Libya: Why a New Flashpoint between Russia and the West?

Even though it is already a well proven fact that the core reason for Libya’s present troubles is the NATO intervention that took place in 2011—which was largely a result of cooked up ‘facts’--- the West continues to treat the war-torn country as its exclusive territory of influence; hence, its increasing resistance to the potential or real entry of any new player—particularly Russia—in the country, a development that, if left ‘unchecked’, might very well leave the West with no other option but to see it gradually moving away, much like Syria, from their reach. It is in this context that we must understand the recent Western narrative on increasing ‘Russian engagement and activity’ in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

For the West—the US as well as NATO—a strong Russian (military) presence in Libya combined with its support for Khalifa Haftar will eventually allow for Libya’s transformation into a ‘Russian ally’ and pave the way for a long-term Russian military presence in a region that has hitherto remained out of its reach. This, as the Western ‘concerns’ show, might happen on the same pattern as in Syria where Russian support was/is not only a key factor in defeating Western ‘regime change’ plan but also in allowing it to establish a long-term and a Syrian state sanctioned military presence. For the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves le Drian, “The crisis [in Libya] is deepening. We are facing a ‘Syrianization’ of Libya” [due presumably to the ‘Russian intervention’].

On May 26, a highly unusual statement issued by the US AFRICOM commander showed a ‘Western charge sheet’ against Russian ‘covert military activity’ in Libya “likely to provide close air support and offensive fires” [to the force of Haftar]. Accusing Russia of ‘enticing things up’, the statement further added that “Russia is clearly trying to tip the scales in its favor in Libya.” “Just like I saw them doing in Syria, they are expanding their military footprint in Africa”, added AFRICOM commander.

AFRICOM is obviously not an independent entity and follows Washington. On May 7, a US State Department briefing on ‘Russian Engagement in the Middle East’ laid out the plan for why ‘countering Russia’ in the Middle East, including Libya, was essential for the West to increase its own direct military presence in Libya once again. Russia, as the briefing said, is conducting a “foreign intervention”, which is exacerbating the political divisions in Libya. The statement obviously absolutely disregarded the findings of a 2016 British Parliamentary Report on Libya that said the NATO intervention was not only a misconceived action, but also unnecessarily brought the country to a breaking point. This is besides the fact that the cardinal purpose of the then intervention and the new intervention being sought now was and still is Libyan oil. NATO was as such used not only to overthrow the so-called ‘tyrannical regime’ of Gaddafi but also control Libyan oil through a pro-Western regime.

NATO, as it stands, is already making plans for another intervention. Only this time, however, this intervention is not to bring a regime down but to support a political faction, the so-called ‘internationally recognised’ government of Libya being currently led by Fayez al-Sarraj.

The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, also told Turkey’s Erdogan that “NATO is prepared to help Libya in the area of defence and security institution building, in response to the request by the Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord to assist the GNA to strengthen its security institutions. Any NATO assistance to Libya would take account of political and security conditions, and would be provided in full complementarity and in close coordination with other international efforts, including those of the UN and the EU.”

Accordingly, NATO is already in direct contact with the politician currently occupying Tripoli, assuring him the military alliance’s full support to “find a political solution to the crisis” [a crisis that they themselves had created in
the first place]. Of course, finding ‘political solutions’ is not NATO’s job and the reference to politics is only meant to give a legitimate cover to NATO’s actual business: direct military presence in the country. Accordingly, NATO SG told Sarraj that they are “prepared to assist Libya with building up its defence through direct military presence and weapons] and security institutions” [through their ‘advisors’].

There is no denying that Russia has deep political and economic interests in Libya. However, while Russia has not yet confirmed its presence in Libya, there is little to no gainsaying that the US/NATO are fully prepared to use the myth of increasing Russian presence and its ‘exacerbating impact’ in the Mediterranean as a means to increase their own military presence to help their man in Tripoli. It is no coincidence that all NATO countries, including Turkey, which other remains at odds with NATO and the US in Syria, are on the same page as far as their ambition to consolidate their man in Tripoli is concerned.

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