilities.

Senior Russian military officers and diplomats hosted Hefatar and his senior staff on several occasions in the Kremlin, and once on a Russian warship off

3. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34840943>.

4. See: <https://www.ft.com/content/489f8f0c-ae02-11e3-974d-00144feab7de>.

5. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

the Libyan coast, an implicit intentional challenge to the UN-led process, whose custodians attempted to sideline Haftar and the Libyan National Army from the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Russian talks with Haftar allegedly included discussions about reactivating a \$2 billion Gaddafi-era arms deal, but as the Russians are well aware, Haftar does not have signature authority.⁶ While Russia has adhered to commitments not to violate the UN arms embargo on Libya, it has sold arms to Egypt, and it is widely assumed a piece of that support has been passed on to Haftar. Russian advisors are believed to have been deployed in western Egypt to offer technical assistance to the eastern Libyan government.⁷ Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have justified their similarly disguised military and logistical support with reference to past (and continuing) support by Qatar and Turkey for radical-infused militias who exert considerable influence within the Western-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and its lingering predecessor, the General National Congress.

In some measure due to the poor decisions of the international community, the Libyan malady has become almost immune to treatment. Libyans have no confidence in their current government representatives, or the international process that enables them. While “federation” was a dirty word in Libya post-revolution, more and more Libyans say they believe that a bottom-up, regional solution is now the only way forward. And that process is already in play, with most of the major cities and their hinterlands operating somewhat autonomously, if poorly.

If the international community chose to help empower cities and regions to solve some of their own problems, while keeping outside – and internal – spoilers in check, pieces of Libya’s social tissue could be conceivably reconstructed across the country, and ultimately woven into a national legal and administrative superstructure. All of which underscores the futility in the present circumstances of any exclusively top-down solution to the Libyan conflict.

Italy has undermined stability in the longer term by paying Libyan militias (who simultaneously manage the human trafficking) to stop refugee sailings to Italian ports.⁸ Other states’ proposals to set up advance-processing centres for would-be asylum seekers are not much more helpful.

The German government is rumoured to be vetting plans to encourage the growth of economic centres along the migrant routes originating in West Africa as a means of diverting refugees from dangerous Mediterranean crossings. Clearly the only long-term solution to the problem is either to bring stability to Libya itself (Gaddafi had little trouble opening the spigot of illegal migration at will), and/or to address the causes of political and economic distress in the refugees’ home countries, exacerbated by the spillover of weapons and fighters from the Libya conflict.

A waiting game

Under its third Libya envoy, Lebanese politician and political analyst Ghassan Salamé, the United Nations is belatedly trying to address failings in the organisation’s sequential conceptions of a unifying Libyan Political

6. See: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/1/19/russia-arms-libyas-haftar-in-2-billion-weapons-deal>.

7. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/russian-special-forces-deployed-in-egypt-near-libyan-border-report>.

8. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/mafia-refugees-libya-italy-stop-leave-militia-mediterranean-crossing-sabratha-migrant-boats-a7906666.html>.

Agreement (LPA) by streamlining bloated, contentious bodies within the Government of National Accord (GNA), and reaching out to some groups excluded from the original process. But it remains to be seen how a two-year deadlock will be broken among parties of whom many have little if any incentive to come to a deal, and much incentive to stall. None of this addresses the fundamental questions of process and popular legitimacy, which even if they were to be elided now, would sow the seeds for future discord.⁹

Undoubtedly, Russia's sympathies lie more with Heftar than any other party in Libya. Heftar's virulent anti-Islamist stance (with the glaring exception of the Madkhali Salafi Islamists in his anti-Tripoli coalition) and blunt approach to stability in Libya's east appeal to the Kremlin's sensibilities.

Once Russia felt Heftar had established himself and the Libyan National Army (LNA) as a sine qua non in Libya's near-term political future, the Kremlin took a diplomatic step forward to engage the head of the GNA Presidency Council Faiez Serraj, and publicly emphasised the need for a peaceful, inclusive solution to the Libya crisis, under UN stewardship.¹⁰ In parallel, Russia has engaged with the Tripoli-based Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC), which, along with other Libyan state institutions like the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) and central bank have, to varying degrees, attempted to remain above the political fray.

As long as there is an active international diplomatic effort underway, Russia sees only downsides to clarifying its position. As one retired senior UK diplomat noted recently, "the Russians have every reason to sit back and wait for an opportunity to play fixer, rather than risk their necks out in a risky diplomatic process – particularly one that resulted from military action they did not support in the first place."

With respect to the United States, the Russians are also in wait and see mode. It appears President Putin would value an improved relationship with the United States (or at least stem the tensions resulting from the scandal over Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential elections – which Russia seems to have not entirely foreseen). If US President Trump's tweets are any indication, the feeling is mutual.

Regardless, Libya will not likely be the locus of a major contest between Russia and the West, at least in the near future. Vitaly Naumkin, one of Russia's veteran Middle East hands, and UN envoy to Syria, describes the Russian approach to high tension regional issues (apart from Syria, clearly) as one of assuming "either a low profile, or constructive relations with the West" (Naumkin, 2016).

Libya's relatively low priority to both the US and Russia might at some point open the door to cooperation that could be used to model or diffuse tensions between the two elsewhere in the region. Further, Russia understands that that a consistent application of a modest level of interest and support over time, without consistent and overt bias, pays off. Accordingly, Russia's Rosneft last summer became one of the first international oil companies to sign a deal with the National Oil Company for regular purchases of Libyan crude.¹¹

9. Azza Maghur, «ليبيا: نهج الإصلاح الطموح» ميثاق، <http://www.arab-reform.net/ar/node/1186>.

10. See: <http://www.libya-al-mostakbal.org/49/27740/العمل-ت-ايسور-ف-ورفال/العمل-ت-ايسور-ف-ورفال.html>.

11. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-congress-rosneft-libya/russias-rosneft-started-to-lift-oil-from-libya-idUSKBN19V1LC>.

Conclusion

There are a number of Russian “nice to haves” with respect to Libya, but few “must haves”. Putin wishes to be perceived as a peacemaker and influence-dealer in the region; and all other things being equal, he would like to bring down the overall temperature in the region, and prevent the spread of the Islamic State – while at the same time encouraging a healthy market for Russian arms. Certainly, Russia would like to assure it has substantive access to the economic fruits of any lasting peace, whenever that might come – particularly in the realm of oil and gas. But every year brings additional complications to the Libya conflict. The longer the international community’s approach to Libya remains weak and disjointed, the more chaos will ensue. Soon, Europe and the United States will likely give up mediation altogether in favour of a strict policy of containment. If this happens, Russia will certainly take the opportunity to say “we told you so”, while attempting to shape whatever remains in Libya to its advantage.

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