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Foreign Policy Strategies of Russia and Italy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region: a case-study of the Libyan crisis

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: The Russian foreign policy action in the Middle East and North Africa region: objectives and prospects.....	8
1.1: Evolution of the Russian regional presence under Putin’s presidency.....	18
1.2: The conflict in Syria as a catalyst for Russia’s Return to the MENA.....	26
1.3: The future of Russia’s MENA policy: an “Off-shore Balancer” or a “Security Exporter”	33
Chapter 2: The Italian foreign policy action in the Middle East North Africa region: objectives and purposes.....	39
2.1: Evolution of the Italian role on the Mediterranean area under the II Republic.....	47
2.2: Italian participation in military missions abroad: the importance of being a NATO Member State.....	54
2.3: MENA: European, Mediterranean or national challenge?.....	63
Chapter 3: CASE STUDY: The Libyan conflict - origins and evolution.....	69
3.1: Key milestones in the evolution of the Libyan conflict.....	70
3.2: The role of international organisations in the settlement of the Libyan crisis.....	83
3.3: The new venues: the future of the Libyan conflict after the Berlin conference.....	91
Chapter 4: CASE STUDY: The Libyan conflict.....	98
4.1: The Russian Federation in Libya: interests and patterns of involvement..	98
4.2: The Italian Republic in Libya: interests and patterns of involvement.....	105
4.3: Italy and Russia: better together or further apart?.....	112
Conclusions.....	119
Annexes.....	127
Bibliography.....	133
Summary.....	142

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been stroke by conflictual dynamics entailing different levels of escalation and spread over the last twenty years. International actors and organisations have been constantly looking at the region with concern for their own stakes within the region and because of the impact of the conflictual dynamics inside and outside the MENA borders. The MENA region is vast and multifaceted, characterised by deeply complex social and political dynamics that seem to further complicate the transitional period the region has been undergoing.

Staffan De Mistura, the former United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, compared the conflictual reality of Middle East and North Africa region to the situation medical doctors find themselves into in treating a high number of patients presenting brutally dangerous diseases¹. Doctors are often aware of the fact that the cure might not exist yet, however they keep treating the patients to reduce their pain. Similarly, the ideal long-term solution for the complex conflictual dynamics of the MENA region seems far to be found and cannot be implemented overnight. Nevertheless, the international community keeps working in order to reduce the disruptive impact of the hybrid threats coming from the region and pervading it.

A notable amount of those threats are regarded to as a primary objective in the foreign policy agenda for the majority of the states and are often multi-dimensional. They entail not only the traditional geopolitical and security dimension, but also the economic and societal field. The consequences of these threats can spread all around the region and beyond, menacing the security of the neighbourhood and the global stability. Furthermore, their complex nature and potential dangerous effects are such that hardly any state is able to cope with them on their own. To mention the most evident ones: terrorism and extremism, the evolution of the hydrocarbons market, the management of the

¹ Staffan De Mistura, chair of the Pannel *Managing conflicts and stabilisation in a broader Mediterranean*, part of the Mediterannean Dialogues Conference (MED) 2019, organised by the Italian think thank ISPI, Rome, 7th December 2019. [<https://med.ispionline.it/schedule/managing-conflicts-and-stabilization-in-a-broader-mediterranean/>].

migratory process, the issue of disarmament and spread of conventional weapons as well as non conventional ones (with a particular concern towards the nuclear applied to military technology). But also some issues related to the long-term effects of the climate change, such as desertification and water and food security.

It is precisely this complex and comprehensive character of the threats regarding and deriving from the MENA region that drove the attention of this analysis to the theory of multilateralism². In its classical expression, the theory entails three fundamental elements: indivisibility, the existence of generalised principles of conduct and a diffuse reciprocity. As for the first one, it regards how a problem concerning a single state impacts on the community - this can find an interesting dimension with regards to the central case-study to this analysis: the Libyan conflict. The second element is potentially the most debatable and should be perhaps divided into two categories: the general accepted principles of international law and the attention for a peculiar case, as it is extremely difficult to outline some general patterns of actions that would fit different scenarios in equal way, while avoiding at the same time a double standard approach. This is especially true in consideration of the complexity of the MENA region. Third, the fact that actors who chose to move within a multilateral system, expect the benefit of their coordinated action to show on the long run and over a combination several issues, rather than expecting immediate results concerning separated issues, addressed one at the time.

Multilateralism seems adequate to describe the MENA regional background and the approach of both the regional and international players, nevertheless the complexity of the dynamics characterising the Middle East and North Africa region makes the multilateral approach insufficient. A broader multi-disciplinary approach would be more complete in consideration of the fragmented character of the MENA region and the fragmentation of interests of all the stake holders at different levels. This is particularly true in the case of

² Caporaso, James A., *International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations*, the MIT Press, International Organisation, vol 46, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 599-632. [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2706990.pdf>].

the Libyan conflict, which is the central topic to this thesis, due to its complex patterns of national interests and the influence its dynamics have on the regional Southern and Eastern Mediterranean theatre.

The analysis of the Russian and the Italian interests and behaviour in the Libyan context, beyond being particularly interesting for the conflict itself, suits the nature of the studies conducted so far by the author, who attends a Russian-Italian double degree. With specific regards to the countries analysed - Italy and Russia - their stakes into the Libyan crisis were determinant for the choice. Moscow's role has grown progressively to such a stage that thinking of any future scenario excluding Russia would be reductive and probably inconclusive. As for Italy, despite its role of "primary backer" for the Government of National Accord (GNA) seems now to have been obscured by Turkey, Libya is still a fundamental piece of the puzzle for Rome's economic, strategic and social security in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Libya seems to be the ideal case study to verify Moscow's and Rome's geopolitical interests in the regional context of MENA, as well as in the global international scene. Last but not least, the bilateral interaction between Russia and Italy are also taken into consideration. In sum, the main research question of this work goes as following: is there any space for closer cooperation for the Russian Federation and the Italian Republic or is it better for the two to take the distance from each other.

The answer to this main research question and to the secondary ones is researched in four chapters. The first chapter describes the evolution of Russia's foreign policy objectives and purposes in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) over the last twenty years. In doing so, particular attention is devoted to some principles of international law that guide Russia's action on the international arena. Furthermore, Chapter I describes the development of Moscow's system of partnerships in the MENA region and the influence the Syrian conflict has had on Russia's "return" to the region. The second chapter delves into Italy's geopolitical and economic priorities with regards to the MENA region under the Second Republic (i.e. approximately the

last twenty five years). Here, the analysis focuses on the prominent role the Mediterranean area has for Italy's security, as well as Rome's particular devotion for the multilateral dimension of its foreign policy, especially in virtue of its NATO and EU membership. Chapter III and IV, look at the Libyan crisis from slightly different perspectives. The former one focuses on the origins and the evolution of the Libyan conflict, from the 2011 uprisings to the disruptive effects of the Field Marshall Haftar's 2019 offensive. In Chapter III, furthermore, due attention is also paid to the efforts undertaken by the international organisations in tackling the crisis - with particular regards to the role of the United Nations -. International venues, e.g. the Berlin Summit and the behaviour adopted by the stake holders of the Libyan conflict in this context is likewise considered. Finally, Chapter IV, dwells on Russian and Italian interests in Libya and offers an overlook on the cooperation opportunities for Moscow and Rome, within the Libyan framework, but also in a broader scheme of things.

The result of this research aims at giving an insight on the importance of the MENA region for Italy's and Russia's security and for their goals on the international arena. In particular, it is important to bear in mind how both countries are in favour of a multilateral approach to crisis management, that would nevertheless still take into consideration a fundamental factor, i.e. the peculiarity of the local scene, which in Libya is essential.

Finally, this thesis underlines an important aspect of the Russian-Italian relations, that is to say the fact that, despite the objective limits imposed by Italy's NATO membership, Moscow and Rome enjoy a long story of friendly relations and have deep reciprocal economic stakes. Therefore, Italy could be a key actor in bridging between European allies interests and Russia's ones.

Chapter 1: The Russian foreign policy action in the Middle East and North Africa region: objectives and prospects

The goal of this first chapter is to provide an overview of the Russian foreign policy strategy approach towards the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). Priorities and guiding principles in the area, as well as a framework of its chronological evolution over the last twenty years are looked at, with particular reference to the role of the Syrian conflict in pulling Russia back into the Middle Eastern arena. Finally, some space is devoted to consideration of possible future scenarios.

In order to understand the peculiar development of the Russian interests concerning the MENA region a short, yet crucial, premise concerning the general purposes and principles of the Russian foreign policy strategy is necessary, as well as a focus on its practical application. This is useful not only in understanding Moscow's role in the regional system, but also within the contemporary international arena, giving fundamental insight in the assessment of Russia's role, interests and future perspectives concerning the on-going situation in Libya. The main theoretical principles are analysed relying on the Foreign Policy Strategy Concept of the Russian Federation³, that provides an overlook of a strategic, political and economic nature. Moscow's idea concerning the future of the structural trend, the subsequent set of priorities towards the different areas of the world and the use of soft power are equally taken into consideration.

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the pragmatic nature of the Russian Federation as an actor of the international system. In fact, its primary goal is to pursue its national interest, aiming at the protection of its people, as well as its territorial integrity and its position within the current international order⁴.

³ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin on November 30, 2016. [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248].

⁴ *Ibidem*, Chap. I - *General Provisions*, Art. 2-3.

Within this context particular importance is given to the principle *pacta sunt servanda* with regards to the international treaties that are already in place and that Russia is part of.

Two common law principles governing the international arena are deemed as fundamental: the respect of national sovereignty and of territorial integrity of states. Particularly, the former one is complied with in the measure in which no state actor interferes in the domestic affairs of a third country, unless a formal request of support comes from the national government of this latter one. Related to the principle of non-intervention the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P)⁵ acquires importance in the analysis of Russia's renewed assertiveness in foreign policy, as well as concerning the developments of the Libyan crisis. The principle of territorial integrity, instead, deals with the respect and maintenance of the national borders and it has been considered a constant trait of Russia's action since the Tsars era⁶, seen also the notable extension of the Russian (or Soviet) territory.

It is important to remark how both principles have constituted source of disagreement with the West, mostly due to divergences concerning the

⁵ The Responsibility to protect (R2P) is a concept conceived within the United Nations framework, following the failure in responding efficiently to the facts in Rwanda and in the Balkan Wars, together with the need, underlined by then Secretary General Koffi Annan to shape a new, effective and comprehensive concept of collective security, that is able to enhance the principles of the UN Charter on a practical level. The R2P refers to the idea that sovereignty entails responsibility, therefore any state is directly responsible for the protection of its own citizens. Subsequently, any state that is unable or unwilling to comply with this principle or if the state itself is the perpetrator of violence against its own citizens, then the responsibility towards them shifts into the hands of the international community, under the principles enshrined *sub capitulo* VII of the UN Charter. Following the 2005 high-level UN World Summit, all Member States committed themselves to this principle, signing the A/RES/60/1; nevertheless, disagreement regarding the implementation of the R2P third pillar still profoundly divides the international community, especially with reference to the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, also considering their power within the UN Security Council (which disciplines the R2P applicability).
[<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>].

⁶ With regards to the Tsarist era this trend is usually referred to as *expansionism* and it can be described as a combination of a push towards the access to a warm sea and the wish to protect Russia's security through the use of territory, in consideration of the absence of natural barriers at its borders such as mountains.

Donaldson, Robert H., and Noguee, Joseph H., and Nadkarki, Vidya. *The Foreign Policy of Russia - Changing systems, enduring interests, fifth edition*, Chap. 2 *The Tsarist Roots of Russia's Foreign Policy*. First Published 2014 by M.E. Sharpe. Published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 30-32.

legitimacy of some forms of humanitarian intervention⁷. Moreover the measure in which one principle might - potentially - undermine the other one⁸ is also a source of controversy. The principal source of Russian scepticism and disagreement with the West regards the third pillar of the R2P concept and is related to the above-mentioned principles and the use of force by third states. It is Russia's opinion that the intervention for the purpose of protecting human rights has been largely exploited by Western powers, mostly the US, as an excuse to extend their influence⁹.

The Russian foreign policy strategy relies on another fundamental principle, that goes together with its pragmatism and renewed assertiveness, i.e. its self-identification as a security provider, a reference for granting stability on both a regional and international level¹⁰.

Furthermore, Russia considers a multipolar order to be the right path to pursue in a moment when the world order is clearly in the process of being built (or re-built) and the international arena sees a paradoxical mix of fragmentation and high interconnection; seen the decline of the American "super power" on the one hand and the progressive affirmation of emerging actors (among which Russia needs out of doubt to be considered) on the other hand. Overall, when speaking of the Russian Federation and its position in

⁷ The modern concept of R2P reposes over three fundamental pillars, i.e. 1) states carry the primary responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (atrocities crimes), and their incitement; 2) the international community has a responsibility to encourage and assist states in fulfilling this responsibility; 3) the international community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes. If a state is manifestly failing to protect its population, the international community must take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the UN Charter [<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/responsibility.shtml>]. With regards to the latter point, Russia remains highly sceptic towards the means at the disposal of the international community, especially on the way any potential intervention shall comply with what the UN Charter states.

⁸ Examples of this are out of doubt represented by issues emerged within the international community, following the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, entailing the proclamation of the Republic of South Ossetia, as well as the Ukrainian crisis. Both dossiers still divide the world profoundly, with particular relevance as for Moscow on the one side and Brussels and Washington on the other.

⁹ Nikoghosyan, Hovhannes. *Great Power Interventions and the Future of Responsibility to Protect*. Valdai Discussion Club - Valdai Papers, No. 74, August 2017. [<https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-74-great-power-interventions/>].

¹⁰ Mamedov, Ruslan. *Russia as a Security Provider in the Middle East: Understanding the Limits and Opportunities*. Institut für Sicherheitspolitik, 12th August, 2019. [<https://www.institutfuersicherheit.at/russia-as-a-security-provider-in-the-middle-east-understanding-the-limits-and-opportunities/>].

international affairs, its fundamental characteristic of being a nuclear power¹¹, as well as its permanent membership - entailing veto power - in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) deserve primary attention, seen how those conditions shape its action. Indeed, both prerogatives - inherited from the Russian Federation (RF) at the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 - can be observed as constant leading principles in the evolution of Moscow's foreign policy strategy since the early 2000's. Further constant features are the following: Russia's already mentioned huge territorial extension, together with its richness in natural resources (on which Russian economy is highly dependent), the prerogative of being a nuclear power and the subsequent interest in regulating the issue, which goes together with the permanent membership of the UNSC and the veto power within the body (largely used by Moscow).

All this said, some peculiarities have changed since the early 2000's, mostly relating to a shift in the internal situation in Russia, which in fact evolved from being a country recovering and reconstructing its institutional and economic tissue after the USSR dissolution to the current status of world-leading power. Despite some differences, it results accurate to affirm that overall the evolution of the foreign policy strategy over the last twenty years results coherent with the above-mentioned principles. We can distinguish three main phases, corresponding respectively to the first decade of the new millennium (from 2000 until 2008) with Vladimir Putin's first two presidencies; a second phase corresponds to Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (from 2008 to 2012) and the third one to Putin's third and fourth mandates as President of the Russian Federation (from 2012 to present).

The very first phase is characterised by the need for the newborn Russian Federation to affirm its power on the world arena, seeking at the same time a

¹¹ The regulation of this particular point is treated under Chap. III - Strengthening international Security, Art. 27 of the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (*Ibidem* footnote numb. 1, Chap. 1).

push towards a new identity that would mark the cut with the Soviet past¹². The maintenance of a close relation with former Soviet Republics and the securitisation of the post-Soviet space constitute the basis for the affirming idea of Eurasian integration¹³. Despite its important focus on matters of domestic politics and regional security, the Russian Federation deems extremely important the relations with the West in this first phase, especially concerning the weapon regulation regime and the struggle against international terrorism. As a matter of fact, Russia responded promptly¹⁴ to the United States call for support following 9/11, having Moscow experienced itself the scourge of terrorism on its own soil. Even though the trust towards the Western coalition appears as quite solid during this period, the relationship is haunted by profound disagreement over the NATO conduct during the 1999 Yugoslavia Campaign, as well as its enlargements, following which Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic become members of the organisation in 1999. In 2004 Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia became members of the Atlantic Alliance. This second enlargement eastwards is perceived as even more threatening from Moscow, seen that three countries out of six are former Soviet republics, which makes NATO action a violation of the fundamental red lines of Moscow's security¹⁵. Furthermore, it is in this phase that the

¹² "Russia lived under the communist doctrine. It would be a mistake not to recognise the unquestionable achievements of those times. But it would be an even bigger mistake not to realise the outrageous price our country and its people had to pay for that Bolshevik social experiment".

Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich. 1999, first paper published as President of the Russian Federation.

¹³ The idea of Eurasian integration was firstly formulated by Evgeny Primakov during his Foreign Ministry mandate (1996-1998) and was resumed by Vladimir Putin as he became Head of State of the Russian Federation. The idea underlines the importance for Russia to maintain peaceful relationship and close bonds with the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, proceeding in the integration of the territories, in order to create a system that would unite Europe to Asia, the so-called Eurasian integration. During the 90's the idea was implemented, following the need to maintain the stability in the area with the settlement of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which main task consisted in making the post-1991 transition easier for the former Soviet Republics, to whom Russia saved very close bonds (mostly of economic nature) and vice-versa. Overall the initiative might be defined as successful, as the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) show, even though some countries that were originally part of the CIS left the organisation, e.g. Moldova, Uzbekistan and Ukraine.

¹⁴ Markedonov, Sergey M, and Suchkov, Maxim A. *Russia and the United States in the Caucasus: cooperation and competition*. Caucasus Survey, 27th February, 2020. [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23761199.2020.1732101>].

¹⁵ The potential NATO membership for former Soviet republics was declared unacceptable already by Evgeny Primakov in 1997.

post-Soviet space equilibrium is stroke by the so-called colour revolutions, a wave of popular upheavals that took place in Georgia (with the 2003 “rose” revolution), Ukraine (with the 2004 “orange” revolution) and Kyrgyzstan (with the 2005 “tulip” revolution). Russia did not see these events as spontaneous, on the contrary, they were perceived as attempts to overthrow weak leaders through the leverage of the desire for democratic rights and piloted from the outside, recurring to external resources¹⁶. Vladimir Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy became iconic. The Russian president underlined Moscow’s dislike for unilateral actions, pointing out the need for rethinking the architecture of global security in a more comprehensive way¹⁷.

The second phase is characterised by a shift in presidency, seeing Dmitry Medvedev as Head of State, while Putin is Prime Minister. During this period Russia’s role in the world affairs is almost fully restored at the status USSR had before its break-up in 1991. Yet, Russia operates in a completely different framework, as the world order, that has seen the affirmation of the US “super power” and the unipolar moment right after the end of the cold war starts now to be challenged¹⁸. During this phase the relational dichotomy between the concept of indivisible security and the strengthening of the non-intervention principle acquires importance. The former one is a notion promoted by Medvedev and later on enshrined on the 2013 Foreign Policy Strategy Concept

Black J.L. *Russia and NATO Expansion Eastwards: Red-lining the Baltic States*. International Journal, vol. 54 No. 2 (Spring 1999), Sage Publications, p. 250.

¹⁶ Bordyuzha, Nikolay. *The Myths and Reality of Colour Revolutions*. Valday Discussion Club, 24th January, 2014. [\[https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the_myths_and_reality_of_color_revolutions/?sphrase_id=603090\]](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the_myths_and_reality_of_color_revolutions/?sphrase_id=603090)

¹⁷ Speech and the following discussion at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10th February 2007. [\[http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034\]](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034).

¹⁸ From the Russian part, the turning point concerning the structural trend and the relations with the West reaches its first peak in 2007 when Putin casts his notorious Munich speech. Although the roots of mistrust and discontent in Washington’s actions are to be looked for in the American campaign in Afghanistan in first place (2001), in the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (2003) following it and in the NATO progressive enlargement Eastwards that arrived too close to Moscow’s red lines in Eastern Europe and expressed a concrete threat in Russia’s eyes with the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine. The American policies of engagement outside the US boarder became progressively more and more controversial, both home and abroad, especially with regards to the financial *coté* (for the Congress and the American people) and their legitimisation in the eyes of the rest of the world. Further details concerning this topic will be addressed later on in this chapter.

of the Russian Federation¹⁹; it implies the affirmation of the interconnection between the security of Russia, the surrounding region (the so-called “near abroad”) and the Western European neighbourhood. The principle of non-intervention refers to the formulation and implementation of the R2P²⁰ and starts finding particular importance seen the evolutions in a number of relevant crisis scenarios that might not have directly concerned Russia at that moment, but that constituted a precedent for future developments.

Indeed, the US-Russia short happy marriage (already stroke by Washington withdrawing from the 1972 ABM Treaty in 2002²¹) came to its conclusion following the launch of the Anglo-American campaign in Iraq²², and NATO 2009 enlargement. Despite the importance of the concept of indivisible security, the mistrust extends also to the relations with the former other side of the iron curtain, due to European Union expansion eastwards and the Eastern Partnership proposal. Despite this, the most consistent threat still comes from NATO. In general, this moment is characterised by a double tendency in Russia’s foreign relations both within Eurasia and in the rest of the world. Indeed, on the one hand we have the unhappy parenthesis of the Georgian War (2008) haunting the stability of the CIS space and the flourishing development of regional positive relations. On the other hand, Russia develops customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan (established in 2007), underlining the strength of the relations with the two countries.

Under these premises Russia enters the third phase, where its position as a world power is almost fully assessed, together with the progressively growing hypothesis of the need to shape a multipolar world order, advocating the respect for the emerging centres of power. The post-Soviet space remains

¹⁹ [<https://www.voltairenet.org/article202037.html>].

²⁰ Already discussed, see footnote number 3, Chap. 1.

²¹ The United States of America withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (widely known as ABM and signed between the USSR and the US in 1972) under the Bush administration in 2002, with the claim that the system was no longer sufficient to protect the security of the American citizens, obviously triggering Moscow’s concerns right at the middle of the two countries short happy marriage. Neilan, Terence. *Bush Pulls Out of ABM Treaty; Putin Calls Move a Mistake*. The New York Times, 13th December 2001. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/13/international/bush-pulls-out-of-abm-treaty-putin-calls-move-a-mistake.html>].

²² Russia actually vetoed the UN Security Council Resolution that proposed the campaign.

Russia's primary concern, as a set of diplomatic initiatives show²³. Furthermore, geopolitically Russia is more inclined in looking eastwards, both due to the increasing vibrant geopolitical dynamics characterising the area (with particular regards to the South China Sea) and to the worsening of the disagreement with Western Europe and NATO, that reached its peak in 2014, following the referendum in Crimea and the Euromaidan protests in Kiev, that triggered the Ukrainian crisis. The most remarkable feature of this moment is the beginning of a rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, on both a regional (CSTO and SCO) and global (BRICS system) platform, marking the starting point of one of the most debated partnerships in the XXI Century.

Observing the evolution of Moscow's behaviour and priorities on a global and regional scale is fundamental in understanding its strategy and interests in the Middle Eastern chessboard. The first point to be made clear is the fact that albeit the Middle East and North Africa region does not constitute an area of primary concern for the Russian Federation, it has always been regarded to as relevant, for its complex and vibrant dynamics can potentially impact the domestic and regional security of Eurasia. Moreover, following its renewed assertiveness and pragmatism in foreign policy strategy, Russia's attention has been driven back to MENA for economic, strategic and geopolitical reasons,

²³ First and foremost the establishment of the *Commonwealth of Independent States* (CIS) itself, initiative proposed in 1991 as a diplomatic mean to smooth the transitional process of USSR dissolution and to avoid controversies among states in the Post Soviet Space. Today CIS involves nine Member States: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

With the perspective of maintaining peace and regulating regional relations, further extending into the security and military sphere, CIS countries (excluding Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan) came together to form a military alliance: the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation* (CSTO), formally settled in 2002 with a strong Russian push. The treaty advocates a peaceful resolution of the controversies among its parties, as well as a mutual assistance clause quite similar to Article 5 of the NATO Charter.

Last but not least, the *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (SCO), originally settled in 2001 by the so-called Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) plus Uzbekistan, that joined later, was thought as a mean to resolve any dispute by peaceful means and to prevent separatism and secessionist trends. It has evolved consistently over the last twenty years and became progressively more and more institutionalised. Nowadays, SCO activities include joint military exercise and a high degree of cooperation in counter-terrorism, opposing extremism and separatism, together with economic cooperation between its members. [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/commonwealth-of-independent-states-comunita-degli-stati-indipendenti_%28Atlante-Geopolitico%29/; http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/collective-security-treaty-organisation-organizzazione-del-trattato-di-sicurezza-collettiva_%28Atlante-Geopolitico%29/; http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/shanghai-cooperation-organization_res-827f66b5-00a4-11e2-b986-d5ce3506d72e_%28Atlante-Geopolitico%29/].

more than for merely political purposes (as it was during Soviet times). The drivers of Moscow's action in the area are coherent with the above-mentioned principles enshrined in the 2016 Foreign Policy Strategy Concept²⁴, the first one being the wish to build a multipolar world order, where Russia is one of the centres of power. Secondly, a certain tendency towards regionalism as the best way to solve issues has been observed in Russia's preferences concerning the address of the complex management of the international system. Not only is regionalism regarded as the best way to regulate the international arena, but also it fits perfectly in the regulation of peculiar MENA dynamics. Relating to this comes the third guiding principle, i.e. Russia's aversion to the practice of regime change, especially if operated from outside the country in question. Last but not least, for its geographic proximity, as well as for a certain degree of cultural affinity between the MENA and the post-Soviet space Central Asian and South Caucasus states, it is Russia's high concern to assure stability of the area, especially following the turbulence that emerged in the whole region following the uprisings commonly known as the Arab Spring. In fact, Russia fiercely opposes the one size fits all perspective towards western values in third countries and looks with suspicious and deep concern to the attempts to export the democratic model²⁵ and the mise en place of secular governments that hardly can find societal legitimisation and turned out to be insolvent in several occasions.

On a purely pragmatic perspective, the Russian penetration into the region entails, *inter alia*, a considerable strategic advantage, that is to say the appealing geopolitical opportunity of gaining direct access to the Mediterranean sea. Secondly, Russia's role as a mediator in the region will contribute to its plans for the shaping of the future world order, allowing at the same time Moscow to gain diplomatic prestige. Finally, probably the most strategic driver: security and the struggle against terrorism, which will serve

²⁴ *Idem* footnote Numb. 1.

²⁵ According to President Putin, the Russian Federation experienced "this misleading conception on its own skin", which led to the critical situation in the North Caucasus in the 1990's. (*Ibid.*, footnote numb.7, Chap. 1).

Moscow's purposes of protecting its own citizens (being it the case both home and abroad) and saving stability and rule of law, not only within the post-Soviet space, which is Russia's highest priority field, but also within national borders²⁶.

As already said, Moscow also has relevant interests in the MENA entailing opportunities of mutually beneficial cooperation, for both Russia and the locals, first and foremost in the energy market, with special regards for the production and retail of hydrocarbons. It is true that at first glance Russia and MENA countries may result rivals in this business, yet a policy coordination, e.g. in the international organisation framework of OPEC could turn the tables in favour of a precious partnership. Not to mention how this stability constitutes a valid support in and a potential alternative to the swinging conditions of the European market. Secondly, the weapon industry assumes a relevant place: although the best customers for Russia still remain India and China, keeping a door open in the MENA market will allow Russia to diversify its buyers, avoiding any potential dependence on Beijing and New Delhi. Furthermore, MENA assumes particular interest for the Kremlin with regards to the food and agricultural sector, constituting a huge hub of resources, as well as an interesting source of possibilities for the settling of agricultural holdings. Similarly, the last field of shared benefits is the infrastructural system, with particular attention to the rail road sector where Russia can offer both expertise and a potential alternative to the Chinese One Road One Belt initiative, whilst MENA countries hold a strategic position that tempts Russia's geopolitical pushes.

To conclude, what is important to understand about the Russian action in the Middle East North Africa is whether the Kremlin is pursuing a great strategy in the area. All considered, affirming that Russia is pursuing a grand strategy in the MENA region would be inaccurate, due to the fact that the area is not one of primary interest in the Russian international relations agenda.

²⁶ With particular regards to some North Caucasus regions, which already experienced the plague of extremism and radicalisation, sometimes exacerbated to such a scale that they led to war, e.g. Chechnya.

Nevertheless, if we take into account MENA as a part of a larger frame, in which the Russian Federation is currently acting, we will seize the importance of this region for Moscow, particularly in assessing a multilateral perspective that aims at gaining better opportunities of economic and strategic cooperation, with special hope for a more stable future for the MENA.

1.1: Evolution of the Russian regional presence under Putin's presidency

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has been seeking an inward-looking behaviour for roughly a decade, due to the fact that the priority was given to internal economic and political reconstruction, as well as the consolidation of the system of regional relations with the Eurasian countries. This introspective phase, though, has not lasted for a long time, hence already at the very beginning of the current century, in correspondence of Vladimir Putin taking the wheel of the country, the Russian presence abroad starts its take back.

With particular regards to the Middle East and North Africa region, where Moscow involvement is deeply rooted in history, its peculiar evolution seems to have gone hand in hand with the affirmation and consolidation of Putin's leadership at the Kremlin. The Russian Federation has reached such a level of importance that in the last months growing hypotheses have been made concerning the fact that Moscow's final aim is to replace the US presence in the area, also considering how Washington seems to be cutting down on its engagement abroad, e.g. President Trump's decision to withdraw some American troops from Syria. Moscow, on the contrary, is looking for constructive and economically profitable partnerships in the region, as the analysis in the first chapter shows. Therefore, it is deemed more accurate to assess that Russia's goal in the MENA region is to obtain equal status of

regional power broker²⁷ with Washington, more than winning the area in an exclusive way. In fact, such an assessment has a cold war flavour more than a XXI Century one.

As mentioned, the core draw-back to the region has developed progressively over the last twenty years and is coherent with the evolution of the Moscow's foreign policy strategy. Hence, the Russian presence in the MENA region follows similar phases from the year 2000 to present. In general two macro-moments can be distinguished: from the early 2000's until 2010 and from 2011 to present.

During the first decade, the Russian Federation has been still very careful concerning power extension and engagement outside its periphery. Indeed it would have not been wise to look outside its immediate neighbourhood, seen the temporary lack of resources and governance issues at home. Not to mention the fact that the post-Soviet space was still dealing with the consequences of the USSR dissolution process and the settlement of fifteen new states, which led in many cases to crisis situations that are not totally solved yet today²⁸. Also, in the earliest 2000's the security of Russia itself was hardly tested with the second Chechen War²⁹. It is evident how domestic issues of this character

²⁷ This is the definition provided by Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss in their article *A brief guide to Russia's Return to the Middle East*, Carnegie - Endowment for International Peace, October 24th 2019.

[<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>].

²⁸ This refers to the so-called *frozen conflicts* within the Post-Soviet space: a series of civil wars or intra-state conflicts, that took place mostly during the earlier 1990's and that are characterised by the fact that in many cases they still lack a final, effective settlement today. Thus, they are referred to as *frozen* because, even though there has not been any violent episodes in recent years, a final resolution has not been provided yet, making new potential escalation a likelihood to be considered.

²⁹ The official name of “Контртеррористическая операция (КТО) на Северном Кавказе” (Counter-terrorism operation in North Caucasus) given by Moscow to the Second Chechen War is quite iconic and makes it evident how relevant and concerning the whole Chechnya question has been in terms of internal security. The campaign officially began in September 1996 when the Russian military restarted the bombings on the region, following the clashes, started by Chechen rebels, who were joined by international jihadist militants, on the Chechnya-Dagestan boarder during the summer. The conflict officially lasted until 2009, when then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared that the situation had been normalised. Despite this, isolated episodes of violence, sometimes involving even civilian killings, have not stopped. The main difference between the first and the second Chechen campaign is that the former one saw a clash between Chechen nationalist rebels and federal forces, therefore the core of the conflict was secession. On the contrary the second campaign saw a great number of international terrorists infiltrated into Chechnya, entailing a shift in the agenda. Managing Chechnya for Moscow is no longer a matter of territorial integrity, at least not at this stage. The most worrying issue is the terrorist claims for Chechnya being part of the virtual global caliphate (Islamic State). This is precisely what connects the whole Caucasus area, as well as Central Asia, to MENA and

have absolute priority on playing any kind of game of power projection on the international arena. Moreover, the painful memories of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan were still alive and made Moscow extremely reluctant in engaging outside of the national borders.

Another relevant point to be looked at is constituted by the relations with the West. The first decade of the 2000's can be divided into two different moments, the first one characterised by good intentions and purposes for cooperation, being Russia and the United States temporarily united by a common enemy: Islamic terrorism. In contrast, the second moment sees the beginning of a progressive distancing of the Kremlin from the Western powers, triggered by the 2003 and 2004 Orange Revolution in Georgia and Ukraine, finding recognition in Putin's words at the 2007 Munich Conference and culminating after the Georgia - South Ossetia conflict in 2008.

In the second phase the climax of mistrust and suspicious keeps rising and is worsened by two main events: the 2011 uprising wave in the MENA, known as the Arab Spring, that together with electoral protests in Moscow, constitute a relevant precedent of political concern for Russia. The second element is crucial for the rupture with the US and the European powers and is constituted by the 2014 referendum in Crimea, that followed the Euromaidan protests in Kiev and the self-proclaiming of the autonomous republics of Donetsk' and Lugansk', triggering the Donbass War. Moscow openly opposed Brussels' and Washington's support to Kiev and the Western powers reacted by sanctioning Russia. The 2014 events are a turning point on international and domestic fronts, for, beside widening the division with the West, they boosted Putin's popularity in Russia, along with creating ground for the Russian intervention in Syria (2015). The coherence of this time line is also proven by the evolution of the Russian military expenditure over the last twenty years (Annex 1), in which a peak is observable in 2015 with over 80,000 million USD expenditure from the Russian Defence Ministry.

makes the maintenance of order and the *status quo* in this latter region such a concerning issue for the Russian Federation.

