

Greece and Libya: A New Maritime Dynamic

by Spyridon Plakoudas

A recent spat between the Greek and Libyan foreign ministers brought to the fore the challenges of Greek diplomacy vis-à-vis Libya. Ever since the two accords between Tripoli and Ankara in November 2019, Athens has been watching with growing discomfort the increasing political, military, and economic influence of Türkiye in western Libya. Abruptly, Greece has awakened to the reality of a Turkish



Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (right) with Fayed Sarraj, of Libya's U.N.-backed government, Istanbul, December 2019. Türkiye's influence in western Libya greatly concerns Athens.

military bridgehead at its southern border. Greece claimed that the two accords violate international law and spearheaded an EU naval mission outside Libya, but this did little to change the status quo in Tripolitania. Athens is now trying to grapple, along with its partners in Cairo and Paris, with the new, deeply unfavorable situation in its backyard.

It is important to explore the pitfalls and shortcomings of Greek diplomacy towards Libya after the downfall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 and analyze with a critical eye the challenges for Athens in Libya with regards to its important, yet overlooked, southern neighbor. This sheds light on the antagonism (short of open conflict) between Türkiye, on the one hand, and Greece and its allies—Egypt and France—in the eastern and central Mediterranean regions.

“Our Brother Qaddafi”

Though an oil-rich country at a stone’s throw from Crete, Libya has never been a top priority for the Greek government. Other countries of the Arab world (e.g., Egypt and Lebanon) eclipsed Libya for specific reasons, for example, the presence of a strong and prosperous Greek diaspora in Alexandria and Beirut. Libya entered the vocabulary of the diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as late as 1984 when the then prime minister of Greece, Andreas Papandreou, engaged in “shuttle diplomacy” between France’s president François Mitterrand and Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi, resulting in the Elounta summit in November later that year.¹ Despite the overt display of affection between Qaddafi and Papandreou, Greece never gained any tangible benefit from Libya with the exception of pro-Greece votes in U.N. fora with regards to the Cyprus question.²

Greece’s Libyan policy in the 1980s and 1990s, best summarized as “our friend and brother Qaddafi” by various left-wing Greek newspapers, was replaced in the 2000s by an abstract idea for a Mediterranean union. Under French president Nicholas Sarkozy, Paris envisioned a loose bloc between the European Union, Türkiye, North Africa, and the Near East under the aegis of Paris.³ Libya participated as an observer country, and Greece

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sought to safeguard its interests and protect itself from Türkiye. However, this Mediterranean union never fully materialized.

Libya would reappear in the Greek media when the country’s aged dictator visited Athens in June 2010 and promised Georgios Papandreou, the son of Andreas Papandreou and then-prime minister (2009-11), to invest a billion dollars in Greece’s ailing economy.⁴ Just like previous promises by Qaddafi, these would prove empty.⁵ However, less than eight months after this visit, Libya would be in the throes of the Arab uprisings and embroiled in the first Libyan civil war of February-October 2011. A second Libyan civil war lasted from May 2014 until June 2020.

Qaddafi responded fiercely to this attempt to topple him, and the armed uprising in Misrata and Benghazi risked total failure. NATO eventually intervened as an enforcer of U.N. Security Council resolution 1973, and, by October 2011, a decades-old autocracy had been overthrown. Paris and London lobbied within NATO in favor of an armed intervention on humanitarian grounds, and U.S. president Barak Obama reluctantly greenlit a military operation. In a clear analogy to the Yugoslav wars (1991-95), it was Washington that saved the day for the Europeans since, alone, they could not tackle even an outdated and outgunned army such as that of the Libyan regime. Greece assisted by offering the military facilities at Souda, Crete, as the launch pad for NATO’s Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector.

1 *SL Press*, Athens, [Oct. 17, 2021](#).

2 Antonis Papandreou, “Metaxu Ideologias kai Pragmatismou: I Exoterike Politike tes Protes Kuvemeses tou PASOK (1981-1985),” MA dissertation, 2009, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, pp. 43-7.

