Article

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

European View
1–9

DOI: 10.1177/17816858261436455
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv
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Southern instability, northern vulnerability: Libya's challenge to European defence

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Abstract

Attention in Europe remains fixed on the war in Ukraine and the transatlantic relationship. This focus, however, risks obscuring mounting challenges in North Africa, particularly Libya. Libya's political fragmentation and unresolved state-building process have created conditions that Russia and China are exploiting to expand their influence across the Mediterranean, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. This article examines how Libya has become a strategic hub for Russian military activity and a platform for expanding Chinese economic and political engagement. It argues that these developments expose strategic incoherence and short-termism in EU and NATO policies, especially the emphasis on migration management over long-term stability, reconstruction and reconciliation. By analysing Libya's internal dynamics and external alignments, the article highlights how continued Western disengagement risks entrenching instability, undermining Mediterranean security and allowing rival powers to reshape the regional balance of power to Europe's detriment.

Keywords

Libya, North Africa, EU security policy, NATO, Russian influence, Chinese engagement, Mediterranean security

Introduction

At the start of 2026, Europe is facing multiple challenges. On the one hand, the war in Ukraine is entering its fifth year, and Russia continues to constitute a threat to the EU and NATO. On the other hand, there are seemingly new tensions in the transatlantic

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relationship which are altering specific dynamics—especially in the short term. While the focus on such matters is vital, neglecting other areas could prove to be just as damaging to NATO and the EU's security interests.

The situation in North Africa—particularly Libya—is offering both Russia and China an opportunity to expand their influence in Africa and the Mediterranean. Both countries are likely to continue to capitalise on NATO's reluctance to engage in the region and the EU's double standards in dealing with Libya. These double standards are, on the one hand, engaging with Libya over reaching short-term solutions in various fields, particularly in terms of migration, and on the other, not engaging with the region in terms of long-term development. The lack of a strategy to support Libyan unification (if this is even possible), stability and reconstruction exposes a deficit of foresight about addressing the situation in what is already a very volatile region. Ultimately, both entities appear inconsistent in their approach.

The context

Following Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's bloodless coup in 1969, the Libyan military expanded and was merged with other security agencies. By the time the Qaddafi regime was toppled in 2011, the Libyan Armed Forces counted 76,000 troops and an estimated reserve force of 40,000 men in the People's Militia (Lutterbeck 2025, 76).

The Qaddafi regime adopted an aggressive foreign and defence policy marked by a strong Arabist orientation, avowed anti-imperialism, and a degree of neutralism and non-alignment, despite the fact that the Soviet Union gradually became Libya's primary weapons supplier. The large-scale import of arms into Libya during this period turned it into one of the most heavily armed countries in the world. On 29 December 1979, Libya was designated a state sponsor of terrorism under the US's Export Administration Act.[1] This led to a ban on arms exports to the country. The same regime was accused of providing considerable quantities of arms to rebel and terrorist groups in various parts of the globe, seemingly operating under an 'anti-imperialist' agenda (Lutterbeck 2025, 77). UN sanctions were imposed in 1992 following Libya's failure to cooperate with the investigations into the bombings of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie and UTA Flight 772.

While Libya's international posturing has often been a cause for concern, little attention has been paid to its internal dynamics. Yet, such dynamics are central to understanding the significance of Libya in geopolitical terms. Erdağ (2017, 26) notes that 'in terms of security matters and power distribution, tribes play a significant role'. While the West often refers to Libya as a singular entity, it is crucial to bear in mind that approximately 140 tribes and clans—many with connections in Tunisia, Egypt and Chad—play a role in the country. Out of these, 30 are more significant in terms of 'political influence and power distribution' (Erdağ 2017, 26), primarily due to Qaddafi's tribe-based policies regarding the distribution of public resources. Moreover, as Erdağ

(2017, 26) argues, 'tribes in Libya played important roles in both security and the composition of the state's elites.'

Chief among the tribes was the Qadhafa tribe—Qaddafi's own tribe—whose members were appointed to various leadership positions on the grounds of loyalty rather than competence. Under Qaddafi's rule, the Libyan army became both a mechanism to defend the regime and the Qaddafi family, and a vehicle for promotion for Qaddafi's sons and relatives and other members of the regime's inner circle (Erdağ 2017).