Therefore, the second decade opens with a general feeling of renewed mistrust and rivalry with the West, in parallel with Russia's realpolitik tendency in foreign policy that currently characterises it, together with larger resources and a more stable internal situation. Those elements, united with muted global system circumstances, contributed to encourage Russia in its push towards a revision of the structural trend, advocating a greater role for itself in a multilateral international relation context. To achieve this goal, prestige in conflict mediation and resolution is needed and no region in the world seems to serve richer occasion to do so than MENA. This, together with the need to keep its neighbourhood pacified³⁰, turns out to be crucial in Russia's eyes. Russia can surely not ignore the geographical element (Annex 2), hence the territorial proximity of MENA with the post-Soviet space is factual, encompassing several ex-Soviet countries that have been going through sensitive situations and that boarder with equally delicate Middle Eastern countries³¹. That is why geography is crucial in understanding the strategic and geopolitical driver of the Russian presence in MENA, furthermore, it helps understanding why, over the last decade, Putin has deemed it so important to develop a system of friendly relations with the main players in the area, not only as a reaction to the cooling of the relations with the West.

The top players with whom Putin assured to boost Russian relations are Iran, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia³². All the above-mentioned actors can be analysed separately in the constitution of their bilateral relations with Moscow.

With regards to the Islamic Republic of Iran, we can observe a belated development of careful bilateral relations with the Kremlin. In fact, the core

³⁰ It is a Russian traditional trend to exploit its territorial extension as a shelter towards the presence of its rivals around its borders, this has been a constant since the Tsarist era, seen that Russia has no natural barrier such as mountains protecting its western and southern edges. [*Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 6].

³¹ It is the case, for instance, of Georgia and Armenia with Turkey or, even more evident, Armenia and Azerbaijan with Iran. This latter one, together with Afghanistan involves wide borders with Turkmenistan. Furthermore, Afghanistan shares its borders also with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (where the largest Russian basis in the post-Soviet space are still present).

³² Nakhle, Carole. *Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Chap. 3), *Russia's Return to the Middle East - Building Sand Castles?*, edited by Popescu, Nicu and Secieru Stanislav. Chaillot Paper, July 2018, p. 32.

starts only in 2015, when the establishment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) awakens the two from a tendency to reciprocal non-consideration that has characterised their relations in the previous years. A certain degree of cooperation is appreciated by both, yet the relations between Moscow and Tehran cannot be defined as a close partnership, status that does not interest any of the two. Their reciprocal distrust is rooted due to contrasting and overlapping interests in several sensitive dossiers (e.g. the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Syria). However, the common opposition to the West, with particular regards to US and NATO, seems to allow the trust necessary to establish a short-term oriented partnership, with open towards the possibility of a future evolution into a closer relationship³³. Finally, even though Putin's leadership has been overall successful in settling decent relations with Tehran that are advantaging Moscow, some discordia elements need to be taken into account, e.g. Iran's profound regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Israel, both constituting relevant partners for Russia. Finally, the real limit to Moscow's relations with the Islamic Republic is the fact that the Russian Federation opposes a change in the status quo of the MENA region, contrary to what Tehran seeks.

Another relevant actor for the Russian Federation is Turkey, relationship with which deserves particular attention due its swinging nature, that leads it to constant evolution. Moscow and Ankara are Cold War enemies, the latter one being a NATO member since 1952. Therefore, political and military relations are controversial and the dialogue between Russia and Turkey has developed on economic basis, with special attention regarding the weapon market, following a growing climax from the early 2000's until the latest shipment of the S-400 air missile system. Moscow and Ankara rapprochement has its roots in anti-Western sentiments and the idea of Eurasian integration, born following a certain degree of disappointment both experienced with regards to the

³³ The Islamic Republic is a permanent observer of the SCO and the CSTO deserves equal consideration in the hypothesis of being used as a channel for rapprochement.

European Union³⁴. Another strong driver of the relations developed during the Putin era is the struggle against terrorism, an issue that both Moscow and Ankara suffered from (with Chechnya as far as Russia is concerned and with Kurdish separatist movements for Turkey). Moreover, on a merely political point of view, President Putin offered full support to Recep Tayyip Erdogan right after the alleged coup d'état in 2016. Despite this formally strong ties, Russia and Turkey remain deeply divided on crucial dossiers, with regards to the military field, the energy market and some delicate ethnic matters. As for the first, the fundamental difference lays in the management of the Syrian conflict - although Putin and Erdogan launched together the Astana Process. Further divergences concern Libya and the situation over Crimea³⁵. The second point of disagreement concerns the geo-economic dimension of the Black Sea and the diverging interests of the two countries over oil and gas reserves exploitation. Finally, Turkey disagrees with the Russian management of some dossiers involving Turkish ethnicities, most notably the Nagorno-Kharabakh conflict and the Balkans.

The relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been developed under the energy diplomacy umbrella, starting from the 2014 fall in Russia's economy, due to Western sanctions and to a dramatic fall in the oil price³⁶. Following the "divorce" with the West, Putin has looked eastwards, also in a pragmatic optic to reach a certain degree of cooperation over the oil sector with the world main producer. The last push is represented by the start of the US oil production. Although it improved much since the Cold War times, the relationship between Moscow and Riyadh remains very delicate and entails a

³⁴ For Turkey the several fruitless attempts to join the European integration process have become progressively more painful to the extent that Ankara has accused Brussels to applying double standards. In fact, Turkey could only watch while many eastern European countries accessed the Union and the common market - even though they did not meet 100% the democracy and human rights standards in Turkish eyes -. The final blow to Turkish aspirations to join the EU was the inclusion of Cyprus (that now owes veto power over Turkish membership) and the decision of the EU to suspend Schengen privileges for Northern Cypriot citizens.

³⁵ Indeed, Russian return to Sevastopol represents a huge geopolitical concern for Turkey, shifting the balance of power in the Black Sea and involving the Tatar Crimean population - ethnically Turkish - that was against the 2014 referendum. Turkey does not recognise Crimea as a part of Russia and openly opposes any Russian involvement in the Donbass conflict.

³⁶ From 110 USD per barrel to roughly 70 USD per barrel, according to Carole Nakhle (Ibidem footnote 32, Chap 1.1), which stroke both Moscow and the Gulf Monarchies.

certain degree of mistrust, due to the historic connection of Saudi Arabia to the United States, as well as Putin reopening dialogue with Iran. A further element of friction lays right in what has united Russia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: oil prices management, which is highly profitable, yet extremely slippery and highly likely to fall within zero-sum-game logic mechanisms.

As for Israel, the rapprochement between the two states may be considered as a successful example of the Putin-led policies of power projection and implementation of decent relations with several states that constitute natural rival to each other, but that are open to dialogue with a common interlocutor that is Russia. It is evident how, being Israel the most effective and powerful military actor in the MENA region, Moscow looks at it as a mean to maintain a delicate balance of power and avoid a detrimental zero-sum game. The Russian Federation and Israel share similar interests in countering the spread of Islamic extremism, as well as in containing the effects of the Arab Spring, not to mention historical memory of the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany and the numerous Russian-speaking community living in Israel. Moscow and Tel Aviv may diverge on some relevant issues, first and foremost their interests in Syria and the undeniable fact that Israel remains the main US ally in the Middle East, while looking with an annoyed glance at Putin's dialogue with Tehran; however, the flourishing dialogue implemented by the two allows smoothly Russia's game of mediator in the region.

Putin's policy towards Egypt has followed a revivalist approach of Yvgeny Primakov's theory of Moscow's role in the MENA region, considering the fundamental role of the country for the region's balance of power. Russia has taken the occasion for rapprochement following the 2011 uprisings, as well as the lead of some American miscalculations that seem to have pushed Cairo away from Washington, apparently guilty of having read the events in an exclusively political key that pointed inevitably towards a push for democratisation³⁷. On the contrary, Putin's Russia has played a better hand in

³⁷ Andrey Chuprygin, Professor at the Higher School of Economics and Russia's leading Middle East expert, argues in his chapter *Russia and the United States in the Cases of Egypt and Libya*, that the "winds of change" in Egypt were driven by and looked more at the economic *coté* of the renewal

avoiding a paternalistic attitude and supporting the regime already in place, which allowed Moscow and Cairo to strengthen their political ties and reopen a flourishing dialogue.

As for Libya and Syria, they will be analysed in details in the following chapters.

Overall Putin's strategy clearly aims at the maintenance of the balance of power in the region and, contrary to what the Soviet leaders used to do to gaining allies in the MENA, does not exclude cooperation with any regional power, even when those are clearly rivalling each other. Of course, the nature of the relations does not allow the establishment of close bonds such as long-term partnerships, yet it involves more a cooperation of economic and military nature (resulting mostly in trade in weapons, where Russia sells and Middle Eastern Northern African actors buy). Putin's strategy leaves room for Russia to choose its partners and to keep an open door for dialogue with almost all the states in the region, due to the fact that, in contrast with the Soviet past trends, the nature of the implemented relations is pragmatic and rational, unlike the ideological and highly politicized drivers of the USSR's action. The Kremlin strategy in the 2000's differs with Washington's one for similar reasons. Indeed the US have overextended their presence and engagement in the region since the end of the Cold War. The advantage for Moscow results in saving resources - both financial and human -, while reserving itself wider manoeuvre space. This has been clearly observable mostly over the last four years when Trump's image of being an impulsive President has been highly in contrast with Putin's rational approach. Furthermore, Moscow has managed to avoid Russian casualties and, most importantly, to take the distance from the regime support game that deeply involved USSR and has been unilaterally brought about by the US under the aegis of democratisation since the early 90's.

process than to the political one, therefore democratisation was taken into consideration only to a certain limited extent and only as long as it served economic reform purposes. [Chuprygin, Andrey. *Russia and the United States in the Cases of Egypt and Libya*. Chap. 6 of the volume *The MENA Region: a great power competition*, edited by Mezran, Karim and Varvelli Arturo. ISPI and Atlantic Council. October 2019, pp. 96-101].

Even though we cannot speak of the establishment of a system of close partnerships, Putin's ability lays in exploiting what unites Middle Eastern governments, resulting convenient and desirable for Russia: oil production and prices management, weapons sells and - probably the most political element - a full-blown distaste for the action of Sunni jihaddist groups³⁸. Finally, the distinguishing element of Putin's strategy is the implementation of successful dialogue with both parts on opposing sides, it is the case for instance of Yemen, as well as for our main focus: Libya³⁹, even though the greater source for this process description is Moscow's role in the Syrian conflict and the Astana Process.

1.2: The conflict in Syria as a catalyst for Russia's Return to the MENA

According to Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, Syria "brought Russia outside the post-Soviet space and made it a visible power in the global context"⁴⁰. Indeed, following a coherent development with the foreign policy phases described under Putin's leadership, Russia has never concretely engaged outside of former USSR borders until 2015, right when tensions with the West reached a peak for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, Russian approach and behaviour in Syria appear as a synthesis of all the points dealt with previously in the analysis of Moscow's aims and action-guiding principles in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA).

The Syrian conflict is iconic for its dynamics and their relevance with regards to Russia's foreign policy strategy aims and priorities, since the

³⁸ We can find a proof of the effectiveness of this last element in looking at the situation in Chechnya, in fact, none of the Middle Eastern governments have ever supported any Chechen independent movement, at least not through official channels, constituting quite an important diplomatic message for Moscow.

³⁹ The Russian Federation officially recognises the UN-backed Government of National Accord led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, while at the same time supports the rival Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar.

⁴⁰ Luhn, Alec. *Putin's Game in the Middle East - Russian leader is seizing opportunities to restore Moscow's clout a a major global player*. Politico. 17th January 2020, last updated 19th January 2020. [<https://www.politico.eu/article/game-in-the-middle-east-vladimir-putin/>].

eruption of the 2011 uprisings. Together with Libya, it is considered by Moscow to be the most evident example of Western interference - generally US-led - within the domestic affairs of a third country. A precision needs to be pointed out over the perspective with regards to the 2011 wave of protests in the Arab world that Moscow adopts. If for the West this phenomenon is commonly known as “Arab Spring”, clearly entailing a positive connotation, the Russian press and scholars usually refer to it as пробуждение (probuzhdenye), literally: awakening⁴¹. This conceptual difference finds confirmation in the controversies over the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which is fundamental in the reading of both Syrian and Libyan events. Moscow disagrees on the extent and mode of application of the R2P third pillar⁴² and sees the cases where it was invoked and successfully implemented (Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011) as a dangerous precedent where the international community allowed the West to play by its own rules, overthrowing established regimes and installing pro-Western ones, hiding behind the sake of human rights protection. Russia does not disagree with the need for each single state to respond for the protection of its own citizens (pillar number one); yet, what Russia dislikes about it is the power vacuum that usually follows a regime change or overthrow. The case of Libya is particularly evident with regards to the matter of post-regime fall disorders, even though in such a delicate background as MENA this applies to several cases. The Kremlin does not oppose an intervention for the sake of efficient institutions and the implementation of a stable and responsible power. Nevertheless, it is deemed that in some cases the status quo is better than the situation of incertitude following a regime change, especially in guaranteeing the protection of human rights. This, in Moscow’s eyes, is exactly the case of

⁴¹ A definition that clearly offers a more neutral perspective and is sometimes used also in Western academic environments. Moscow has been careful in assessing the nature of the Arab uprising, due to the fact that the belief that they were at least encouraged if not organised and financed from abroad is still profoundly rooted in Russian minds. [Berdyayev, Nikolay A. «Арабские пробуждение» и позиция России, (The “Arab awakening” and Russia’s position), Chap. 3 of the publication Ближневосточный клинч: Конфликты на ближнем востоке и политика России, (Middle Eastern clinch - Conflicts in the Middle East and Russian policies), from Irina Zvyagelskaya, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2014, pp. 60-61.

⁴² *Idem* footnote Numb. 5, Chap. 1.

Libya and it could have been the case of Syria. Therefore, while considering Russia's role and interests in the Syrian crisis we shall take into account a combination of elements, including its perspective concerning the R2P and the Arab uprisings.

Another interesting point with regards to Syria is the fact that it somehow can be considered an iconic moment in the weakening of the Pax Americana model in the MENA region, a clear symptom of the beginning of the declining phase for the "super power". This was evident in the reiterated decisions not to intervene in the conflict from the Obama Administration, both in 2011 and in 2013.

If the US inaction rises concerns in the West, mostly for its NATO allies, this, on the contrary, constitutes an occasion for Moscow to step in the region. However, it is important to bear in mind that it is not in Moscow's interest to engage in any direct or proxy conflict with the US, this applies to everywhere in the world, especially in MENA. All this said, mutual tolerance for presence of the other one as a player in the conflict is the key to reading action on the Syrian stage, from both parts. One more time, after the shortly successful rapprochement of the earliest 2000's, the Kremlin and the White House found a common element in the struggle against terrorism, in this case the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)⁴³.

From a merely factual point of view the Syrian conflict has started as a civil war and has escalated into a three-driver conflict that involved external players and created frictions within the international community.

⁴³ Even tough, with regards to terrorism differences among the two powers conception of this word arise. Russia looks at the phenomenon in broader terms, with special regards to Syria, that embeds basically any group rising against the established regime. This results in a definition that involves also a more political dimension of terrorism, the one that has to do with popular discontent and potential push towards separatism and their violent escalation, which damages for the central government Russia knows way to well and has experienced for over a decade, due to the Chechen War. On the contrary, Washington defines terrorism with a particular focus on the extremist and *jihadist* groups born and raised in the Middle East North Africa, especially Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and ISIS, due to the fact that their most traumatic event with these regards still remains 9/11.

Russia's success in the Syrian conflict depends on three main factors⁴⁴: the effectiveness of the strategy implemented, called light footprint approach⁴⁵, the successful action of the Syrian forces on the ground and a certain weakness and disorganisation of the insurgent forces. As for the first point, not going boots on the ground for Moscow has turned out to be a far-sighted strategy; so has the establishment of a special centre in Baghdad for strategic coordination and intelligence sharing, gathering the key Middle Eastern players of the Syrian war (Damascus, Tehran, Baghdad itself and even Tel Aviv)⁴⁶.

Despite the general success in its operations, the Russian Federation should bare in mind that some important hurdles remain with regards to the stabilisation of the Syrian context. Firstly, the Islamic State, albeit having been eradicated from the territory is not completely defeated and kept to itself important resources and training bases. The second element of concern is constituted by the internal context in Syria. A peace treaty has not been signed yet but even if it was, profound structural problems grip the country and constitute a concrete obstacle to post-war reconstruction that should not be undermined. Indeed, reconstruction entails extremely high costs, that the Syrian government cannot afford by its own, while foreign sources of funding remain uncertain for their dependence on external factors and evolutions on the global scene⁴⁷. Furthermore, the economic strategy implemented by Assad seems to tend towards the marginalisation of some groups, deepening inequalities within the Syrian society. This potentially contributes to the emergence of new

⁴⁴ Jones, Seth. *Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will it Be a Pyrrhic Victory?*. CTC Sentinel, Combating Terrorism Centre, volume 12, issue 9. October 2019, pp. 1-9.

⁴⁵ Bearing in mind the painful memories of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Moscow deemed it wiser not to deploy any boots-on-the-ground forces, leaving the stage for it to Iran and contributing to Assad's cause in the conflict with air cover. Moscow's concerted action with Iran and Hezbollah forces has been particularly relevant in changing the destiny of the conflict.

⁴⁶ Idem, footnote numb. 40, Chap. 1.2.

⁴⁷ For instance, the confrontational dynamics between Iran and the US is one factor to be taken into account. Another example concerns Iran and Russia pulling out from projects for repairing or constructing power plants in Syria. Damascus, following the disposals of the Memorandum of Understanding signed with both Moscow and Teheran, was supposed to secure funds for its contribution to this project. Having Syria failed in complying with the terms agreed on, Russia and Iran quit the project.

Daher, Joseph. *The Paradox of Syria's Reconstruction*. Carnegie - Middle East Centre. 4th September, 2019. [<https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/09/04/paradox-of-syria-s-reconstruction-pub-79773>].

unrest⁴⁸. This popular discontent might grow to such an extent that it could contribute to a new wave of radicalisation, potentially leading to violence perpetration in the post-Soviet space and in the North Caucasus itself. Finally, the exacerbation of the rivalry in between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel, together with the escalation of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry might lead the Syrian conflict to a further escalation into a proxy war (paving the way for a fourth driver of the conflict, entailing a new dimension of diverging interests for the players involved). This evolution could put Russia in the difficult position of having to chose a single interlocutor in between the big players, not to mention the fact that it would definitely undermine the balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa region.

All those scenarios go against the interest of the Kremlin, for it is not convenient for Russia to change a strategy that so far has proven to be successful; hence a deeper degree of engagement is not conceivable neither serves its national interest in any way, however leaving the scene by quietly withdrawing is inconceivable as well. The strategic weight that Moscow has acquired on the Syrian battlefield in four years and a half follows a variety of fundamental stakes for Russia. The trigger of the intervention was out of doubt the wish to honour the long and historically rooted good relation with Syria, nevertheless the drivers are deeper and more complex and the first one is the will for Russia to avoid a regime change in the country. This interest has a dual dimension: firstly, Moscow fears the creation of a power vacuum in Syria and its consequences, secondly, Russia does not want Washington to incept any US-friend leadership in the country, which would surely destabilise it, producing security issues right at the periphery of the Post-Soviet space. The second driver for Russia's action has a geopolitical nature: stepping into Syria as an ally of the established government means gaining direct access to the Mediterranean sea, something Russia has been looking for through centuries⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ *Idem.*

⁴⁹ *Idem* Footnote Numb. 6.

Counter-terrorism operations and the possibility to monitor the situation from the within is out of doubt another main factor pushing Moscow to seat at the Syrian table. The prominent role taken by Russia in the Syrian civil war and the continuative support offered to its ally Bashar al-Assad shows the main powers in the region how Moscow can be a reliable partner, in open contrast with the United States and the roller coaster policies pursued by the Trump administration⁵⁰. Furthermore, Syria represents for Russia the perfect stage to show its ability as negotiator - proven by the establishment of the Astana Peace Process in 2017⁵¹ - and gain diplomatic prestige on the international scene. Moscow, lately, seems to be more incline to an overture towards political reforms and reconciliation for the settlement of the Syrian crisis, considering how relevant the country's stabilisation and its recovery are for the Kremlin's long-term interests. Despite this, Russia is facing the trade-off between pushing for promoting secularism and political inclusiveness, and a more detached, purely strategic perspective⁵².

In general, what complicates the Syrian conflict is that there are three main drivers overlapping: the battle against the self-proclaimed Islamic State; the original cause leading to the eruption of the civil war, i.e. the uprisings against the established power of Bashar al-Assad; the Turkish-led operations against the Kurdish forces. Its peculiarity lays in an extraordinary divergence of specific interests and aims, dividing even those players who are part of the same coalition. What appears clear is that, besides the defeat of the Islamic

⁵⁰ Examples of this behaviour can be found also back in the past years, such as the way the USA acted in Egypt: right after Hosni Mubarak was overthrown they immediately cut ties with a partner they have been dealing with for more than three decades, at the minimum sign of trouble. In open contrast, the Russian Federation has been constant in backing Assad for all the years, since it entered the conflict, a partnership that has been lasting for over fifty years, from the Soviet times. (Ibidem, footnote numb. 25, Chap. 1.1).

⁵¹ The Astana Peace Process is a platform for negotiation of a settling for the Syrian conflict established by the Russian Federation, gathering together the main parts of the civil war, plus Turkey and Iran. The meetings and talks are held in between the Kazakh capital city (now renamed into Nur Sultan) and the Russian resort city of Sochi. [Al-Jazeera. *Syrian War: All you need to know about the Astana talks*. 30th October 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/syrian-war-astana-talks-171029160554816.html>].

⁵² This is particularly true in consideration of Iran's assertiveness recently applied on the Latakia region and Teheran wish to make Syria a part of its "axis of resistance". Frolovskiy, Dmitry. *Russia's Role in Syria is Changing*. The Moscow Times. 9th January, 2020. [<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/09/russias-role-syria-changing-a68823>].

State, there are no other purposes that totally unite any player. This has been proven evident in the par excellence international peace and security forum: the UN Security Council, that has been seeing profound division in between the five permanent members, who have largely exercised their veto power right⁵³. In fact, now that the battle against the common enemy, ISIS, is over the fragmentation of national interests re-emerges, resulting potentially into a greater advantage for Moscow than for Washington, seen the approaches taken so far. Syria is such an important piece of the puzzle in Putin's run to "make Russia great again" because it represents a perfect synthesis of the Kremlin's main stakes in the MENA region. Moreover, it constitutes the proof of a feasible alternative to the Pax Americana for the region.

The Kremlin's action, furthermore, also does enjoy a certain degree of domestic appreciation, as Russians feel a strong patriotic pride in being part of the struggle against terrorism and be regarded to as a leading power again, a country holding a specific weight possibly for the first time after the painful years of post-Soviet reconstruction.

Finally, Syria has represented a catalyst for Russia's attention to be drawn back to MENA. Furthermore, it shares common characteristics with another crucial scenario: Libya, most likely serving as a model for the future of the Russian action in the region.

⁵³ With regards to draft resolutions regulating the Syrian conflict, Moscow cast fourteen vetoes in the UN Security Council meetings (out of the nineteen vetoes employed since 2011). The US have exercised their veto power just three times from 2011 (out of the sixteen times they have since 1991) and none of them concerned Syria; this is highly likely due to the fact that Washington was among the sponsors of the majority of the draft resolutions that have been vetoed by Moscow and Beijing. Indeed, China as well has resorted to its veto right several times with regards to the Syrian conflict (eight vetoes out of the nine posed since 2011). With regards to the United Kingdom and France, those two permanent members have not exercised their veto power since 1989. This, in general and with special regards to Syria, depends on the fact that they are Washington's allies, therefore highly likely co-sponsors in the draft resolutions over Syria. [<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php>].

1.3: The future of Russia's MENA policy: an "Off-shore Balancer" or a "Security Exporter"

In chapter 1.1 it has been described how Russia installed a system of relations with the majority of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa region under the Putin leadership; the importance of the short-term nature of those relations, mostly with regards to the most controversial players, has also been underlined. This is due to the fact that MENA is likely to remain a turbulent region in the next five years relating not only to the armed conflict dimension (which in some cases is likely to de-escalate) but also regarding the socio-economic dimension of this vast and various area. In such a scenario, the most convenient attitude for Russia to be maintained is the rather off-shore balancer tendency that has been characterising Moscow's action, particularly from 2015⁵⁴.

To understand the drivers and reasons of this assessment, it is necessary to proceed with order, looking first and foremost at the military and strategic coté of the area. Syria will hopefully know the dawn of stabilisation in the next few years, entailing, though, a delicate position for the Kremlin. In fact the re-establishment of the Assad regime might create discontent, among the Syrian population⁵⁵ in primis and in the eyes of the immediate bordering countries. Turkey, is already showing its intention to keep pursuing its interest in countering the Kurdish forces, having created new disorders and crisis situation at the Syrian-Turkish boarder. This evolution will surely involve Moscow, if not directly at least on the diplomatic level in the capacity of leading negotiator. Therefore, the wished stability and transition to a pacified country might ruin Moscow's plans to keep the balance of power in the region in its favour. It is also true that Putin's diplomacy has revealed its extraordinary effectiveness in maintaining a decent dialogue with opposing parts on sensitive

⁵⁴ Zviagelskaya Irina and Surkov, Nikolay. *Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Coasts of the Big Game*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 30th May, 2019. [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/workingpapers/russian-policy-in-the-middle-east-dividends-and-coasts-of-the-big-game/>].

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 47.

issues. Another thing is Turkey who has been moving quite fast on the MENA regional chess board, perhaps seeking for the role of regional hegemon. Examples are the Idlib offensive and a resumed strong role in the Libyan conflict in support of the Government of National Accord⁵⁶. With regards to this second point, the tandem Putin-Erdogan might constitute a game-changer in the conflict resolution, developing something similar to the Astana model⁵⁷. However, Turkey remains a NATO member and, despite some frictions with its military allies, it might decide to exploit this driver to serve its seek for hegemony into the MENA region.

Expanding the analysis, the conflict in Yemen and the Libyan crisis still constitute traditional security concerns for Russia, as they are clearly quite far from being settled on a short-term perspective. In the specific case of Libya, last year escalation and the perpetration of the conflictual dynamics over the past few weeks show how the match can be easily reopened and the tables can be turned, albeit the country was very close to holding new elections.

Another security dimension that needs to be carefully looked at in the short term is the economic one, still profoundly connected to the hydrocarbon market. This point is also in dependence of factors that are external to the region and do not depend on the Russian action, involving mainly the US shell oil on the short term and the growth of the use of renewable sources of energy on a longer term⁵⁸. However, the nature of this issue makes it difficult to forecast any relevant changes in the hydrocarbons market in the short-term perspective.

⁵⁶ With the sign of the Memorandum of Understanding in December 2019 firstly and by deploying troops in Libya in support of the Tripoli's government in January. Both moves underline Erdogan's intention to gain a more prominent role for Ankara in the geopolitical and diplomatic dynamics of the MENA region.

⁵⁷ *Joint Statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation*, 8th January, 2020. [<http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5470>].

⁵⁸ The wish to increase the use of clean energy is a fact in the European Union, on its way for implementing a system that will see greater efforts from the Member States for a transition to the exclusive use of renewable energy. The trend is just at the beginning of its path to be settled equally in the whole Union, yet the commitment of the European Commission seems to be quite consistent, at least in its declaration of intents, witnessed by the launch of the European Green Deal. The aim of this ambitious plan, among others, is to reach "climate neutrality" through the exploitation of alternative sources of energy. This will translate into the loss of one of its main customers for Moscow, that will also lose great part of its geopolitical leverage on western Europe. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en].

In sum, a greater or deeper engagement in the role of security exporter for Moscow in the short run is unlikely to be taken, as it will be too far from Putin's strategy adopted so far, that has shown overall effective in satisfying Russia's great power status aspirations. The strategy adopted in the Syrian conflict shows a dual advantage for the Kremlin. On the one hand the provision of air cover has efficiently helped Assad in reaching his strategic and military goals, without putting in peril Russian lives. On the other hand the key role of the Astana process in managing the immediate evolutions of the conflict was key. This process goes in parallel with the Geneva talks for the resolution of the Syrian crisis, even though the role of the negotiations held in Switzerland concerns long-term effect settlement, including political transition, reconstruction of the Syrian institutional tissue and, last but not least, the management of the refugee crisis. On the contrary, the Astana model has proven successful in acting on "haemorrhages", providing short-term solutions, thanks to Moscow's flexibility to shift from military field to the political table. The management of this process demonstrates a prerogative for Russia to take the role of a security broker, more than exporter. Furthermore, it shows how a certain tendency to favour regionalism remains appreciable from MENA actors, but also from the Kremlin. Moreover, an effort towards the balance of power results more sensible within a scenario that remains highly tense, as we can observe looking at the level of military forces in the MENA countries (Annex 3).

Another important factor to be taken into account is the fact that a new world order is currently in the making and, even though we may not see the final result in the short term, this reality is a fact and will have a consistent impact on the future of the Russian off-shore engagement. To make any kind of forecasts in the medium-term prospects of Moscow's role in the Middle East and North Africa, it is necessary to look at the future scenarios of Russia's own domestic developments. Indeed, Putin's leadership formally has an expiring date: the 2024 presidential elections, when its fourth mandate (second in a row for the second time) will come to an end. Although it is evident how both the

political establishment and the leader himself are already preparing to some extent the ground to allow the smoothest possible post-Putin transition⁵⁹, we cannot know exactly in this moment who might be his successor, neither can we already say how Russia will look like without Putin as head of state. Nevertheless, we can assess with a certain degree of probability that he will not simply walk away in silence and will likely remain highly involved in the country governance. This, with regards to the Russian role in the MENA region probably entails a perspective of coherence with the behaviour perpetrated so far. Also in consideration of the afore-mentioned stakes Moscow has in the region.

Another factor to consider is the role of the other big players and the way their relations with Russia may develop and impact on Moscow's strategy in the Middle East. Relations with Europe cover a relevant part for Moscow, including both the economic and the strategic field. As far as the first one is concerned, sanctions and the evolution of the trade in hydrocarbons is the fundamental point. It is often said that sanctions are only having a limited impact on Russia, due to European dependence on Russian gas⁶⁰, which actually pushes some countries in developing bilateral relations with Moscow to secure themselves the supply, despite the sanctions regime. All this said, as the renewed European Commission installed in Brussels, one of the main campaigns it launched is the Green Deal, entailing consistent efforts from the European Union to reduce as much as they can the consume of non-renewable sources of energy. If realised, this purpose would entail issues of a certain concern for Moscow, for it will lose its energy leverage in Europe. Of course this is an interesting element to monitor in the long run.

⁵⁹ The Constitutional reform idea launched last February is a clear first attempt of settling the conditions for a transition that should do anything to avoid the formation of a power vacuum in the country, which would make the Russian Federation reverse in the worst conditions. Having been approved by the State Duma almost unanimously, it will later on be the turn for the Russian citizens to advocate their point of view.

⁶⁰ In 2018, the European Union imported 29.8% of its crude oil intake and 40.1% of its natural gas demand from Russia. The EU has an overall energy dependency rate of 58% from its foreign partners (2018), which is an element to be taken into consideration, seeing that Russia is its first provider for all the fossil fuels imported. [<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/energy/bloc-2c.html>].

Another top player important to the future of Russian foreign policy is the People's Republic of China, which has become a fundamental economic, financial and technological partner for Moscow, that looked eastwards in consideration of the deterioration of its relations with the West. The partnership has been based so far on the principle “never against each other, not always with each other” and despite their respect for mutual sovereignty China is factually a more powerful economic actor than Russia is. This element might lead to future frictions, nevertheless it is fundamental for Russia to avoid over-dependence from Beijing⁶¹. Furthermore, in the long run, Russia's attention might be turned away from the MENA, to reach more vibrant geopolitical areas, the best candidate with these regards to be South East Asia, with North Korea and its nuclear programme at the top of the priorities list⁶².

All this said, the most sensitive forecast with regards to the mid-term future of Moscow's engagement in the Middle East and North Africa needs to rely on one pillar, i.e. the fact that Russia will never engage at the same level that the US did when it was having its so-called “unipolar moment”. Firstly, Russia does not have the economic and military means and resources to make such huge investments needed to protect someone else's security, without concrete and immediate return, nor is it willing to⁶³. Such a scenario, in fact, is quite inconsistent with Moscow's design for the world order to come and for its role within it. Therefore, a future role as off-shore balancer seems to be more likely to happen, with a certain constant look at the security dimension and, potentially, a tendency to favour some actors on a bilateral basis at some point.

⁶¹ Trenin Dmitry. *How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 19th May, 2020, pp. 1-2. [https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/how-russia-can-maintain-equilibrium-in-the-post-pandemic-bipolar-world/?sphrase_id=36849930].

⁶² This vision is largely shared in the Russian academic environment, as A. Kortunov - director of the Russian International Relations Council (RIAC) - has assessed: “policymakers in Moscow should bare in mind that this region is not as central to Russia's security and prosperity as Europe or Asia Pacific”. [Kortunov, Andrey. *The Astana Model - A Path Forward for Russia*. Chap. 3 of the volume *The MENA Region: a great power competition*, edited by Mezran Karim and Varvelli Arturo. ISPI and Atlantic Council. October 2019, pp. 62-63].

⁶³ Despite the stability of the Middle East North Africa and the preservation from the spread of terrorism and extremism in this area highly relies to Russia's boarder security (South Caucasus and Central Asia) and can potentially entail consequences in the Russian regions that have Muslim majority. *Ibid.* pp. 61-62.

Hence, contrary to the US strategy during the “unipolar moment” of 1990’s, Russia will never play the policeman of the world. Trying to export a security model is risky for both diplomatic and strategic reasons, being the first one related to Russia’s commitment to principles of non-interference, together with its dislike for forced democratisation attempts. In fact Russia advocates - and has been doing so during the whole Putin’s era - the need for each state actor to find their singular model - something that is also in line with Russia’s perspective concerning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)⁶⁴. The strategic reason has to do with the rise of non-state actors, among which militias cannot be ignored, neither can be ignored their role in regional conflicts and their relationship to certain states.