3 Antonia Blanc Altermir and Eymis Ortiz Hernandez, “L’union pour la Méditerranée (UPM): Une approche critique,” *Paix et Securite Internationales*, 2 (2014): 47-64.

4 *To Vima* (Athens), [June 10, 2010](#).

5 Sotiris Kyriakidis, journalist, Athens/Macedonian News Agency, interview, Thessaloniki, Greece, Dec. 28, 2022.

“Arab Spring” and a Debt Storm

After the downfall and death of Qaddafi, most liberals in Europe expected that the Tunisian “Jasmine Revolution,” then an apparent success story for the Arab uprisings, would replicate itself in neighboring Libya. These high expectations rapidly vanished, however, as the country relapsed into violence and factionalism only months after the downfall of the Qaddafi regime. Despite the country’s proximity to and significance for Greece, Athens was powerless to influence events.

Between 2010 and 2015, Athens’ attention was entirely absorbed by the negotiations with the troika of the European Central Bank, European Commission, and International Monetary Fund about its bail-out from the worst debt crisis in its history. In effect, Greece expended its diplomatic capital (and the assistance of its allies, most notably Washington under the Obama administration) only to secure three bail-out packages.⁶ During this period, matters of security and diplomacy took the backseat. The rapid succession of governments did not permit the design of a coherent and sound policy in diplomacy since, between 2010 and 2015, five Greek governments in total were sworn in.

The European Union did not fare any better. Brussels watched uneasily, but



Syrian and Iraqi refugees arrive at Skala Sykamias Lesvos, Greece. The EU launched an operation in June 2015 to stem the migratory flows to Europe out of Libya and Syria.

passively, as Libya was thrust into a second civil conflict (2014-present) and as the black banners of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) were raised over Derna in the Gulf of Sirte. The EU’s almost exclusive concern was not the spread at its doorstep of jihadist terror by ISIS but rather the migratory flows out of Libya and Syria. The EU eventually decided to launch Operation Sophia in June 2015 in an effort to stem the migratory flows (over 1.5 million people in 2015 alone) toward its shores⁷; this naval operation only achieved some of its stated objectives and was replaced in March 2020 by Operation Iirini, an operation with an entirely different agenda, which was meant to oversee the U.N. arms embargo over Libya.

The EU twice attempted to broker a tentative peace deal between the rival Libyan camps: in May 2018, at the Paris summit, and in November 2018, at the Palermo

⁶ Ilias Kouskouvelis, “Krise kai Exoterike Politike,” *Foreign Affairs*, Hellenic ed., Feb. 5, 2012; Constantinos Challounis, “[I Exoterike Politikes Elladas Kata ten Periodo tes Krises](#),” Occasional Paper, University of the Peloponnese, 2017.

⁷ “[Migrant Crisis](#): Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts,” *BBC News*, Mar. 4, 2016.

summit. The two summits were attended by Fayez al-Sarraj, prime minister, Government of National Accord (GNA); Khalifa Haftar, commander-in-chief, Libyan National Army (LNA); Agila Saleh, president of the House of Representatives; and Khalid al-Mishri, head of the High State Council. The two summits were organized by the French and Italians respectively and spotlighted the open competition between them for influence in post-Gaddafi Libya. Lacking any concerted effort on the part of the EU, the two summits achieved very little, and the two rival Libyan camps continued fighting.⁸ Greece participated in the two summits as Libya's neighbor; however, its role was that of a walk-on with Paris and Rome as the protagonists.

Four months after the Palermo summit and ten days before the Libyan National Conference, in April 2019, LNA commander Haftar launched an assault on Tripoli and, in effect, nullified the 2015 Skhirat accord.⁹ The EU condemned the attack but did very little to stop the bloodshed: Paris supported Haftar's LNA whereas the Italians cooperated with Sarraj's GNA.¹⁰ Once again, Brussels could not speak with a single voice about a crisis on its periphery. In stark

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contrast to other rounds of in-fighting in Libya, this one would directly affect the interests of Greece because of the overt intervention of its archrival Türkiye.

