

A GAME OF POWER BALANCE ON THE LIBYAN CHESSBOARD

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Abstract

This article is going to examine how recent trends in international politics have affected Libya's post—Qaddhafi era. As part of an increase of tension among actors, as well as due to the country's unfortunate domestic situation, Libya became a venue of international power politics. Arguably, realist-perspectives have not prevailed so much since the end of the bipolar world and as part of this, seeking influence over this fragile country has manifested on various occasion by different actors. Strategically speaking, Libya would be an important piece in all the major states' and alliances' plans in order to alter regional balance of power in their favor. Most of these same actors are interested in Libyan crude oil, the country's most important export. Additionally, security-related risks have promoted this issue to a global level. Due to old and forming, official and informal alliances, geographical distance does not affect the equation. In other words, the main goal of the paper will be to analyze what actors by which means and in agreement with which allies have conducted any kind of activities in the post-Arab spring era in Libya, in relation to power-projection.

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In the era after the Arab Spring, one can monitor multiple interesting and complex developments in the Middle-East and North-Africa. Syria, Yemen, as well as Libya are all part of these developments. Although these cases are all rooted in domestic tension, they all — though to a different extent — imply involvement from various international actors. Syria seems to be the most obvious example, as means of power politics between the West and the East are reported on predominantly in the Syrian context. This, in itself, suggests a scale of opposition between two parties that could not be experienced since the end of the bipolar world. Libya — though not so visibly and transparently as Syria — also got involved in the struggle for greater influence in the region. Consequently, the question worth monitoring is: does the struggle for more power within Libya among international actors qualify the country's ongoing conflict a global one?

In striving to answer this question, this paper is going to scrutinize the evaluation of the balance of power in Libya from the post Qaddhafi-era—up until recent trends. More precisely, the analysis will concentrate on how foreign actors attempted to gain bigger influence—through various contributions and actions—within the country. While it will be important to highlight the most relevant foreign actors, their methodologies are also going to receive stressed significance. This will not only demonstrate the differences present in those actors' strategic perceptions, but will also offer a rudimentary evaluation of the scale of success in the case of all of them. The thus obtained results will provide a better picture on the power balance in Libya. Such a study would not be accurate without including the role of oil since the country's exports are predominantly based on crude petroleum (approximately 69 percent)¹ and an eventual reconciliation and restoration of order will greatly depend on it. Considering this and the world-wide significance of oil, the inclusion of oil sector related developments in Libya falls within the field of interest of this paper.

1. Introduction

First of all, a brief outline of Libya's status quo has to be drawn up to facilitate later understanding. The country, which is after the Qaddhafi's rule, where in the case of the Tripoli - Tobruk axis, the more decisive

¹ Observatory of Economic Complexity 2018, 'Libya'. Available from: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/lby/> [19.03.2018].

part of the international community favored the previous one, but where the inner—as well as outer—tensions are still as massive that national stability seems to remain a dream for quite a while. But is it really the case? History teaches us that wherever instability, as well as a vacuum, arises, some actors attempt to fill the gap, and subsequently aid the cause of restoring order. Translating this to Libya's case, there is a UN-backed government in Tripoli, which is not free of scandals and its operation is still debatable. On the other hand, the most powerful opponent of Tripoli is General KhalifaHaftar, who controls the eastern part of the country and seemingly has matching interests with the Kremlin². Additionally, the PRC is active in the region and has already shown open arms towards Libya, but at this point, its offer is more about preparing for the post-war reconstruction³. Additionally, Libya's exposure to foreign influence also roots in the fact that all the other countries in the region had greater population even before the start of the recent migration towards Europe, even though there are some significantly smaller states among these—as far as territorial size is concerned.

2013	Libya	Tunisia	Algeria	Niger	Chad	Sudan	Egypt
Population (million)	6,2	10,9	39,2	17,8	12,8	38	82,1
Territorial Size (million km ²)	1,76 m km ²	0,16 m km ²	2,38 m km ²	1,27 m km ²	1,3 m km ²	1,9 m km ²	1,01 m km ²

2. Theoretical background

As the title already suggests, the balance of power theory will provide the framework of this paper, inasmuch as the currently ongoing efforts pursued by both Western and Eastern actors to achieve a kind of positive (re)alignment recall aspects experienced in the early years of the bipolar world, when the affiliation of the non-aligned states was not yet decided and there existed a struggle between great powers endeavoring to earn bigger influence. Another reason behind the legitimacy of this theory is that the changes occurred within the past decade in the oil sector also exemplify the emerged positioning. Consequently, this paper will rely on the realist school's teaching, which is admittedly not complete and is not without flaws, nevertheless explains the developments within Libya the best.