To conclude, despite its current relevance, the MENA region has never represented and does not currently represent a priority in the Russian foreign policy agenda. The trend, settled under Putin, of looking eastwards through the implementation of a set of regional institutions aims at balancing the cooling in relations with the West.

⁶⁴ See chap. 1.2.

Chapter 2: The Italian foreign policy action in the Middle East North Africa region: objectives and purposes

The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of the principles guiding the Republic of Italy in the formulation and implementation of its foreign policy strategy, with specific reference to the objectives and purposes guiding Rome in the MENA region.

Firstly, a general overlook of the principles characterising the Italian action on the international arena is provided, aimed at underlining the presence of a set of constant features dictating a certain degree of continuity in its behaviour over the decades. The period around which the analysis is concentrated is the so-called Second Republic, in first instance to provide a coherent picture with the one given about the Russian Federation in Chapter 1.1⁶⁵; secondly because it is over the last twenty years that the role of the Italian Republic has known a more interesting development in the global context, in particular looking at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The main guiding principle of the Italian action in foreign policy concerns out of doubt the pursue of the national interests, an element embedding a variety of factors that all serve the respect of some basic constitutional principles. Geography constitutes a fundamental driver in the leading principles of Italy, as well as for its geopolitical and strategic action, indeed being a peninsular state in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, which constitutes the largest part of its national borders, is a strongly influential characteristic.

The second fundamental principle to be taken into account concerns the political framework Italy is a part of and the bond the country has with regards to the values characterising it. Not only has this role in international Institutions allowed Italy the security dimension necessary to recover from World War Two, it became full part of Italian political and institutional culture, assuring Rome a consolidated position in the global system. This is why its membership

⁶⁵ As the Second Republic encompasses a period of time starting from the second half of the 90's up to present day.

within multilateral organisations is such a relevant element for the Italian Republic, with particular reference to the European Union (being Rome among the six funders) and NATO. The United Nations Organisation is considered to be the main platform for international diplomacy and address of threats and issues at a global level.

Together with its place among the members of the international organisations, the Italian Republic has always showed a certain interest and - I allow myself to add aptitude - towards the implementation of bilateral relations with third states, in which its peculiar interest is still evident at present. On a purely political point of view, Italy sees an important distinction in between its multilateral and bilateral action drivers, however the two coexist (so they have been doing since 1945) and have shown equal importance in the last few years, like a double track over which Rome runs.

Furthermore, an extremely powerful driver of the Italian foreign policy strategy is constituted by Rome's commercial interests, embedding a series of fields, from agricultural products, to manufacture. The most relevant field for the aims of the current analysis and for Italian politics in general is represented by the energy market, where Italy - lacking the primary resources in this sector - is a customer not a seller. This entails a series of consequences, among which the importance of the above-mentioned bilateral dimension of the Italian foreign policy strategy, as this kind of business regards in larger part actors that are not part of the institutional tissue in which Italy acts.

Last but not least, in analysing Rome's action in foreign policy it is necessary to assess that Italy is usually regarded to as a latecomer of the global dynamics, meaning that the country has only lately established an independent strategy, preferring for most of the time to act within the above-mentioned multilateral institutional framework. This is recognisable to a certain extent and is due to some structural characteristics of the Republic. Firstly, a certain degree of fragility with regards to the Italian national identity still constitutes a reality and is a great catalyst for Italy to devote more attention to its internal dynamics than to the global ones. This strongly relies to the second structural

element: the historical strong role of the public opinion with regards to Italian politics and the importance of the popular support for any executive, not to lose the trust of the parliament. Those two characteristics led the country to a tendency to prefer intermittent specific manoeuvre to target a very peculiar aspect of the global politics instead of realising a greater picture in terms of foreign policy action. This tendency results in a vicious loop with the previous points, due to the fact that only a limited amount of resources is devoted to the external action, making Italy look like a passive actor of the international relations⁶⁶ at the eyes of its own public opinion.

Despite a relevant trend in shifting in the leadership (mostly characterising the last two decades) some constant elements of the Italian foreign policy strategy can be observed, all of them relying to the above-mentioned defence of the national interest and main priorities. First and foremost Italy is characterised by a certain degree of incertitude with regards to its place in the global political scene⁶⁷. This is due to the wish to maintain its highly beneficial place in the post-1945 institutional framework: Italy obtained military protection and a place within the in-the-making European system. Albeit Rome was never keen to any great power aspiration it is quite clear how Italy has always looked for a relevant role in the Western world. The intention, of course, is not being cut out a system that is highly beneficial for Italy under an economic, but mostly political and diplomatic point of view.

This leads to the second constant point: the tight bond and great sense of belonging to strong actors and multilateral organisations as allies, with a general tendency to bandwagon in international affairs. Of course the most

⁶⁶ According to a survey conducted by IAI Laps in 2017, 82% of Italians think that Italy has few or no weight in the matters of international politics, a very similar figure to the one registered in a similar survey in 2013, as reported by Pierangelo Isernia in his chapter *La politica estera fra ambizioni e capacità*, of the 2018 report *L'Italia al bivio - Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana* from IAI.

⁶⁷ This characteristic seems to emerge more obviously with the constitution of the post-Cold War global order and even more over the last few years, due to a crisis of the American Superpower. Nevertheless, as observed by Fabrizio Coticchia in his chapter *The foreign Policy of a Latecomer*, Italy has been dominated by a feeling of nostalgia of the Roman Empire greatness since its unity in 1861 and even before, in the higher classes; evident examples of this are the arguments of Dante Alighieri or Machiavelli in their political works. The fil rouge of different eras and arguments appears to be a general sense of frustration with regards to the disunity characterising the country and for Italy's minor status in the international arena.

privileged interlocutor in this sense is to be looked for in the United States of America as for the state-actors and in the EU and NATO as for the organisations. Italy's strong attachment to them, together with its role in the United Nations organisation goes together with a strong advocacy of the principles of liberal democracy, liberal economy market and human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Another constant element in Italian foreign policy strategy formulation deals with a deficit in instruments of diplomacy, which opens a controverted debate with regards to the asymmetry between objectives and resources⁶⁸.

While analysing Italy's role in the global dynamics it is necessary to recognise that the country does not have any direct traditional security threat. Indeed, its continental borders are securitised and there is not any threatening rivals in its neighbourhood, since all the European countries are part of NATO⁶⁹. The military alliance encompasses a series of facilities that would grant immediate assistance to Italy in case of attack from a third state (following the principles enshrined in Art. 5 of the Treaty of Washington), some of which are also located within the Italian national borders. Furthermore, its being part of the European Union and the Schengen system grants a further degree of security with reference to the economic and social dimension, implementing a flourishing market that allows freedom of movement within a system of countries that share Italian values by and large.

In fact, the main threats for Italian security are of a non-conventional kind and rely to its geographic position and the strategic implications deriving from it; the importance of the energy market; the management of the migratory flows from outside the Schengen borders; the counter-terrorism, together with the prevention of any radicalisation processes evolving in extremism.

⁶⁸ As argued by Pierangerlo Isernia (*Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 66, Chap. 2), there is a problem in formulating and conceiving what Christopher Hill called the "capability-expectation gap", i.e. objectivity and coherence in analysing the goals and the assets. The problem for Italian public opinion with this regards consists in the fact that it expects the goals to be fulfilled with flying colours, while it is ready to put in place only limited capabilities and resources.

⁶⁹ Exception made for Switzerland and Austria, that do not constitute any direct threat to Italian or European security anyway.

All of those issues relate somehow to the southern edge of the Mediterranean Sea and, together with its wish to adopt a prominent position in the region, constitute the main drivers of a renewed initiative from Rome in the MENA region, which has become increasingly more active from the publication of the 2015 White Book.

The main point concerns out of doubt the importance of the MENA energy market: seen the scarcity of hydrocarbons on the Italian territory, Italy is largely dependent on foreign suppliers. Confindustria has registered a 92% dependence with regards to gas and a dependence between 90-95% for oil market from foreign suppliers⁷⁰. Such a dependence is crucial in determining an increase in the bilateral activity of Italian foreign policy, as the majority of the suppliers are from outside the European Union and constitute controverted actors of the international arena, including most notably the Russian Federation⁷¹, a series of Northern African countries (Algeria and Libya⁷² being the most relevant ones) and some countries from the Arab peninsula (the most debated one to be Qatar). In parallel, Italy advocates its interests with regards to the energy market in the most relevant platforms of dialogue it is part of, mostly the G7. Rome's ultimate goal is fostering its industrial dimension with regards to the energetic sector, while advocating its position over the 3 most controverted points of this issue: Italy's special relation with Russia, which directly connects to the following ones, dealing with the passage of the pipelines through the Ukrainian territory and the realisation of the North-Stream2 pipeline. This latter one would lead to the de facto monopole of the Russian gas supply from Germany, surely against Rome interests, that sees a clear preference for a diversification of the routes. Although beneficial for Italy at a first glance, diversifying routes of gas supply turns out to be a highly controversial matter. On the one hand it would foster Italy's relations with

⁷⁰ Those data are updated at the year 2017 following the 2018 Report from Confindustria [https://www.confindustria.it/wcm/connect/aa361be6-363a-4a43-8bac-ee4dc24e8ae8/cap.+3_SG19.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-aa361be6-363a-4a43-8bac-ee4dc24e8ae8-mDEV4g].

⁷¹ Sartori, Nicolò. *Le direttrici della politica energetica*, Chap. 8 p. 94 of the report by Greco E. *L'Italia al bivio - Rapporto sulla politica estera Italiana*. Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2018.

⁷² *Idem*.

Moscow, while on the other hand, it would touch extremely sensitive dossiers in the eyes of the EU⁷³. With regards to the other area of big suppliers, the MENA region, Italy has worked sensitively through the action of state-owned companies, such as ENI (with the opening of the Zohr field in Egypt and a ten-year presence in both Algeria and Libya). The company seems to be aiming at making the Eastern Mediterranean an essentially Italian hub of gas extraction and transportation and has shown excellent skills in pulling the strings of the energy diplomacy. This is why the Italian political interest is so high in the MENA region and is so highly threatened by the constant instability within the area. To secure valide alternatives, Italy has broadened its action in the energy field within the African continent, involving now both the Sahel area and the African Horn. The scope is not only establishing durable partnerships that would favour the Italian interests on the long run, but also promoting a driver of security and stability on both the strategic and the socio-economic point of view with regards to the areas on a long-term perspective. Of course, in the greater picture Italy sees high margine of cooperation within institutional framework, the EU and the G7 in primis, with the former one evaluating under the aegis of the Commission a project of common interest concerning the realisation of the pipeline EastMed⁷⁴. The energy market will perhaps see over the future years a great influence of the EU Commission Green Deal and its ambition in making Europe the first continent with zero environmental impact, a project with broad consequences - potentially not favourable for Rome - that, however will show its fruits on the longer run.

The Sahel region assumes particular relevance also in a further fundamental security-driver for the Italian Republic, i.e. the migration

⁷³ The reference here goes to the Southern route of gas supply from Russia, encompassing projects such as the South Stream route (suspended in 2014 following the Crimea crisis and the eruption of the Donbass conflict). Further potential alternative routes that would rebalance Italy's position within the European energy market concern the possibility to realise the Poseidon Stream, a pipeline that is supposed to deliver Russian gas in the peninsula, passing through the TurkStream across the Black Sea. The level of incertitude of the realisation of this project passes European borders and depends also on the evolution of the relations between Moscow and Ankara, which puts Italy in a more critical position to advocate the project, despite Rome enjoys decent relations with both powers.

⁷⁴ In 2017 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Tel Aviv by the at the time Minister of Economic Development Carlo Calenda and his Greek, Cypriot and Israeli homologue to realise the pipeline. [*Ibid.* Footnote n. 71, p. 96].

processes and their management. For its complexity this matter is considered among the non-traditional challenges that the modern world is facing, the ones depending on the consequences of the globalisation process and which dimension is such sensitive and varied that it would be impossible for one country to face them alone. Furthermore, the issue easily captures the attention of the public opinion, particularly in a coastal state as Italy is, even more, the attention is driven on the measures taken and even more on their effectiveness. Therefore, the regulation of the migratory process is a matter that finds its collocation within both the bilateral and the multilateral frameworks of action for the Italian foreign policy strategy, with a predominance of the former one, more precisely within the EU framework.

Despite some paradoxical trends emerged and affirmed within certain political environments in parallel with the 2014-2017 Mediterranean “migration crisis”, migration⁷⁵ is a phenomenon that is not likely to decrease on the medium-long run; on the contrary, it is predicted to grow⁷⁶, mostly with regards to the African continent. Therefore, the focus for Italian interest is on the efficiency of the managing policies, as trying to bring down migration as a phenomenon in general usually turns into even bigger concerns on the long run. In fact, individuals are generally more keen on seeking irregular routes of migration, rather than not moving. It goes without saying that illegal migration constitutes a matreshka of threats for the Republic of Italy, striking a variety of fields, from national security, to matters of public order, including deep social problems, as well as human rights concerns. All those, are shared by the majority of the 27 European Union Members (under the aegis of the Art. 80 of the TFUE), reflecting a formal agreement from the other Member States in

⁷⁵ The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as *any person who is moving or has moved across an international boarder or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes of the movement are and (4) what the length of the stay is.* [<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/migration/index.html>]

⁷⁶ With particular regards to the African Continent, the United Nation has forecast a growth in population over the next 40 years from 1.2 billion to 2.5 billion, with a subsequent increase in the number of individuals aged 15-35, age where people are most likely to seek movement. Villa, Matteo and Corradi, Elena. *The future of migration from Africa to the EU*. Chap. 16 of the report *Weathering the storm - charting new courses in the Mediterranean* published by ISPI for the 5th Edition of MED - Mediterranean Dialogues, 2019.

tackling this issue together. Being a coastal state, Italy has extremely high stake with these regards, therefore it has been particularly active in advocating and demanding a coordinated response from the European Union in implementing the principle of solidarity through a consistent technique of burden sharing. At the core of the “migration crisis” in 2016, Italy was ready to welcome with enthusiasm and strongly advocate the EU Commission’s proposals to set up a European Border and Coast Guard, together with the opening of a dialogue to revise the Dublin Regulation. The coordinated effort in improving the existing system of migration governance was supposed to encompass non-EU countries as well, such as Turkey, following in particular the agreement between Brussels and Ankara. In parallel, Italy has conducted a series of bilateral initiatives with third countries, formally recognised and supported by the European Union. The matter of the governance of the migration in the Mediterranean is a sensitive issue and some progress has been made, despite the low if none cooperation shown by some Member States. Italy itself has shown a lower degree of readiness cooperation under the Movimento Cinque Stelle - Lega administration, with episodes that contributed more to increase the visibility of some political figure than to an efficient solution of the issue. This further confirms what said previously in the chapter, i.e. the fact that in Italy there is an historical trend in favouring the internal politics, with an extraordinary attention to the public opinion, than to the international one.

To sum up, a good migratory governance, together with a flourishing and secured energy market are the drivers for the Italian Republic with regards to the Middle East North Africa, bearing in mind Italy condition of relatively small power on the global scene and its trend of double track between bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

Finally, while speaking of Italian foreign policy strategy at present, we should not undermine two fundamental factors that will find further explanation later: the emergence of new centres of power (either regional or global) and Rome’s relation with them, in parallel with an inward-looking tendency from the United States; secondly, the effects of the economic and

financial crisis, impacting on the public opinion concerning the public defence expenditure, as defence is a fundamental factor of the Italian foreign policy strategy⁷⁷.

2.1: Evolution of the Italian role on the Mediterranean area under the II Republic

Going further into the analysis of the Italian role in the Mediterranean, it is important to focus on the period of the Second Republic, corresponding by and large to the last twenty-five years, full in events directly touching Italian interests and is characterised with rapid and consistent changes. The Second Republic itself is settled following a turbulent moment of the Italian domestic policy, which arrives right after the end of an era in international relations, i.e. the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rupture of the balances shaped during over forty years of Cold War. Suddenly, the enemy is not clearly identified any more in a territorial actor, representing a model of life and culture for a whole part of Europe. Apparently, the western world has never been more secure than in 1991; de facto the power vacuum left by the absence of Moscow's iron fist eastwards of the iron curtain leaves more space to conflict in the surrounding region than expected. The consequences involve high security concerns for the bordering region, that is to say the at the time still in the making European Union.

It is possible to identify two macro-periods in the Italian Second Republic, corresponding by and large to the 1992-2010 period for the first one and to the last decade as for the second period. The main difference lays in the objects of Italian attention, indeed the Balkan Wars and their consequences in the region are the catalyst of the 90's and the early 2000's, due to their regional proximity on the one hand and their range on the other hand. The most serious concern for Europe in general and for Italy specifically is the migratory flows, potentially directed westwards, deriving from the conflicts and the need to face

⁷⁷ As explained in further details in paragraph 2.2: *Italian participation in military missions abroad: the importance of being a NATO Member State.*

them and manage them effectively. Another threatening factor that emerges during this first phase is transnational terrorism, which after 9/11 and the strikes on European soil in Madrid and London is perceived as a global threat to be countered at any cost. Italy understands the importance of the issue and joins the Atlantic coalition in fighting terrorism, contributing, among others, to the NATO mission in Afghanistan⁷⁸. The years up to 2010 see a more consistent concentration of the EU action in polishing its aspect, shaping its institutions, culminating with the sign of the Lisbon Treaty in 2006, seeking the goal, among others, of granting a pacified and democratic space at its eastern boarder (through diplomatic initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership that will find form later on).

During this first moment, the main track of foreign policy action for the Italian Republic is the multilateral framework. Furthermore, despite its growing role on the regional scene, there is still an important prevalence of domestic priorities over international action⁷⁹. The 2008 economic and financial crisis and its tough consequences, arriving in Europe in the following biennium, re-direct the executive priority on the domestic coté of politics.

The second phase of the Italian Second Republic opens with a critical moment for Europe in general and for the country specifically, characterised by austerity measures aimed at contrasting the effects of the economic crisis. Those already somehow show first signals of a lack of solidarity in between the EU Member States, which seems paradoxical seen the affirmation non-traditional challenges on the international relations field (such as international terrorism, illegal migration flows, cyber-security and environmental concerns) and the awareness of the need for a concerted answer. Those threats are now perceived as physically closer than the war in Iraq and Afghanistan or the conflicts in the Post-Soviet space; therefore Italy's interest in protecting itself and its neighbours grows. Despite this situation awareness, the economic fragility still represents an important game-changer. Italy faces

⁷⁸ Those will be exhaustively described and analysed in paragraph 2.2.

⁷⁹ An example is a 2007 episode, when the Prodi administration almost touched the government crisis over the possibility of renewal for intervention in Afghanistan.

its *annus horribilis* in 2011 with the so-called “spread fever”⁸⁰, the outbreak of the public debt crisis, touching several other western countries and dividing the states within the EU. On the southern edge of the Mediterranean, the Arab Uprisings erupt in Tunisia, with a rapid domino effect in the whole MENA. Italian interests are deeply damaged in Libya, Rome’s main gas supplier, touching the energy sector. Italy also tastes the consequences of the uprisings in Tunisia with impressive numbers of Tunisian citizens fleeing the country and reaching the small island of Lampedusa. It is clear that in a scenario where challenges grow and European solidarity seems to decrease, Italy needs more space for independent action, as well as a more careful look to foreign policy formulation.

The publication in 2015 of the White Book for International Security and Defence by the Ministry of Defence is a milestone in this sense, with a look further in the future than at a single political mandate; indeed the document gives important directions over both the diplomatic and the defence field. Among the most important assessments it is necessary to enumerate shift in equilibrium at global level⁸¹, which potentially entails new conflict situation for Italy, Europe and the Atlantic Alliance; a growing influence of modern technologies⁸² that are more and more protagonist of people’s daily life and, therefore, will get a growing fundamental role in the international relations, diplomacy and the military. With these regards, Italy shall keep the pace with the rest of the world in all the above-mentioned fields. Other relevant trends are change in demographics, that directly deals with the development of strategic areas⁸³, going hand in hand with urbanisation and the issues deriving from the

⁸⁰ The value of the spread in 2011 soared from the 173 points of January 4th to the 528 of December 30th, with heavy consequences on the public finances of the country, especially the public debt, drawing Italy into a situation without precedent, that exacerbates its need to fix the domestic situation, before dealing with the international arena.

Scacchioli Michela. *Da Berlusconi a Monti la drammatica estate del 2011 tra spread e rischi di bancarotta*. La Repubblica. February 10th 2014. [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2014/02/10/news/estate_2011_spread_berlusconi_bce_monti_governo_napolitano-78215026/].

⁸¹ Ministero della Difesa, *Libro Bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*, July 2015, art.29, p. 23.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Art. 31, p.23.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Art. 33, p. 24.

phenomenon and the fundamental confrontation over resources⁸⁴, a potential driver for instability and conflict. The White Book notes with concern a trend in containing investments for the defence, since the general perception is that Italy is secured and resources shall be allocated differently. However, as the report remarks, Italy owes its security to the NATO umbrella and it is extremely important for Rome to maintain its position within the organisation. It is through NATO and its shared values of freedom, peace, wealth and development⁸⁵ that the security dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean area⁸⁶ is looked for, with Italy assuming a special role in this. The Mediterranean is presented as an area full of challenges, specifically political disorders (Art. 44)⁸⁷ and rise of terrorism (Art. 45-46). The White Book states clearly how regional stability in the Middle East North Africa and the region in their immediate proximity plays a fundamental role in the security of the Italian Republic.

Assuming a proactive role in MENA is fundamental for Rome's interest, as the region embodies all the above-mentioned points stated in the 2015 White Book. The main drivers in increasing bilateral relations with MENA countries concern the political, economic (Annex 4) and social securisation of the region, a priority for Italy, to maintain its stability at home. The action in the energy sector - brought about in large portion by the state-owned company ENI Gas e Luce - assumes the lead. However, the dossiers uniting the Farnesina interest in cultivating bilateral relations in the area involve counter-terrorism, development cooperation and the controverted management of the migration flows towards European countries, where Italy is an hub.

Egypt, despite the delicate status of bilateral relations with Rome, due to the affaire Regeni, represents one of the most relevant interlocutors for the Italian Republic. Its value, despite its high level of political instability, lays in

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 35, p. 24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 41, p. 26.

⁸⁶ According to Art. 50 of the *White Book* "for Italy it impossible to distinguish the security of the Euro-Mediterranean area from the security of the Euro-Atlantic one".

⁸⁷ Making the economic and social dimension of the countries in the region particularly vulnerable to organised crime and its control on any activity that would foster national and regional development.

its role in the whole MENA region, due to its geopolitical advantage represented by the Suez canal, together with its stakes in the Libyan crisis. El Cairo holds a special place in Italy's economic concerns, due to the role of the Zohr natural gas field, discovered by ENI in 2014, followed by a 10 billion euros investment, with positive fallout on the local work market⁸⁸. Even though ENI has sold part of its share of the Zohr gas field to the Russian Rosneft (30%) and the British Petroleum (10%)⁸⁹ in 2018 the revenues still remain potentially very high.

Algeria is another Northern African country with highly strategic value for Italy, mostly after 2011, when Italy loses large part of hydrocarbons supply from Libya, whereas Algeria, under the highly debated guidance of President Bouteflika, avoids involvement in the Arab Uprisings. In 2019 pacific protests, formally named as Hirak, animate the Algerian political scene, following Bouteflika's candidacy to the elections for his fourth mandate⁹⁰, despite his considerable age, weak health and scarce popularity. What Italy cannot afford is a prolonged crisis situation in Algeria, whose political stability is fundamental for the whole MENA area, being it the largest country in Northern Africa, with considerable influence in the Libyan crisis and a delicate situation concerning the inception of terrorism.

Turkey, with its recently developed hegemony ambitions with regards to MENA and its long-dated dialogue with the European Union, together with its NATO membership, constitutes an important partner for Italy. The bilateral relations between the two are mostly economic, involving not only the energy sector (where Turkey plays the role of transition country in several pipeline projects that will end in Italian soil), but mostly the infrastructure building. Another important dossier where Turkey is an interlocutor is migration, with

⁸⁸ Tramballi Ugo. *Italy and Egypt no more business as usual*. ISPI Commentary. 30th May, 2016 [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/italy-and-egypt-no-more-business-usual-15153>].

⁸⁹ Tramballi Ugo. *Italy and Egypt, Between Morality and Raison D'état*. ISPI. 15th March, 2018 [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/italy-and-egypt-between-morality-and-raison-detat-19879>].

⁹⁰ According to Yahia Zoubir in his article *Country to Watch 2020: Algeria*, elections are only the spark to lighten up a discontent that has been characterising the country for long time, due to the conduct of a largely corrupted regime, that relying on historical legitimacy and hydrocarbons revenues kept the population under control without really providing any great opportunity for the country's development.

special regards to the flow of Syrian refugees. For the volume of investments made, Italy saves interests in maintaining an open dialogue with Ankara, despite some recent political developments such as the shipment of Russian military technology and the launch of a new offensive in the Syrian province of Idlib from Erdogan.

For the principle of spill-over effect, also MENA periphery assumes growing importance in the Italian eyes. The Sahel emerges during the migration crisis, in fact the interest international actors show towards it is due to its instability, which potentially favours illicit movement of goods and people, together with the action of terrorist organisations and the eruption of conflicts over natural resources. The geographical proximity to Northern Africa makes Sahel highly influential on the Mediterranean dynamics. Subsequently, the regional security and development is a catalyst for Italian attention and interest, encompassing all those elements that have been unlisted as drivers of Rome's stakes in MENA. Sahel is a region rich in natural resources, as the discovery of gas fields by ENI in 2014 witnesses⁹¹, entailing high levels of competition over these resources, first and foremost among locals. Despite being a late comer to this area, Italy has conducted a substantial work over the last three years, especially with regards to Niger and Burkina Faso (where Italian Embassies have been opened respectively in 2017⁹² and 2018); Farnesina has also appointed a Special Envoy for Sahel. Furthermore, the Defence Ministry became active with the launch of a bilateral mission in Niger in 2018, aimed at fostering counter-terrorism and boarder control. Italy is, moreover, undertaking efforts in cooperation development, with particular regards to counter desertification. The Italian action in the area still knows considerable limits in instruments and knowledge of the context, this is why the multilateral dimension still needs to be regarded to as a precious instrument.

⁹¹ ENI conducts business, among others, in Algeria, Libya, Cote d'Ivoire and Mozambique, with 43,9 million Euros investment for local development in sub-Saharan Africa alone in 2018. [<https://www.eni.com/it-IT/presenza-globale/africa.html>].

⁹² https://ambniamy.esteri.it/ambasciata_niamy/it/i_rapporti_bilaterali/cooperazione_politica.

As far as the African Horn is concerned, Italy had historical interests in the area, however a recent come back has been brought about as a strategic penetration for the safeguards of Rome's interests there and in MENA. The governance of the migration flows is the top concern for Italy, seen that 20-25% people that try to go to Europe, passing through Libya comes from here. Another fundamental driver is the counter-terrorism and the struggle against transnational crime, with particular regards to piracy and illegal fishery. Last but not least, the energy driver has an important weight in Italian stakes in the Horn of Africa, with ENI holding positions in Kenya and recent discovery of oil and gas fields off-shore Eritrea and Somalia. Here the key-achievement is to avoid the rise of a geopolitical competition with other international players over the resources. The most encouraging sign for a period of stability in the region comes from the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea signed in 2018; yet Italy fostered its presence there starting from 2014 with the agreement Operating Lines of Italian Development Cooperation in East Africa. The Horn of Africa represents a golden occasion for Italy to take a leading position in the EU-Africa dialogue, advocating the interests of both and mediating the cooperation process. On a bilateral point of view, Italy can - and is already looking to - give important insights in the development of sectors such as agriculture, tourism and infrastructure development⁹³.

Overall, but with particular regards to MENA and its neighbourhood, there has been a soar in Italian diplomatic and political activities during the Second Republic; after 2010 a stronger aim in converging this activity within a strategic, long-term dessin seems more evident although still remains far to be concrete. Italian priorities have not changed much in substance over the last twenty-five years, underlining how being a part of a strong multilateral system drives the country and maintains its behaviour in international politics consistent, despite the frequent changes in internal leadership. It is evident how, during a turbulent era in which the world order is in the making, those

⁹³ This last one with particular regards to the building of dams, including the Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile River and the Gibe III on Omo River one, considering how relevant water is as a resource for development.

countries which are pawing to see their position recognised at the international level are in desperate need of one crucial element: a long-term view in addressing the issues of the XXI century and their transnational dimension.

2.2: Italian participation in military missions abroad: the importance of being a NATO Member State

Military missions abroad constitute a crucial part of the Italian foreign policy action, witnessing Rome's engagement within the multilateral framework of action of the international organisations and fostering its prestige on the global scene. It is fundamental to assess the character of the military missions as instruments in the pursuit of a set of objectives in the Italian external action strategy, under no circumstances military missions abroad are to be considered as goals themselves. It is also important to recognise how military missions abroad have never entailed any kind of advantage with regards to the economic field for the Italian Republic; on the contrary, they have often been source of disagreement in the domestic political scene, considering that the participation in any mission abroad, be it under the aegis of the United Nations, the European Union or NATO itself needs a dual approval: from the Government and from the Parliament.

Excluding the economic factor, as well as the support of the public opinion and the stabilisation of the internal politics dynamics, three main drivers of Italian engagement in military missions abroad can be named. Notably, the importance to underline and potentially foster the Italian role in the international organisations, secondly, the need of a multilateral response to the hybrid nature of challenges the world is currently facing (e.g. terrorism and piracy) and last but not least the potential benefits regarding legitimacy on both a bilateral and multilateral basis coming from a successful mission. A further element of advantage concerns the improvement of operational capabilities of Italian armed forces gained from missions abroad: it concerns both the operational skills of each single soldier, that are fostered during a mission on

the field, and the general capacity of the Italian Army, both concerning the operational procedure and the theoretical aspect of missions, not to mention the value of the intelligence potentially gathered.

The character of the missions undertaken abroad has changed sensitively since the 90's, as the ultimate goal and inner characteristics of the tools aimed at fostering peace, security and stability has evolved accordingly to the needs of an evolving world. The United Nations recognise four different kinds of activities: conflict prevention, peace making, peace enforcing and peace building; along with them go the peacekeeping operations (PKOs). Conflict prevention entails a set of diplomatic measures, including the action of the United Nations Secretary General aimed at the prevention of intra-state or inter-state tensions from escalating into conflicts⁹⁴. Peace making activities involve measures to address ongoing conflicts, with the general goal of bringing hostile parts to a negotiation table through diplomatic instruments. Regional organisations, groups of states, national governments and also non-governmental groups are usually involved. Peace enforcing missions is the instrument involving coercive measures, including the use of military forces, in those situations where the Security Council deems it necessary to restore peace and security. In accordance to the UN Charter, the SC might decide to use regional organisation to pursue this goal. Peace building missions are the instrument used in the post-conflict phase to lay the basis of a sustainable and long-term peace and development of the area involved. Those are complex process, that usually require several years to show successful and durable results, as their goal is the legitimation of the State authority among the population. The boundaries among those four instruments are often quite fleeting and peace operation are rarely limited to one type of activity, considering how the coexistence of several at one time has proven more effective than the pursuit of those four tools at different times, seeking the rigid respect of different phases. In this context, peacekeeping operations find their

⁹⁴ United Nations Peacekeeping terminology. [<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/terminology>].

dimension of support to the other instruments, even though their main role is the support of the implementation of a cease fire.

Italy, as a member of the international community, follows the provisions given by the UN, participating in all the different kinds of missions. More specifically, in 2019 the Italian Republic has seen the deployment of an average force of 6290 units over three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa and of a various nature, ranging from bilateral missions to operations under the aegis of the UN, the European Union and NATO (Annex 5).

The goals of the various international operations cover a wide range, however all of them generally aim at the securisation and social stabilisation of those areas characterised by a lack of stability and profound incertitude, where the Italian stakes are a priority in terms of national interest. The most consistent driver of engagement in Italian military missions abroad still remains counter-terrorism, particularly evident in both Africa and the Middle East. Indeed it is the Middle East that sees the deployment of the greatest number of Italian soldiers, particularly in Iraq, with 1100 units engaged in the struggle against the Islamic State⁹⁵. A second important theatre in the region is Afghanistan, where 700 units have been deployed in 2019⁹⁶. In general, Italian soldiers are appreciated for their skills in training local armed forces, this is particularly true as far as MENA is concerned. Furthermore, the Italian Republic gives substantial contribution to maritime missions in the Mediterranean Sea with the aim of making the area safer, countering any sort of illicit movement (be it of goods or people) directing towards Europe from the Magreb shores. The main engagement for Rome consisted in 2019 in the EU mission EUNAVFORMED Sophia (generally known as simply Sophia), the Mare Sicuro Operation and the NATO Sea Guardian. A consistent part of those missions sees the training of local armed forces from Italian soldiers,

⁹⁵ The number, however, sees a decrease from the 1497 units of 2018, probably in relation of the defeat of the Islamic State on the territory. Despite this, the deployment remains consistent, underlining how Italy understands the strategic importance of the Iraqi theatre in countering the inception of the Islamic State and its contribution to international terrorism.

[<https://temi.camera.it/leg18/provvedimento/autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019.html>].

⁹⁶ *Idem*.

entailing a notable capacity building and technical knowledge sharing. In Eastern Europe Italy maintains its participation, with 538 units, within the NATO mission Joint Enterprise⁹⁷, settled in 2004 as a reorganisation of the Atlantic Alliance presence in the region.