Libyan Factions

The two rival camps in Libya represented a set of different regions, tribes, and even political cultures. The so-called Eastern camp was represented by Haftar and Agila Saleh, the heads of the LNA and the Libyan parliament respectively. This camp coalesced the people and tribesmen (e.g., the Awaqir, Obeidat, Barassa, Hassa) of the regions of Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) and Fezzan (southern Libya) under the banner of the fight against Islamism; however, the tribal leaders, in particular, were loyal personally to Haftar and not the eastern camp's institutions or ideology.¹¹

On the other hand, the so-called Western or Islamist camp was centered around the two important cities of the region of Tripolitania: Tripoli and, especially, Misrata. Its supporters originated primarily from these cities and, most importantly, the Islamist militiamen of Misrata and Zawiyah.¹² In stark contrast to their rivals in the east, the political parties and militias in Tripolitania could not agree on a unified leadership due to their endemic factionalism; however, they did receive plentiful support from abroad (specifically Qatar) owing to the prominent role of the Muslim Brotherhood in their ranks.

8 Giovanna de Maio, "[The Palermo Conference on Libya: A Diplomatic Test for Italy's New Government](#)," Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., Nov. 19, 2018; Dario Romano Fenili, "[Italy's New Approach to Libya](#)," Royal United Services Institute, London, Aug. 24, 2020.

9 "[Haftar's Assault on Tripoli: What's at Stake for Libya?](#)" *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), May 10, 2019.

10 Tarek Megerisi and Arturo Varvelli, "[Italy's Chance in Libya](#)," European Council on Foreign Relations, London, June 16, 2020.

11 Alison Pargeter, "[Haftar, Tribal Power, and the Battle for Libya](#)," *War on the Rocks* (Washington, D.C.), May 15, 2020.

12 Jonathan M. Winer, "[Origins of the Libyan Conflict and Options for its Resolution](#)," Middle East Institute, Washington D.C., May 2019.

It should be noted, however, that the loyalties in Libya shifted continuously. For example, the militiamen of al-Kaniyat (in Tarhuna) opposed Haftar in 2014 but allied themselves with him in 2019. Nonetheless, one aspect of Libya's state of affairs remained a constant: the intervention of outside powers.

Türkiye and Russia capitalized on the inaction or indifference of Washington and Brussels in Libya.

Türkiye and Russia Set the Rules

The battle of Tripoli did not progress as Haftar anticipated, despite continued support from outside powers (e.g., Egypt or the United Arab Emirates, UAE) and the conventional military superiority over the militias in Tripoli.¹³ The resulting stalemate offered Türkiye and Russia a unique opportunity to intervene in Libya. This was not the first time that external actors had intervened in Libyan internal affairs.

Türkiye and Russia capitalized on the inaction or even indifference of Washington and Brussels over this new chapter in Libya. Although they supported rival camps in this civil war (Türkiye, the GNA; Russia, the LNA), the two sought and reached an accommodation in Libya. Their actions conformed with the motif of “controlled competition and cooperation” that would occur later on the battlefields of Syria and Nagorno Karabakh. This bond between Türkiye's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russia's Vladimir Putin has even survived the test of the Ukraine war.

The Russian Wagner group deployed its battle-hardened mercenaries in Tripoli in the fall of 2019 to support the LNA's stalled offensive. Under severe pressure, the GNA appealed to Türkiye for urgent assistance

and, despite its initial objections, eventually acceded in November 2019 to Ankara's burdensome terms: a controversial memorandum of understanding regarding the

delimitation of maritime zones and another regarding military cooperation.¹⁴

Around that time, Ankara introduced the concept of the “Blue Homeland”—a term without legal meaning designed by a retired Turkish admiral. With little or no deference to the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which Türkiye has not signed, the proponents of this theory argued that the territorial waters and exclusive economic zone of Türkiye extended far and wide into the Mediterranean Sea. In effect, the maps of the Blue Homeland divided the Aegean Sea in half, despite the presence of numerous Greek islands, and even ignored Crete.¹⁵