1. The development is hindered by domestic problems

It has to be emphasized that Libya's case is unique since there was no serious attempt by any party to hinder democratization and development in the sudden aftermath of Qaddafi's removal. No, at that time none of the major countries attempted power projection in Libya. On the other hand, intra-state conflicts, continuous tension and above all, the impossibility to reconcile set the country on a hopeless path. Even so, the dictator's death provided a power vacuum that did not escape other actors' attention for too long. To continue, recent history of Libya is appropriately referred to as the country's darkest period in the modern age. It did not only experience the negative events stemming from the failure of Arab Spring flowing through the country, as well as a foreign intervention that liberated people from the dictatorship of Qaddafi, it also got on the verge of falling apart in the midst of an ongoing civil war, with many already referring to Libya as a failed state⁴. If that would not be enough, for long time it had to suffer all the negative effects stemming from the lack of security and order in the region, created by *Daesh* and other smaller insurgencies⁵. Also, there are militias led by nationalistic motives (that had been oppressed during the "reign" of Qaddafi), and they also demand more recognition and a greater role in the future. Mentioning all these provides the impression that the country's instability and more importantly, its vulnerability is not rooted exclusively in the past decade—in fact, it is mostly not—, but that the core of the problems can be traced back to decades within the Libyan society. One symptom, which describes the situation of Libyan society the most accurately is that based on Transparency International's corruption index, the country took the 170th position out of the 176 most corrupt countries on the planet in 2016.⁶ Obviously, corruption and the lack of transparency have an

²Bibbo, B 2017, Can Russia resolve the conflict in Libya? Available from:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/russia-resolve-conflict-libya-170316094138550.html>. [27.03.2017].

³Rogers, D 2016, Chinese consortium to invest \$36bn in Libyan infrastructure bonanza. Available from:

<http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/chinese-consortium-inv7est-36bn-liby7an/>. [27.03.2017].

⁴Cafiero, G & Wagner, D, 2015, *Four years after Gaddafi, Libya is a Failed State*. Available from: <http://fpif.org/four-years-after-gaddafi-libya-is-a-failed-state/> [10. July 2017].

⁵BBC 2016, *Guide to key Libyan militias*, 11 January 2016. Available from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533> [10. July 2017].

⁶Transparency International 2017, Corruption perceptions index 2016. Available from:

https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016 [04 April 2017].

impact on the major income sources of the country with the oil industry considered to be among the most effected ones⁷.

Not less importantly, the role of Sirte has to be mentioned, as well. The city proved to be an important piece in the jigsaw already during colonial times, when Italy—after the era of two political governments, military commands and administrations—finally managed to unify Tripolitania and Cyrenaica by defeating the rebels of the Sirtic Corridor. The relevance of Sirte is indisputable even today. Besides the fact that it was the home city of Qaddhafi, Daesh has also realized its strategic importance, and occupied it. But this turned out in a negative way for the terrorist group as historically opposed militias united against it and liberated the city. The lesson from this once again is that the main problem in Libya is not terrorist groups and insurgencies, but Libyans themselves. “Libyans are winning the battle, not the war. In Libya today, the main threat is not ISIS. It has never been. In Libya, the main problem are Libyans, fraught with internal decisions, just like a century ago. Many tend to perceive the foreign presence—even if decisive for a victory, as in this case—as a threat rather than as true alliance”⁸.

3. Libya and the West

Related to Qaddhafi’s removal, the necessity for the west to intervene by this contributing to the creation of the power vacuum will probably always be criticized. Examining from today’s perspective, there are still arguments favoring both pro and anti-interventionist approaches. President Obama, in his last year of incumbent President defended the intervention by stating out that it was the right thing to do at that time. However, even he admitted the existence of fatal shortcomings in the planning. Precisely, he referred to the “failing to plan for the day after [...] intervening in Libya” as his worst mistake in his presidency⁹. As much as this example might serve with vital experience for researchers of nation and state building, it also has to be observed that nothing signifies more the unpreparedness and—to an extent—naivety of the decision-making of the time, than this honest confession by the previous President. Moreover, the dictatorship provided stability vanished, even if this was not in the interest of NATO MS.