As mentioned above, the consistent participation in military operations abroad has become, starting in the earliest 90's, a constant of the Italian foreign policy strategy, bringing prestige to Italy's armed forces all around the world. The Mediterranean is the main theatre of action, in consideration of Italy's geopolitical interests. Indeed, it is in the Mediterranean, particularly in the Middle East North Africa that Italy has obtained its most relevant successes in the field of military operations. Out of the three missions that are considered by this author to be the most relevant ones for the Italian Republic, two have been conducted under the aegis of NATO. The Atlantic Alliance still constitutes a milestone in the Italian security and with regards to its power projection process. Despite it was originally conceived as an American shield for Western Europe against the Soviet Union, in fact, NATO has managed to renew itself after the USSR dissolution and, even though Russia remains among its primary security concerns, the Alliance has managed to amplify its range of action, encompassing new challenges such as counter terrorism, that make its presence fundamental for Italy. An Italian proactive role has double beneficial dimension: for the Alliance and for Rome itself, which can keep advocating its interests at NATO negotiation table, among which the need to maintain a dual dimension of relational attitude towards the Russian Federation: deterrence and dialogue, as none of them alone has shown enough effective.

Going more into details with regards to Rome's successes in military missions abroad, the first one worth special mention is the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL), has been first launched in 1978 from the United Nations Security Council (following UNSC Resolution 459 of the same year). The mission mandate has been renewed every 6 months until 2006, when

⁹⁷http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_oltremare/Pagine/Kosovo-KFOR-Joint-Enterprise-contributo-nazionale.aspx.

the dimension of the mission has been broadened, authorising the deployment of up to 15000 units under the aegis of the so-called UNIFIL II (following UNSC Resolution 1701), expanding also the area of operation of the mission on the whole Lebanese territory. Italy assumes a relevant role within UNFIL starting from 2006 with four mandates as Force Commander and Chief of Mission, the last one seeing General Stefano Del Col coordinating 10500 soldiers from 42 countries⁹⁸. The 2006 crisis could have evolved in a concrete threat for Europe, considering the potential spill-over effect on the region with growing tensions and escalation, also refugees would have become a problem. Italy surpassed traditional contributors such as France, providing more units and therefore gaining key roles in the mission.

The UN-patroned ceasefire can be considered an Italian success, thanks to the maritime task force that offered to patrol the Lebanese waters. Another important point of success is the assistance of the local armed forces to “taking steps towards the respect of borders and territorial control”⁹⁹. The fundamental point for UNSMIL was to make Lebanese armed forces regain their exclusive monopoly of the legitimate force, avoiding Hezbollah to overcome it. Although the situation has not been stabilised yet an important containment has been provided, in fact there seems to be a interpenetration between Lebanese national army and Hezbollah forces, despite the organisation has been unlisted as a terrorist organisation from the EU in 2013. The real success of the Italian contingent and task force is its role among the civilian population, which is engaged in a number of activities favouring dialogue and fostering the conditions of the locals.

The other two Italian big achievements in military missions abroad have been realised under the aegis of NATO, i.e. Kosovo and Afghanistan.

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http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_oltremare/Pagine/UNIFIL-Contributo-Nazionale.aspx.

⁹⁹ Paragraph 8-e of United Nations Security Council. 2006. Resolution 1701 (11th August 2006). [Online]. S/RES/1701 (2006). [Accessed the 4th April 2020]. https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_res_17012006.pdf.

The KFOR mission was launched in 1999 with the initial aim of granting a fluid and safe evacuation of the OSCE emergency observers from Kosovo in first place and supporting the humanitarian operators assisting refugees fleeing from the country in a second moment. In 2004 the European Union takes over the responsibility of the mission in Kosovo and NATO decides to regroup all its missions in the Balkans area under the name of Joint Enterprise, encompassing the KFOR activities, together with the joint EU-NATO interaction and the NATO head quarters in Skopje, Sarajevo and Tirana. Despite from 2010 the capacity of the mission has changed to a considerably more modest dimension, the mission still entails the participation of 31 NATO countries. From 2011, the mission sees two multinational battle groups, out of which one is Italy-led with the participation of Carabinieri of MSU Regiment. Originally launched as a peace-support mission, following UN Security Council Resolution 1244, today the mission has the larger goal to stabilise the whole area of western Balkans. With particular regards to Kosovo, NATO works to ensure a stable, peaceful, democratic and multinational state. The value of the Italian contribution to the mission has been formally recognised in 2013, since when General Michele Risi assumed the command of the KFOR mission, role that the General and Italy are still covering at present. On a practical level, Rome contributes under a variety of factors to the success of the mission, covering several functions, ranging from intelligence and surveillance, liason and monitoring to maintain alive the fundamental bridge with the local population, local governmental Institutions and political parties and all the national and international organisations operating on the field, with the ultimate goal of providing the pacified and secure environment they need to operate their missions. Beyond being a clear example of Italian excellence in the military operations abroad, a growing participation in the KFOR mission has served the national interest in monitoring and containing the greatest threat to Italian security of the 90's and earlier 2000's: the consequences of the Balkan wars on regional stability.

With regards to Afghanistan, Italy has contributed in several missions of different nature and aims: the UN-led UNAMA, which competence regards not only the stabilisation of the country but also its governance and rule of law, together with ensuring the respect for human rights and the social and economic development. Secondly, Italy got involved in 2003 in the special operation Enduring Freedom (Nibbio), following the US request to involve a contingent for support. The scope of the mission was counter terrorism, with particular regards to contrast and limit the action of al-Quaeda on the Afghan territory, particularly at the boarder with Pakistan.

Finally, and most importantly for us, Italy participated in the NATO-led action in Afghanistan since the beginning of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2001. The mission was approved by a UNSC Resolution 1386 and was initially conceived with an international mandate, however NATO assumes the guide of the mission until its conclusion in 2014. Italy has authorised the deployment of 2250¹⁰⁰ Italian units within ISAF mission and has assumed the control of the Regional West Command (RC-W), including the provinces of Herat, Badghis, Ghowr and Farah, furthermore maintaining its commitments in Kabul. Following the expiry of ISAF a new mission has been launched right after: the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), a non-combat mission which aim is providing with assistance and training the Afghan police forces, as well as the country's key Institutions (with particular regards to those connected to the security dimension). Resolute Support has maintained the division in regional commands (Annex 6).

The mission has recently¹⁰¹ shown results towards the implementation of intra-Afghan negotiations, including both Afghan national team and Taliban with the aim of settling a comprehensive peace agreement. Although this represents only a first step, it is a considerable one for NATO. In this context, Italy has maintained the control of the Western Command, now named Train

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http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_oltremare/Pagine/ISAF-Contributo-Nazionale.aspx

¹⁰¹ News updated to February 29th 2020, according to the session devoted to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan on NATO Website. (Last updated 2nd March 2020, last consultation 6th April 2020). [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm].

Advise Assist Command West (TAAC-W), as well as its commitment at the head quarters of the mission in Kabul. Resolute supports involves several divisions of the Italian armed forces, including Esercito Italiano, the Italian air force Aeronautica, the Italian Navy Marina Militare Italiana and Carabinieri. As mentioned, the main goal of the mission is favouring the implementation of a good governance system, relying on the principles of transparency and rule of law, through the training of the local police and military forces, including also advisory activity with regards of the field of logistics. Within the context of the NATO missions in Afghanistan the Italian armed forces are particularly appreciated for their capabilities in both training and advising local forces; indeed a special mention has been given in several occasions to Carabinieri for their abilities of mixing law enforcement with military skills. Their multi-tasking capacities seem to be of particular use in the phase of transition from armed conflict to a pacified nation since, unlike UN peacekeepers, they are able to maintain public order and to advice local police, while they are also trained soldiers. Apparently this peculiarity of the Italian model has received the praise of important personalities, like for instance the former UN Secretary General Koffi Annan¹⁰².

Through the action of Carabinieri specifically and of all its armed forces in general, Italy has reported consistent successes in military missions abroad under the aegis of the UN and NATO. Another peculiarity is also the implementation of the so-called General Angioni model (deriving from the 1982 operation in Beirut), characterised by a greater attention to the local population and its needs, together with a clear humanitarian driver, thanks to which Italy has proven successful in several operational theatres. The key lays in the ability of understanding the peculiar needs of the local population and adapting the measures to be taken, resulting in a higher likelihood for those to be successful, as they rise popular consensus. In this sense also continuity of

¹⁰² Braw, Elizabeth. *For Not-Quite-Wars, Italy Has a Useful Alternative to Traditional Troops*. Defense One. 16th April 2018. [<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/04/todays-not-quite-wars-italy-has-alternative-traditional-troops/147457/>].

the presence enhances the building of a confidence relation, which favours out of doubt the positive reception of the foreign military by the locals; this can be observed in all the three above-mentioned missions.

Moreover, with its successes in the NATO missions, Italy has gained a special say in advising the set of priorities of the organisation. Indeed NATO has taken with greater concern into consideration the southern Mediterranean as an area of fundamental importance for the security of the Atlantic Alliance. In particular, the Italian role - and interests - in the Mediterranean theatre have been recognised as a priority with the establishment of an Allied Joint Force Command in Naples in 2018.

Despite this, from 2018 to 2019 a contraction in the Italian engagement abroad has been registered, due to the doubts raised by both the public opinion and some political forces within the Parliament and the Government over the actual need of the missions abroad, mostly underlining the inconvenience of the expenditure they entail, which appears to be much higher than the benefits they bring. It is likely that this kind of rhetoric will be brought further about, considering the status of emergency that Italy is facing right now with contrasting the epidemiology from Covid-19, resulting in a trend that entails a minor engagement for the years to come, devoting financial and human assets to other fields. This, on the long run, would be a damage in the Italian foreign policy strategy, mostly for Italy's position in the global scene and this is not exclusively a matter of diplomatic image; on the contrary if Rome will be perceived as weak and as an actor withdrawing assets from the common field, it will lose its say in the international negotiation tables it is already a weak part of in absolute terms. Considering the value of the Mediterranean, particularly MENA, for Italy's strategic interest, Rome cannot afford to be marginalised and it should follow the lead that it has maintained so far with its engagement in military operations abroad.

2.3: MENA: European, Mediterranean or national challenge?

In this chapter the analysis has focused on the strategic value of the Middle East and North Africa region for the Italian Republic and, to some extent, for Europe and the Atlantic Alliance. Numerous initiatives have been taken at all the levels, showing different degrees of success over the years, which have been shaping the evolution of the area security and political dimension, together with the perception of the numerous actors involved. In order to make any forecast, though, it is first and foremost necessary to understand the measure in which the different actors will be involved and following which kind of pattern they will act; in other words, determining whether MENA should be considered as a national, regional or global challenge and if regional under which kind of framework.

It is evident at this point how the area represents an issue of primary concern for the security of the Italian Republic and its citizens, entailing not much traditional security threat such as the direct menace of an armed attack on the Italian territory, but mostly a set of non-traditional security threats which make Rome's action in the area extremely sensitive. Looking at the inner nature of the security concerns characterising the Mediterranean basin, it is remarkable how their essence has not evolved considerably over the last twenty years; indeed all the issues characterising this area are linkable with a lack of stability and a certain extent of underdevelopment. Those traits are recognisable in all the main critic points characterising MENA, i.e. moderated level of economic development and a general difficulty in differentiating the market from the sell of hydrocarbons; profound social inequality among the population, deriving generally from huge differences in financial conditions; important figures in youth unemployment generating mistrust and disillusion towards the Institutions; growing population with a low average age; golden occasions for international organised crime to build its web and gather adepts; potential spread of fundamentalism disgorging into great advantage for the terrorist organisations. The picture offered is obviously reductive and aims at

providing a general look over the area, not presuming to be exhaustive. The point here is underlining how the main issues characterising the Middle East North Africa are perceived from European Countries, including Italy, as non-traditional security threats. Their complexity and a combination of factors make it hardly possible for one single state to contain and counter them efficiently. Indeed, not even the United States managed to contrast this kind of threats by them selves in their super power solo period after the fall of the Soviet Union. For valid that it could be, the contribution of one state alone is not enough to respond to these issues by effective measures, that is why they are said to have assumed a global security dimension, due to the high level of interconnection of the contemporary world. Furthermore, this kind of issue hardly knows any national or regional borders and they can potentially spread at global level very easily, that is why a coordinated global response is useful in contrasting problems that the whole world might have to be dealing with if they are not contained.

The globalisation mega trend, together with the digital revolution and the technology accessibility are core point in the evolution of the global dimension of contemporary threats, therefore it seems spontaneous to wonder why the global response alone is not enough to respond to the non-traditional security threats. The answer might lie in the fact that a certain tendency to fragmentation is emerging stronger and stronger, particularly with regards to the MENA dynamics and to the solutions provided. Indeed, the delicate tissue and peculiar internal situation of the majority of the MENA countries makes it necessary to address it with due cautiousness and commitment to understand the root causes and the particular features of the case. There are of course similarities and trends to be observed all over the region, as for similar social and political phenomena assume similar connotations, the most evident example to be the Arab Uprisings and their spread around MENA; nevertheless the attempt to implement some sort of “one size fits all” solutions turns out to be unsatisfactory and does not solve the matters. At this point, regional actors shall enter the game in contrasting the issues characterising the region, as they

have, indeed, higher stakes in the Mediterranean, which should ideally correspond to a deeper expertise with regards to the actual state of the region. Therefore, the players involved on a regional level can be looked at two different perspectives: regional organisations (in our case mainly NATO and the European Union) and groups of states formally or informally recognised. This does not exclude the contribution of global actors in the MENA region or the Mediterranean, as such a scenario would be paradoxical, but rather an effective, coordinated action is needed, which entails the likelihood for global actors to sometimes step aside and leave the lead to regional actors. Similarly, it is of fundamental importance to understand that every single actor playing their own games will not pay off on the long range, as the results will only be evident for a limited period, then destabilisation will strike the area again. In 2011 the world tasted at which speed a phenomenon can spread around MENA, a speed that potentially increases at a constant rate with the improvements of technological means. Therefore, big moves undertaken by solo players would result in pyrrhic victories, damaging them and the large portions of the area, whereas a coordinated regional response will provide durable results.

Regionalism is important for Europe during this historical moment of rebuilding of the world order, indeed single European States can hardly confront powers of the dimension of the Russian Federation, China or the United States¹⁰³. All this said, it is necessary to consider which dimension shall the Middle East North Africa assume in Italy's eyes, not neglecting Italian national interests and priorities as an actor inserted within a relevant regional political and economic framework: the European Union.

Recapitulating, the most urgent concerns for the Italian Republic looking at the MENA region are the security of the energy markets and the

¹⁰³ Even though the United States of America are Europe's strong allies and they are part of a military alliance with the other side of the Atlantic, a tendency in taking the distance from Europe has been observed lately from the Trump administration, with particular regards to custom tariffs, but also following a serie of declarations from the US President with regards to a potential consistent disengagement from NATO. Not to mention then, that Washington has completely different stakes than EU countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, as geography helps them considerably in making any potential decision to let the scenarios evolve by themselves or simply to step aside and withdraw a considerable amount of assets put in place in the MENA region at present time.

management of the migratory flows. As for the first point, it is fundamental for Italy to get its oil and gas supplies ensured from the Mediterranean partners with continuity and affordable prices, avoiding sudden shifts or, worse, cuts in supply causing important repercussions on the Italian internal situation. As for the latter one, the core point lays in ensuring the legal element of this process, efficiently countering illegal flows, usually conceived and kept alive by international organised crime and affecting one of the leading principles of Italy as a political actor: the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. A further relevant element for Italy, encompassing both security at home and its peace-building action abroad, is the counter-terrorism. Here the regional element assumes particular relevance, as the Italian Republic has never experienced any terrorist attack of Islamic matrix on its soil, however a combination between the need to prevent this from happening and the coordination with its European and NATO partners entails considerable efforts from Rome in the field of the struggle against international terrorism.

Taking into consideration the Italian Republic and the Middle East and North Africa region, once we exclude both the solo player option and the universal way, two options arise in a regional perspective: the European one and the Mediterranean one. The former entails the European Union and NATO with all their Member States, including even those who do not have such profound and delicate interests in MENA as Italy has. An example with these regards is constituted by Poland and the Baltic States, whose top security concern is still represented by the Russian Federation and its renewed assertiveness, who therefore, will be quite reticent in investing in the Mediterranean security those precious resources that they would like to fully devote to monitoring Moscow.

The Mediterranean perspective includes nineteen countries, divided into three macro regions, sharing direct access on the Mediterranean Sea, i.e. the Southern Europe - with Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Malta and Cyprus; the Magreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya) and the so-called Mashreq (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Syria, Turkey and the

Palestinian Authority). There are two contrasting elements defining this group of states: on the one hand their geographic proximity entails a profound correspondence in geopolitical interests; on the other hand there is no institutional framework owing actual strong legitimisation (as it is the case of the EU or NATO) that bonds together all those countries¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, there is a huge difference in between the three regions, with a visible contrast in the level of development and economic status between Southern Europe and the MENA countries (with exceptions, e.g. Israel and Turkey).

Theoretically, therefore, the Middle East North Africa represents a challenge under several dimensions for different reasons, on the practical level, global and national concerns seem to be only a suboptimal perspective to address the situation. Therefore, Italy should undertake action within the European framework, never forgetting the value of the NATO military instrument, while bearing in mind that the key of the real area stabilisation lays in a political and social process, fostering the security of region and its development, as none of those two elements exists without the other one. The coexistence of the military and the political tool is of a crucial importance. It is, furthermore, fundamental that this process is conducted in accordance with the locals, in order to avoid any form of paternalism or new-colonialism that will lead to no point. In this sense, some good premises in the form of international organisations or diplomatic platforms of dialogue have already been put in place, as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), yet their legitimation still seems to lack on both the edges of the sea. It is expected than, a player like Italy will lean on a greater commitment from more reliable and influential

¹⁰⁴ Actually some dessins for a platform of dialogue inclusive of both the edges of the Mediterranean Sea exist, i.e. the EuroMediterranean Partnership, launched in 1995 with the Barcelona Process, following a joint declaration and evolved in the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008. At present, the initiative includes Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Tunisia and all the EU countries, together with Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro and Turkey as Mediterranean partners. The UfM aims at the securisation of the Mediterranean area through fostering its development, as the two elements are one the *condicio sine qua no* of the other. Despite some initiatives have shown successful, it is necessary to recognise how the partnership has known a considerable number of issues, entailing some important setbacks in its development. A concrete example, with these regards is the membership of Libya within the UfM, which became a controverted issue in 2012 and still remains so after eight years. Syria has gone through a similar process.
[\[https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/\]](https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/).

partners. In this sense, cooperation at the European Union level is fundamental, albeit it seems very hard to be reached at present, despite the thick institutional tissue implemented and all the security initiatives put in place. A EU concerted action would result efficient only if the single Member States will act for the good of the whole Union, not exclusively seeking for their own profit. With these regards, the Middle East and North Africa region has been a tough testing ground for European solidarity and coordination, which have been put aside in several cases for the sake of single Member State national interests or a small group of States. This is true concerning different dossiers, be it in the field of energy resources supply or with regards to the issues of migration governance.

The most evident example of this kind of attitude, and the reason why the Italian Republic should bare in mind to maintain its action on a double diplomatic track (multilateral and bilateral action) with regards to the MENA region, is the case of the Libyan crisis. The management of the Libyan conflict shall remind to Italy why its action in foreign policy deserves proper attention and how Rome cannot afford to be cut off from the dossier, due to the fact that it has been neglecting it while engaged in solving other matters that at the moment seemed of a greater priority.

Chapter 3: CASE STUDY: The Libyan conflict - origins and evolution

The Libyan conflict has been taken as a case study as it represents the ideal example for practical consideration of the theory analysed and described during the previous chapters, with regards to both the Russian Federation and the Italian Republic. Furthermore, both states hold important stakes in the Northern African country, which are iconic of their action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Another important element that has driven the choice is the vibrant developments that animated the Libyan theatre during the last year. The launch and perpetration of Haftar's "western offensive" demonstrates how the game is still open and how alternative solutions are needed for a country, which has been stuck into a conflict for nine years now with different levels of intensity. Libya has been defined during the colonial period a "sandbox"¹⁰⁵ which turned into a lock box in the exact moment when oil started being found all around the country¹⁰⁶. Also it has experienced the inception of the Islamic State and other terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda, which make it a country to monitor and a place to be for those actors who are particularly engaged into the international struggle against terrorism. Not to mention the potential disruptive spill-over effect on its neighbours, due to the weak and porous nature of the Libyan borders. Both the countries in the Sahel region and in Magreb are

¹⁰⁵ The Term sandbox is used in reference to the arid nature of the territory, which was an element contributing to the scepticism towards Libya during the colonial period. There was a profound debate within the Italian government for deciding whether to start the Libyan campaign or not, considering the nature of the territory, Italy's wish to expand its influence within the territory was seen as pure propaganda and power hunger. Actually, voices referred to the presence of sulphur and other mineral resources on the territory, but they were never confirmed, that is why Libya seemed more a giant sandbox than a territory worth conquering to a part of the Italian public opinion at the time.

Cresti, Federico and Cricco, Massimiliano. *Storia della Libia contemporanea - Dal dominio ottomano alla morte di Gheddafi*. Chap. 2: *Le ambizioni italiane sulla Libia e l'occupazione (Italy's ambitions on Libya and the occupation)*. Carrocci Editore. 2012, pp. 51-52.

¹⁰⁶ When six major oil fields were discovered in both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1959, Libya's international status changed consistently from the dependence on foreign aids to the condition of oil monarchy. Moammar Gadhafi came into power just ten years later and started exploiting all the leverage he could from Libya's richness in natural resources in the negotiation with the foreign powers. Paradoxically, the territory that was seen as a desert with nothing interesting inside became a key northern African rentier state, lead by an extremely assertive leader until 2011. [<https://www.britannica.com/place/Libya/The-discovery-of-oil>].

concerned with this issue, multiplying the puzzle of national interests confronting on the Libyan chess board, together with the level of instability for the region.

The result is an extremely competitive and fragmented context, that concerns not only the local and regional level of the conflict, but the international community as well. Last but not least, Libya is an example of failed mediation attempts from the international community. The most iconic one is the short-sighted process to implement a top-down unitary approach - typical of Westerns actors - into a country that is characterised by profound internal divisions. Similarly, the European failures in implementing a coordinated answer to the crisis, due to the preponderance of different national interests over the common policies find concrete expression on the Libyan stage, with more and more players trying to have their say at the negotiation table. Moreover, Libya becomes the icon, potentially more than Syria, of a progressive disengagement of the United States with regards to the Middle East and North Africa region. A phenomenon that runs parallel to a renewed Russian interest for the area, entailing - perhaps - a greater success for Moscow than it did for Washington.

3.1: Key milestones in the evolution of the Libyan conflict

To understand the ongoing situation in Libya and to think through any possible future scenario it is important to take a step back into the country's recent history and to look over its peculiar social tissue and political environment.

It is often said that the main issue with Libya lays in the lack of national feeling among its people, that define themselves according to the division into tribes and clans. Family bonds bypass the faith into the state institutions and tribal dynamics win over any kind of national belonging, even with references to the three macro-regions: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. These divisions are deeply rooted in history, in fact they already existed under the Ottoman

Empire rule¹⁰⁷. This premise is fundamental while reading the 2011 events. In fact, despite they have initially been connected to the Arab Uprising wave of protests, they acquired a completely different connotation in Libya. This does not exclude the push towards more equal life conditions - especially in consideration of the redistribution of wealth. However, it is important to distinguish the fundamental drivers, i.e. tribal dynamics and oil revenues from the accessory one (democratisation). A factual analysis is the key starting point for distinguishing the different phases of escalation that led Libya from living a popular revolt into being the theatre of a big players confrontation.

In 2011 Gadhafi's Libya is a rentier state whose economy is entirely based on the revenues coming from the oil market, which are also the element that, through a complex system of checks and balances among tribes, has allowed the rais to stay in power for over forty years. Under Gadhafi's rule, in fact, Libyans used to enjoy general better economic conditions if compared with their Northern African neighbours, as the oil production used to be abundant¹⁰⁸ satisfying the market's constant request. Nevertheless, tribal rivalries and confrontational dynamics between different Libyan regions were far from being exhausted and just temporarily suspended. In particular, in the Cyrenaica region people did not forget the way Gadhafi got into power - by overthrowing King Idris al-Mahdi al-Senussi - and they question the legitimacy of his Jamahiriya "super power". Therefore, the panorama of political agitation characterising the Middle East North Africa region in 2011 arrived within the Libyan borders and reached out for the tribes opposing the rais as a golden occasion for turning tables. The sprinkle of the protests eruption is of a humanitarian matrix, indeed people gather in the streets of Benghazi on February 15th 2011 to rise their voice against the arrest of the human rights

¹⁰⁷ Mercuri Michela. *Incognita Libia - Cronache di un paese sospeso*. Chap. 1: *Le fratture del passato che ritorna - La tribù. Attore fondante della Libia* (Par. 3). Franco Angeli editions. Milan 2017.

¹⁰⁸ After Gadhafi got into power in 1969 the already existing - and flourishing - oil and gas production developed a conventional structure presided by the National Oil Corporation (NOC), an actor that even nowadays still plays an extremely relevant role. The sector has been growing at constant rate between 1969 and 2011, with an average daily oil output of 1.6 million barrels per day in 2011, before the eruption of the crisis in February.

Barltrop, Richard. *Oil and Gas in a New Libyan Era: Conflict and Continuity*. The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. University of Oxford. November 2019, p. 6 and graph at p. 9.

lawyer Fethi Tarbel, asking Gadhafi to resign and release political prisoners. The response was prompt and involved the use of artillery. This led to a quick and violent escalation from both parts, with demonstrators, that are particularly active in Cyrenaica¹⁰⁹, taking control of Benghazi and starting their expansion towards Tripoli. Meanwhile, Sayf al-Islam - Gadhafi's first born and his dauphin - exhorted the population to give up, as the protests could have easily taken to a civil war, that the government was ready to "fight until the last man, the last woman, the last bullet"¹¹⁰.

By the end of February the retaliatory acts of Gadhafi's regime on the Libyan population earned the factual condemnation from the international community. Later a travel ban, an arms embargo and the freezing of the Gadhafi family assets were put in place by the UN Security Council. Further sanctions came from the European Union and a number of states. The rais responded by accusing Western states of having "renewed colonial aims" towards Libya and the demonstrators of being stirred up by al-Qaeda and to be acting under the effects of acids. The situation entered a stationary phase when the rebel movements assumed some sort of political structure in Cyrenaica and the National Transition Council (NTC) was established. The NTC controlled at that point the east of Libya and the two factions had similar military capability. While Libya was falling apart and hordes of civilians tried to flee the country, de facto weakening its borders, the Libyan parties were stuck in the impossibility of reaching consensus over the issue. The international community was also profoundly divided over the events in Libya. The tiebreaker arrived on March 17th with the UN Security Council Resolution

¹⁰⁹ This is not surprising considering how Cyrenaica is the region where Gadhafi has encountered the lowest levels of support. Cyrenaica has always saved its attachment to the Senussia Fraternity and saw the rais as the usurper to King Idris's throne. This relied in large part also to the perceived unfair distribution of oil revenues, which granted higher profits to the Tripolitania tribes, according to the eastern ones.

Ibid. Footnote Numb. 107. Chap. 2 *La Libia di Gheddafi* and chap. 3 *La primavera araba libica e le sue anomalie*.

¹¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, David D. and El-Naggar, Mona. *Qaddafi's Son Warns of Civil War as Protests Widen*. The New York Times. 20th February, 2011. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/africa/21libya.html>].

1973¹¹¹. the resolution established a no-fly zone on Libya and renewed previous measures such as the enforcement of the arm embargo, a ban on flights and assets freeze¹¹². Despite the declaration of a cease-fire from the Gadhafi regime, violent clashes continued in Libya, with the number of civilian casualties increased consistently. Meanwhile, the French President Nicholas Sarkozy, supported by the United Kingdom and the United States convinces NATO allies in launching air raids on positions of Gadhafi forces. On March 27th, NATO assumed the command of the military operations in Libya, led by a US-France-UK coalition, despite the scepticism of a number of NATO countries, Italy first and foremost. The Russian Federation also took note of the NATO intervention with a great deal of concern regarding the respect of the principle of national sovereignty.

The situation remained stuck in a stalemate until the summer, when the rebel forces took over strategic spots such as the Zawiya oil refinery, a victory that would allow them to advance towards Tripoli and finally conquer the rais head quarters in the Bāb al-‘Azīziyyah compound on 22nd of August. While Gadhafi’s location and moves remained unknown, the NTC managed to consolidate its leadership along the Libyan coasts, fighting those who remain loyal to the rais in cities such as Sirte. In September the UN General Assembly recognised the National Transition Council as the official representative of Libyan people within the UN platform. The 20th October 2011 rebel fighters discovered and brutally killed Muammar Gadhafi in the city of Sirte, where they were conducting operations to solidify their control over it. The news regarding the killing spread all over the world, as the Libyan mad dog - as former US President Ronald Reagan once called Gadhafi - was finally defeated.

¹¹¹ United Nations Security Council. 2011. Resolution 1973 (17th March 2011). [Online]. S/RES/1973 (2011). [Accessed the 17th April 17, 2020]. [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1973%20\(2011\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1973%20(2011)).

¹¹² The resolution still leaves unsolved the question of the military intervention into the country, hypothesis presented by France and supported by the United Kingdom, but fiercely opposed by the African Union. In any case there is not enough consensus within the UN platform to approve any military operation in Libya. [*Idem*].

The killing, however, unleashed the tribal rivalry that have been smouldering for decades. It was, above all, a matter of legitimisation of the National Transition Council, as a number of armed groups claim that they have been fighting their battles with equal vigour and a certain degree of autonomy from NTC. Therefore they refused to recognise its government, as they claim that NTC has been imposed from the outside and has no legitimate authority. The priority then was the country reconstruction, preventing Libya to be stroke by a power vacuum. In order to ensure a smooth transition, elections were organised with the ultimate goal of approving a new constitution, unique and comprehensive. The high number of political parties that emerged on the political scene following the uprisings in the country, showed the essence of the Libyan fragmentation and a quasi total absence of national identity – all of which made the process of the new government formation challenging.

Despite these structural issues, some parties managed to rise consensus, with an important Islamic component. It is the case, for instance, of the Justice and Construction party, considered the Libyan expression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development¹¹³. There were also parties of a more secular nature, as the National Front Party (created on the ashes of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya). Some other political factions were born out of the initiative of former members of the NTC or the Libyan executive. They turned out to be capable of coming together into a united front, and got rewarded with a brief success at the National Assembly elections. The National Forces Alliance (NFA) regrouped 58 parties and won the support of the international community, as it had important differences comparing with Islamic parties,

¹¹³ A party with clear Islamic references, whose leader, Ali Sallabi is an extremely influent religious figure within Libya and holds contacts outside and within the national borders, more precisely with Egypt and Qatar outside and with military groups in Tripolitania (Abdel Hakim Belhaj) and Cyrenaica (captained by his brother Ismail Sallabi).

Varvelli, Arturo and Pelosi, Gerardo. *Dopo Gheddafi. Democrazia e petrolio nella nuova Libia*. Chap. 5: *I nuovi partiti politici: chi sono e cosa vogliono*. Fazi Editore, 2012.

encompassing modern traits and proposals for decentralisation of the power on the territory, albeit being against federalism¹¹⁴.

The parliamentary election of 7th of July 2012 was welcomed by the Western press as the icon of the democratic triumph. Electors were called to select a temporary assembly - the General National Congress (GNC) - in charge of appointing a cabinet and a Prime Minister, as elaborated by the National Transition Council. The system conceived by NTC saw a repartition of 200 seats in the assembly as follows: 100 for the western region of Tripolitania, 60 for the eastern region of Cyrenaica and 40 for the southern region of Fezzan. Even though some protests and isolated violences occurred during the 2012 election day, mostly in the eastern region, where people feared to be marginalised again as under Gadhafi's regime, 2.8 million voters were registered¹¹⁵ to have conveyed at the polls. Once the election was over, a practical issue remained to be solved, i.e. the high number of militias still spread on the Libyan territory. Those armed groups led the revolutionary hotbeds and were very committed to maintaining their power positions.

The importance of entertaining smooth relations with militias was understood already in January, when the National Transition Council started a process of integration into the national army, that produced scarce results. Furthermore, hardly any attention was given to Fezzan, which presented objective structural issues, including accessibility and ongoing violent confrontation among ethnic groups. Furthermore, the General National Congress, initially supposed to be appointing the 60 members of the National

¹¹⁴ *Idem*.

¹¹⁵ According to BBC's article *Libya Election: high turnout in historic vote*, 7th July, 2012. [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18749808>].

Even though the data have been widely contested by analysts later, who observed how the high numbers recorded were the product of a structural mistake due to the limits in the National Electoral Commission in counting people who registered as voters. Actually, only 1.7 million people actually gathered at the polls to cast their votes and such a high discrepancy between the registered voters and those who actually exercise their right is rare in a country where elections are held for the first time in decades. Which led to the release of numbers that largely exceeded the actual affluence at the polls.

Alunni, Alice. *Elezioni in Libia, verso una nuova legittimità?*, (*Elections in Libya, towards a new legitimacy?*). ISPI Commentary. 25th June 2014. [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-libia-al-voto-verso-una-nuova-legittimita-10719>].

Assembly, was deprived of this task by the NTC right before the elections. This was due to the will to welcome Benghazi's request for a popular vote.

Even though the election is regarded to be a milestone in opening the democratic way for Libya, the ad interim government turned out to be unable to draft a new constitution and to provide adequate economic measures to foster people's life. In an already tense climate, the seeds of discordia kept spreading around and they inflamed the population against the armed groups and vice versa, involving all the regions of the country. Furthermore, conflicts happened also within the GNC, resulting in its decisional paralysis. On 5th May 2013 the General National Congress approved (with 164 votes in favour and only 4 against¹¹⁶) a law that prevented all those who served under the Gadhafi's regime from being eligible for any kind of public position¹¹⁷. This law came after weeks of pressure from armed groupes over the GNC, following the encirclement of the city of Tripoli. The situation in Libya became a multi-dimensional confrontation game, which added the political clashes to the tribal dynamics. Furthermore the relations between Islamic parties Islamic militias were also affected by conflictual dynamics. The international players in the Libyan risk game failed to understand the relevance of the local dynamics for the Libyan stability and they kept pursuing their interests. Internal disorders and clashes among ethnic groups went on for the whole summer. The country's governance was weak, divided and focused on power games and tribal dynamics, therefore it hardly paid any attention to the country's stabilisation or to the implementation of economic measures for the recovery of the Libyan system. This created a power vacuum within Libya, that contributed raising popular discontent and mistrust for the political class. It is in such fragile context that extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) find fertile ground to incept.