The two accords, particularly the memorandum on the maritime zones, angered the Greeks because they directly and negatively affected its national interests. The memorandum essentially erased Crete from the map and united the exclusive economic zones of Libya and Türkiye in violation of basic provisions of the UNCLOS. Athens expelled the Libyan ambassador and, upon the mediation of the French and Emiratis, invited the two leading figures of the anti-

¹³ *Mada Masr Online* (Egypt), [Dec. 17, 2020](#).

¹⁴ Keith Johnson, “Newly Aggressive [Turkey Forges Alliance with Libya](#),” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 23, 2019; Ryan Gingeras, “[Blue Homeland](#): The Heated Politics behind Turkey's New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020.

¹⁵ Aurélien Denizeau, “Mavi Vatan, the ‘Blue Homeland’: The Origins, Influences, and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey,” *Etudes de l’Ifri* (Paris), Apr. 2021.

GNA camp, Haftar and Saleh, to Greece.¹⁶ However, Athens did nothing else to assist the camp of east Libya diplomatically or militarily because it was widely thought that Haftar would eventually win the battle for Tripoli.¹⁷

These two accords were a wake-up call for the newly-elected Greek government of Konstantinos Mitsotakis since they dispelled the idea of a rapprochement with Türkiye's Erdoğan. The four-year term of Mitsotakis would be marked by a sharp deterioration of the already strained Greco-Turkish relations: the two crises in 2020 (the Evros Crisis in March and the Oruç Reis in July) exemplified this dynamic. Meanwhile, the situation across the Mediterranean in Libya continued to deteriorate in the winter of 2019-20.

Despite their occasional differences and competition, Putin and Erdoğan reached an agreement and outsmarted the other actors (e.g., Egypt and France) in Libya. They used their respective influence over the rival Libyan camps to organize a summit in Moscow in January 2020. However, this initiative failed to yield any positive results, mainly due to Haftar's inflexibility. The aged commander was equally intransigent during the Berlin summit later that month. Like the previous ones, this summit was organized unilaterally by an EU heavyweight—on this occasion, Germany. This initiative did not sit



Libyan soldiers in training by the Turkish armed forces, Tripoli, Libya, November 2020. The Turks also deployed weapons to Libya in violation of the arms embargo.

well with every EU member-state. Paris and Rome resented this new German lead, whereas Athens and Nicosia chafed at Berlin for yielding to Türkiye's blackmail and withholding an invitation. This new summit, unsurprisingly, proved a failure: the warring factions paid only lip-service to the agreed ceasefire and arms embargo and, instead, prepared for war.

The other diplomatic initiatives by Cairo and Rome around the same period also failed to yield any tangible results. On the other hand, Ankara utilized the temporary lull in hostilities to reinforce its allies in Tripoli and thus offset Haftar's military superiority. In a flagrant violation of the arms embargo, the Turks deployed the necessary weapons via air and sea (notably, the Bayraktar TB2 UAVs) and Syrian mercenaries for the next, decisive phase of the battle for Tripoli.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Kathimerini* (Athens), [Jan. 24, 2020](#).

¹⁷ Walfram Lacher, "[A Most Irregular Army](#): The Rise of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, Feb. 2020, pp. 28-9.

¹⁸ Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puzstai, "Turning the Tide: [How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli](#)," Middle East Institute, London, Nov. 10, 2020.

Ankara's military build-up alarmed the Greeks and French; upon their insistence, the EU decided to replace Operation Sophia with Operation Iriini. The EU would

focus on containing not the migratory flows out of Libya but the flows of men and weapons into Libya. Ankara criticized the mission as unbalanced since only the maritime flows (i.e., the flows from Türkiye), and not those by air or land, would be monitored. Lacking a clear-cut mandate and the necessary resources, the mission yielded poor results.