Having mentioned this, it would be inaccurate to state that there were no successful steps made in the direction of reconstruction and nation building in Libya. The UN, for instance stood up as a leading actor and attempted to resolve critical issues affecting the lives of millions. The best example would be the Stabilization Facility for Libya—launched in April 2016—, which aims to provide improvements in citizens’ lives that can be felt in a short term. This includes the rebuilding of critically important infrastructure including roads, “clinics, hospitals, police stations, water facilities, waste water treatment facilities, power grids and stations, etc.”¹⁰. From a humanitarian perspective, this may be even more important than the restoration of a single government since the first palpable effects of that—on the ordinary citizens’ level—might be perceivable only after years. Practicality also plays a role since local authorities, as well as the population are being used to determine the list of priorities by this aiding the work of the *United Nations Development Program* (UNDP) and ensuring that the most in need places and areas top the list. Certainly, this all would not be possible without the generous financial funds offered to these projects by countries such as Germany—being by far the highest single-state contributor—, the U.S., Italy, the UK, Qatar, Norway, Switzerland, the EU as a whole, etc.

As a result of such efforts conducted by UN member states, neither of the governments of Libya were able to take control over the National Bank (amid of a failed attempt last year¹¹), the National Oil Corporation (NOC), and state-owned investment vehicles¹². The relevance of these institutions cannot be debated in a war-torn country where different actors are striving for power simultaneously. And while

⁷GAN 2016, ‘Libya corruption report’. Available from: <https://www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/libya> [19.03.2018].

⁸Fasanotti, 2016, *A house divided: Why partitioning Libya might be the only way to save it*. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/08/18/a-house-divided-why-partitioning-libya-might-be-the-only-way-to-save-it/>. [10 March 2017].

⁹Tierney, 2016, *The Legacy of Obama’s ‘Worst Mistake’*. Available from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/>. [12.03.2017].

¹⁰ UNDP, 2016, *UNDP Libya launches the Stabilization Facility Plan for Libya during the Senior Officials meeting in Tunis*. Available from: <http://www.ly.undp.org/content/libya/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/04/13/undp-libya-launches-the-stabilization-facility-plan-for-libya-during-the-senior-officials-meeting-in-tunis.html>. [27 March 2017].

¹¹Baconi, T 2018, ‘Libya’s rebounding oil sector critical to stabilization’. Available form: http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_libyas_rebounding_oil_sector_critical_to_stabilization[19.03.2018].

¹²Lacher, 2015, *Supporting stabilization in Libya*. Available from: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C36_lac.pdf. [2 April 2017].

money can help their cause, depleting the national revenues might lead to decades long lasting hardships subsequently for the country. To put it another way, these efforts fit well in a strategy of containment of the further escalation of conflict. In addition, they will provide better financial grounds later to the leadership possessing sufficient backing. In the last two years, the number of the openly anti-war communities have increased leading to ceasefires and at many places—mostly in the west and the south—signs of hope for reconciliation have appeared.

Still, it is accurate to state that the fragile victories are often overshadowed by failings. For instance, a deputy leader of the Government of National Accord left his office with the following words: “I announce my resignation due to the failure of the Presidential Council, because it holds responsibility for the killing, kidnapping, and rape that happened over the past year. I don’t think we are unaware of what citizens are suffering, but we are incapable, and I admit that we are failures because we didn’t solve the problems, which are many”¹³. Obviously, the functioning of the Council is far from perfect considering the lack of unity on key issues among members, as well as due to many boycotting the sessions. However, the necessity of guidance and help from the side of the UN is not contested, for without them, Libya’s situation would be hopeless.

4. Current developments forming Libya’s future place in international relations

In light of all these, the question worth scrutinizing would deal with the development of processes regarding the balance of power. Precisely, what actors are conducting any form of activities in Libya, directly or indirectly to increase their influence in the country, and in the region in a broader term? Secondly, what kind of ‘toolbox’ are these actors using? Are these all wholly different, or are there certain similarities? And finally, what is the level of their success that can be monitored at this point? These are the questions in the core of this research. In terms of methodology, Marton’s¹⁴ foreign policy analysis model will be used, inasmuch as when analyzing foreign policy strategies of a given actor, I will take into consideration (1) the officially declared foreign policy, (2) the real foreign policy behavior, and (3) the perceived foreign policy of the relevant states. This model is going to aid the monitoring of real developments in Libya that will ultimately lead to a clear picture of the state of ongoing processes.

History teaches us that wherever instability, as well as a vacuum, arises, some actors attempt to fill the gap, and subsequently aid the cause of restoring order. Translating this to Libya’s case, there is a UN-backed government in Tripoli, which is not free of scandals and its operation is still debatable. The European Union is playing a major role in solving the problems causing the migration crisis and several of its member states are playing an active individual role. On the other hand, the most powerful opponent of Tripoli is General KhalifaHaftar, who controls the eastern part of the country and seemingly have matching interests with the Kremlin¹⁵. Additionally, China is active in the region and has already shown open arms towards Libya, but at this point, its offer is more about preparing for the post-war reconstruction¹⁶.