¹¹⁶ Il Post. *Intanto in Libia - Una legge vieta di ricoprire cariche pubbliche a chiunque avesse incarichi ai tempi di Gheddafi, primo ministro compreso e ci sono proteste.* 6th May 2013. [<https://www.ilpost.it/2013/05/06/intanto-in-libia/>].

¹¹⁷ This provision includes the at-the-time president of GNC, the Prime Minister, four people serving in his cabinet and some fifteen deputies. [*Idem*].

The inconsistency of the Libyan institutions and the wide discontent of the population, mostly for the unsatisfactory economic measures promulgated, led to the organisation of new elections, scheduled for 2014. Respectively, the election of a new constituent body - in charge of drafting a new constitution - was scheduled for February and the election for the House of Representatives was settled for June. New electoral mechanisms were conceived for both events in an effort to establish rules that reflect more accurately the Libyan reality¹¹⁸.

The prolonged internal clashes, with the growing important role of militias impacted the electoral mechanisms and pulled the country into a new civil war. Frictions arose among Islamic groups and those who rather see a secular future for Libya. More specifically, two coalitions emerged with a precise geographic crystallisation¹¹⁹. The Operation dignity launched by Haftar as a campaign to contrast the Islamist militant groups in Benghazi on the one hand and the operation Libya Dawn, a coalition of Islamist groups based in the west, that included Ansar al-Sharia group¹²⁰ on the other hand. In the parliamentary election of May the Islamist parties were heavy defeated in a climate where the electors were discouraged to go to the polls, due to security concerns. Right after the election the clashes between the two factions escalated quickly and reached a peak with the destruction of the Tripoli international airport. Embassies were closed and foreigners evacuated. At that point the battle for ruling Libya seemed to have bypassed tribal, regional, political and religious lines, as each faction named its military chiefs and created its political institutions¹²¹. Support to the two factions arrived also from outside the country with Qatar supporting Libya Dawn and the United Arab Emirates backing

¹¹⁸ Relying on the provisions of Law No. (17) of 2013 for the Constituent Assembly and of the provisions of Law No. (10) of 2014 for the House of Representatives.

[<https://h nec.ly/%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%ae%d8%a7%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%87%d9%8a%d8%a6%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%a9/>].

¹¹⁹ Global Conflict Tracker. *Civil War in Libya*. Council on Foreign Relations. Last updated 22nd of April 2020. [<https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>].

¹²⁰ The Islamist armed group which is considered responsible for the 2012 attack to the US Consulate in Benghazi, where the Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other members of the diplomatic corps were killed. [*Idem*].

¹²¹ The House of Representatives based in Tobruk and the General National Congress in Tripoli. [*Idem*].

Haftar's Operation Dignity, with the risk for Libya to become the theatre of a proxy war between the Gulf powers¹²². Furthermore, Libya Dawn is considered alarming for its strong Islamist component, which might lead to associate the faction with jihadist organisations, despite they declared themselves as the real advocates of the revolutionary values¹²³. Talks among the two parties are encouraged and brought about by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, with the support of the UN Special Envoy for Libya Bernardino León, later replaced by his successor Martin Kobler. The situation of quasi-anarchy in the country, together with the profound dissatisfaction with the political situation, provides the Islamic State with the perfect ground for extending its hand on Libya, trying to make a Caliphate province out of it¹²⁴. Libya presents a consistent trend in al-Qaeda supporters, who have been militants in Iraq and, more recently Syria. There is evidence that more than half of Libyan foreign fighters originated in the city of Derna¹²⁵.

Libya entered 2015, its fourth year of civil conflict, with a renewed attention from the international community, responding to Libya's structural problems and trying to contrast IS in its efforts to get over the oil facilities around Sirte. Khalifa Haftar assumed in this moment an important role in the military containment of the Islamic State in Libya. He offered the international players the occasion to avoid a boots on the ground intervention and to concentrate on the political aspect of the Libyan reconstruction. The primary goal was to find a compromise between the two political factions emerged from 2014 election, the HoR in Tobruk and the GNC in Tripoli, before the mandate of the former one expired in October. The general aim was to form a national unity government for a two-years period of transition, before holding a new round of parliamentary elections. The dialogue among the two main political factions seemed to be quite successful and entailed, besides the UN and the

¹²² Stephen, Chris. *War in Libya - The Guardian Briefing*. The Guardian. 29th August 2014. [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/29/-sp-briefing-war-in-libya>].

¹²³ *Idem*.

¹²⁴ Varvelli, Arturo. *The Libyan Radicalisation Hotbeds: Derna and Sirte as case studies*. Chap. 6 of the book *Jihadist Hotbeds - Understanding Local Radicalisation Processes*. Edizioni Epoké - ISPI, Milano, 2016.

¹²⁵ *Idem* pp. 95-96.

Libyans a range of international players with important stakes in the country, such as Italy. In particular, Italy assumed an important role, working in tandem with the United States and also hosting a conference in Rome.

On 17th December 2015 the negotiation efforts were rewarded with the sign of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)¹²⁶ in the city of Skhirat (Morocco). The deal established the equal authority and the power-sharing among three institutions: the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, the House of Representatives (HoR), based in Tobruk and the State Council.

Peace and stability, however, remained a mirage, as a large number of militias that played an active role in the 2014 civil war and were still enjoying territorial support claimed to be neglected by the Shkirat Agreement provisions. Therefore, they refused to recognise the authority of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. Factually the Libyan Political Agreement resolved nothing, as the confrontation simply shifted to those who favoured its roadmap and those who did not; both were well-equipped and enjoyed foreign support. Furthermore, the presence of the Islamic State remained an unsolved reality for Libya. The victory on the field arrived for a coalition of western Libyan militias, acting with the support of the Tripoli government and the US air cover. Those groups, although capable to produce effective results when united, are natural foes and there was a reasonable likelihood that what kept them together will dissolve once IS is driven out the coastal city of Sirte. Furthermore, another strong armed group was settled in the east of Libya: the militias guided by Khalifa Haftar, who had no intention to condone the authority of the Tripoli government. Fighting the Islamic State remained a top priority until July 2017, when the terrorist group was ejected from Benghazi after three years of fighting, with consistent contribution of the Misrata militias group.

¹²⁶ The Agreement reposes on four pillars described in its introduction, p. 2, i.e. ensuring 1) the democratic rights of the Libyan people; 2) the need of a consensual government based on the separation of power oversight and balance between them 3) the need to empower the state institutions such as the Government of National Accord; 4) respect for the Libyan judiciary and its independence.

The complexity of the Libyan fragmentation post Skhirat Agreements remains a main issue. In 2016 and 2017 the presence of the Islamic State further complicates the Libyan scenario (Annexes 7 and 8).

The conflict became particularly harmful for the Libyan economy, as it was impossible for the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) to restore the facilities in the oil crescent (Gulf of Sirte, Benghazi and Tripoli) and restart the exports, which constitute the major source of income for the country. Furthermore, the Libyan fragmentation started infecting international players as well, who started polarising their support to the various factions. A group of western states, supported with vigour the western government - this was also the official position of the European Union -. Whereas a coalition of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and France was more inclined to support the relevance of the Libyan National Army (concerned for the influence western militias might have on the Islamist government).

In 2017 the international attention to the conflict and the polarisation with the two factions grew. The GNA was hardly able to bare Libya's fragmentations and on 2nd January its deputy leader Musa al-Koni resigned. Right after, Haftar opened a line of dialogue with Moscow by visiting Russia's aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Admiral Kuznetsov and discussing fighting terrorism in the MENA region with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu¹²⁷. In March Haftar's forces managed to take over the last Islamist rivals' positions, located south-west of Benghazi. In May the General launched a new offensive, while in Tripoli clashes began between Islamist militias and GNA supporters. The fightings continued until July, when al-Sarraj and Haftar agreed on a cease-fire and to new elections to be held the following year. In autumn the newly-appointed UN Special Envoy for Libya, Ghassam Salamé, brought on the table the idea of a Libyan national conference to resolve the controversies among the local parties, this resumed the road map contained in the Libyan Political Agreement, in a more inclusive perspective, in order to get

¹²⁷ Eljarh, Mohammed. *What Game is Russia Playing in Libya*. Al-monitor. January 2017. [<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2017/01/russia-game-libya-hifter-syria-gna.html>].

more durable results from the elections. In December Haftar announced he would run for the 2018 elections, as he considered the GNA obsolete and incapable of listening to the people. Later that month, the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army captured the last Benghazi district which was still held by Islamists.

The election year is stroke by disorders, as clashes emerge in January in the capital. While the US had been striking the Islamic State with its drones in southern Fezzan, Haftar undergone a surgery in Paris in April, to return to Benghazi just fifteen days later. IS suicide bombers attacked the Libyan High National Election Commission in Tripoli¹²⁸, causing 12 casualties. Haftar and Sarraj met in Paris, despite the disorders following the LNA offensive launched on Derna. They committed to the approval of a new electoral law by September and to new elections to be held in December. The premises left with good hope, confirmed by the NOC reopening four oil-export terminals in July¹²⁹. Nevertheless, violence escalated again in September among armed groups in Tripoli, including an armed attack at the Headquarters of Libyan National Oil Corporation on September 10th. This attracted the attention of the United Nations that renewed its support mission in Libya (UNSMIL) for one year, its panel of experts and a new cease-fire. In November an international conference was held in the Italian city of Palermo¹³⁰.

While major external players were focused on the coast with an eye to help restore the political process, Haftar used the leverage of the battle against any form of Islamic extremism to move across a large desert area, mostly in the southern province of Fezzan. By 2019 he has paved the way for his offensive, that would be eventually launched on 4th of April, winning large consensus among armed groups in Cyrenaica and Fezzan, with the support of relevant international players. In February 2019 the Libyan National Army captured El

¹²⁸ Rowan, Mattisan. *Libya Timeline: since Qadhafi's Ouster*. United States Institute for Peace (USIP). 1st July 2019. Last accessed 28th April 2020. [<https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/libya-timeline-qaddafis-ouster>].

¹²⁹ *Idem*.

¹³⁰ The main international summits organised with regards to Libya will be described in further details in paragraph 3.3.

Sharara, the country's largest oilfield, driving out the GNA-aligned militias who were constantly asking for higher and higher wages. At the end of the month Haftar and al-Serraj met in Abu Dhabi and agreed on holding national elections, without establishing a date. While clashes among militias continued, the NOC restarted the El Sharara oil production and Ghassam Salamé announced a national conference to be held in April in the city of Ghadames. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had just landed in Libya to take part into the national conference when General Haftar and his LNA began the 2019 "western offensive" to take over Tripoli, which has been going on up to present and has de facto eliminated the division into three provinces. At the moment the country is divided within three main areas (Annex 9), with a wide territorial extension for the Libyan National Army and very small portions of territory still under the control of the Government of National Accord. In the South an important area is still under the control of militias and tribes. At the international level, both parts have consolidated supporters: Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, France and Saudi Arabia support Haftar. The main consolidated supporters of al-Sarraj, those providing him with concrete aids, are Qatar and Turkey.

The position of the Russian Federation in Libya is nuanced and keeps an open door for dialogue with both the GNA and the LNA¹³¹. Italy mainly supports the Government of National Accord, nevertheless Rome is trying to keep negotiating with both parts in the Libya conflict¹³².

Haftar's latest move was declaring the Shkirat Agreement void, claiming to follow people's will¹³³, furthermore the General is said to have asked Tripoli to formally recognise his political authority on Libya. This move has all the flavour of a coup d'état, in fact neither the Tobruk Parliament guided by Saleh (constituting the main source of Haftar's internal legitimation), nor the

¹³¹ Its complexity will be described further in details in Chap. 4.1, seen the centrality of Russia's position in Libya for the analysis conducted in this thesis.

¹³² Italy's position and interests in the Libyan conflict are dealt into in further details in Chap. 4.2 of this thesis.

¹³³ Middle East Eye. *Khalifa Haftar declares himself ruler of Libya with 'mandate' from the people*. 28th April 2020. [<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/khalifa-haftar-declares-himself-ruler-libya-mandate-people>].

executive settled in Benghazi gave any formal response. Since the concrete intervention of Turkey, the situation on the field seems to have reached a stalemate, stroke by this last move, which the EU has defined unacceptable. Tripoli accuses the General to show his authoritarian face to the whole world. Despite his notable soft skills in presenting himself as “fighter of the jihadist groups”, which were fundamental in building his cavalcade towards Tripoli, Haftar’s attitude might have crossed the red lines, even with those actors who have been engaged in a diplomatic dialogue with the GNA so far. In particular, Moscow was surprised by the sudden stance against the Skhirat agreements¹³⁴. Indeed, the Kremlin’s priority in Libya remains a comprehensive diplomatic settlement of the conflict through a multilateral process. That is why the Kremlin has remained in touch with all the parties involved in the conflict¹³⁵.

Six months after the Berlin conference the Libyan game is still open, presenting more or less the same issues that were supposed to be regulated by the Shkirat Agreement, as both Haftar and Sarraj do not enjoy much legitimacy among the Libyan population. Despite the efforts undertaken, the international community keeps failing in guaranteeing the cease-fire, as well as the ban on weapons. While Haftar tries the all in with his declaration, the international stake holders seem increasingly convinced that a place in Libya equals to a prominent place in the energy routes of the Mediterranean¹³⁶.

3.2: The role of international organisations in the settlement of the Libyan crisis

The Libyan conflict has seen the attempt to be settled by international organisations since its earliest phase with the NATO-led intervention and its

¹³⁴ Assad, Abdulkader. *Russia surprised by Haftar’s coup on political process, EU finds it unacceptable.* The Libya Observer. 28th April 2020. [<https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/russia-surprised-haftars-coup-political-process-eu-finds-it-unacceptable>]

¹³⁵ Reuters. *Kremlin: Russia still in contact with Libya participants, wants diplomatic solution.* 28th April 2020. [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-russia-kremlin/kremlin-russia-still-in-contact-with-libya-participants-wants-diplomatic-communication-idUSKCN22A1AX>].

¹³⁶ ISPI. *Libia: lo strappo di Haftar.* ISPI Daily focus. 28th April 2020. [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lo-strappo-di-haftar-25918#g1>].

role in bringing to the Gadhafi's fall. The intervention of the military alliance has been regarded to with suspect until its implementation and later on highly debated by stake-holders in Libya. It seems fair to recognise how the NATO intervention led to a higher fragmented and less secure context within the country, perhaps contributing to pave the way for further escalation of the conflict. The initial evidence pointed to a mandate exclusively focused on the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect principle¹³⁷, also considering the reported employment of missiles and other weapons on the civilians¹³⁸. Despite this, there is evidence that NATO action pointed to a regime change as ultimate goal¹³⁹.

The United Nations remain the main international organisation that has been dealing with the Libyan conflict resolution effort. A wide set of measures have been implemented, they are mainly of a political nature, with the longest lasting one to be the establishment of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)¹⁴⁰. The ultimate aim of the United Nations efforts is the establishment of a democratic, independent and united Libya¹⁴¹. To do so the tool emerging from the very beginning is the implementation of a national comprehensive political dialogue, to promote reconciliation and the adoption of a Constitution. Those guide-lines have been directing the UN effort all through

¹³⁷ Relying to Gadhafi's declared intentions of cleansing Benghazi from the rebels by any means and to fight a war until the last man, woman and bullet. [*Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 107. Chap. 3.1].

¹³⁸ Amnesty International. *The Battle for Libya: Killings, Disappearances and Torture*. 13th September 2011. MDE 19/025/2011. (Accessed 25th April 2020). [<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE19/025/2011/en/>].

¹³⁹ For instance the bombings of Gadhafi's forces in Sirte, where they did not constitute a real threat to the civilians or the alleged overstepping of the UN mandate according to which NATO troops did not simply offer their support in helping the implementation of the no fly-zone but offered actual air cover to the rebels.

Green, M. *To What Extent Was the NATO Intervention in Libya a Humanitarian Intervention*. e-international relations student. 6th February 2019. [<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/02/06/to-what-extent-was-the-nato-intervention-in-libya-a-humanitarian-intervention/>].

¹⁴⁰ Firstly settled on 16th September 2011 with the Resolution 2009, its mandate has been renewed several times, last one on 13th September 2019 (up to September 15th 2020) with UNSC Resolution 2486.

¹⁴¹ Cit. United Nations Security Council. 2011. Resolution 2009 (17th March 2011). [Online]. S/RES/2009 (2011). [Accessed the 23rd April, 2020]. [<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/SRES2009.pdf>].

the nine years of conflict¹⁴², together with the protection of human rights, with particular attention to the most vulnerable groups, the need to re-establish law and order within the country and to secure the monopoly of force into the hand of a legitimate state actor.

The 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) is considered a milestone in mediating the varied and clashing interests of the national parties. The provisions of the LPA aim at implementing an effective political process of state building through the settlement of a power-sharing mechanism that splits the institutional functions between the two main factions within the country. On the one hand the House of Representatives (HoR), settled in Tobruk, while on the other hand the General National Congress (GNC), settled in Tripoli. To ensure a fair deal the HoR is granted legislative power, while the executive is held by a Government of National Accord (GNA), set in Tripoli. The parties were supposed to act as an interim government of coalition, committed to the task of granting a smooth transition towards the organisation of new elections to be held in 2016. In paragraph 3.1 the de facto failure of the agreement has been described looking through the events that followed and witnessing the growing fragmentation that characterised the last four years of conflict. It appears appropriate now to investigate the reasons of this failure, which can be found looking into the conflict from a multi-dimensional perspective involving the local, regional and international level. On the first level the core of the attention should be the internal structural issues in Libya and a potential misunderstanding of the top priorities from the UN. The second level concerns the role of the regional players and their progressive polarisation. The third level looks at the UN response, considering the fragmentation of interests of the international stake-holders. Finally, a general trend of mistrust towards the United Nations and its effectiveness in the conflict resolution shall be taken into account.

¹⁴² Indeed they can be found in the texts of all the resolutions renewing the mandate of the UNSMIL, i.e. S/RES/2040(2012); S/RES/2095(2013); S/RES/2144(2014); S/RES/2238(2015); S/RES/2273(2016); S/RES/2291(2016); S/RES/2376(2017); S/RES/2434(2018); S/RES/2486(2019).

Despite it formally recognises the equal role of a variety of parties¹⁴³, the Libyan Political Agreement de facto legitimises only two: Tripoli and Tobruk. Considering the Libyan deep-rooted fragmentation and the loyalty to the tribal dynamics characterising the country, together with the complete absence of any form of national state for over forty years before the conflict, the failure of this mechanism is not completely surprising¹⁴⁴. Indeed the LPA structure does not guarantee a complete representation of the local panorama, de facto repeating the mistake made after the 2011 revolution of excluding certain parts of the society from the new institutional tissue. This entails a de-legitimation of the proposed measures, as the majority of the population will not respect provisions given by an agreement that neglects to emphasise their role. The LPA is developed in 67 articles and provides with solid and detailed basis for implementing the democratic transition of the country. Yet it presents quite a weak range of propositions to resolve the conflict on the military field, with these regards some provisions are given, even though they are of a wide character¹⁴⁵ and focus on the fight against the terrorist organisations present in Libya¹⁴⁶. Of course it was not the task of the UN-mediated process to settle the military dimension of the conflict, especially since the content of the Agreement is intentionally political (it is indeed named the Libyan Political Agreement). Furthermore, any reference to the settlement of the conflict in military terms falls under the provisions of Chap. VII of the United Nations Charter, therefore it is a responsibility of the UN Security Council (which is

¹⁴³ *The armed groups, municipal councils, political parties, tribal leaders, and women's organizations contributed to other elements of the dialogue to promote a genuine and stable reconciliation.* Cit. Introduction to the Libyan Political Agreement - as signed on 17th December 2015, UNSMIL, Skhirat (Morocco). [Accessed the 21st April 2020]. [\[https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf\]](https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf).

¹⁴⁴ “What is puzzling in Libya’s fragmentation is the difficulty political and military actors have faced in centralising control even over entire cities or regions, and the emergence of ever new rifts at the local level”. Lacher, Wolfram. *Libya’s Fragmentation - Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*. I.B. Tauris, 20th February 2020.

¹⁴⁵ *Security Arrangements*, Art. 34; 37(3); 39; 40 pp. 13-15 of the Libyan Political Agreement - as signed on 17th December 2015, UNSMIL, Skhirat (Morocco). [Accessed the 24th April 2020]. [\[https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf\]](https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf)

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, Art. 35; 36, p. 14.

highly polarised on the matter). Nevertheless, a more structured combination of the the political mediation with adequate military diplomacy would have maybe contributed to give durable life to the agreement.

Holding new elections requires certain conditions, e.g. a pacified environment and a united army granting security and stability¹⁴⁷. The impression is that the LPA has been signed in a rush, to give support to those who seemed more trustworthy in saving the country's territorial integrity¹⁴⁸. The result are measures that are not regarded to as legitimate by the locals because not constructed on the basis of their sensitivity. This makes the UN efforts lose their point in the eyes of the Libyans, while being part of an armed group is more appealing, considering the high income in contrast with the low-paid jobs panorama characterising the civil society¹⁴⁹.

Secondly, it is important to take into account the regional context and the consequences the Libyan conflict entails on the MENA region, to understand the interests of the regional actors and their behaviour in the Libyan chess board. It is, also, important to bear in mind that the conflict in Libya entails consistent spill-over effect also in the Sahel region, characterised by fragile security balance. The lack of stability in its southern neighbourhood drags Libya into a vicious circle of never-ending conflict, mostly in consideration of the weakness of its borders. On a plain security point of view, the inception of terrorist organisations, e.g. al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) and the Islamic States (IS), constitutes enough of a concern for Libya's neighbours. Indeed, Libya, with its strategic position and porous borders constitutes the

¹⁴⁷ As observed by Moustafa Fetouri in his article *Battle for Tripoli appears destined to grind on in Libya*. al-Monitor. 25th June 2019. [<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/libya-tripoli-battle-hifter-sarraj-political-settlement.html#ixzz6KRRn6lvX>].

¹⁴⁸ International Crisis Group. *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*. Report No. 170/Middle East North Africa. 4th November 2016. [<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libyan-political-agreement-time-e-reset>].

¹⁴⁹ Saini Fasanotti, Federica and Varvelli, Arturo. *Conflict Resolution in Libya*. Chap. 2 of the volume *The Rise and Future of militias in the MENA Region*. ISPI and Brookings Doha Centre. Milan, 2019, p. 50.

perfect base for launching attacks in the neighbouring states¹⁵⁰. In addition, several sort of criminal activities have developed in Libya, entailing considerable impact on the region, particularly with regards to the traffic in weapons and migrants smuggling. Moreover, the Libyan confrontation theatre has become, since the 2011 Revolution but even more following the 2014-15 civil war, an occasion for regional powers to bring about their proxy confrontation. More specifically, a confrontation between the counter-revolutionary powers, i.e. mostly the Gulf Monarchies and Egypt with al-Sisi, and the countries supporting political Islam forces in the region - mainly Qatar and Turkey - has emerged. The regional actors have repeatedly violated the arms embargo by selling weapons to the factions they support. Internally, this translates into the opportunity for militias and armed groups to gain power, while exploiting the inability of the central governments to respond to people's needs¹⁵¹. This phenomenon entails advantages and economic profit for the regional actors, wide power for the local parties supported by them and a total undermining of the political process settled under the aegis of the United Nations.

This point leads to the third level: the global one, which sees a similar phenomenon among international players. Despite in principle they all support the UN-backed Government of National Accord, they de facto pursue their national interests in a very self-oriented way. One of the drivers involves the struggle against terrorism, which constitutes the pretext for France to give wide support to the Libyan National Army to help Haftar eradicate the Islamic State. The Italian interest is of a different nature and deals with energy security in first place and with the fight to people smuggling¹⁵², beyond, of course, the counter-terrorism driver. The Russian Federation holds a combination of

¹⁵⁰ As it has been the case for Algeria in 2013 and Tunisia in 2015-16, as reported by Djallil Lounnas in the working paper *The Libyan security continuum: the impact of the Libyan crisis on the northern African/Sahelian regional system*, MENARA Working Papers, No. 15, October 2018. [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_15.pdf].

¹⁵¹ Eljarh, Mohamed. *The Libyan Crisis: Internal Barriers to Conflict Resolution and the Role of Multilateral Cooperation*. Chap. 2 of the volume *Search for Stability in Libya - OSCE'S Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Edizioni Nuova Cultura. Rome, 2018, p. 58.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

interests, comprehensive - to a certain extent - of its dislike for political Islam, together with support in fighting terrorism¹⁵³. The United States, despite they declared a progressive commitment to the “leading from behind” strategy for MENA still have unfinished business in Libya, mostly relying on fighting terrorism and to conflict management to a certain extent.

This said, a global trend with direct regards to the United Nations deserves some mention, i.e. the strong polarisation of the Security Council, determining a certain degree of dis-functionality in mediating the conflict. Resolutions are produced, but hardly any international actor respect their provisions¹⁵⁴. The behaviour of the external players to the conflict undermines the UN action, with particular regards to the work of its special Envoy for Libya. For instance, Ghassam Salamé efforts to organise an inclusive national conference in Libya faded with the beginning of Haftar’s offensive in April 2019. This tendency to zero-sum game logic applying within the Security Council - which is the only UN body that produces legally binding documents - is typical of the conflicts entailing high fragmentation of interests among the parties (it was the case of Syria as well in some ways). Despite its controversies, the United Nations cannot bare all the blame for the failure of the mediation in Libya, in fact the organisation acts implementing the will of the member states.

Another international organisation whose response to the Libyan crisis has been highly influenced by its internal divisions and by the conflicting interests of its member states is the European Union. Indeed, on the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution the EU reaction has been defined as late and insufficient, due partially to the structural limits imposed by the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty. Libya is, in fact, an issue that is expected to be regulated through the inter-governmental decision-making process to be used in the address of those issues that traditionally regards the sovereignty of the member

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁴ Eljarh, Mohamed. *Mohamed Eljarh on Why the United Nations are failing in Libya*. Valdai Discussion Club. 21st February 2020. [https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/video/mohamed-eljarh-on-why-the-united-nations-are-failing-in-libya/?sphrase_id=485289].

states¹⁵⁵. In this sense, the afore-mentioned diverging interests of Italy, France and the United Kingdom have consistently paralysed the action of the Union. Some initiatives have been put in place in the context of joint navy operations in the Mediterranean, most notably the EUNAVFOR MED operation Sophia, an initiative under the aegis of the European Union External Action Service that aims at contrasting illegal migration through the address of its root causes. This concerns Libya, as the country became a fundamental hub in the illegal routes for migration and the perpetrated conflictual situation hinders the country to contrast this phenomenon efficiently. Particularly, the EU contribution consists in providing the Libyan coastguards and navy with training and in supporting the United Nations in the implementation of its arm embargo¹⁵⁶.

Another way would be the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In fact, it regroups all the European stake holders in a forum of dialogue that is comprehensive of the Russian Federation and the United States. Furthermore, the OSCE structure presents some elements that will be useful for the arbitration of controversies in Libya, e.g. the High Commissioner on National Minorities or the Court for Conciliation and Arbitration. Furthermore, the Mediterranean represents a top concern for a number of OSCE's European members, as well as a hub of interest for the Russian Federation and the United States. Though an OSCE role within the Libyan conflict-resolution process would make sense once the organisation manages to get over its internal divisions and conflictual dynamics that emerged on the east-west driver, following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. At present it is unlikely that this will find any concrete dimension, due to the fact that Libya is not part of the Mediterranean Partnership yet and, mostly, due to the fact that the Mediterranean partners do not hold any right to vote within the organisation¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁵ Fabbri, Sergio. *The European Union and the Libyan Crisis*. Luiss School of Government. 10th April 2014.

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.operation sophia.eu/about-us/>.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 151. Chap. 1: *The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, Libya and the MENA Crisis*. Chap. 1 of the volume *Search for Stability in Libya - OSCE'S Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges*, p.23. By Dessì, Andrea.

3.3: The new venues: the future of the Libyan conflict after the Berlin conference

Seen the struggle of the multilateral UN platform in providing an effective solution, the idea of taking the lead of the mediation efforts seems to have incepted into the mind of regional actors. More precisely, the trend setter is the French President Emmanuel Macron, who, in July 2017, invited Khalifa Haftar and Fayeze al-Sarraj to the Elysée with the intention of promoting a direct dialogue between the two¹⁵⁸. This format has seen a number of different séances between 2018 and 2020. Those meetings have the common characteristics of being organised in full regalia and presented as the decisive element in bringing peace. However de facto the situation in Libya has seen very little if no improvement and the international summits seem to have served better the interests of the European players than those of the Libyans¹⁵⁹. In the meanwhile, the Russian Federation started proposing its own way, in a tandem with Turkey.

The first meeting in Paris in 2017 saw the participation of Fayeze al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar, together with Ghassam Salamé, who at the time just took office as UN Special Envoy for Libya. France's goal was to obtain a joint declaration recognising Sarraj's political legitimacy and Haftar's military one, seen the impossibility to implement a military solution. Yet the French President was aware of the importance of dialogue, considering the issues with the presence of jihadist groups on the territory and the fact that a protracted conflict paves the way for the traffic in weapons and human beings. Elections were mentioned but nothing concrete was agreed on and the meeting seemed to

¹⁵⁸ In Macron's move lays also the will to grant France a priority place in Libya, considering how rich in natural resources the country is. Furthermore, Macron has just been elected to the Elysée and, among the key points of his presidential campaign, the Libyan dossier was presented as a priority. AFP. *Rencontre entre rivaux libyens à Paris pour esquisser une sortie de crise*. Le Point. published 27th of July 2017, accessed 27th April 2020. [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/libye-macron-reunit-sarraj-et-haftar-mardi-pres-de-paris-25-07-2017-2145587_23.php].

¹⁵⁹ Ottaviani, Marta. *Ecco come la UE ha fallito sulla Libia. Il commento di Marta Ottaviani*. Formiche.net. January 2020. [<https://formiche.net/2020/01/berlino-conferenza-ue-libia/>].

have been more useful in understanding Haftar's position¹⁶⁰ than in actually regulating the relations among Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. As the clashes were perpetrated in Libya in the following months, a second reunion was organised in Paris, on 29th May 2018. This time, besides al-Sarraj and Haftar, two more Libyan players were invited, i.e. Khaled al-Mishir - Head of the Council of State - and the President of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh. On the table that time was the draft of a declaration structured in eight points (approved by Ghassam Salamé), which aimed at regulating the electoral calendar for Libya with particular regards to the question of the electors registration. A step forward, in comparison with the previous conference consisted also in a broader ouverture of the event. In fact, if the 2017 meeting had kind of a secret diplomacy flavour¹⁶¹, the second time the Elysée opened its doors to international and regional stake holders, including China, Russia, the United States, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. The final statement gave provisions for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held on December 10th. However, the document was not signed by any of the Libyan representatives. Macron admitted that the failure in obtaining their commitment was due to a lack of consensus and reciprocal recognition among the Libyan parties. However, he also underlined the success in bringing together - for the first time - all Libyan stake holders, both on a national and international level. Ghassam Salamé exhorted to bear in mind how a lot of work still needed to be done at the end of the conference. The general impression remained that still too much importance was given to the political process, completely neglecting

¹⁶⁰ Evidences already show his enhanced presence in the west of the country, including a military capacity that potentially can launch an offensive on Sirte. Furthermore, various diplomatic sources agree on the impossibility to trust Haftar, as he would hardly obey any civilian authority. [*Idem* footnote Numb. 158].

¹⁶¹ For instance, Italy, the European country that has been leading the negotiations for Libya up to that moment, has not been notified about the event, despite the close cooperation between Rome and Paris. This latter one preferred relying on the British intelligence support, even though at that moment London was very committed to the management of the Brexit dossier and paid few attention to any other scenario.

Nigro, Vincenzo. *Libia, la Francia invita Haftar e Sarraj. A Parigi un vertice senza l'Italia*. La Repubblica. 21st July 2017. [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/07/21/news/libia_la_francia_invita_haftar_e_sarraj_a_parigi_un_vertice_senza_l_italia-171278672/].

the military, economic and security fields¹⁶². It appeared increasingly clear how no international conference could successfully enhance the provisions of the Libyan Political Agreement without the implementation of a national reconciliation process first, that would allow a flourishing dialogue among all the Libyan parties. This option, introduced by Salamé in autumn 2017, assumed growing consistency, considering how fundamental the agreement among the parties would be to support the reconstruction in Libya. Among the points to be discussed at national level the most relevant ones were the redistribution of oil revenues, the reconstruction of a national army and the importance of an institutional reform. In fact the current doubling of the main institutions between Tripoli and Tobruk still widely contributes to their inefficiency. Taking those points into consideration, Italy hosted a high-level summit in Sicily in mid-November 2018, expecting a consistent presence of international and local stake holders. Overall, the Palermo conference can be considered a success in promoting a bottom-up approach to conflict resolution, involving Libya's main players. On the contrary, what cannot be regarded to as a success is the general participation to the conference. It is true that Italy managed to bring together Sarraj and Haftar at the negotiation table, however only for a very short time and in a separate meeting. Indeed, Haftar refused to participate at the plenary session the last day, after having pushed very strongly for ousting the Turkish delegate from the talks with Sarraj¹⁶³. The Cyrenaica strong man, furthermore, threatened not to show up until last minute, yet concerted efforts by Italian Secret Services, together with the diplomatic intervention of Russia and Egypt helped bring him aboard¹⁶⁴. A further critical point lays in the international diplomatic participation to the Palermo Conference, in many cases delegated from top leaders to their cooperators.