By early 2020, it was clear that the Libyan crisis was intertwined with the broader crisis in the eastern Mediterranean. The governments of France, Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, all of which had been affected by Ankara's aggressive behavior, coalesced into a loose, anti-Turkish bloc. However, both Rome and Jerusalem were conspicuously absent from this bloc, each for their governments' own reasons. Another actor, however, joined the bloc: Abu Dhabi. The Turks and the Emiratis had faced off against each other in the blockade against Qatar between 2017 and 2020 and in the Horn of Africa (Somalia and Sudan); now their rivalry spilled over to the Mediterranean, too. In May 2020, the foreign ministers of the new bloc issued a strongly-worded communiqué that denounced Ankara's aggression in Libya and Cyprus. Strongly-worded statements did little, however, to change the balance of power on the battlefields of Tripolitania.

Thanks to a military build-up and guidance by the Turks, the GNA's reorganized and resupplied militias counter-attacked against Haftar's LNA in April 2020 and slowly recaptured the lost territory. Ankara would, indeed, perfect its strategy of

Moscow supported the LNA to increase its leverage over Libya and other players including Washington.

surrogate warfare in the coastlines and deserts of Libya: a new doctrine that Ankara efficiently experimented with earlier in Syria.¹⁹ In May, the LNA's offensive against

the capital collapsed utterly after the Turks seized control of the skies over Tripoli in the so-called "first drone war in history"²⁰ and negotiated with the Kremlin an orderly withdrawal for the Wagner group mercenaries. By mid-June, the GNA advanced eastwards to the gates of Sirte and Juffrah.²¹ At that critical moment, two other non-European powers intervened to contain Türkiye's advance: Egypt and Russia.

Cairo, though never truly supportive of the ill-conceived military adventurism of Haftar in Tripolitania, could not allow Türkiye and the GNA to destroy the LNA entirely (and, by extension, dismantle its "buffer zone" in central and eastern Libya) and capture Libya's "oil crescent."²² As Egypt's president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi publicly declared, Juffrah and Sirte were Egypt's red line. Moscow, which supported Haftar as much as to increase its leverage over Libya and other players such as Washington,²³ stepped in and stopped the GNA's offensive against Sirte and Juffrah in its tracks.

19 Engin Yüksel, "Turkey's Approach to Proxy War in the Middle East and North Africa," *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 4 (2020): 138-52.

20 Walfram Lacher, "[Drones, Deniability and Disinformation](#): Warfare in Libya and the New International Disorder," *War on the Rocks*, Mar. 3, 2020.

21 Pack and Pusztai, "[How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli](#)."

22 *The Gulf News* (Dubai), [June 27, 2020](#).

23 Jalel Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya," *War on the Rocks*, [Jan. 7, 2021](#).

Ankara ordered a halt and did not risk a direct confrontation with the Russians.²⁴ After several rounds of talks, the two countries reached an agreement in Libya just as in Syria a few months earlier. With Haftar side-lined by his two main backers (Russia and Egypt), the road to peace talks opened up in August and an official ceasefire was announced in October. On this occasion, however, Brussels as well as Athens would be conspicuously absent. The governments of Egypt, Russia, and Türkiye would dominate the new political track in Libya.

These developments set in motion a flurry of diplomatic activity by the Greeks. Athens signed two maritime delimitation agreements, one with Italy in June 2020, and one with Egypt in August 2020, and, more crucially, two defense pacts with the UAE in November 2020 and with France in September 2021.²⁵ The two pacts, both of which included a special clause for mutual defense assistance, greatly diminished the alarm in Athens over Ankara's military victory in Libya. But as subsequent developments showed, they did not erase it completely.

The Illusion of Elections

However, the realities on the ground could not be dismissed. Türkiye acquired and



expanded a military foothold in Tripolitania, and the elites in Tripoli depended more and more on Ankara for political authority and legitimacy.²⁶ On the other hand, Greece bet on Haftar and the LNA as the Greek national security advisor lamented.²⁷ In the absence of a coherent policy on Libya, Athens decided to follow Cairo's lead.