Following the toppling of the regime in 2011, the Libyan armed forces disintegrated, and since then its security landscape has been shaped by various armed militias which vie for control over resources. By 2019 two main factions had emerged—each with its own armed forces and international supporters.

The Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, is linked to the Libyan House of Representatives, based in Tobruk. It is estimated to have a fighting force of around 25,000 men, mostly former members of Qaddafi's military and rebel fighters who had revolted against the former leader. Russia is one of the most important backers of the LNA, together with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, France.

On the other hand, the internationally recognised Government of National Accord, based in Tripoli, can count on the support of approximately 16,000 fighters. Among the international backers of the Government of National Accord are Turkïye, Qatar and Italy.

The support the two blocs receive is varied and, in some cases, substantial. It includes the delivery of arms despite the UN arms embargo that has been in place since 2011.

This situation should be a cause for concern in Europe. Libya remains a strategic hinge between the Mediterranean, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. In addition, it is located on the periphery of the Middle East and, while having little influence on regional security, is 'an important component of the Maghreb sub-complex' that has become critical to Middle East security since the Arab Spring (Erdağ 2017, 21).

NATO's intervention during the Arab Spring changed the balance of power in favour of those protesting against the regime—a regime which, as previously explained, relied primarily on the loyalty of the armed forces. Yet, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the international community was unable to solve the Libyan crisis. The groups that toppled the Qaddafi regime lacked the capabilities or political vision to lead the political transformation required. Part of the problem lies in the challenge that Libya faces—it is one of state formation rather than that of democratisation which affected Egypt and Tunisia. Each of the rebel groups has its own aims and objectives, which makes it hard to organise an internationally recognised election and to bring about the transitional justice needed for a potential state apparatus to function. Without internal

mechanisms to bring about this change, Libya remains vulnerable to insecurity and political instability (Erdağ 2017).

In view of this, this article seeks to analyse how Libya could become a focal point for Russian and Chinese influence and what this reveals about EU and NATO strategic incoherence in North Africa.

Russian and Chinese activity

Both Russia and China have been expanding their involvement in Africa. Much of this involvement—and the considerable accompanying Russian and Chinese trade and investment—is attractive to the region since it does not involve the specific 'human rights conditions, good governance requirements, approved-project restrictions, and environmental quality regulations that characterise U.S. and other Western government investments' (Monroe 2010, 54).

In addition to its economic interests in the region, the People's Republic of China has increasingly been focused on securing more diplomatic allies and extending its influence. Beginning in 2000 with the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative has continued to increase economic cooperation between China and Africa. Kurylo (2024, 123) argues that China has a threefold interest in the region: to seek 'natural resource access, export markets, and political and economic stability to achieve its economic and commercial objectives'.

Similarly, Russia has also been trying to engage with Africa. The 2014 annexation of Crimea proved to be a turning point, as Russia's global diplomatic isolation forced it to seek new partners to advance its ambitions. The first Russia–Africa Summit, held in 2019, followed the same framework as its Chinese equivalent and was based on 'non-interference, shared interests and the fight against exploitation and colonialism' (Kurylo 2024, 125). Capitalising on the historical legacy of the USSR, internal Russian documents reveal that it seeks to increase its influence by 'stoking anti-imperialist resentment', which contrasts with 'the idea of Western interference' (Kurylo 2024, 125).

While there is seemingly coordination between the two sides over their Africa strategy, Kurylo (2024, 128) contends that both countries have 'shunned bilateral discussions concerning the continent, engaged in commercial competition with each other, and pursued conflicting agendas'. Nonetheless, this is no cause for rejoicing in the West, since both sides are engaging in aggressive tactics that could cause a high degree of insecurity in Europe. Russian and Chinese activity in Libya should be one cause for concern.

Russia, China and Libya

There are several developments in Libya which should serve as warning signs to both the EU and NATO. In June 2025, Radio France International uncovered increased Russian

activity at the Al-Khadim airbase, 100 km east of Benghazi (*Radio France International* 2025). A large Russian Antonov-124 aircraft, designed to carry up to 100 tonnes of cargo and operated by the 224 Flight Unit of the Russian Ministry of Defence, landed at Al-Khadim and continued its journey to other destinations, including Bamako in Mali and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, before returning to Russia. This flight unit is welcomed in Libya despite facilitating military operations, not least the transfer of North Korean missile components to Russia.