¹⁶² Wintour, Patrick. *Libyan factions agree to hold elections on 10 December*. The Guardian. 29th May 2018.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/29/macron-hosts-libyan-factions-in-paris-in-push-to-secure-elections>].

¹⁶³ De Maio, Giovanna. *The Palermo conference on Libya: a diplomatic tests for Italy's new government*. Brookings. 19th November, 2019.

[<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/11/19/the-palermo-conference-on-libya-a-diplomatic-test-for-italys-new-government/>].

¹⁶⁴ *Idem*.

Putin, for instance, sent Prime Minister Medvedev, neither Trump nor Pompeo attended the summit and not even Macron did, though the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian has long experience on the Libyan dossier and perhaps seemed a more adequate representative. The Palermo conference turned out a posteriori to have been more a stage for the new Italian executive to test its diplomatic skills, mostly in front of the European partners, than an effective peace-promoter for solving Libyan controversies. De facto hardly anything new was established.

The failure of the 2018 peace talks appeared more than ever clear when Haftar launched his 2019 offensive, just ten days prior to the scheduled date of the Libyan national conference in Gadamesh. This move clearly underlined a lack of will from the Field Marshall to keep faith to the commitments taken, be it under the UN aegis or at the negotiation table in France or in Italy.

In 2019 the interests of the international stake holders evolved, trying to keep the pace with the local evolutions. In particular Turkey, who has backed the Government of National Accord, decided that the time had come for a more consistent role in the conflict. A memorandum of understanding was signed between Ankara and Tripoli, entailing the possibility to receive military support by Turkish troops¹⁶⁵. The agreement involved also the establishment of new maritime borders between Turkey and Libya. This last element worried the European stake holders consistently, for a marginalisation of the European role on the one hand and for a potential emergence of controversies with Cyprus over the exploitation of the maritime space on the other hand. The growing tensions among international players in supporting one faction over the other within the Libyan conflict already raised the concern of Ghassam Salamé in July 2019, when he called for the UN Security Council to adopt a “plan for action in three points”: a comprehensive truce, a renewed dialogue among the national parties (all of them, as the Ghadames conference was

¹⁶⁵ Wintour, Patrick. *Libyan government activates cooperation accord with Turkey*. The Guardian. 20th December 2019. [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/20/libyan-government-activates-cooperation-accord-with-turkey>].

supposed to be) and an international conference to bring together international players.

In this aftermath Germany came up with an idea of hosting an international summit in January 2020. The aim was to establish a rupture point with the past, to lead the most relevant international players in respecting their commitment for stop fightings. On a purely formal point of view, the Berlin summit can be considered a success, as its result was a declaration from the most prominent international players of the Libyan conflict - including the Russian Federation, Egypt, France, Turkey and the United States - for a renewed commitment in avoiding any intervention on the field and urging all major players to do the same¹⁶⁶. The final communiqué established a 5+5 Committee, whose power was shared between Haftar and Sarraj, following the conclusions reached in the previous conferences and the provisions of the Libyan Political Agreement. The importance of the respect for the national Institutions - such as the Libyan Central Bank, the National Oil Corporation and the Libyan Investment Authority - was underlined, as well as the need to implement the provisions for an equal distribution of wealth and to proceed with the disarmament of militias. Nevertheless, any kind of military solution to the conflict was declared de facto not realisable at the time¹⁶⁷. Albeit it was called successful, the Berlin Summit did not produce grater results than the previous events, as the same countries that signed the cease-fire around the table, restarted pursuing their interests in Libya right after and clashes have not stopped up to present, despite the critical situation with the global pandemic.

A sui generis approach in conflict resolution has been attempted by the Russian Federation. Indeed, a few days before flying to Berlin, Vladimir Putin has hosted both Haftar and Sarraj in Moscow for a round of talks to which also

¹⁶⁶ “We commit to refraining from interference in the armed conflict or in the internal affairs of Libya and urge all international actors to do the same”. As reported in the following article: Feltman, Jeffrey. *The Berlin Conference on Libya: Will hypocrisy undermine the results*. Brookings. 21st January 2020. [<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/21/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-will-hypocrisy-undermine-results/>].

¹⁶⁷ Zaptia, Sami. *The Berlin Conference on Libya: CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS*. Libya Herald. London. 19th January 2019. [<https://www.libyaherald.com/2020/01/20/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-conference-conclusions/>].

Erdogan took part. Previously, (8th of January) the Russian President and his Turkish counter-part signed a cease-fire regarding Libya, which was probably expected to be reinforced by a consistent agreement in Berlin. Despite the two leaders back opposite sides in the Libyan conflict, their interest might converge on a broader perspective and lead Erdogan and Putin to implement something similar to the Astana peace process used in Syria in Libya as well. Perhaps the cautious partnership established between Moscow and Ankara will provide with the key to move on the military table, even though it seems unlikely that their work will lead out of the Security Council impasse described in paragraph 3.2.

Five years have passed since the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement and the goal to hold elections has not been reached yet. Not only the military solution seems extremely far, but also the political legitimisation of both parties is very low, despite their successes on the battle field. In fact, neither al-Sarraj nor Haftar are highly appreciated by the locals, who hardly see any benefit in their leaderships. This is the fundamental limit of all the summits held so far and - to a certain extent - also of the multilateral framework of intervention: a mismatch between what has been regarded to as a priority and what the primary interest of the Libyans actually is. People in Libya are still lacking access to electric energy, health service and cash withdrawal, which are much more urgent needs than casting votes in a poll. Ensuring the deployment of the basic services should be the main concern of the international community, while the task of granting territorial integrity should be left in the hands of the Libyans themselves, as accessed by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov¹⁶⁸. This approach is, tough, hard to implement and it relies to some extent to the former¹⁶⁹ UN Special Envoy for Libya's "plan in three points". However this seems quite far from the conferences held, for at

¹⁶⁸ <https://ria.ru/20200217/1564855176.html>

¹⁶⁹ Ghassam Salamé resigned in early March this year, explaining that he cannot keep going through such levels of stress, due to health reasons.

Al-Jazeera. *UN Envoy for Libya Ghassam Salame resigns, citing 'stress'*. 3rd March 2020. [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/envoy-libya-ghassan-salame-resigns-citing-stress-200303071218017.html>].

the end of the day Paris, Palermo and Berlin seem all doubling each other in substance, despite their different dynamics. The success of an hypothetical Astana-like process is still far from being accessed.

Chapter 4: CASE STUDY: The Libyan conflict

The Libyan conflict is deemed to be the ideal case study to check the practical application of the foreign policy strategy drivers and principles for the Russian Federation and for the Italian Republic, as described respectively in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2.

For the sake of clarity and with the intention of responding in a more transparent way to the key research question contained in paragraph 4.3 (Italy and Russia: better together or stronger apart?) the analysis will proceed reading the Russian and the Italian interests in Libya separately.

Moreover, the analysis of the stakes will be divided into three main categories: the strategic field, the economic field and the political field. In all the three domains the issues taken into consideration can be of a national, regional or global character. With regards to the national dimension, this refers mainly to Russia's or Italy's interests inside Libya or to the bilateral relations of both with Libya. The regional level refers of course to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with a particular focus on the dynamics animating the southern Mediterranean coast. The global level of analysis concerns the consequences of the Libyan crisis on Moscow's and Rome's interests and role within the international community.

The nature of the Russian and Italian stakes in Libya is also considered in virtue of them having a short-term, mid-term or long-term perspective, as this might influence the space for cooperation between the countries.

4.1: The Russian Federation in Libya: interests and patterns of involvement

Russia and Libya enjoyed friendly relations that were economically beneficial for both and politically neutral. The flourishing nature of the economic exchanges with Tripoli, mostly during the 70's - was resumed by Vladimir Putin in 2008. At the time Russian Prime Minister negotiated a series of trade agreements with Moammar Gadhafi worth between 5 and 10

billion USD. The contracts entailed, inter alia, weapons sells and the construction, by the company Russian Railways, of a rail link between Sirte and Benghazi¹⁷⁰. The 2011 revolution turned the tables of this relation, as the UN sanctions regime prevented the shipment of Russian anti-missile technology system to Libya, creating an harm of 4 billions USD for Russia.

Since 2011, Russia has been supporting the need of a multi-lateral approach to Libya in order to settle the conflict. Moscow has kept an open dialogue with the various parties into the conflict, assuming a more prominent role from 2016¹⁷¹.

Considering the strategic dimension of the Libyan conflict, Moscow has one short-term top priority, i.e. the durable and efficient settlement of the conflict. Indeed, the power vacuum in Libya, caused by the perpetration of the conflict is concerning for two main reasons. First and foremost, the negative influence of the Libyan instability on the surrounding region, which entails considerable security issues. Besides being politically dangerous, as it generates continuous source of conflict among the parties, the instability also prevents Libya from moving efficiently in the energy market. Oil exports are the main source of revenue for the country and every time the conflict gets to a new escalation peak, the oil production gets blocked¹⁷². This, besides damaging the Libyan development, is harmful for the Russian economic interests within the country, as described further in this chapter.

Secondly, prolonged instability due to a power vacuum that no person or institution seems able to fill efficiently, together with the spread of poverty and

¹⁷⁰ Saini Fasanotti, Federica. *Russia and Libya: a brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship*. Brookings online. 1st September, 2016. [<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/09/01/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>].

¹⁷¹ Russia's role in Libya grew at the moment when its foreign policy strategy, in general and with specific regards to the MENA region, became more assertive. *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 151. Chap. 4: *Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the role of the OSCE*, p.92. By Stepanova, Ekaterina.

¹⁷² It was the case last time in January, when Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar shut down crude oil exports in order to maximise his pressure on the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. The move has consistently jeopardised the NOC ambitions for rising the production to 1.5 m b/d in 2020. Sheppard, D and Saleh, H. *Libya oil output set to collapse to lowest level since the fall of Gadhafi*. The Financial Times. 22nd January, 2020. [<https://www.ft.com/content/bf045b36-3c4b-11ea-b232-000f4477fbca>].

precarious life conditions create the ideal ground for jihadist groups to inception and perpetrate their interests. The Islamic State (IS), which shortly managed to hold territorial dimension in Libya, was driven out from the city of Sirte in 2016; despite this the jihadist organisation is still present on the Libyan territory. A number of contradictory reports describes IS current position in Libya¹⁷³, however what remains sure is the threat it constitutes to the state-building process within the country. In fact, it seems like IS is at the moment more inclined to perpetrate the disorders aimed at spreading discordia among the various Libyan tribes than to try and seize control of any portions of territory¹⁷⁴. The fight to IS and other extremist groups in Libya seems to be more of a catalyst for the Russian action than an actual stake¹⁷⁵. Moreover, since the situation in Libya does not represent a direct threat to Russia's national security, fighting IS there is more a matter of strengthening its international position of counter-terrorism "champion" for Moscow¹⁷⁶.

With regards to the economic dimension, Russia has commercial interests in Libya, mostly in the three following fields: agriculture, hydrocarbons and weapons market. Before 2011, Moscow used to benefit from energy deals and construction projects.

In consideration of this and of the abundance of hydrocarbons in Libya, many Russian companies now hold important stakes in getting back to the country, not to mention Libya's strategic location for the northern African trade routes. An agreement over crude oil exploration was signed in 2017 between the Russian state-owned company Rosneft and the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC)¹⁷⁷. Fossil fuels remain the main source of revenues for

¹⁷³ As argued by Inga Kristina Trauthig in her report *Islamic State in Libya: from force to farce?*, International Centre for Study of Radicalisation, King's College, London, 2020, p 5. [<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ICSR-Report-Islamic-State-in-Libya-From-Force-to-Farce.pdf>].

¹⁷⁴ *Idem*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁵ Bijan, Aref. *Russia's comparative approach to the crisis in Libya and Syria*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 13th January 2020. [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/abijan/russias-comparative-approach-to-the-crisis-in-libya-and-syria/>].

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*. Footnote Numb. 171.

¹⁷⁷ Raval, Anjli. *Rosneft, NOC agree to crude oil exportation cooperation*. The Financial Times. 21st February 2017. [<https://www.ft.com/content/0b15cb5e-2f1e-35da-8b6d-ec85790c7457>].

Libyans and the careful redistribution of the incomes coming from this sector could be the key to manage the complex tribal fractures among them¹⁷⁸. Briefly, Libya needs assistance from the major international oil companies and their investments to recover¹⁷⁹, while Russia will earn a new partnership in the MENA hydrocarbons market, which will broaden the list of Moscow's trade partners in the region, strengthening its position.

Another interesting field for Moscow is agriculture, indeed in the framework of the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi in 2019, Moscow has signed a number of agreements with the Government of National Accord (GNA) for the import of agricultural products from Russia to Libya¹⁸⁰.

Russia's long-term goal on a trade perspective for Libya is the restoration of the country's place within the world economy. To do so, the key lays in contributing into the eradication of the shadow economy and illicit traffics that have characterised Libya since the beginning of the conflict. This would lead to two benefits: firstly, the earnings coming from trade will go to the state and will be finally redistributed among the population, fostering the stability of the country. Second, the institutional and political settlement will strengthen the long-term effects of the stabilisation and allow the development of the economic tissue. In this way, Libya will become a strategic piece of Russia's MENA puzzle.

Finally, the political interests of Russia in Libya are based on the urgent strategic need of stabilising the country through a comprehensive national agreement that would, eventually, allow the implementation of a smooth post-conflict transition process. To reach this goal, Moscow has been working

¹⁷⁸ Varvelli, Arturo and Lovotti, Chiara. *Starting from resources: a model for conflict resolution in Libya*. ISPI. 4th July, 2019, pp. 5-6. [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/isp_i_policy_brief_libya_eng_july_2019_0.pdf].

¹⁷⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁸⁰ Mamedov, Ruslan. *Russia's "Wait and See" Policies and the Libyan Settlement*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 23rd December, 2019. [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-s-wait-and-see-policies-and-the-libyan-settlement/>].

with all the parties in Libya, including the southern tribes¹⁸¹. Frequent interaction with Haftar, together with the alleged presence of Russian private military contractors (PMCs) supporting the Libyan National Army (LNA)¹⁸² in the eastern part of the country, made the observers think of a close alliance between the two. It is true that, right after the beginning of the LNA offensive on Tripoli, the Field Marshal seemed to be the right man to gamble on in the perspective of Libya's stabilisation. This is due to his technical resources and for the wide range of sub-groups embedded in his coalition¹⁸³.

However, Russia seems to have taken the distance from him over the last few months, considering his low reliability in sticking to its commitments¹⁸⁴. Furthermore, Haftar has brought about a refined propaganda work to depict Russia as his closest ally in Libya, which has been picked up and reported by Western media¹⁸⁵. On the contrary, Russia's priority is maintaining its role as mediator and its open dialogue with all the parties. This widely relates also to the broader regional context, considering Moscow's interest in maintaining the balance with its regional partners¹⁸⁶, together with their alignment over the Libyan chess-board. Indeed, Haftar is backed by Egypt, whose relations with

¹⁸¹ The first one to directly get in touch with Russia was Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who firstly travelled to Moscow in June 2016. His visit was followed by several other meetings, with Fayez al-Sarraj, with the President of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh and with the Chairman of the High Council of State Khalid al-Mishri. Last meeting held in Moscow was last January, right before the summit in Berlin and it saw Haftar and Sarraj sitting at the table with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
[https://www.mid.ru/uk-UA/pozicia-rossii-po-situacii-v-livii/-/asset_publisher/uFvfWVmCb4RI/content/id/3034506].

¹⁸² There is a high number of reports speaking of mercenaries from the Wagner Group fighting alongside the LNA, especially following the beginning of its "western offensive" last year. The Kremlin has denied the presence of any Russian citizen fighting on the Libyan field - at least not representing Russian interests and not receiving money from the Russian Federation - (cit. President Putin after the talks held with German Chancellor on 11th January). Nevertheless, it seems accurate to say that maintaining several groups bringing about various interests - perhaps contrasting with each other - was not harmful for Russia's national interest in Libya.
Belenkaya, Marianna. *Can Libya be turned around and become Russia's 'second Syria'?*. Al-Monitor. 15th January 2020.
[<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/russia-libya-turkey-hifter-saraj.html>].

¹⁸³ Suchkov, Maxim A. *Russia cultivates neutral image as Libya quakes*. Al-Monitor. 8th April 2019, [<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/russia-libya-crisis0hifter-putin.html#ixzz6Jl3mPt0V>].

¹⁸⁴ As described in Chapter 3.

¹⁸⁵ This is what Lev Dengov - head of the Russian contact group on the intra-Libyan settlement - underlined during a conference at the Valdai Discussion Club in 2017.
[https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/how-russia-contributes-to-intra-libyan-settlement/?sphrase_id=531010].

¹⁸⁶ As described in Chap. 1.1.

Russia have improved consistently since al-Sisi seized power, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. All those countries entertain decent relations with Moscow, being part of a delicate balance of power system. At the same time, the prominent role played by Turkey, since the adoption of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with Tripoli last December¹⁸⁷, cannot be ignored. Turkey and Russia have been protagonists of a rapprochement in the last few years that adds one more element in Moscow's equation for maintaining a balanced status quo in the MENA region.

All this said, a concerted effort of the international players, involving also the European stake holders, seems the most convenient perspective of action at the moment. This widely relates to Moscow's role as off-shore balancer for the Middle East and North Africa region. As described in Chapter 1.3, the strategy Russia has been pursuing over the last five years seems to point in this direction. This serves the Russian interests adequately, seen that the MENA region is not a priority for Moscow¹⁸⁸, yet it could become the occasion for fostering Moscow's dialogue with the European countries, being Europe, on the contrary, among the Kremlin's highest concerns.

There are sources of friction among the Russian Federation and the West which can find a role in the Libyan conflict, especially the conflict management and the boarder between the concepts of respect of national sovereignty and non-intervention in the affairs of a third state and those of human rights protection and Responsibility to Protect (R2P). With regards to this last point, Russia saw the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya as exclusively aimed at enacting a regime change that would establish a

¹⁸⁷ Bozkurt, Abdullah. *Full Text of New Turkey, Libya sweeping security, military cooperation deal revealed*. Nordic Monitor. 14th December, 2019. [<https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2019/12/full-text-of-new-turkey-libya-sweeping-security-military-co-operation-deal-revealed/>].

¹⁸⁸ "The importance of the MENA region notwithstanding, policy makers in Moscow should keep in mind that this region is not as central to Russia's security and prosperity as Europe or Asia Pacific" cit. Kortunov Andrey. *The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 15th October, 2019. [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-astana-model-methods-and-ambitions-of-russian-political-action/>].

pro-western government¹⁸⁹. The escalation of the Libyan conflict and its evolution up to present day have become iconic for Moscow in underlining the danger constituted by the violation of a third country's sovereignty, even for the sake of human rights protection.

Libya is also a bright occasion for Russia to show the efficiency of its conflict-management approach, which relies on the need to adopt a multilateral perspective, entailing at the same time ad hoc measures that take into account the sensitivity of all the parties into the conflict, as in the Middle East and North Africa region no "one size fits all" approach has ever proved successful¹⁹⁰. Russia has adopted a more independent look with regards to Libya over the last three years. Despite it remains committed to endorse the Libyan Political Agreement of 2015¹⁹¹, a certain weakness of this multilateral approach, due to the high fragmentation of interests of the international players, led Moscow in trying to become a leading singer out of the international community choir.

In the first chapter the importance of the Syrian conflict for the Russian strategy in the MENA region has been analysed. In broader terms, it might be argued that showing mediation capabilities and presenting itself as a fundamental actor both at the negotiation table and on the military field is what has made Russia great in the eyes of the regional actors. Maintaining good terms with a wide range of actors allows long-term benefits on all levels: national, regional and global. The national level covers mostly the dimension of the bilateral relations between Russia and Libya. Beyond the turnover of the commercial exchange among the two, a closer cooperation in the field of education has been already considered in Moscow's *dessins*. The idea entails

¹⁸⁹ Naumkin, Vitaly. *BRICS Supports Russia's Position on the Middle East*. Valdai Discussion Club. 1st December, 2011. [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/brics_supports_russia_s_position_on_the_middle_east/?sphrase_id=531112].

¹⁹⁰ As argued by Andrey Kortunov, director of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) of Moscow. *Idem* footnote Numb. 19.

¹⁹¹ On 23rd December 2015 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2259 (2015), formally recognising the content of the Libyan Political Agreement and de facto making its provisions legally binding.

United Nations Security Council. 2015. Resolution 2259 (23rd December 2015). [Online]. S/RES/2259 (2015). [Accessed the 1st May, 2020]. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2259\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2259(2015));

both the possibility for Libyan students to attend University in Russia and even for Russian institutes to open a branch in Libya; this last one of course after careful consideration of the safety and security conditions¹⁹². With regards to the regional level, after Syria the success for Russia as an off-shore balancer for the Libyan crisis would mean the possibility for Moscow to further strengthening its role in the region. Also, Moscow's partnership with Turkey might benefit from a new stage of cooperation for the two in mediating the crisis in Libya. A further rapprochement with Turkey means for Russia a more secure environment in the Black Sea¹⁹³, together with an interesting dialogue in the energy market.

Finally, on the global level, winning the reputation of efficient conflict manager and skilled MENA mediator would out of doubt help Russia consolidating its position in the international community.

4.2: The Italian Republic in Libya: interests and patterns of involvement

The Italian Republic has an historical interest with regards to Libya which dates back to the colonial era, when the Libyan campaign ended in the Italian occupation of the Cyrenaica and Fezzan regions¹⁹⁴. Later on, during de-colonisation, the bonds between Rome and Tripoli remained alive in consideration of the numerous Italian population still living in Libya. In the forty-two years during which Moammar Gadhafi owed the leadership of Libya, the Italian Republic has been consistently engaged in a demanding diplomatic

¹⁹² Kuznetsov, Vasily. *Russia eyes deeper economic engagement in Libya*. Al-Monitor. 30th May 2018. [<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/russia-eyes-deeper-economic-engagement-libya.html#ixzz5H4vjmsPk>].

¹⁹³ Markedonov, Sergey and Dubowy Alexander. *Neutrality for the Black Sea Region Countries: Abstraction, Unattainable Goal or Effective Model?*. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). 2nd March, 2020. [<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/neutrality-for-the-black-sea-region-countries-abstraction-unattainable-goal-or-effective-model/>].

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 105. Chap. 3: *Le ambizioni italiane sulla Libia e l'occupazione*, (Italian ambitions on Libya and the occupation), pp. 75-77.

dialogue¹⁹⁵ with the rais. The result was the establishment of the Italy-Libya Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed in 2008¹⁹⁶, during Silvio Berlusconi's third mandate as Italian Prime Minister. The Republic of Italy still owes important stakes in Libya of a strategic, economic and political nature with repercussions on the national and regional Italian foreign policy strategy.

On a strategic point of view, the settlement of the Libyan conflict owes a prominent place in the Italian foreign policy agenda¹⁹⁷ for two main reasons: the stability of the whole region (including also the neighbouring Sahel) and the effects of the conflict on the migratory process. Rome's formal commitment to settle the conflict was confirmed by the last executive, who endorsed its resolution through the meeting between the Prime Minister of the GNA Fayez al-Sarraj and the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs Luigi di Maio in February¹⁹⁸. Di Maio, furthermore, received in Rome Fathi Bashaga¹⁹⁹, Libya's Minister of Interior. A durable and efficient strategy for the settlement of the conflict, leading to the establishment of a legitimated national state in Libya would, out of doubt have a positive influence on the whole MENA region, fostering its stability, with particular regards to the Magreb and to the Sahel.

¹⁹⁵ Gadhafi didn't make it easy for Italy to maintain decent relations with the Jamahiriya. As he was aware of Libya's strategic position in controlling the northern African traffics and of the importance Libya had for the Italian energy market, the rais used those elements as a leverage for obtaining consistent Italian investment in the country as a sort of formal apology for the Italian behaviour during the colonial period.

Ibid. Footnote Numb. 107. Chap. 6: *I rapporti italo-libici. Una storia complicata*, (*The Italy-Libya relations. A complicated story*).

¹⁹⁶ La Repubblica. *Ecco il testo dell'accordo, va ratificato dal Parlamento*, (*Here's the text of the Agreement. It needs the Parliament approval*). May 2008. [<https://www.repubblica.it/2008/05/sezioni/esteri/libia-italia/testo-accordo/testo-accordo.html>].

¹⁹⁷ Last September, as he took office for his second mandate as Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte declared that the restoration of stability in Libya was a priority to the new executive.

Alharathy, Safa. *Italy's new government says stability in Libya is a top priority*. The Libya Observer. 11th September, 2019. [<https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/italys-new-government-says-stability-libya-top-priority>].

¹⁹⁸ Assad, Abdulkader. *Al-Sarraj, Italian Foreign Minister discuss ongoing developments in Libya*. The Libya Observer. 12th February, 2020. [<https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/al-sarraj-italian-foreign-minister-discuss-ongoing-developments-libya>].

¹⁹⁹ Alharathy, Safa. *Italy receives Libya's interior minister in Rome*. The Libya Observer. 4th February, 2020. [<https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/italy-receives-libyas-interior-minister-rome>].

Nevertheless, the top short-term priority - with long-term effects - for the Italian Republic in Libya remains the management of the migration flows, as the northern African state is the main departure hub of the Central Mediterranean²⁰⁰ route for migrants coming from sub-Saharan Africa to reach Europe²⁰¹. The migration crisis has been a priority for the internal and foreign policy agenda of the last three Italian executives and has relevant political repercussions on both national security and Rome relations with Brussels. Actually, the theme of migration became a priority in Rome's relations with Libya already in the 2000's. Indeed, the main Libyan commitment in the Italy-Libya Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation was a firm control of the migration flows starting from the Libyan shore and crossing the Sicilian Channel. Following the 2011 revolution in Libya, the treaty was suspended and efforts were put in place by Rome to keep an open dialogue with all the parties of the Libyan civil war.

With regards to the influence of Libya's instability on Rome's stakes in the field of migration, the measures implemented under Paolo Gentiloni's administration - with Marco Minniti as Minister of Interior - (2016-2018) are worth mentioning. They, in fact, represent an attempt of synthesis between the internal and external security concerns for Italy. Respectively, the integration of the migrants in the Italian society and the burden-sharing with Rome's European partners in the management of the migration crisis. The perpetration of an armed conflict at roughly 534 kilometres from the Italian coast is particularly concerning for Rome whose priority is avoiding the collapse of Libya, which would aggravate the situation with the migratory phenomenon. In an attempt to address the root causes of illegal migration from Africa to

²⁰⁰ The map (p. 6) of this UNHCR report shows the main migration routes from Africa to Europe. It is clear how the routes starting from Mali, Niger and Sudan all converge to the Libyan coasts, to reach Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, which leads to the Italian shores in Sicily. Despite some routes cross Egypt and Algeria before getting to Libya, in the first case they all converge to Tripoli, while in the second case only a part of the people transiting reaches for Libya. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Routes Towards the Mediterranean - Reducing Risks and Strengthening Protection*. UNHCR Appeal. June, 2019, p. 6 [<https://www.unhcr.org/5d1327ab7.pdf>].

²⁰¹ The UNHCR has reported a decrease of the arrivals to Europe from Libya by 86% in 2018 (if comparing to 2017); nevertheless, movements are likely to continue in virtue of the smugglers adapting their activity to the fostered capability to intercept vessels from the Libyan coast Guard. [*Idem* p. 11].

Europe, Minniti tried to implement a strategy, consisting in blocking the migrants before they could reach the Libyan shores. To do so, a constant and productive dialogue needs to be brought about, not only with all the parts of the Libyan game (especially the tribes settled in Fezzan), but also with the authorities of the bordering countries, such as Niger and Mali²⁰². This kind of diplomatic mission is no easy task, even more difficult in a country with an ongoing conflict, however the crucial weight of this issue for Rome leads Farnesina to keep negotiating with both the GNA and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk.

The importance of settling the Libyan conflict bridges between the urgency of managing the migration flows towards Italy and another strategic security concern: the fight against terrorism. In 2016, Italy considered the deployment of a military operation in Libya. At the time the Italian special forces were reported to operate training activities in both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, cooperating with the Italian external intelligence service AISE (Agenzia Informazioni Sicurezza Esterna)²⁰³. However, Rome finally preferred setting up a military hospital in Tripoli, through an operation called “Ippocrate” (which remains in place today). It is also important to underline how Rome’s commitment in the counter-terrorism field is shared with France, the United Kingdom, the US and Russia.

The stabilisation of Libya would mean a more solid security field for the whole region, with positive repercussions in the economic field as well. With these regards Italy has two main priorities, i.e. contrasting illicit traffics of goods and people in order to allow the development of a flourishing legal economy and maintaining its prominent position in the Libyan hydrocarbon

²⁰² Liga, Aldo. *Playing with molecules - The Italian approach to Libya*. Institut Français de Relations Internationales (IFRI). April 2018, pp. 18-21 [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/playing_with_molecules_the_italian_approach_to_libya.pdf].

²⁰³ This mostly dates back to 2016, despite Italian special forces are perhaps still present on the field today, as the mission “Ippocrate” is still in place, apparently they are not concretely engaged in any military action but just present on the field with the purposes of monitoring the situation. Ranieri, Daniele. *Forze speciali e servizi italiani si portano avanti con “il lavoro” a Bengasi*, (Special Forces and Italian Secret Services get a head start on work in Benghazi). Il Foglio. 16th April, 2016. [<https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2016/04/16/news/forze-speciali-e-servizi-italiani-si-portano-avanti-con-il-lavoro-a-bengasi-95022/>].

market. Indeed, Libya has always been a key country for the Italian energy security, witnessed by the long-dated activity of the Italian company ENI in Libya, which dawn dates back to 1959. The geographical proximity of Libya to the Italian shores surely plays a role in the strategic importance for the collocation of the pipelines²⁰⁴. Moreover, the company has continued its activity in Libya, despite the ongoing conflict, and in 2018 it announced an agreement, together with the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC), for incrementing the production in the Bahr Essaham plant, Libya's biggest off-shore gas plant²⁰⁵. Having being rooted on the territory for over sixty years, ENI owes a strategic advantage in the Libyan energy market, which allows it to continue its activities, assuring the fossil fuel provisions for Italy. Furthermore, considering Libya's central location in northern Africa, occupying a solid position there potentially means a consolidated role in the MENA regional energy diplomacy chessboard²⁰⁶. Indeed, ENI's role in Libya has allowed Italy to seat at the table with the big powers²⁰⁷. Nevertheless, this does not completely protect Italy from the swinging nature of the Libyan energy market, due to the prolonged conflict. The most recent example dates back to January, right before the international Berlin Summit, when the NOC was forced to shut down oil production in the fields of Sharara and El Feel - in the south-west of the country -, following Haftar's move to suspend the supply from two

²⁰⁴ The pipeline Green Stream connects the Libyan shores (the Mellitah plant) to the Italian town of Gela, in Sicily, being the longest underwater pipeline ever realised in the Mediterranean sea with a capacity of 8 billion cubic metres per year. [<https://www.greenstreambv.com/it/gasdotto-greenstream.html>].

²⁰⁵ ENI. *Il progetto off-shore Bahr Essalam Fase 2 ha iniziato la produzione*, (The Bahr Essalam off-shore project started phase 2). [<https://www.eni.com/it-IT/media/comunicati-stampa/2018/10/eni-bp-e-noc-firmano-un-accordo-per-ri-cominciare-le-esplorazioni-in-libia.html>].

²⁰⁶ Several foreign companies have tried to enter the Libyan energy market, with consistent effort from the French company Total and an important role of the British Petroleum (BP). This latter one, has accorded to ENI a quota of 42.5% in the BP's *Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement* in Libya, aimed at promoting the foreign investments within the country. [*Idem*].

²⁰⁷ Villa, Matteo. *In for the Long Haul: Italy's Energy Interests in Northern Africa*. ISPI. 30th May, 2016. [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/long-haul-italys-energy-interests-northern-africa-15198>].

pipelines transporting oil from the Zawiya refinery to the coast of the Mediterranean²⁰⁸.

Equally harmful for the country's development - and for the Italian economic stakes - is the shadow economy that has been growing in dimension since the beginning of the Libyan conflict, mostly as a physiological response to the liquidity crisis and the soar in price of commodity goods²⁰⁹. The damages of illicit trade to the Libyan economy have been pointed out by Ghassam Salamé, former UN Special Envoy to Libya, according to whom this is a crucial matter for conflict resolution. Salamé has underlined how the black market finds several practical expressions in Libya, from drug trafficking, to the traffic of fuel or commodity goods²¹⁰. The most harmful for the Italian interests is out of doubt the traffic in human beings, which impacts consistently on the management and dimension of the migratory process.

Finally, considering the geopolitical importance of the Mediterranean Sea for Italy, Rome also has consistent political interests with regards to the Libyan conflict, mostly dealing with its role within NATO and its status of regional power in the Mediterranean area. The first one has characterised the foreign policy strategy of the Italian Republic in the last seventy years. Even though in the last decades Italy managed to foster its role within NATO²¹¹, Rome still feels some sort of need to demonstrate its attachment and commitment to the Atlantic Alliance. This was probably the leading factor that pushed the condone

²⁰⁸ Those fields are managed by the Mellitah Oil and Gas (MOG) a joint venture between ENI and the Libyan National Oil Corporation, therefore the shut down de facto blocked ENI's production. Similarly, some days earlier the NOC was forced to suspend the oil production for the fields in eastern Libya, following orders coming from militias that cooperate with Haftar.

Nigro, Vincenzo. *Libia, Haftar chiude anche i pozzi petroliferi ENI nel sud*, (Libya, Haftar closes ENI oil facilities in the south). La Repubblica. 19th January, 2020. [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/01/19/news/libia_pozzi_petrolio-246165107/].

²⁰⁹ Zaptia, Sami. *Libya's growing shadow economy threatens more destabilisation says report*. The Libyan Herald. 10th June 2017. [<https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/10/libyas-growing-shadow-economy-is-an-increasing-destabilization-threat-report/>].

²¹⁰ Lewis, Aidan. *Libya won't stabilise unless shadow economy smashed: U.N. envoy*. Reuters. 29th March, 2018. [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-un/libya-wont-stabilize-unless-shadow-economy-smashed-u-n-envoy-idUSKBN1H51FE>].