Therefore, Athens and Cairo demanded the withdrawal of all foreign forces—a direct reference to the presence of mercenaries from Syria and Russia (and to a lesser degree Sudan) and the advisors and officers from Türkiye.²⁸ The Egyptians, especially, were adamant about a drastic reduction in Türkiye's military footprint in Tripolitania

24 Marc Pierini, "Understanding the [Erdoğan-Putin Duet](#)," Carnegie Europe, Brussels, Aug. 30, 2022.

25 *Ahval News* (Cyprus), [Nov. 28, 2020](#); Spyridon Plakoudas, "[Rosia kai Tourkia](#): Antagonistes, Okhi Ekhthroi," Capital.gr, Jan. 25, 2021; Bruno Tertrais, "Reassurance and Deterrence in the Mediterranean: [The Franco-Greek Defence Deal](#)," Institut Montaigne, Paris, Nov. 17, 2021.

26 Samuel Ramani, "Turkey's Evolving Strategy in Libya: A Winning Gambit for Erdoğan?" *Confluences Mediterranee*, 3 (2021): 49-64; Aron Lund, *The Turkish Intervention in Libya* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2022), pp. 62-4.

27 *To Vima*, [June 24, 2020](#).

28 *Arab News* (Riyadh), [May 6, 2021](#).

because, for Cairo, Libya is an issue of national security. So when Erdoğan decided in 2021 to normalize his strained relations with several key players in the Middle East, his “charm offensive” vis-à-vis Sisi repeatedly stumbled on the issue of Libya: Cairo actually set the withdrawal of Türkiye’s military forces as a necessary condition for a full normalization.²⁹ Even after the so-called “earthquake diplomacy” between Cairo and Ankara in the wake of the deadly earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria in March 2023, the Libyan question, among other issues, still divides them.³⁰

At the same time, a political track had begun in Libya under the auspices of the U.N., Cairo, and Paris (and, thus, Athens indirectly) that supported Agila Saleh and Fathi Bashagha as candidates for the new interim government. However, Mohamed al-Menfi and Abdul Hamid Dbeibah were eventually elected as the heads of an interim administration in February 2021.³¹ The governments of Egypt, France, and Greece supported Saleh and Bashagha because they thought, that if elected, the two would annul the 2019 memoranda between Tripoli and Ankara. In the light of the international community’s commitment and the ceasefire’s upholding, Athens decided to recalibrate its strategy on Libya.

Greece invested heavily on the prospect of elections in Libya (scheduled for December 2021 as per the U.N.’s roadmap

Fair elections could not be organized in Libya for reasons including Türkiye’s opposition.

for peace) as a panacea for its policy woes. According to policy-makers in Athens, a new elected government would negotiate the

withdrawal of Türkiye’s military forces in western Libya and nullify the two accords of November 2019—especially the one on maritime borders. However, this was wishful thinking at best. Free and fair elections could not be organized in Libya for several reasons: the strength of the various militias, the decay of the state institutions, and Türkiye’s opposition.³²

In the context of this elections strategy, Athens cultivated its ties with certain key figures in Libya, most notably Saleh (the head of the Libyan parliament) and Menfi (the head of the new interim administration). Menfi had been Libya’s ambassador to Athens until his ignominious expulsion in December 2019 over the memoranda of understanding between Tripoli and Ankara.³³ Despite the obvious obstacles, Athens lobbied within the EU in favor of general elections in Libya by December 2021. Quite predictably, the elections never materialized and were postponed indefinitely.

This violation of the U.N. roadmap for peace triggered a cascade of events. Saleh, as the Libyan parliament’s head, allied himself with LNA leader Haftar, and elected rival-turned-partner Bashagha as interim prime minister. The new “Libyan triumvirate” was endorsed directly by Cairo and indirectly

29 *Al-Monitor* (London), [June 30, 2023](#).

30 Ali Bakir, “[Egypt-Turkey Normalization](#): Ankara’s Perspective,” Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., Apr. 12, 2023.