The Al-Khadim base could be pivotal for Russian operations in the Sahel. With eastern Libya controlled mainly by the Russian-backed Khalifa Haftar and with an estimated presence of 2,000 Russian mercenary troops in the region, the warm-water ports of Tobruk and Benghazi could be potential bases for the Russian Mediterranean Fleet (Black and Kaushal 2025). This would place the fleet just 600 km south of the Italian and Greek coasts.

While supply lines through Tobruk have been established, there remains limited military infrastructure; with 'limited repair facilities and no dry dock, few berths of sufficient size, and limited opportunities for expansion, long-term investment in a permanent presence would likely present technical challenges' (Black and Kaushal 2025). On the other hand, the port of Benghazi has better facilities which may be more suited to Russian needs. However, its infrastructure has been severely damaged by the conflicts in Libya. According to reports, the LNA 'appears to be intent on building both air and naval facilities in the vicinity of Benghazi', thus offering Russia the opportunity to be involved in the construction of the necessary infrastructure (Black and Kaushal 2025).

This Russian presence in Libya could potentially shift the balance of power considerably; it would enable Russia to achieve its long-held objective of having a warm-water port, thereby enhancing Moscow's ability to influence regional dynamics and counter Western interests. It would also allow it to gain access to critical resources, such as Libyan oil, thereby affecting global energy markets and placing more pressure on Europe.

Russian support for General Khalifa Haftar and the LNA is crucial to both sides. By backing Haftar, Russia is attempting to gain strategic leverage in eastern Libya while also positioning itself as a key player in resolving Libya's political stalemate. Moreover, this backing also places Russia in a good position to secure several post-conflict projects and contracts. Haftar is also increasingly reliant on Russia, partly because it can counter the Western- and Turkish-backed Tripoli government. Haftar's visit to Moscow in May 2025 (*Arab Weekly* 2025) has made many in Europe nervous about just how deeply Russia is involved in Libya.

Russia has also been aiming to expand its military presence at the Maaten al-Sarra base—largely abandoned since 2011—which lies next to the borders with Chad and Sudan. As of December 2024, Russian technicians and Syrian troops were reportedly

restoring runways and warehouses there. This base would allow Moscow to directly supply weapons to Burkina Faso, Mali and Sudan (*Africa Defence Forum* 2025). This once again demonstrates the intent to use Libya as a base for the Russian Ministry of Defence Africa Corps, established in 2023 to replace the Wagner Group's operations in Africa.

Similar reports also reveal that Russia is strengthening its operations at various bases around Libya, thus increasing its capacity to host fighter planes and drones in the Mediterranean basin (*Africa Defence Forum* 2025).

Russia is therefore seeking to entrench Libya's fragmented state of affairs in the long run, making the political unification of Libya more difficult. This frustrates attempts by both NATO and the EU to support the US-recognised Government of National Unity based in Tripoli. Naturally, this has the potential to harm the stability of the Mediterranean, with various interest groups seeking to gain influence in Libya due to its strategic position.

While Russia has firmly entrenched its position with the fortunes of the LNA, the People's Republic of China is playing a balancing act between the two rival governments. Its influence is also more nuanced. Following visits to Beijing by Libyan officials in May and September 2024, including a high-profile visit by the prime minister of the UN-backed Government of National Unity, Abdul Hamid Al-Dbeibah, the Chinese government announced a strategic partnership between the two countries. So far, this relationship has been based on meeting economic objectives and implementing reconstruction projects. It would, however, be hard to rule out other dimensions to this partnership.

Furthermore, Chinese investment in eastern Libya has also increased significantly. For example, BFI Consortium—a leading Chinese firm—has been involved in several significant projects, including the building of solar and water desalination plants and railway construction. Moreover, it will be involved in the China-funded Benghazi metro project (Abdullah 2024).