²¹¹ Mainly through the participation in NATO military missions abroad, e.g. in the Balkans and in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Italy has consistently pushed for a greater role for the Atlantic Alliance in the Mediterranean, as described in Chapter 2.2).

for the deployment of the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya. More precisely, a combination of factors led Rome in acting against its national interest. Firstly, Italy was internally divided concerning this matter, which made its reaction late and fragmented²¹². This factor surely did not help the defence of Italy's national interest at the negotiation table in Brussels, where the Italian representatives seemed to be out of move before the repentine action of its closest allies²¹³. Finally, Italy perhaps rather condoned than confronted France's and UK's strong anti-Gadhafi positions because it was afraid of having to "stand with the looser" if it took side with the rais. Italy, moreover, condoned the decision in the hope of a strong American hand in the Libyan theatre, which would have contained the French aspiration to play the game-changer role²¹⁴; hope that was disappointed.

Today, Italy seeks to maintain an open dialogue with all the parties in Libya - also through the fundamental activity of ENI -, with a stronger ouverture towards the Government of National Accord (in virtue of Rome's strong support to the Skhirat Agreement). Furthermore, the Italian Republic holds one more fundamental stake in the Middle East and North Africa region, i.e. the international prestige deriving from its position in the Mediterranean. It is Italy's long-term interest to be recognised as the leading actor in the area, since this will reflect positively on its position within the European Union in particular and within the international community in general. The Libyan crisis

²¹² Dottori, Germano. *La drôle de guerre all'italiana*. Dossier: La guerra di Libia, Numb. 2 (2011). Limes online. 12th April, 2011. [<https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/la-drole-de-guerre-allitaliana>].

²¹³ In the Italian academic environment various hypothesis arose with regards to the French behaviour in the Libyan 2011 revolution, some of which also considered a role of the French Secret Services in favouring Gadhafi's fall with the aim of turning the tables of the Northern Africa hydrocarbons market in favour of Paris. In particular, some episodes of the revolution in Libya seem less spontaneous than others, it is the case of the attack to the military quarters in Derna, which Libyan regime sources reported was conducted by people equipped with weapons. Also, the defections of some top figures in the regime at the end of February 2011 are read *a posteriori* as a sign of a foreign hand behind the revolution. It is the case, for instance of the Minister of Justice, Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ġalīl, the Minister of Internal Affairs, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Yūnis, and the Libyan Ambassador to the United Nations, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ṣalgām.

Mezran, Karim. *Come l'Italia ha perso la Libia: il gioco della Francia e il fallito golpe anti-Gheddafi*, (How Italy lost Libya: France's game and the failed coup against Gadhafi). L'Italia dopo l'Italia, Numb. 2 (2011). Limes Online. 3rd May, 2011. [<https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/come-litalia-ha-perso-la-libia-il-gioco-della-francia-e-il-fallito-golpe-anti-gheddafi>].

²¹⁴ *Idem* footnote Numb. 43.

represents the test-bench for Italian stakes in this direction. For instance, the Palermo conference was seen as the golden occasion for Rome to reassert its role as leading European power in Libya²¹⁵. The country, after all, has always represented the preferential channel for Italy to gain power and international prestige, since the colonial era²¹⁶.

In consideration of the conflict-resolution strategy applied so far in other complex scenarios, such as Lebanon or Afghanistan, Rome should probably consider a greater role in Libya through the deployment of a training mission for the local police forces. This kind of provision has proven effective in Afghanistan (as described in Chapter 2.2) and seems to be adaptable to Libya as well, seen the inner complexity of the conflict. This idea has been tried to be implemented to a certain extent through the EU-led mission EUNAVFOR MED Irini, aimed at stopping the weapons supply to Libya. Nevertheless, the mission has been highly debated and said to be widely ineffective, due to the cumbersome bureaucratic steps for renewing its mandate and to its limited impact on the Libyan ground²¹⁷.

In short, a more direct involvement would be beneficial for Italy on two perspectives: for fostering its role and restoring its prominent space in Libya on the short-term and for improving its position within the European Union framework as a reliable and effective actor.

4.3: Italy and Russia: better together or further apart?

In consideration of everything said above, as well as in the previous chapters, is there any space for closer coordinated action of the Russian Federation and the Italian Republic in Libya or does such a scenario remain inconceivable?

In general, there are two main principles that represent a source of division between Moscow and Rome with regards to the conflict resolution.

²¹⁵ *Idem* Footnote Numb. 163.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 195, p. 52.

²¹⁷ Pietz, Tobias. *Operation Irini is wrong, for Libya and for sea rescues*. Euobserver. 11th May, 2020. [<https://euobserver.com/opinion/148307>].

Firstly, Italy is a long-date member of the Atlantic Alliance and the NATO membership remains one of the anchors leading the Italian foreign policy strategy over the last twenty-five years, despite the consistent differences characterising the various Italian executives or the divisions in internal politics. Secondly, the degree of priority in the foreign policy agenda represented by the Libyan crisis differs consistently according to the Russian and the Italian perspective. Indeed, as described in Chapter 1 and reiterated in Chapter 4.1, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region does not represent a priority for Moscow, that considers its relations with the post-Soviet space, with Europe and East-Asia a more urgent concern. On the contrary, Libya represents for Italy a matter of primary concern for three main reasons: the geographical proximity of the Libyan shores to Sicily, the fundamental stakes Italy has in the energy sector with regards to Libya and, finally, the weight Libya has on the management of the migratory crisis, which is still perceived as Italy's main problem by a large part of the population²¹⁸ and remains at the top place in Italy's foreign policy agenda.

Historically, both Rome and Moscow entertained positive relations with Libya before 2011. Perhaps the Italian stakes are more profound as they date back further in history and considering how geographically close Libya is to Italy. However, the economic partnership and contracts settled with Moammar Gadhafi were highly beneficial for the Russian business environment, entailing consistent interest in maintaining that kind of relation. The 2011 NATO intervention in Libya was disruptive for both Russian and Italian business affairs in Libya, albeit for different reasons and with different outcomes.

²¹⁸ A survey conducted by Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) in cooperation with IPSOS and published in December 2019 shows how, among the most concerning threats perceived by the Italian population, the immigration stands at the second place, following only the economic crisis. Actually, the percentage of Italian people seeing migration as the most urgent threat to Italy decreased over the last four years. Indeed it was 22% in 2015 and only 12% in 2019, nevertheless it still remains an important concern.

ISPI. *Sondaggio ISPI 2019 - Gli italiani e la politica internazionale*. 20th December, 2019. [<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/gli-italiani-e-la-politica-internazionale-24646#g8>].

Russia saw in it an inconclusive attempt to install a pro-Western regime that was supposed to favour Western interests within the country, but that turned out to sentence Libya with nine years of conflict and instability.

Italy, on the other hand, capitulated to the concerted action of France and the United Kingdom, who played a far better game than Rome did in advocating their national interests before the eyes of the international community. They managed to present the intervention in Libya as a shared strategic and political interest, considering how urgent and concerning the situation was.

Even though this point is hardly sufficient in consideration of a closer Moscow-Rome cooperation on the Libyan field, it is a worth-considering element, while looking at the broad picture.

Despite the different position Libya occupies in their agenda, Russia and Italy have extremely similar interests on the economic field, with particular regards to the importance of contrasting the illicit economic activities within the country to allow the development of a legal economic tissue, constituting the back-bone of the Libyan reconstruction. More specifically, both Moscow and Rome are interested into the Libyan hydrocarbon markets. For Italy, Libya is among the main Italian providers of oil and natural gas, not to mention the interests in investing on this field for the company ENI.

As far as Russia is concerned, its interest in Libya regards the potential investments into the country - in consideration of the beneficial economic relations pre-2011. Furthermore, a pacified background, together with the implementation of an efficient economic recovery plan would allow Libya to meet its production potential, avoiding the swings in oil production and distribution that are typical of a country facing a conflict situation. Perhaps this change will not be crucial in stabilising the global oil market, but at least the disruptive effect caused by inconstant production and export rate will be limited.

At first glance, the Russian and the Italian political position in Libya seem diametrically opposed, as Moscow is said to cooperate more closely with

Haftar's Libyan National Army, while Italy seems to support more strenuously Fayeze al-Sarraj and his UN-backed Government of National Accord. Despite this formal net division, the reality of facts is more complex and sees a potentially closer position for Moscow and Rome. Both states are implementing a strategy characterised by the ability of keeping an open dialogue with all the parties involved into the conflict. Careful analysis of the Libyan context suggests how reducing conflict to the mere confrontational dimension between Haftar and al-Sarraj is hardly exhaustive in describing it and less than ever in trying to settle it.

Sergey Razov, the Russian Ambassador to Italy, has observed how the Russian and the Italian approach share the following ideas for conflict settlement: calling on all parties for a cease-fire, promoting a pan-Libyan forum to discuss a comprehensive solutions and bringing about the idea of holding high-level international meetings to ensure a multilateral approach from the international stake-holders to the Libyan crisis²¹⁹. The potential precious role of Moscow in settling the Libyan crisis, or more simply the impossibility to exclude Russia from the negotiation table has been circulating in the Italian military and academic environment since 2016²²⁰. Over the last few months, this idea seems to find growing legitimacy, seen the frequent contacts between the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Russian President Vladimir Putin²²¹.

Moscow and Rome seem to share also the support to the implementation of a bottom-up approach in the conflict-resolution in Libya, that does not exclude a parallel application of a top-bottom approach (which has been privileged so far through the international summits). The importance of this latter one should not be neglected, as it offers the occasion for international

²¹⁹ Ria Novosti. *Посол в Италии отметил общий подход Москвы и Рима к урегулированию в Ливии*. (Russian Ambassador to Italy points out a common approach from Moscow and Rome towards the settlement of the Libya crisis). 21st November, 2019. [<https://ria.ru/20191121/1561229697.html>].

²²⁰ Pierri, Michele. *Cosa possono fare Italia, Russia e Nato in Libia. Parla il generale Tricarico*. (What can Italy, Russia and Nato do together in Libya? General Tricarico speaks). Formiche.net. 4th March 2015. [<https://formiche.net/2015/03/libia-nato-russia-italia/>].

²²¹ Especially in December, as reported by the official website of the Italian government <http://www.governo.it/it/articolo/libia-conversazione-telefonica-conte-putin/13675>.

players to meet and negotiate their position. Despite this, a greater attention should be devoted to the bottom-up approach. Indeed, it is the most efficient way to promote the direct dialogue among the numerous Libyan parts - as former UN Special Envoy to Libya Ghassam Salamé suggested in 2017. It seems quite obvious at this stage of the conflict that any road-map for Libya that lacks legitimacy among the Libyans will result into a perpetration of the conflict.

In an effort to act as guarantors of a comprehensive internal dialogue among the parties, Italy and Russia could be successful, as their bilateral relations have always been friendly and constant, even though with some source of divergences.

With these regards, it should be born in mind that Italy has condoned the renewal of the EU sanctions regime to Russia, despite being among the states less favourable to this measure, that damages Italy's commercial relations with Moscow. A further element deserving consideration is the more assertive role that Erdogan's Turkey has been playing in supporting the GNA in Libya since December 2019, which might marginalise Italy in the multilateral negotiations, seen that Ankara and Moscow have now verified experience as a mediation tandem. Also, in consideration of the positive moment for the Russia-Turkey relations.

Perhaps, the cautious economic partnership that Russia is entertaining with Ankara can be an option working well for Rome as well, in consideration of two main factors. First, the institutional context Italy is a part of and deems fundamental in its foreign policy strategy, i.e. being part of NATO and of the European Union²²². Second, Italy and Russia have always maintained friendly and beneficial relations on the economic field, with particular regards to the energy market²²³.

²²² Turkey as well is a NATO Member State and this element did not prevent Moscow and Ankara from opening up to reciprocal dialogue, which evolved into a beneficial and pragmatic rapprochement.

²²³ For instance, former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi tried to hold up and avoid sanctions renewal, as the regime is harmful to Italian economic interests in Russia. Furthermore, he discussed the project for building the North Stream 2 Pipeline with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as the possibility to find a compromise for Syria.

As underlined earlier in this chapter, both Italy and Russia have consistent stakes with regards to the Libyan fossil fuel market. That is why the energy sector can be the starting point for enhancing the bilateral cooperation of Italy and Russia in the Libyan context, as both hold important stakes in the country and in the Middle East North Africa in general with these regards. A crucial role in this sense is played by the energy diplomacy dialogue between the Italian ENI and the Russian Gazprom, which in 2017 signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the development of a southern corridor for gas supply connecting Russia to Europe, which will directly include Italy²²⁴. This perspective entails benefits for both Moscow and Rome, as the former one has a chance to diversify the gas-shipment routes to Europe and to exit the impasse constituted by the North-Stream II pipeline project. At the same time, Italy would gain a stronger economic and geopolitical position in Europe, as the hydrocarbons shipment to Rome will not pass entirely through Germany.

Considering the global point of view, both Moscow and Rome can potentially obtain benefits from a coordinated action of conflict settlement in Libya.

Russia has a golden occasion of showing its ability of mediator in another MENA arena, where it can afford a certain degree of detachment (unlike Syria, where Moscow's stakes were higher than in Libya²²⁵). Italy, on the other hand, can relate on the confidence relation built with a number of actors in the Western part of the country, to be the European player that manages to favour mediation instead of the *chacun pour soi* attitude that has characterised the action in Libya so far²²⁶. In terms of image, this would contribute to improve Italy's position within the multilateral context of international organisations that is such dear to Rome.

EURACTIV.com. *Putin and Renzi discuss 'potential energy projects'*. 8th January 2016. [<https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/putin-and-renzi-discuss-potential-energy-projects/>].

²²⁴ https://www.eni.com/en_RU/eni-russia/partners-projects/partners-projects.shtml

²²⁵ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 171.

²²⁶ Mercuri, Michela. *Il ruolo della Russia in Libia. Un possibile alleato strategico per l'Italia? (Russia's role in Libya. A potential strategic ally for Italy?)*. Dialoghi Mediterranei, n. 33. September 2018.

[<http://www.istitutoeuroarabo.it/DM/il-ruolo-della-russia-in-libia-un-possibile-alleato-strategico-per-lit-alia/>].

To conclude, the cooperation on the economic field seems the most likely way for Russia and Italy, as it would boost the benefits of the Rome-Moscow relations, beyond serving their interests in Libya. In fact, an agreement over a military resolution of the conflict constitutes slippery ground. In first place, Italy has military commitment to NATO and establishing a shared military agreement over Libya with Russia will probably alarm its Atlantic Alliance partners. Secondly, any military solution is expected to be comprehensive of a political settlement. Tensions remain extremely high in Libya for both those fields.

In sum, the main obstacle for a “better together” model of cooperation for Italy and Russia in the Libyan conflict is of a political nature and entails the Russia-West confrontational dynamics emerged from the 2014 rupture between Moscow and the West. Furthermore, the progressive marginalisation of Italy in the Libyan context can influence the field of cooperation with Russia as well. On the bright side, a higher degree of cooperation in the settlement of the Libyan conflict is potentially beneficial for both, mostly in consideration of the fact that Italy has always been among the NATO members that advocated the need to conduct the dialogue with Russia on a double basis: deterrence and dialogue, with a certain tendency in favouring the dialogue. In the long run, a successful closer cooperation on Libya can favour Italy in assuming the role of Russia’s leading European interlocutor in the resolution of other conflicts, where the Moscow- Brussels dialogue is extremely sensitive.

Conclusions

The turbulent character of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is likely to remain unchanged, at least on a short and mid-term perspective. In general, this is due to three main factors: the complexity of the region that entails different levels of development and event evolution in different territories at different time frames. The impression that the risks for regional actors to move around the MENA chessboard overtake the opportunities and, finally, the importance of implementing a multilateral approach to problem-solving, taking into account the local peculiarities.

On the contrary, analysts seem to agree on the fact that the three following points will have a less consistent impact²²⁷ on the evolution of the MENA region. Firstly, the possibility that the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia escalates to such a level that the region becomes strongly polarised in this sense. The low probability of this scenario serves Russia's interest in maintaining the status quo in the MENA region, which allows Moscow to keep alive the system of partnerships built under Putin's leadership.

Secondly, the fact that the global dynamics might have a determinant influence on the regional evolution, with particular reference to the importance of leaving aside paternalistic attitudes from the most relevant international players in favour of a tailored analysis of the specific regional context.

Third, the role of non-state armed actors, which were said to have become central players in the MENA region, but de facto did not. This last point seems to find legitimacy in the context of the Libyan conflict if we take into account the Misrata militias or even the Libyan National Army (LNA). Despite they have become particularly influential at a local level, they still lack the strength to act without the support of international actors, as well as the political legitimacy at a national level.

²²⁷ Göll, Edgar and Colombo, Silvia and Soler i Lecha, Eduard. *Imagining Future(s) for the Middle East and North Africa*. MENARA Final Reports, No. 2. March 2019, p.12. [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_2.pdf].

Moreover, unrest as main characteristic of the future regional dynamics does not necessarily mean escalation of new conflicts or animated military and strategic confrontations. The hypothesis concerning the mid-term and long-term perspective favours a political and mainly social kind of confrontation. In particular, the factor contributing to social frictions is a combination of high level of unemployment, corruption, bad governance, environmental degradation, political repression, identity conflict, technological developments and territorial disparities²²⁸.

The social dimension of unrest in the MENA region finds confirmation by looking back to 2019, when a new wave of protests crossed the region. Some analysts²²⁹ called the facts in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan and Iraq “Arab Springs 2.0”, nevertheless those countries were only marginally if not at all touched by the 2011 uprisings. The 2019 unrest was guided by a push from the youths - which account for 70% of the MENA population - to overcome old disputes and go beyond ethnic and religious divisions. The firm belief that Arab countries should find their own way took the shape of civilian movements strengthened by nation-state identity ideals²³⁰. It is of course too early to assess the outcome of this movements on the whole region, mostly in consideration of the complexity of MENA. For instance, the idea of national identity would hardly apply to Libya, due to the profound tribal division characterising its social tissue.

That said, a leading character of the MENA region is the fragmentation characterising the interactions among players at a national, regional and international level, which is, again, the case for Libya. Socially speaking, the fragmentation has two main directors around which the confrontational dynamics develop: the contrast between wealth and poverty and the contrast

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 7.

²²⁹ Muasher, Marwan. *Is This the Arab Spring 2.0?*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 30th October, 2019. [<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/30/is-this-arab-spring-2.0-pub-80220>].

²³⁰ This opinion is shared by Raghida Dergham and Mohammed Ishan, leading Middle East analysts, respectively with reference to Lebanon and Iraq.

Truevtsev, Konstantin. *Middle East: Long Term Forecast. What's Next?*. Valdai Discussion Club, 27th February, 2020. [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/middle-east-long-term-forecast-what-next/?sphrase_id=485289].

between secularism and religious elements in politics. Contrasts in this sense are exacerbated by the fact that the Middle East and North Africa region is not an exclusively Arab region, considering the presence of actors such as Iran, Israel and Turkey, as well as large number of Kurdish ethnic groups scattered around the region. Their presence and influence cannot be disregarded while looking at the dichotomy between unitarism and decentralisation and between the secular and the religious element.

As for the former case, decentralisation seems a valuable solution to be implemented to help the conflict de-escalation²³¹ (it could be, for instance, the case of Libya). It is fair to say that so far the implementation of this option has produced profoundly different results. For instance, in Iraq the federal option did not turn out as much effective for the moment, whereas the system implemented in the United Arab Emirates seems at present quite solid²³².

The dichotomy between the religion and secularity still occupies a prominent place and is unlikely to be solved on the short-term. Mainly, this is due to the fact that the frictions between different groups over this factor are profoundly rooted in history; furthermore, they have been influencing the development of different areas and different societal groups. Finally, over the last decade, this dichotomy assumed a political dimension²³³. Considering the profound level of sensitivity of this issues, a compromise seems likely to be favoured from the outside, with external actors moving within the limits of the principle of non-intervention²³⁴.

In the long run, main sources of unrest can be identified as belonging to three main socio-economic domains: the scarcity of natural resources and their unequal distribution; the energy factor and the societal fragmentation.

In the first case, the reference is mainly to food provision, access to drinkable water and to a general scarcity of natural resources. In a long-term

²³¹ Naumkin, Vitaly and Kuznetsov, Vasily. *A New Security Architecture for the Middle East?*, Valdai Discussion Club, February 2020, p. 4. [<https://valdaiclub.com/files/29140/>].

²³² *Idem*.

²³³ *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

²³⁴ It was the case of the Russian President Vladimir Putin together with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in their negotiations for a cease-fire in Libya last January.

perspective the effects of the climate change shall be added to the bill, together with those of demographic growth. Mostly if managed inadequately, the impact of the global warming on the MENA region will only broaden inequality in a region where differences are already consistent²³⁵.

On a related field the importance of the energy market will probably remain a leading factor of the MENA region policies evolution. The trade-off between the increase in oil demand and the push towards de-carbonisation will keep broadening the difference between the energy exporters and the energy importers²³⁶. It is worth noting how the interests of the elites in MENA still remain oriented towards the fossil fuel market, especially with regards to those countries that are part of the OPEC+ platform. This tendency potentially reflects as an advantage for Russia, even though with the reserves deriving from the evolving relations with the other OPEC+ countries. For the Italian Republic the matter remains highly controverted, especially in consideration of its interests in Libya. Speaking of this particular case, the unequal distribution of revenues from fossil fuel market is the first source of Libya's social unrest.

Societal fragmentation, finally, is likely to present two scenarios: either the hardening of relations among several existing identities or the success of the parties in finding a *modus vivendi*. In Libya, the polarisation of the various tribal realities has become a source of security unrest. According to MENARA Final Report²³⁷, the fragmentation will keep finding expression on the Islamist field, both on the national, regional and international level, with reference to the division between moderate and conservative Islam. Although this is not the case for Libya, this distinction largely concerns other areas of the MENA region and partially reflects the polarisation of regional actors in supporting the factions of the Libyan conflict.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 227, pp. 15-16.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 227, p.18.

This situation is also valid for external players and is particularly true for our case study, as Russia is an energy exporter, while Italy is an energy importer, with a growing interest for de-carbonisation, mostly in the EU framework. Furthermore, both countries have energy-relied interests in Libya, which economy is at present entirely based on fossil fuel production and exports.

²³⁷ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 227, p. 27.

As mentioned before, the Middle East and North Africa region is vast and complex, therefore it seems opportune to analyse separately the dynamics and future perspective of the Maghreb countries, seen their relative lower interdependence with the Mashreq region, also due to their proximity with Europe²³⁸. This is particularly true in the case of Algeria and Libya. Three scenarios are outlined for the Maghreb region: status quo, explosion of higher social tensions and complete settlement.

The first one seems the most likely to be realised on the short and mid-term and, despite the continuing tensions, it will prevent the impact of disruptive elements on the region, for instance inflows of jihadist towards Libya.

The second scenario, represents the occasion for jihadist groups to sow discord among the mosaic of actors settled in the region, particularly in consideration of the ethnic and tribal divisions, e.g. the destabilisation potentially entailed by the strengthening of the Berber nationalism.

The third scenario for Maghreb sees the successful and durable settlement of the Libyan crisis, together with a smooth political transition in Algeria. Despite reassuring, this is the less likely one to come true, while the prosecution of the status quo seems the most likely short and mid-term scenario for the Maghreb²³⁹.

In sum, fragmentation represents the key issue of the unrest in the Middle East and North Africa region, reposing on the disillusion and social tensions caused by profoundly different levels of development. Further disaggregation is dangerous, as it will mean a puzzle of conflict zones alternated with isolated areas which will grow successfully. Such a scenario will constitute a vicious circle of the main issues gripping MENA countries, exacerbating the conflictual dynamics. With these regards, not only the behaviour of the local actors is important, but also the attitude chosen by international players. Of

²³⁸ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 230, p. 15.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 230, p. 16.

course, a fragmented attitude from the international stake holders will serve any purpose but the stabilisation of the Middle East and North Africa region.

How do the afore-mentioned elements translate in practice for the Russian Federation and for the Italian republic?

As for Russia, it is likely that it will maintain the policies applied so far to the MENA region, led by a pragmatic detached attitude which aims at building constructive equidistant relations with a wide number of countries. Bearing in mind the golden rule, i.e. the MENA region does not represent a priority matter in Moscow's foreign policy agenda²⁴⁰, the benefits of maintaining cautious friendly relations with a variety of partners has also a geopolitical advantage. In fact, through MENA Russia manages to get direct access to the Mediterranean sea, which solves the old geopolitical matter constituted by the freezing of the Arctic Ocean during winter. Overall, Russia is interested in maintaining its role as key MENA mediator.

With regards to the Italian republic, its geopolitical and economic stakes are likely to remain extremely high in the MENA region, with particular reference to the Maghreb. Despite this, there is a non correspondence in between its profound stakes and its detached degree of involvement, particularly with reference to the Libyan crisis²⁴¹.

In consideration of the arguments presented in Chapter 2 and with special reference to the crucial importance of the multilateral action in its foreign policy, it seems fair assessing that it is unlikely for Italy to act outside of the context of the European Union. With these regards, the European Union should seek higher internal cohesion, in order to finally speak with a sole voice, covering an independent role. This enhanced cohesion is fundamental in addressing the hybrid and complex nature of the challenges presented before the European states, many of which are characteristics of the Middle Eastern and Northern African context. 2020 is the year in which the Cotonou Agreements will expire, underlining the need for a new comprehensive

²⁴⁰ *Idem* Footnote Numb. 188.

²⁴¹ As assessed in the 2019 MENARA Final Report, *Ibid.* Footnote Numb. 230, p.12.

European approach to MENA. In this context, Italy has extremely profound stakes in taking a leading role and shaping the EU future according to its interests, seen the importance of the MENA region for Rome's security.

Such an assessment seems paradoxical, in consideration of the crisis striking the Euro zone today, which sees particularly harsh criticism from some members of the Italian political panorama, coupled with wide-spread Euroscepticism among the population²⁴². The crisis is mainly due to growing distrust and lack of solidarity among member states, widely related to the preponderance of the national interests over the European ones. The management of the migration crisis, as well as the pattern of interests in the Libyan conflict are quite emblematic of this. In general, the root causes of Euroscepticism can be individuated in the factual inexistence of a European identity²⁴³.

It is fair to admit that at present the political advantages of the European Union are hardly to see, in contrast with the evident contradictions between common interests and national stakes. The Libyan crisis is emblematic of this European trend, as described in Chapter 4, paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3. Nevertheless, a further integration, for the purposes of necessity, is the only way for the European Union to keep the pace with the evolution of global politics²⁴⁴. This becomes crucial in consideration of the EU relations with the main international players, i.e. the United States, Russia, China and other BRICS countries such as Brazil and India.

²⁴² This is not only a reality for Italy, but also for Poland and Hungary as the most prominent EU critiques. Also, Euroscepticism exists in the majority of the countries of the Union. Friedman George, *The Fragmentation of the European Union*, Geopolitical Futures, 28th January 2020. [<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/pdfs/the-fragmentation-of-the-european-union-geopoliticalfutures-com.pdf>].

²⁴³ According to George Friedman (Idem), the European identity has its fundamentals in the liberal democratic values of the *acquis communautaire*, which still represent EU's most important principles today. In his opinion, the compliance to these values was more a moral principle to be observed for being admitted into the European club and get rid of a difficult past than a factually implementable reality. It is true that today, 28 years after the establishment of the Maastricht Treaty, the European identity is still not a fact and there are growing trend of discussing not only the political but also the economic dimension of the European Union, which seemed its strongest point.

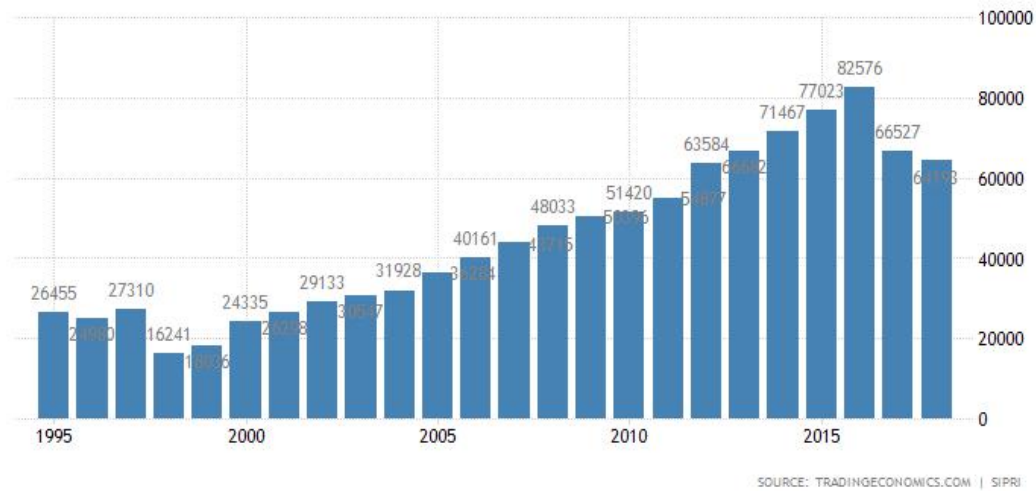
²⁴⁴ Soete, Luc. Europe's future: fragmented implosion, or greater integration?. United Nations University (UNU). Maastricht, 18th July, 2011. [<https://unu.edu/news/news/europes-future-fragmented-implosion-or-greater-integration.html>].

A more united and independent European Union might become successful in smoothing the angles of its relations with Moscow, especially in consideration of the Brexit factor. Of course, thinking of perfectly friendly relations between Moscow and the European Union would be utopian. Nevertheless, the progressive establishment of a cautious and pragmatic partnership seems desirable, especially in consideration of Russia's relevance in the hydrocarbons market and as an economic partner for the European Union²⁴⁵. Considering the position Europe occupies in the scale of Moscow's foreign policy priorities, a détente in the relations with Brussels can be mutually beneficial. The Italian role in this sense could be, in coherence with what has been done so far, representing a bridge between Europe's softer positions and harsher perspectives towards the Russian Federation.

In consideration of this, the first small steps might be taken in the Middle East and North Africa region, through the implementation of a system for stabilisation which would ideally include the US, Russia, China and the European Union as the four prominent international players, to act in the limits provided by the respect of the international law. In this sense, the ideal instrument would be a format able to gather actors with virtually extremely different positions around the same negotiation table. A successful example is the Astana process, which successfully de-escalated extremely complex nodes, with Turkey and Iran sitting together for finding a compromise.