5. Russia (and Egypt)

The peaceful two decades after the end of Cold War have been followed by a rather strained era not in the old, bipolar but in a multipolar way. This era has been characterized by an increasing number of various crises at different points of the globe. There is hardly a major issue where the international media omits the Kremlin’s position. Also, opposing geopolitical interests with the United States and the West in general often constitute parts of these reports. For this reason, it can be claimed that these major cases (Syria, Ukraine, Libya) are in a way interconnected. Russia’s role in Syria seems to have decided the question of whether Assad would stay in his position or not. In that case, it was obvious that Putin measured the stakes—of losing an ally¹⁷ and losing further influence in the region—high and his official statements¹⁸, as

¹³ Amara, 2017, *Deputy leader of Libya’s U.N.-backed government resigns*. Available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-politics-idUSKBN14M13A>. [27 March 2017].

¹⁴ Marton, 2013, *A külpolitika elemzése*, Antall József Tudásközpont, Budapest.

¹⁵ Pigman, L and Orton, K 2017, ‘Inside Putin’s Libyan power play’. Available from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/14/inside-putins-libyan-power-play/> [20.03.2018].

¹⁶ Rogers, D 2016, Chinese consortium to invest \$36bn in Libyan infrastructure bonanza. Available from: <http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/chinese-consortium-inv7est-36bn-liby7an/>. [27.03.2017].

¹⁷ Cooper, C 2016, *Vladimir Putin revealed to have told Assad: ‘We will not let you lose’*. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/putin-assured-assad-he-will-not-let-syria-lose-civil-war-says-mp-a6987986.html>. [3 April 2017].

well as perceived and real actions¹⁹ supported this since the size of Russian military contribution sent to the country was quick and significant.

Regarding Libya, Russia's role in the stabilization process took an important turn at the beginning of last year, when Moscow expressed its support towards General KhalifaHaftar. This can be regarded as part of the country's declared foreign policy since the commander was welcomed on board of a Russian aircraft carrier²⁰, which was followed his visit to Moscow, meeting foreign minister Lavrov²¹.

What seems obvious is that the Kremlin desires a bigger role in the region and since the UN-supported Tripoli government does not show signs of strength, its strategy is not without potential success. Haftar is one of the most important figures in the war-torn country these years, but he desperately needs military aid in order to succeed. Precisely, the '*commander of the east*' ruled the majority of the country's oil fields and ports but lost control over several locations at the beginning of last year²². Assuming that Russia would be interested in importing Libyan oil, once again, the interests are matching. Looking from the general's perspective, since western powers have already expressed their blueprint with the Tripoli government, turning to Russia—which is generally interested in greater influence in the region, beyond Syria—is a logical move. Not less importantly, a good relationship in the future for these two—in case of a favorable outcome in Libya—would promise a good political cooperation, as well, which would be crucial for Libya, as far as the reconstruction and stabilization processes are concerned, but on the same logic, useful for Russia too.

What is more, as part of a meeting between Haftar and Lavrovin December 2016 in Moscow, Russia allegedly negotiated for a military base to be built in the country as part of the deal (Dockery, 2016). It would be hard to determine the course of the decision-making process of Haftar—if this plan turns out to be real. Namely, he is a warlord seeking power over the full country to unite the peoples and eventually to rule them and as such, he possibly also keeps in mind the fact that if a foreign power's military base is operating in the country that would consequently reduce some amount from his desired sovereign power. However, he can also consider this equation in a different way, taking the constituent of various Islamist groups as a valid threat against which any possible help might come handy. From this perspective, Russia's role in Syria might come as a sufficient reference, since it constantly bombs positions of Daesh and other anti-Assad groups signaling once again that when perceived stakes are high for the Russian leadership, swift and adequate action follows. Importantly, if this cooperation is about to prevail, Libya would turn to be a Russian influenced field on the chessboard.

Another case that has to be brought up is that of Egypt, with which Russia has improved its relations during the past three years. Understanding the fundamental reasons behind Russia's and Egypt's approaching towards each other helps explaining their current standpoint on Libya. It could be appropriate to state that there has been a mutually beneficial course of actions for both Putin and Sisi as the Russian President was looking for allies at a time when its country was severely condemned in the media as a result of what was happening in East Ukraine, while the Egyptian leader could utilize this newly formed friendship besides others to show that his country was not exclusively dependent on the United States when it came to military procurements²³. Sincethen, further agreements were reached between the two, including the one that allows Russian military jets to use Egyptian airspace and bases²⁴, which further strengthens the position of Haftar.