31 Mohamed Eljarh, “Analysis: Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Appoints New Government for Libya,” Libya Desk, London, Feb. 7, 2020.

32 Amal Bouhrous, “[Libya’s Electoral Limbo](#): The Crisis of Legitimacy,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Apr. 29, 2022.

33 Angelos Syrigos, Greek deputy minister of education (2019-23), interview, Athens, Aug. 12, 2022.

by Paris, Athens' two key partners. Athens, unable to influence the developments on the ground, followed Cairo's new lead as before.

Libya was now a country with two prime ministers—one in Tripoli and one in Sirte. Soon enough, the boiling tensions between the two rivals erupted into open conflict. In May and August 2022, Bashagha tried to force his way into Tripoli, but he twice withdrew from the capital shortly afterwards when his militias were defeated by those loyal to Dbeibah.³⁴ In September, a short round of fighting in Tripoli further cemented the predominance of Dbeibah in Tripolitania.³⁵ However, still insecure about his position and power in Tripolitania, Dbeibah decided to ingratiate himself with Ankara so as to survive.

In October 2022, the Dbeibah government inked two controversial deals with Türkiye: one on defense cooperation and one on energy exploration. As expected, the two new accords elicited an angry denunciation from Cairo and Athens as “illegal.”³⁶ Athens cited as an argument that the U.N. peace roadmap stipulated that the interim Libyan government could not commit a future government with binding accords. Precisely three years earlier, the GNA's Sarraj signed two controversial accords with Ankara to stave off an imminent downfall of Tripoli at the hands of Haftar; now it was Dbeibah's turn to conclude two pacts with Türkiye's Erdoğan in order to stay in power.

Athens and Cairo inked a memorandum on maritime search and rescue that countered the Turko-Libyan agreement.

Athens countered this move via eastern Libya and Egypt. In mid-November 2022, the Greek foreign minister visited eastern Libya and reiterated the Greek government's official stance that the interim Libyan government under Dbeibah had overstepped its mandate under the U.N. In late November, Athens and Cairo inked a memorandum of understanding on maritime search and rescue that countered the recent Turko-Libyan agreement.³⁷ The timing of the signing ceremony was selected to coincide precisely with MEDUSA 12, an annual drill between the Greeks and Egyptians south of Crete.

Since the start of Fall 2022, Athens has endeavored to utilize its network of allies and partners within the EU to exert pressure on the interim Libyan government.³⁸ The vote in the European parliament in November 2019 against the Turko-Libyan memorandum should be seen in this light. Athens does not count solely on Paris, its traditional partner, to advance its agenda on Libya within the EU. Athens has started to court Rome, a key player in Libya. Although Rome implements its own policy on Libya—often at odds with Paris and Athens,³⁹ the right-wing government in Greece proposed a defense pact to the new right-wing government in Italy, which included a special clause about Libya and the eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁰

34 Reuters, [Aug. 28, 2022](#).

35 Sghaider Hidri, “Libya: [Tough Choices after Bashagha's Failure](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., Oct. 3, 2022.

36 Reuters, [Oct. 3, 2022](#).

37 *Ekathimerini* (Athens), [Nov. 22, 2022](#).

38 Kyriakidis interview, Dec. 28, 2022.

39 Michael Tanchum, “[Libya, Energy, and the Mediterranean's New 'Great Game'](#),” Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid, Sept. 23, 2020, pp. 4-8.

40 Kyriakidis interview, Dec. 28, 2022.

However, unless a shift in the Greek policy towards Libya occurs, such diplomatic maneuvers will only amount to temporary fixes, not long-term solutions.

A Policy Shift for Athens?

Athens faces the stern reality of a Turkish military foothold in Tripolitania and has been forced to formulate a new Libya policy. After the overthrow of Qaddafi, Libya took a backseat in Greek policymakers' minds; their priority was the next aid package by the troika amidst an almost 10-year debt crisis. In reality, Athens was content to delegate the "Libyan file" to Paris and Brussels during its years-long saga with the creditors.

