

The Berlin Conference Showed Europe's Dwindling Influence in Libya

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The recent Berlin conference on Libya confirmed that European countries do not call the shots in that country—something that has become more and more evident over the past months. Almost thirty years after the Balkan wars, when their inaction forced the United States to intervene, European countries are failing once again to tackle and manage a conflict on their doorstep. This time however, a U.S. intervention is not in sight, and other countries are filling the vacuum. This could be a preview of the Mediterranean of tomorrow, one in which old powers (Russia and Turkey) are returning, and new actors (China and the United Arab Emirates) are arriving, all increasingly relevant in shaping the dynamics of the Mediterranean basin. In Libya, this dynamic is very obvious.

Germany hosted the conference after months of prepping and delaying before suddenly accelerating. This was initially envisaged as an opportunity to address external interference in the Libyan conflict and to end to the violations of the arms embargo imposed in 2011. However, the meeting had a much broader yet vague scope, turning into yet another peace conference aimed at initiating a “political process” to preserve “a sovereign Libya” and trigger an “inner-Libyan reconciliation process.”

Some results, such as the agreement on a truce and the appointment of a “5+5” commission consisting of representatives of the two warring sides, which should discuss a more formal ceasefire at the end of this month—are positive, although small steps forward. But the Berlin conference failed to reach its primary goal of putting in place a mechanism to punish violation of the arms embargo. Without this, any truce will be structurally fragile: external actors know that they can continue to meddle in the conflict with no consequences, and Libyan factions have an incentive to use to aim for a definitive victory.

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The latter would be particularly significant for Khalifa Haftar, the eastern-based leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces/Libyan National Army. The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) of President Fayez Al-Sarraj can defend its positions and territory, but it cannot attack Haftar's forces in the east, while

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Haftar, who has always been explicit about his ambition to take Tripoli by force, has minimal incentive to accept anything short of a full victory.

The Berlin conference did put European countries back in the game, and their diplomatic activity that preceded it was a positive step. Yet, their influence on Libyan actors has declined sharply for several reasons: European divisions, above all between France and Italy; the neglect of key regional actors, with Morocco, Qatar, Tunisia, and the Arab Maghreb Union excluded from the conference; and the lack of a genuinely proactive approach. The latter is astonishing.

European countries recently became much more engaged in the Libyan conflict but only after Turkey announced last November its intention to support the GNA militarily and signed a controversial agreement on maritime borders delimitation. Turkey saw this as an opportunity to break its growing diplomatic isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, apparently reversing what it was doing at that time: several Libyan sources say that Ankara had started scaling down its support to the GNA at least since last September. This was a sort of wake-up call for Europeans. However, the situation in Libya needed a more structured, proactive, and intense European action well before last November.

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The three factors mentioned above—internal divisions, the neglect of many local players, and the lack of a more proactive approach—undermine the possibility of a more coherent and effective European approach. They also contribute to the decline in the influence that any single European countries can have on Libyan actors. By contrast, developments of the past few weeks clearly show that Turkey, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates wield real influence on Libyan actors, unlike European countries. For example, Haftar left the peace talks in Moscow without signing any agreement at the urging of the United Arab Emirates, while Sarraj refused to land in Rome because Italy had hosted Haftar before him yet a few days later, he agreed to be in the same city as Haftar as Turkey wished.

Europe's incapacity of exerting influence in Libya will also weaken more and more its role in the broader Mediterranean. As it becomes more multipolar, the region's countries will increasingly engage the returning and emerging powers while having less incentives to engage with European countries.

This is not a positive situation for the United States either. Libya remains a secondary theater for Washington, which thinks that mediating in the conflict is Europe's responsibility. The U.S. Asian pivot suggests an intention to disengage from the Mediterranean region, although the number of U.S. troops there do not yet reflect this. Moreover, divisions within the administration complicate the picture. President Donald Trump has sided more with Haftar while the State Department and other sectors of the administration have a more balanced outlook, even leaning toward the GNA when Russian support for Haftar became more obvious. Finally, the lethal attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi in 2012 still shapes the perception of Libya, preventing the United States from engaging more consistently.

Despite all the problems and misunderstandings of the past few years, the United States and Europe are still bound in an alliance based on common values and, in many cases, shared geopolitical goals. Thus, Washington would welcome a more decisive, proactive, and consistent role in Libya (and in the Mediterranean) for the European countries, which could keep other external influences away. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised Germany for its efforts and leadership. However, the German diplomatic activism was remarkable, but the Berlin conference did not deliver what it promised. The developments on the ground suggest that the truce agreed in Berlin is fragile. As such, such U.S. comments were likely diplomatic more than anything else: the reality is that the European role the United States wants to see in Libya has failed to materialize.

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