¹⁸Nochols, M, Osborn, A and Perry, T 2017, 'Russia warns of serious consequences from U.S. strike in Syria'. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/russia-warns-of-serious-consequences-from-u-s-strike-in-syria-idUSKBN1782S0> [20.03.2018].

¹⁹Middle East Eye, *Russia sends more military gear to Syria after drawdown claim*, 10 January 2017. Available from: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-amplifies-military-presence-syria-2058695140>. [3 April 2017].

²⁰Reuters 2017, 'East Libya strongman visits Russian aircraft carrier in Mediterranean: RIA'. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia-haftar/east-libya-strongman-visits-russian-aircraft-carrier-in-mediterranean-ria-idUSKBN14V1T2> [20.03.2018].

²¹Reuters 2017, 'Libyan military commander Haftar visiting Russia:RIA'. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-russia/libyan-military-commander-haftar-visiting-russia-ria-idUSKBN1ASOLD> [20.03.2018].

²²The Economist 2017, 'Fighting over Libya's oil ports'. Available from: <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21718892-battle-complicates-already-chaotic-civil-war-fighting-over-libyas-oil-ports> [20.03.2018].

²³Reuters 2017, 'Russia, Egypt seal preliminary arms deal worth \$3.5 billion: agency'. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-egypt-arms/russia-egypt-seal-preliminary-arms-deal-worth-3-5-billion-agency-idUSKBN0HC19T20140917> [20.03.2018].

²⁴Kirkpatrick, DD 2017, 'In snub to U.S., Russia and Egypt move toward deal on air bases'. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/middleeast/russia-egypt-air-bases.html> [20.03.2018].

Not less importantly, restoring stability in Libya is a national interest of Egypt due to geographical reasons. Egypt can perceive the inability of GNA to reach this and just like Russia, it might consider Haftar a potential leader of the future Libya. For these reasons, the *Libyan National Army* (LNA) under Haftar's command is meaningfully aided with weapons and various sorts of equipment by the Egyptian military²⁵. Whether Egypt is legally allowed to do this or not remains one another question. Namely, there is an international arms embargo in place prohibiting weapons and military equipment to be transported to Libya. Nevertheless, fighting Daesh and other terrorist groups in the country are used as legitimization of Egypt's action—which can be considered as a wise recognition of the possibilities in the status quo. In other words, there is a strong Haftar – Russia – Egypt axis, where members share high stakes.

6. NATO

Because of the present military support by Russia and Egypt, the next obvious question: what is NATO's role? If such a topic arises, it is inevitable to mention the role of the United States. However, the Libya intervention belongs to a unique category in the history of the organization. To be more precise, figures of burden-sharing in operations, as well as in the case of general contributions have reflected an increasing disproportionality in the direction of the US in the post-Cold War era. However, the Libyan was a unique case in NATO's history since it was the first major operation (the *Unified Protector*), where the US—although having been a crucial contributor—was not behaving as the ultimate leader of the operation and was not one of those actors carrying the biggest burden²⁶. Remaining at the previous model, one could argue that within a NATO context, the stakes were the highest for France due to the combination of historic and political reasons.

The Libya case has multiple levels of examination from a NATO perspective. The first one is the political level. In this respect, alliance politics proves to be a relevant theory focusing on MS's contribution on a political level. As all states supported the intervention on a political level most likely since they all had interest in enforcing the responsibility to protect (R2P), all of them benefited from the intervention, whether they contributed militarily or not²⁷.

However, only about a third of the MS have in reality contributed to the operation militarily, and this brings up another level of examination: the collective action hypothesis. Although the NATO-led coalition comprised many states' real contribution—including some non-MS's, too—the French leading role was indisputable when it came to burden sharing. A great portion of the literature of burden sharing deals with hypotheses like exploitation theory focusing on free riding exercised by some member states of an organization on the disadvantage of some other, usually more powerful states. Such argumentations were drafted also in relation to this case. Nevertheless, these seem to lack the consideration of other mention-worthy variables such as these same states' contribution to other but simultaneously conducted missions of the organization, the defense spending and capabilities of states, and domestic constraints within MS. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to refer to *Unified Protector* as an example of intra-organization freeriding. Rather, political unity should be appreciated at its real value.