While there is no apparent military cooperation between Libya and China at present, there is scope for such collaboration in the future. China has increasingly been cooperating militarily with countries in Africa; various Chinese-operated ports in the region have also been used for security purposes. Moreover, China has increased its cooperation with Egypt, Algeria and Sudan, thereby demonstrating its interest in the region and in expanding its influence there (Abdullah 2024).

Conclusion

This increased activity by China and Russia is in marked contrast to the de facto disengagement from the region by the West. NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya—though authorised by two UN Security Council Resolutions and not opposed by Russia—is

widely perceived as having failed. Russia has capitalised on this, often accusing the West of using this intervention as a pretext for regime change. On the contrary, both Russia and China are willing engage with regional partners without insisting on democratic alignment and governance reforms. This strengthens their hand in the region.

Nonetheless, the EU, the US and their allies have a strategic interest in ensuring that Libya does not fall further into the sphere of influence of either China or Russia. Concurrently, it is also in their interests that Libya does not become a potential training ground for jihadist groups and criminal organisations within striking distance of Europe. In view of this, several perspectives should be considered.

From a European perspective, Libya is primarily seen as a security concern due to migration. Indeed, a potentially porous border coupled with a level of lawlessness in some parts of the country make it susceptible to human trafficking, the smuggling of arms, criminal activity and terrorism. Without a viable Libyan state capable of maintaining a secure border with the support of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance agencies, the situation is likely to worsen. While the EU Border Assistance Mission Libya aims to support the Libyan authorities in securing the country's borders through advising, training and mentoring, its success has been mixed. Although it has recently been extended until June 2027 with a budget of €52 million, its effectiveness is highly debated and it has had limited impact due to Libya's fragmented politics, weak state structures and the proliferation of militias. In January 2026 some reports suggested that the EU is planning on investing in a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Benghazi. This would be the first time that the authorities under Haftar's control would benefit from EU support (Wallis 2026). Nonetheless, there should be some conditions attached to this support—not least obliging the Haftar-led authorities to engage with the UN Support Mission in Libya which 'aims to facilitate an inclusive political process, support ceasefire implementation, and advance national reconciliation, human rights, and the rule of law, while assisting with economic reform and the reunification of state institutions' (UN 2026).

The fragmented political situation in Libya has an impact that extends beyond its borders and is therefore a security concern for Europe and the Mediterranean. The lack of a coherent policy in this regard should be of great concern. In view of this, support for a process of national reconciliation is imperative. Though put forward over a decade ago, Chivvis and Martini's observations remain alarmingly prescient. Their call for 'disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration' remains relevant, as does their observation that 'repeating empty declarations that it must happen will not work' (Chivvis and Martini 2014, 21).

While Russia's overtures are concerning, its influence is not absolute, as various factions and interests are at play in the region. Moreover, while rarely linked to military aid, China's involvement should not be underestimated. There is, thus, some room for manoeuvre for both the EU and NATO. The current passivity may, however, exacerbate insecurity, and Europe may find itself fending off Russia on multiple fronts.

The EU's Global Gateway infrastructure offers opportunities for investing in high-standard, transparent infrastructure in the energy and digital sectors in Libya in order to compete with China's strategic partnership. Such investment would also support the diversification of the energy sector, thereby potentially preventing Russia from using Libyan oil production to leverage European markets.

Most importantly, however, the EU and NATO have a direct interest in acting in a unified manner over Libya. At the time of writing, a number of member states, including Italy and France, often pursue conflicting bilateral interests. While the EU has an ambassador in Libya, there is scope for a higher-level envoy with a mandate to bridge the gap between the factions. Moreover, the EU can—and should—place more emphasis on the 2026 UN Support Mission in Libya Structured Dialogue, which focuses on issues of governance and security and aims to progress towards a Libyan-led transition which could pre-empt foreign interference.

On a more basic level, both the EU and NATO need to have more open and pressing conversations on the Mediterranean and its link to the European security structure. While the focus on other areas is urgent and justified, similarly serious threats continue to appear at its southern borders.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. On 30 June 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rescinded the US designation of Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism.

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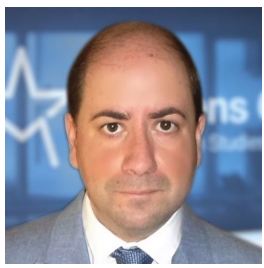

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