However, the EU did not fare any better in Libya. Though instrumental in the overthrow of Qaddafi, the EU did little to stabilize the country owing to a lack of cooperation and coordination. Even the two EU heavyweights with vested interests in the country, France and Italy, were eventually outmaneuvered by Ankara and Moscow from fall 2019 onwards.

In a nutshell, the Greeks' "Libyan policy" followed this rough trajectory: from "our friend and brother Qaddafi" in the 1980s and 1990s, to the "small wars in our southern neighborhood" in the 2000s and 2010s, all the way to "Türkiye in our backyard" from November 2019 onwards. These ups and downs reveal a lack of consistency and coherence in Greek diplomacy vis-à-vis Libya and the Libyan crisis. However, Athens recently has begun to design a Libyan policy; the establishment of a North African division within the Greek ministry of foreign affairs will be instrumental to this end. Still, the policy needs to be dissociated from the



U.S. marines at the arrival of the USS Iwo Jima, Souda Bay, Crete, May 27, 2021. A Greek naval base will be expanded with U.S. financial help next to the U.S. base in Souda Bay.

troubled Greco-Turkish relations.

Indeed, Athens currently struggles to upgrade Greece—amidst the Ukraine war—into a hub for energy, telecommunications and logistics, and a bridge between the Middle East and Europe. The various projects, e.g., the data cable between Saudi Arabia and Greece or the electrical cable between Egypt and Greece, showcase Athens' aim not only to increase its regional clout and strength but also to decouple its foreign policy from the decades-old Greco-Turkish disputes.

The recent exploratory drills by Chevron and Exxon Mobil south of Crete within the Greek exclusive economic zone—despite the protests of the interim government in Tripoli—reveal a new approach by Athens. With renewed self-confidence by virtue of overt U.S. support, Athens offers Tripoli an apparent choice: either resolve the disputes under the provisions of international law and share in the hydrocarbon wealth south of Crete or miss out on the bounty in the eastern Mediterranean.

These new moves by Athens relate one way or another with the interests of two countries: the United States and Türkiye. The

2021 U.S.-Greece mutual defense cooperation agreement stipulated, among other things, investments by Washington in Greek military bases across the Aegean Sea islands. In accordance, the naval base in Souda Bay, Crete—literally next door to the U.S. naval base—will be massively expanded with the financial help of Washington in order to serve as the second main base of the Hellenic navy after Salamina. Thus, the Hellenic navy will gain the capacity in the near future to project its power in the hydrocarbon-rich waters of the Mediterranean Sea south of Crete and opposite Libya. In addition, the Hellenic navy could use that naval base as a launchpad to oversee energy projects under consideration such as the GREGY Interconnector between Egypt and Greece and the East Med Pipeline—a project that was revived after the recent victory of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.

Ankara views the upgrade of Souda Bay and the strengthened U.S.-Greek military cooperation with unease if not alarm. With the presence of U.S. and Hellenic navies in Crete, the Turks can neither support the doctrine of the “Blue Homeland” nor throw a wrench in the works of the East Med Pipeline—at least not as easily as the decision-makers in Ankara presumed. Despite the

transactional relationship between Washington and Ankara and bilateral tensions over the Kurdish issue, Erdoğan has been careful not to antagonize Biden directly and risk an irreparable rift. This is especially true in the light of recent developments with regards to Ukraine and NATO. Ankara’s alarm explained in great part the war threats by the Erdoğan regime against Greece in late 2022 and the persistent calls for the demilitarization of the islands of the Aegean Sea.⁴¹ However, these calls and threats fell on deaf ears in Athens and Washington.

In the light of these developments, several questions need to be asked: Do these actions represent a policy shift or just a temporary fix for Athens? Will the next government in Athens follow in the current direction or not? Only time will tell.

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⁴¹ Ryan Gingeras, “[Why Erdogan Might Choose War with Greece](#),” *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 5, 2022.