7. China

The motivations of the Chinese leadership both in terms of short and long term goals have been divergent from the above mentioned actors'. Throughout the past decades, stakes were never especially high for the PRC in terms of strategic interests. More precisely, those were merely dominated by the export – import arena. What is more, Libya was not one of the most important trade and investment partners even before the Arab Spring. Having mentioned this, China did purchase 11% of Libya's oil exports²⁸ and had several FDIs in the country during Qaddhafi's reign. Furthermore, although Libya was at most marginally important for Beijing, there have been contracts signed (mostly in the construction sector) for around 20 billion USD

²⁵ The New Arab, *Egypt's regime 'sends military support to Libya's Haftar'*, 23 October 2016. Available from: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/10/23/egypt-regime-sends-military-support-to-libyas-haftar>. [3 April 2017].

²⁶ Haesebrouck, T 2016, 'NATO Burden Sharing in Libya: a Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

²⁷ Shimizu, H & Sandler, T 2010, 'Recent peacekeeping burden sharing', *Applied Economics Letters*. Available from: <https://utdallas.influent.utsystem.edu/en/publications/recent-peacekeeping-burden-sharing>

²⁸ Holan, AD 2011, *Libya sells most of its oil to Europe, not China*. Available from: <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/apr/11/donald-trump/libya-sells-most-its-oil-europe-not-china/>. [4 April 2017].

before the war broke out²⁹. What this suggests is that stakes were not particularly high for China and the only interests it had in Libya were related to financial goals.

Paradoxically, Chinese interests still suffered significant harm shortly after the beginning of tensions due to a falsely chosen strategy. Beijing opted not to help those who rebelled against Qaddafi (unlike many Western states), which was manifested, above all, in its abstention from supporting the UNSC resolution for the protection of civilians in Libya. Moreover, China reportedly was not only willing but was actually attempting to sell arms to Qaddafi in the last phase of fighting between rebels and government forces³⁰. Needless to say that these have not contributed positively to China's reputation in Libya and beyond. Nonetheless, Beijing is zealous to rebuild it and has intention to participate in Libya's post-war reconstruction.

One way to do so is by supporting the country's leading industry: the oil sector. As part of this, Petro China has recently signed a contract with NOC to become one of the first partners of the 'reborn' company³¹. However, risks are still low for China and the patient and cautious approach—shown by the fact that only a short term contract was signed—suggests that the PRC does not want to commit itself at least as long as the political stability is not restored. The question of which party will be able to grab the lead within Libya is not so relevant from a Chinese perspective—or at least not as important as for Russia. This is the reason for the lack of any officially declared foreign policy goal on this matter. In other words, China opted for a win – win situation, inasmuch as it imports oil by this helping the restoration of Libyan economy through the country's most valuable asset, this way also improving its own international prestige. Not least importantly, it can do so without revealing its regional strategy as Libya's position on China's preferred chessboard is remains unrevealed.

8. The case of oil in Libya

Oil and gas related incomes provided the biggest part of national income within Libya until the outbreak of conflicts. To be more accurate, the country's highest ever GDP per capita was reached in 2010 (11933.78 USD), which was followed by the lowest ever number in 2011 (4509.26 USD)³². Serious financial losses were suffered in the subsequent years as a result. Nevertheless, the already mentioned UN-led action by which the National Oil Company's assets were frozen needed to be initiated if the national resources were to be preserved for a later phase of stabilization and reconstruction of the country.

Not less importantly, one has to consider the fact that Libya is a major oil exporting country, an OPEC-member, historically contributing to the world's sufficient oil supply. As such, the events in the country—together with other oil-exporting states' joining to the Arab Spring and the following instability—played a role in the increase of world oil price. In other words, as the tensions increased in the country, the world price reached its peak of around \$120 per barrel. "As of August 2016, conflict and budget shortfalls had caused oil production to plummet to below 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) out of an overall capacity of 1.6 million bpd"³³. Accordingly, one might argue that there is a mutual dependency on the Libyan domestic stability—even if the issue of foreign influence is not decided by this.

From the perspective of oil, the year of 2014 was a turning point for two very important reasons: the rise of tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine and the agreement with Iran and the subsequent lifting of embargoes. These two resulted in a sharp fall of oil prices. Libya by then was on its way to increase its daily production but as the low price hurt many members of OPEC, several voices called for production cut. It has to be mentioned that OPEC is not free of political tensions and for a long time now, there is a lack of unity among its members. This has led to a situation in which on one side there is Venezuela and other MS that demand serious production cut to increase the price, and on the other hand there is Saudi Arabia (favoring market share over price), Iran (after its reentry to the world market) and Libya (in serious need of

²⁹ Sotloff, S 2012, *China's Libya Problem*. Available from: <http://thediplomat.com/2012/03/chinas-libya-problem/>. [4 April 2017].

³⁰ Barnard, A 2011, *China Sought to Sell Arms to Qaddafi, Documents Suggest*. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/05/world/africa/05libya.html> [4 April 2017].

³¹ El Wardany, S and Hurst, L 2018, 'Petro China is said to agree to 2018 deal to lift Libya oil'. Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-01/libya-crude-output-is-said-to-be-stable-despite-key-field-s-halt> [20.03.2018].

³² Tradingeconomics.com. (2018). *Libya GDP per capita: 1999-2018*. [online] Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/libya/gdp-per-capita> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2018].

³³ Blanchard, CM. (2018). *Fas.org – Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*. [online] Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf> [Accessed 11 Jan. 2018].

higher incomes). This is what makes this issue so complex, leading to a scenario where organization politics is at best secondary for many MS, including Libya.

9. Is Libya a global conflict?

Taking into consideration what has been learnt from the lessons of the Arab Spring on a regional level, one characteristic must be mentioned when it comes to the Libya case. Namely, the failure of transition is always highlighted, but there is no mention made on the highly-relevant fact that in that period, there was no foreign pressure forcing the developments to proceed in a preferred way from the perspective of this or these actor(s). Uniquely, what the world could witness was a dictator, who has been toppled by his peoples, which was not followed by any powerful foreign attempt to influence. This has to be stressed since history has provided multiple instances on cases when a new leadership of a state could not consolidate its authority due to such non-domestic related issues. No, Libya—though being situated in the strategically important MENA region in an arguably important period—did not fail to turn to a blank sheet according to the will of great powers. On the other hand, the already mentioned deeply rooted intra-society issues most likely contributed to the hindrance.

Having elaborated on this, the subsequent era must not be left out from the equation. It was probably due to a set of various international events occurring within the region and elsewhere too, as well as since the Cold War not experienced increase of tensions that altogether have led to the reevaluation of strategies. One thing remains without doubt: Libya was not isolated for too long in the big powers' game. One clear sign on this was the strengthening Russian role in the country's domestic matters. Even three years ago, the status quo was wholly different, but around the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine and the stemming international stress, Russia's foreign policy doctrine seemed to have been given a more powerful route, which was manifested in the alignment with general Haftar and the provided support—a clear and multiple-pillar-supported evidence that Libya has been elevated to a prioritized position among the Russian foreign policy goals. But this is not everything, considering the Egyptian role in the region, as well as the current Russian-Egyptian relations that both predict that this tendency is likely to be further strengthening.

On the other side of the coin, one also has to make a mention on the decreasing influence from the side of the European Union as an organization in the same period. However, talking about an alliance of separate states, the wise approach in this case is a non-whole-based one. It is so because as France had the most powerful relationship with Qaddafi's Libya out of all the EU members, the scandal surrounding the elections and Sarkozy, as well as the French leading role in the NATO-bombings—needless to say—were harmful on the relations. There is however an intent from the side of France to play a role in the country's future, which is signaled by its activity in reconstruction related matters, but the problems surrounding that are meaningful, as they were elaborated on above. Most importantly—if the above used foreign policy interest measurer is to be used—, for the EU, as an organization, Libya was not a particularly high priority goal for a long time, which is clearly proven by the fact that Hungary was the only member state that had an operating diplomatic mission in Tripoli throughout the whole conflict³⁴. The debate about the accuracy of this approach started with the intensified migration crisis, which qualified Libya's case a priority. However, due the lack of agreement among states, these actions are predominantly led by separate nations and politicians. Instances include Italy's agreement with Libya's coastguard³⁵, attempts made by the French President Macron for reaching peace³⁶ and Germany's paramount financial support³⁷.

Looking at the other side of the Atlantic, it can be claimed that Libya was not the biggest challenge taken on by the Obama administration. Yes, there were a handful of soldiers in Benghazi in 2012, but in terms of support received and the role they were playing in the country, it seems more appropriate to state that it was not a high-priority mission for the U.S. On the contrary, Syria arguably became one. Finally, in terms of the PRC, maybe Henry Kissinger's book *On China* can be quoted to describe the picture the best. As he composes, the PRC historically has been utilizing the principle of 'still waters run deep'. China only showed up to express a desire to participate in the reconstruction process, something it has been doing in many other

³⁴ EN Ro' zsa, 'Libya and the Hungarian EU presidency', 13 July 2011, at <http://www.hia.hu/pub/displ.asp?id%4TVYBGH>. The first half of 2011 coincided with Hungary's presidency of the EU.

³⁵ Bracken, A 2018, 'A year after the Italy-Libya migrant deal: fewer deaths at sea but persistent abuse on land'. Available from: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-02-06/year-after-italy-libya-migrant-deal-fewer-deaths-sea-persistent-abuse-land> [20.03.2018].

³⁶ Harchaoui, J 2017, 'How France is making Libya worse'. Available from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2017-09-21/how-france-making-libya-worse> [20.03.2018].

³⁷ Cousins, M 2018, 'Germany continues to lead foreign financial support for Libya'. Available from: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2018/01/03/germany-continues-to-lead-foreign-financial-support-for-libya/> [20.03.2018].

parts of Africa, too. It does not initiate comprehensive operations, but it awaits first. Speaking from the perspective of methodology, China's approach clearly differs from the others, but the main issue is still valid: it is cautiously increasing its influence over Libya.

Concluding remarks

To arrive to the concluding remarks, the righteousness of those, who foresaw a long period of unpredictability and instability in Libya after the fall of regime³⁸ has to be highlighted. Today, even after these many years, Libya is an exceedingly vulnerable state, where every small improvement rests on fragile ground. To an extent, the instability of the country is still rooted in the lack of agreement among tribes. But the country is now a figure of interest on the middle of the big powers' chessboard, and predicting this figure's outcome as a result of the implemented strategies of these powerful actors might be an even more aspiring venture than it was before.

Even so, the coming period will be decisive for Libya. As oil incomes are on the rise and exports started to return to normal standards, there really are two possible scenarios: (1) the strengthening economy can either provide the fundamentals for political stabilization and subsequent reconciliation, or (2) it might foster the internal conflicts prompting various groups to initiate a fearless attempt to gain possession over oil fields and the related infrastructure. It is no exaggeration than the outcome will depend on the international actors. To emphasize the seriousness of this issue, more than 80 percent of Libya's oil revenue used to be distributed via the country's major workforce: state-employment. As of today, NOC is responsible for collecting oil revenue and then transferring it to the Central Bank, which is heavily criticized due to the still lacking transparency, resulting in corruption related allegations³⁹. In other words, citing back to the introduction, the problem is not the people but the system itself. Furthermore, this issue will hardly be solved by Libya itself. Without a cooperation of international actors executing controlled and well-aimed assistance to increase transparency within Libya's oil sector would be required.

On the other hand, to indicate a truly realist approach, one has to raise the question: would this be worthy? Precisely, if these groups manage to take control over oil fields, they will do so because they want to trade and they will only be able to do so under the market price. Statistically speaking, Western countries and China used to be the biggest importers of Libyan crude (Italy 39%, Germany 14%, France 9.7%, China 9.6%, Spain 6.9% and Austria 4.1%).⁴⁰ Looking from this perspective, maintaining the tension among the two governments—as long as the supply is safe—would be financially beneficial for these states and for the energy companies. In other words, this is a purely moral question for these actors and in the coming years, they will have huge responsibility over the success of Libya's stabilization but this all will be decided on the chessboard.

To conclude, there is a good chance that the current era of Libyan history will be remembered as an intermezzo, the period of transition. This process was intentionally initiated by NATO countries, but not every subsequent development could be regarded as favorable by these same states. Right now, it is not clear how long this period will last and what the outcome would be. As the country lacks a single actor powerful and accepted enough to take control over the whole country, alliances are being forged. The one with the greatest potential is between Haftar and Russia, Egypt and nowadays France too. The general's strategic movements suggest a wise fore thinking by which power maximization focuses on the oil-rich territories. Without doubt, Libya's greatest asset is its crude and the one who controls the sources and the related infrastructure—and has the necessary contracts with a range of foreign actors—has a great chance to stabilize. At this moment, this is where Libya is at. However, as much as general Haftar has the strongest position, this struggle is far from decided.

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³⁸ Zoubir YH and Erzsébet NR, 2012, 'The end of the Libyan dictatorship: the uncertain transition', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 33, No. 7, 2012, pp 1267-1283.

³⁹ Baconi, T 2018, 'Libya's rebounding oil sector critical to stabilization'. Available from: http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_libyas_rebounding_oil_sector_critical_to_stabilization [19.03.2018].

⁴⁰ Observatory of Economic Complexity 2018, 'Libya'. Available from: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/lby/> [19.03.2018].

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