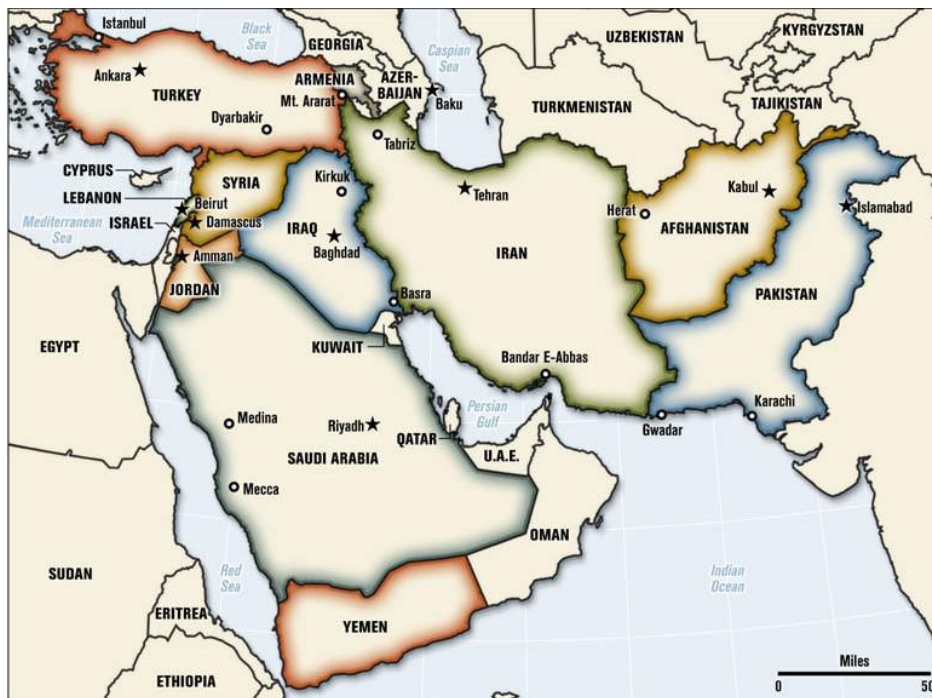
²⁴⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>

Annexes



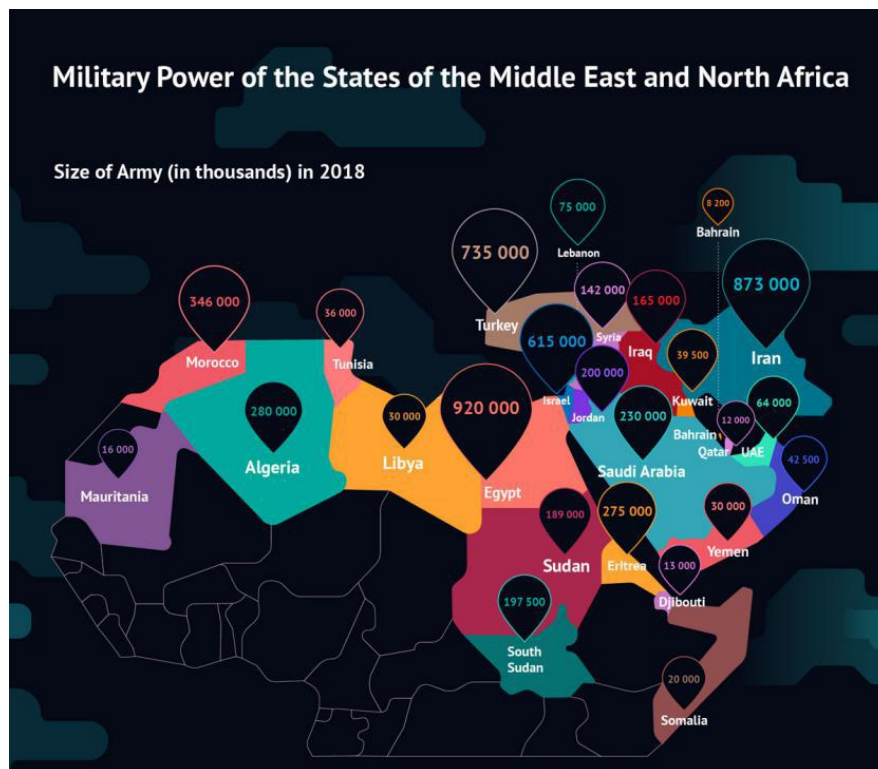
Annex 1: Evolution of the Russian military expenditure (1995-2020)

Source: [<https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/military-expenditure>]



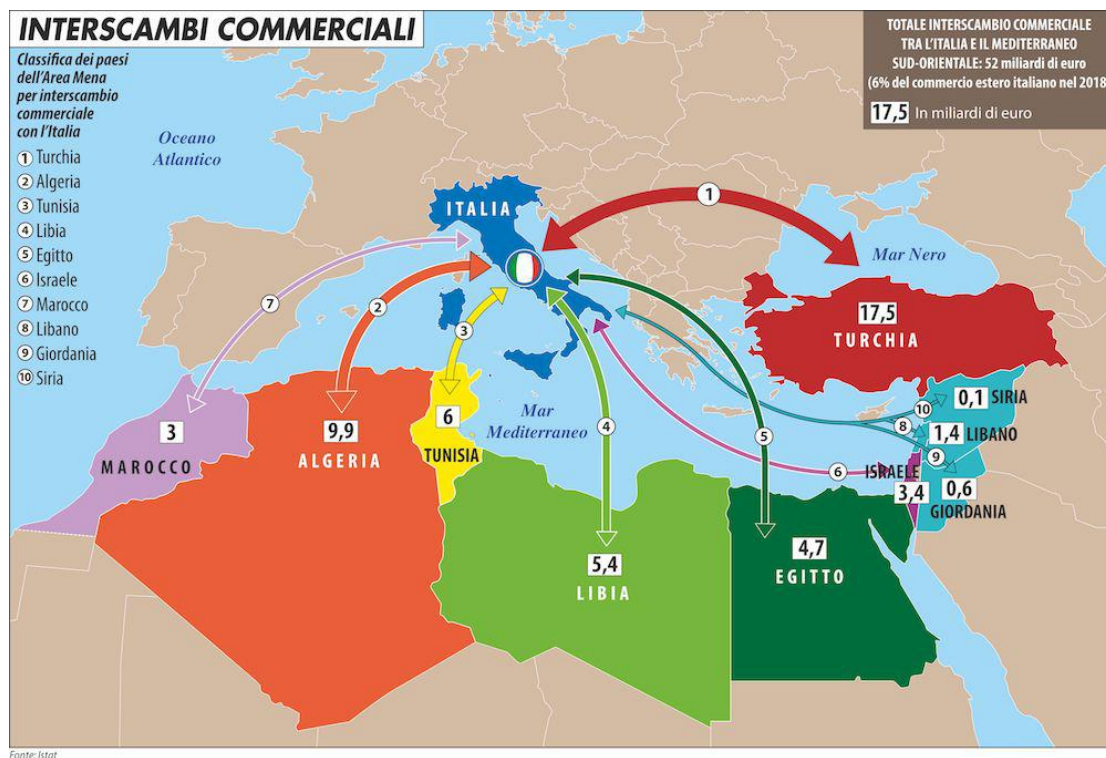
Annex 2: The MENA region and its proximity to the post-Soviet space

Source: [<https://syria360.wordpress.com/globalist-agenda/>]



Annex 3: Military Power of the States of the Middle East and North Africa (2018)

Source: [<https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/iblock/gcceu1.jpg>]



Annex 4: Overall of Italy's trade with countries of the MENA region by volume

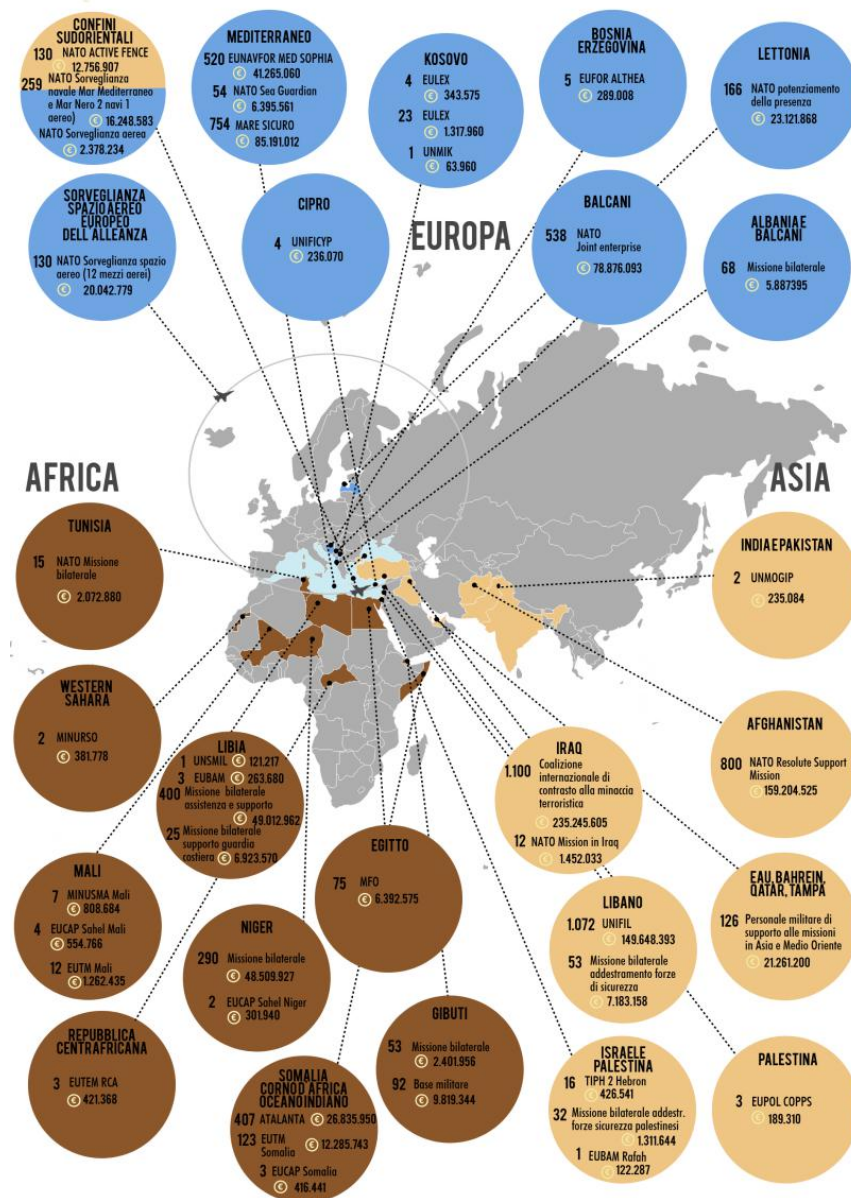
Source:

[<https://www.limesonline.com/carta-intercambio-commerciale-italia-mediterraneo-nordafica-medio-oriente/113637>]

L'ITALIA NELLE MISSIONI INTERNAZIONALI MONDO

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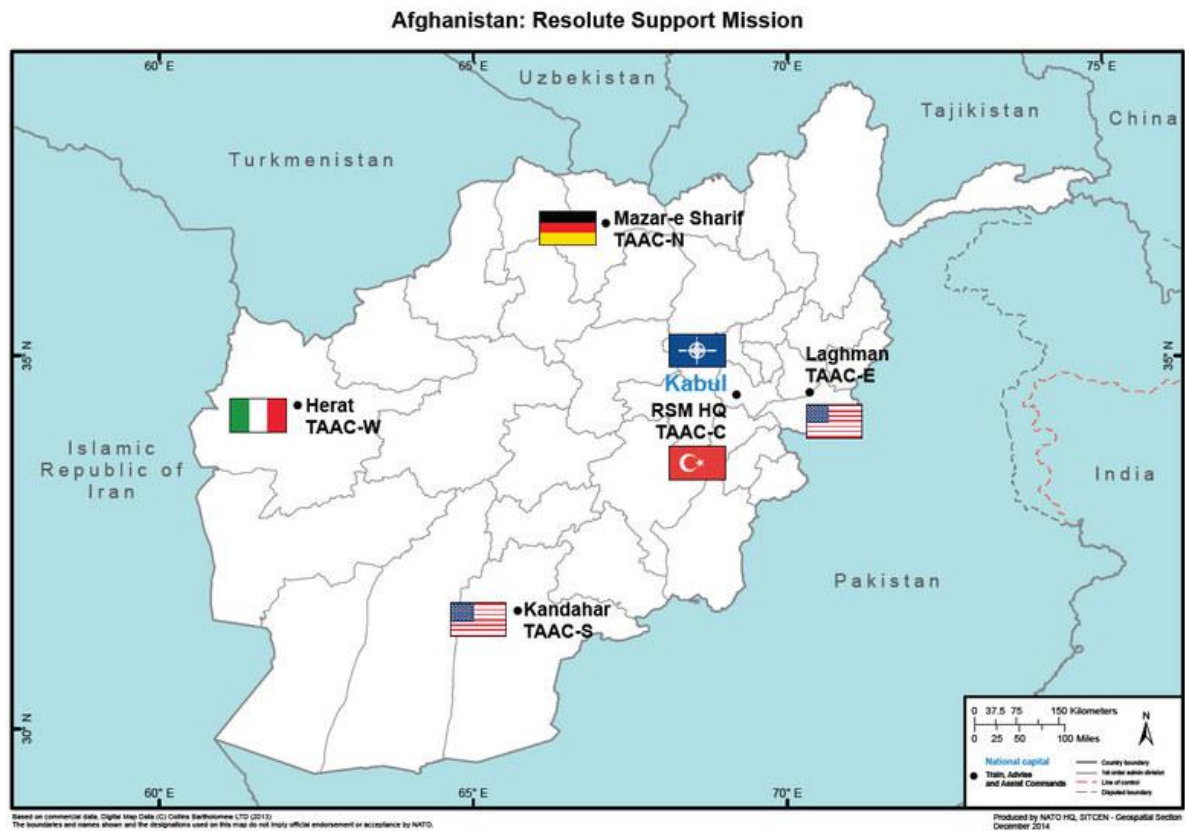


DELIBERA DEL CONSIGLIO DEI MINISTRI DEL 23 APRILE 2019

Annex 5: Italian presence in the international military missions in the world

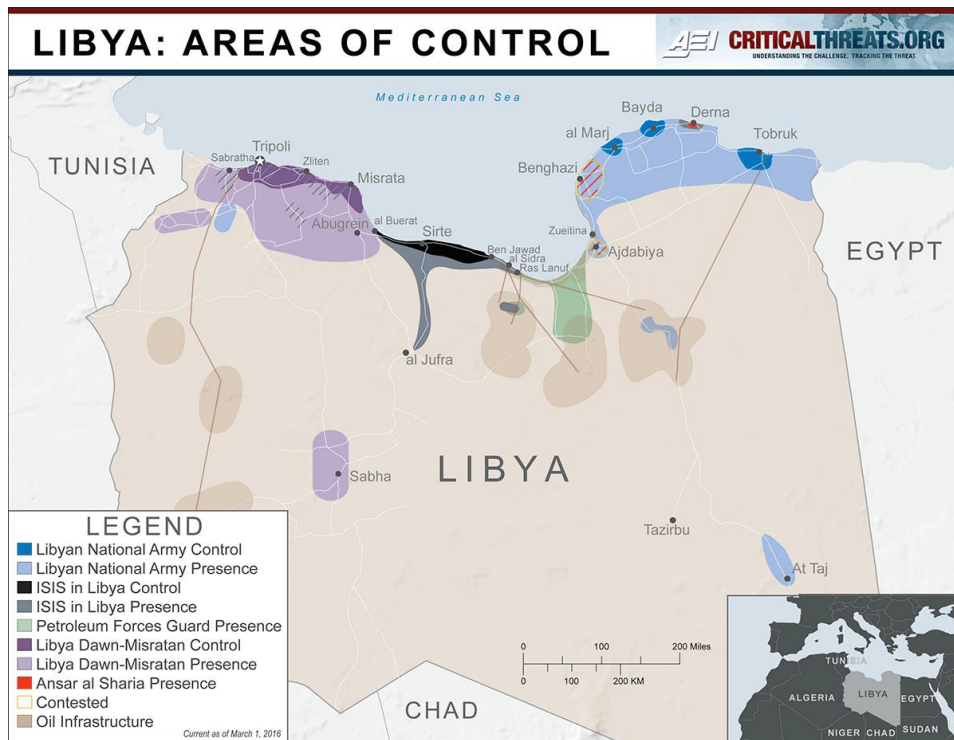
Source:

[\[https://temi.camera.it/leg18/provvedimento/autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019.html\]](https://temi.camera.it/leg18/provvedimento/autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019.html)



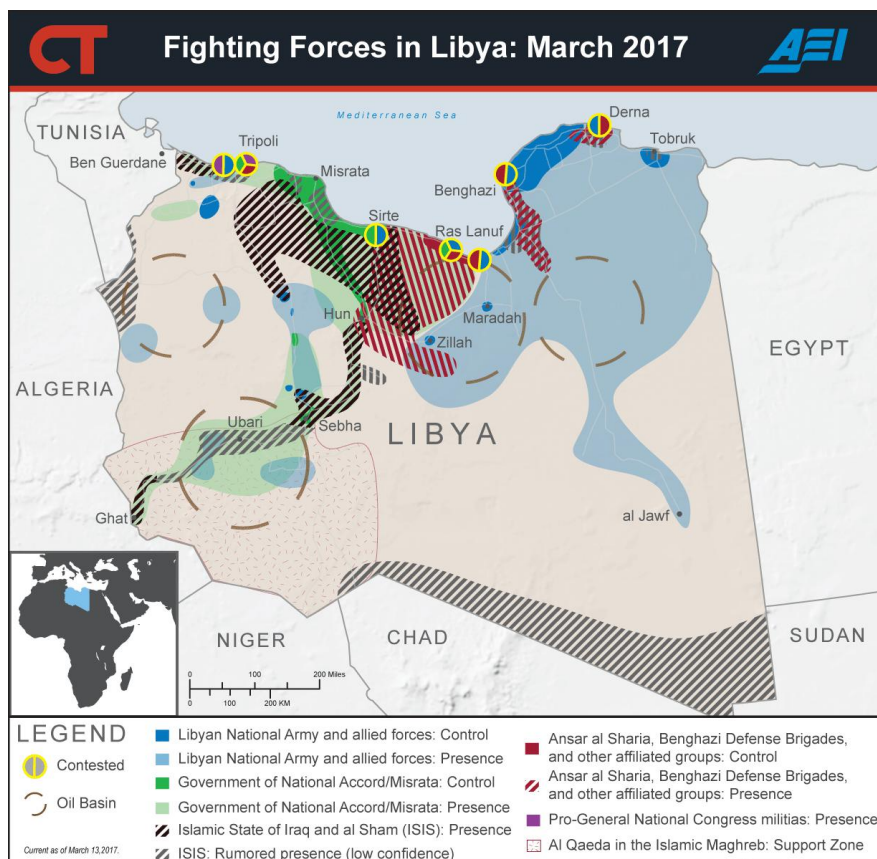
Annex 6: Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan - regional commands division

Source: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm]



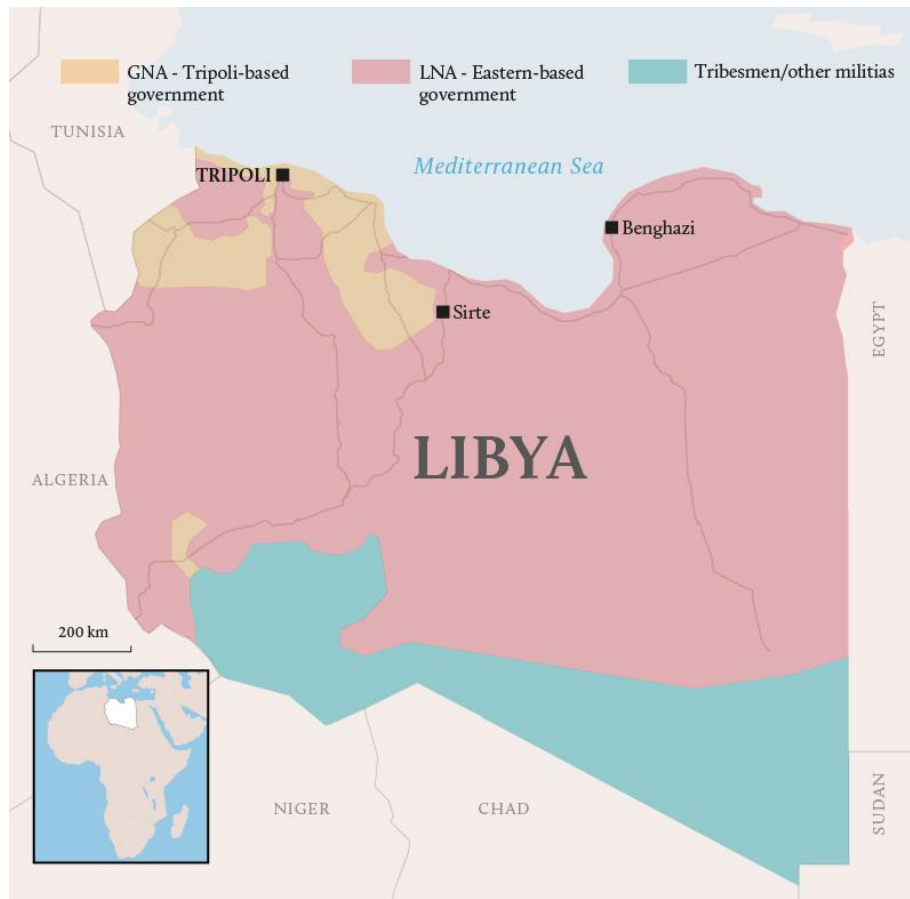
Annex 7: Areas of control in Libya (2016)

Source: [<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/backgrounder-fighting-forces-in-libya>]



Annex 8: Fighting forces in Libya (March 2017)

Source: [<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/fighting-forces-in-libya-march-2017>]



Source: Google Maps, Liveuamap



middleeasteye.net

Annex 9: Libya's territorial division (April 2020)

Source: [<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/khalifa-haftar-declares-himself-ruler-libya-mandate-people>]

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Summary

The research intends to conduct a compared analysis of the Russian and Italian political, strategic and economic policies with regards to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The first part has a theoretical purpose, i.e. a compared analysis of the principles leading the Russian and the Italian foreign policy strategies in the MENA region. The second part, on the other hand, has a more practical goal, that is why it focuses on the concrete case-study of the Libyan crisis.

The MENA region has been selected for its multifaceted character, determining the complexity of its social and political dynamics and their repercussions on the neighbouring regions. Those are, *inter alia*, the reasons why the MENA region is a central topic for the Italian foreign policy agenda. In the meantime, they also explain why the MENA region has gained more importance for the Russian Federation in recent years. In particular, since Moscow's intervention in the Syrian conflict (2015), which represents Russia's iconic take back in the region.

The Libyan crisis, furthermore, has been chosen as a case study for this thesis, as it seemed to the author that it represented in a comprehensive way the practical application of the fundamental foreign policy theoretical drivers for both Russia and Italy. Besides, due to its recent vibrant dynamics, Libya represents one of the core topics of the international agenda and seemed a proper context for applying a global look over the broader Mediterranean region. Last but not least, analysing an open conflict turned out to be an extremely interesting - and demanding at the same time - task for a Master's student enrolled in an international relations Double Degree programme.

Considered the nature of the degree, which goes together with the author's academic interests, the analysis intended to respond to one main research question, i.e. whether - in consideration of all the circumstances and factors - is there any space for cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Italian

Republic within the Libyan theatre; or whether the two will never be able to share any view and should rather take further steps apart.

To respond to this main research question, the author started from the theory of multilateralism²⁴⁶, in consideration of the fact that the traditional and non-traditional security threats²⁴⁷ impacting the Middle East and North Africa region are of such a character that no actor is at present able to handle them by their own. With regards to the three main assumptions of the theory of classical multilateralism, i.e. indivisibility, the existence of generalised principles of conduct and a diffuse reciprocity, they all appear as a good fit in describing the Libyan conflict. Indeed, as long as the first one is concerned, in a highly interconnected world, an issue for a single state can potentially become an issue for many. This is particularly true in a fragile context such as the Middle East and North Africa region. The second principle, though quite debatable, finds application while looking at the conduct of the major stake holders in the Libyan crisis. Indeed it is difficult to outline some general principles of conduct that would avoid the application of double standards approach, while respecting the peculiar nature of any different case. This is a task for the Libyans as well as for the major regional and international stake holders. Last assumption concerns the behaviour and expectations of the actors of the international system. Due to the principle of reciprocity, the actors usually expect to benefit from coordinated action in response to a combination of issues. Furthermore, this concerted action is expected to pay off on the long run.

Despite it fits good for the afore-mentioned reasons, the theory of multilateralism is not completely exhaustive in explaining the deep complex dynamics characterising the Libyan conflict, with its continuous social, political and economic evolutions. Yet, it results appropriate in bringing about

²⁴⁶ Caporaso, James A., *International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations*, the MIT Press, International Organisation, vol 46, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 599-632. [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2706990.pdf>].

²⁴⁷ To mention the most relevant ones to our case: terrorism, management of the migratory process, trade in conventional and non-conventional weapons, the geo-economic implications of the hydrocarbons market, as well as the long-term impact of desertification and other phenomena related to climate change.

the main analysis of this thesis. Together with these theoretical principles, the author decided to take into account a perspective of a national, regional and global nature in separated stages, in order to have the most possible complete overlook on the Libyan scenario. As mentioned, the action of both Russia and Italy has been analysed in virtue of their strategic, political and economic interests, with particular regards to the perspective those stakes entail (short-term, mid-term or long-term).

In order to put Moscow's and Rome's policies vis-à-vis Libya in a proper context, the research analyses the Russian and Italian foreign policy strategies in a theoretical way in chapter I and chapter II. In chapter III the author focuses on the main milestones characterising the development of the Libyan crisis, as well as on the efforts undertaken by the international community to tackle the crisis. The fourth chapter is aimed at responding the research question through an attentive comparison between Russian and Italian interests in Libya.

More specifically, chapter I is divided into four parts, the very first one provides an outlook on the main theoretical principles guiding Moscow's foreign policy on legal, political and strategic point of view. The main source employed is the 2016 Foreign Policy Strategy Concept of the Russian Federation²⁴⁸, which clarifies the pragmatic nature of Moscow's action in foreign policy. The most important legal principles outlined in this session are the respect for the principle of territorial integrity and respect for the sovereignty of a third state. Of equal importance is the principle *pacta sunt servanda* with reference to international law and the commitment taken with other states. In this chapter, the author analyses the Russian view with regards to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine and the controversies between Russia and the West concerning its application.

R2P is, among others, a fundamental instrument in the analysis of the Libyan crisis, as its third pillar (disciplining the applicability of the principle)

²⁴⁸ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin on November 30, 2016. [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248].

profoundly divides Russia and the West. In fact it lays at the basis of the confrontation over the Ukrainian dossier, to mention one. Furthermore, from the analysis of the Russian sources emerged how Russia wants the world order to be of a multipolar kind, so that the ideas advocated from the emerging actors (notably the BRICS group, of which Russia is a part) will find equal consideration. In this first part, it is also important to underline how the Middle East and North Africa region is not considered as a priority by Moscow, whose greatest concern remains the post-Soviet space, together with Europe and Eastern Asia. The chapter also explains how Moscow took the distance from the West in a progressive way, in response to several NATO enlargements that actually violated Russia's security red lines in Eastern Europe, as the organisation admitted among its members some former Soviet Republics.

The progressive development of Russia's current foreign policy strategy in general and in the MENA region, went hand in hand with Putin's presidential mandates and is articulated through four phases, in a growing climax of assertiveness and distancing from the West. Especially during the latest phase, i.e. following the 2014 events in Ukraine, the Russian Federation started pursuing a pragmatic and detached foreign policy in the MENA region. This attitude allowed the Kremlin to build a web of cautious economic partnerships with countries that are actually rival with each other in the MENA regional context. It is, for instance, the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or the former one and Israel, not to mention Russia's peculiar relations with Turkey. In doing this, the Kremlin has shown a remarkable ability to dialogate with different actors at the same time arriving to a point where the status quo and the stability within the region represent an important element for Moscow. This, also, in consideration of the geographical proximity of some of those countries with the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These areas are Russia's primary concern and present consistent Muslim communities living there. The influence MENA social and political unrest could entail on the post-Soviet space and the troubles constituted by those regions for Moscow security in the past pushed Russia in pursuing a role of

off-shore balancer for the MENA region. In fact, this kind of attitude allows the Kremlin to keep an open door with several players in the area, without getting stuck in any long-term or ideological partnership (as it was the case for the Soviet times). Those ideas were the driver of Moscow's intervention in the Syrian conflict, following a call for help from Bashar al-Assad, together with Russia's will to fight the Islamic extremists and the IS jihaddist. Overall, Syria was a success for Russia, that benefited from the naval facility of Tartus for getting direct access on the Mediterranean Sea and managed to avoid Russian casualties in the conflict. Nevertheless, should it escalate in the dimension of a proxy war between Iran and Saudi-Arabia, Russia would lose its position of inter-mediator. In addition, a new wave of destabilisation in the fertile crescent could entail severe consequences on the South Caucasus and Central Asia, striking Russia's area of primary concern.

What emerges clear from chapter I is that Russia does not consider the MENA region as a priority, despite the considerable geopolitical advantage offered by the possibility to directly access the Mediterranean Sea. The emergence of a hegemon in the MENA region would not be convenient for Moscow, since this would mean being in the condition of having to take parts for the Kremlin. Russia sees the Middle East and North Africa region as the ideal place to advocate its multilateral world order model, thanks to its abilities of skilled mediator and its role in counter-terrorism. Russia's main priorities in the area concern the economic domain, with special regards to the hydrocarbon market, through the action of the OPEC+ platform (with its benefits and controversies). Other fields of essential interest for Russia in the region are the weapon market, where the MENA countries represent a valid alternative to Russia's best customers (India and China), allowing Moscow to differentiate its sells. The MENA region is also an opportunity for Russia to invest in the field of agriculture and facilities building, with particular regards for the railways sector.

Chapter II is divided into four parts as well, the first one enumerating the fundamental drivers of Italy's foreign policy strategy, a second one observing

the evolution of Rome's policies in the broader Mediterranean under the Second Republic, a third one focusing on the Italian participation in military missions abroad and the last one investigating whether the challenges coming from the MENA region are of a national, regional or global character. The main source employed for analysing the Italian foreign policy strategy is the 2015 *Libro bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*²⁴⁹.

From this chapter some clear trends emerge, first and foremost Rome's tendency to operate on a double diplomatic track, taking into account both the multilateral and the bilateral context in its international relations. The Italian Republic has a strong political and strategic tie with both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Another fundamental element for Italy is the preponderance of internal issues over international affairs, possibly due in part to the constant shift in the national leadership as well as on the relevance of the public opinion for the Italian executive. This, in particular, seems to lead to a consistent gap between its expectations and the assets the public opinion is ready to put in place in facing the challenges Italy encounters. Rome's foreign policy strategy is largely based on the economic interests, most notably trade and energy diplomacy, led by the commitment to the principles of liberal economy market.

Italy is generally defined a *late comer* of the international relations world. This is due to the fact that it is quite rare that Rome makes any great move outside of its multilateral system safe-zone. Nevertheless, the XXI century could be divided into two moments concerning Italy's foreign policy: the first one characterised by a preponderance of the multilateral track of diplomacy over the bilateral one. It was the period of the eruption of the Balkan wars, entailing issues with migration for Italy. Furthermore, the world was extremely concerned with terrorism at the moment, following the 9/11 attacks on Twin Towers in New York and the eruption of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the meanwhile, the European project was shaped with the establishment of new

²⁴⁹ Ministero della Difesa, *Libro Bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*, July 2015.

institutions and the enlargement to new members in Eastern Europe. This phase for the EU culminated with the Lisbon Treaty of 2006.

In 2008 the global economic and financial crisis strikes the European Union solidarity and acts as a sprinkle in starting the crisis of the Euro-zone. This means for Italy a re-direction of the executive concern on the internal politics issues, which has grown in relation to the austerity measures agreed on in the EU platform. In the meanwhile, non-traditional security challenges, e.g. international terrorism, illegal migration flows, cyber-security and environmental concerns emerged on the global scenario and got a growing relevance. Indeed, with globalisation, those threats that seemed to be located extremely far from the Italian shores became closer. This happens in a moment when the European solidarity is facing a crisis and after its *annus horribilis* in 2011, Italy seems to veer to the bilateral track of diplomatic action, relying more on itself. In 2015 the *White Book for International Security and Defence* is published by the Italian Ministry of Defence, witnessing a wish to look further into the future in both the diplomatic and defence fields.

The White Book underlines how the Mediterranean area is fundamental for the Italian security, seen the political unrest that spread around the region after the 2011 Arab Uprisings and due to the rise of terrorism. Seen the fundamental role of the MENA stability in granting the Italian security, both multilateral and bilateral tracks of action should be taken into consideration by policy-makers. A special mention is deserved by NATO in the multilateral field, that plays a fundamental role in granting Italian security. On the bilateral level, it is important to mention the Italian company ENI and its leading role in advocating Italian economic interests into the broader Mediterranean, with particular regards to Rome's energy partners. Furthermore, over the last five years, Italy seems to have acquired a more active role in the broader Mediterranean aimed at tackling the issues that cause the de-stabilisation of the MENA region. In particular, Italy expanded its action in the neighbouring Sahel and the African Horn, with the goal to contrast the negative spill-over effect deriving from crisis contexts.

Italy's main commercial partners in the MENA region are also its main gas and oil suppliers, it is the case, for instance of Egypt and Algeria. Turkey, with its hegemonic aspirations towards the region and its controverted dialogue with the EU, constitutes a relevant and sensitive partner for Rome as well.

In general, the period corresponding to the Second Republic has seen a soar in Italy's diplomatic activity, with particular regards to the second decade of the XXI Century. In the multilateral context, Italy has grown in prestige through its participation in military missions abroad, both under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) and of NATO.

It is fundamental to point out that the military missions abroad are an instrument not a goal of the Italian foreign policy strategy. It is also fair to recognise that those missions have often been a source of internal disagreement within the Italian leadership, due to the fact that they have never entailed any economic advantage for the country. Italy's participation in military missions abroad follows three main drivers, i.e. strengthening Rome's role in the multilateral framework it is a part of, participating to a coordinated response to hybrid security threats and fostering Italy's legitimacy in the case of the mission has successful results. Not to mention the opportunity to foster the operational capabilities of both the single soldiers and the Italian armed forces in general.

The Italian Republic follows the provisions of the international community in participating in the military missions abroad, that are aimed at several goals. In 2019 the total of forces deployed was comprehensive of 6290 soldiers, over three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa, with the MENA region being the area hosting the greatest number of Italian soldiers. Something Italy has been distinguishing itself for over years is the ability from Italian armed forces to train local forces in foreign countries, with particular regards to Carabinieri.

Three main successes deserve mention, while speaking of Italy in military missions abroad: the UN mission UNIFIL in Lebanon, the NATO-led KFOR in Kosovo and the the NATO-led ISAF in Afghanistan.

With regards to UNIFIL, Italy assumes a relevant role in this mission in 2006, when the refugee crisis started constituting a concrete threat for Europe. The main success of the Italian contingent is represented by the capacity to establish a dialogue within the local civil population, that allowed a better condition for them.

The KFOR mission in Kosovo is under the command of Italy with General Michele Risi since 2013; in this case as well, Italy plays a fundamental role in maintaining alive the bridge with the local population, through the action of Carabinieri of MSU Regiment.

Finally, with regards to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, Italy has assumed the control of the Regional Western Command, comprehensive of four provinces around Herat. Italy also maintains its commitments in the capitol city of Kabul. The main goal of the mission is the implementation of a good governance system. The Italian model employed in military missions abroad by Italy, consisting in mixing law enforcement and military techniques with a particular attention to the needs of the locals, has deserved the praise of former UN Secretary General Koffi Annan.

In the last part of the chapter the author tried to evaluate whether the MENA region should be considered a national, regional or global challenge for the Italian Republic and if regional under which framework (European, Mediterranean). The complexity of the challenges coming from the MENA region makes it impossible for one state only to respond efficiently to them, in coherence with the first pillar of the theory of multilateralism (i.e. indivisibility). This excludes a national approach. At the same time a global kind of approach can be excluded as well, due to the constantly growing degree of fragmentation that concerns the MENA region and that makes a global kind of response to the threats emerging from the area not accurate enough, therefore ineffective.

This said, the regional framework appears as the one to be privileged, not excluding the action at a national and global level and through the international organisations. Action that needs coordination among states and stakeholders to

be effective. The regional framework to gamble on for Italy should probably be the European Union, as the Mediterranean framework is much more fragmented and entails different levels of development among southern Europe, Maghreb and Mashrek; furthermore it does not present any kind of institutional framework, unlike Europe.

Chapter III analyses the key milestones of the Libyan conflict. It has been going through several phases, from the 2011 uprisings against Gadhafi's regime, through the 2012-2015 civil war, to the escalation into a highly fragmented conflict, entailing the participation of foreign stakeholders (both on the regional and global level). The borders among the phases depicted above are not clearly marked, as the Libyan conflict is complex, multi-dimensional and still in evolution today.

What emerges clearly for the author is that Libya has profound issues with legitimisation, which makes both the political and military solutions for the conflict extremely difficult to be delineated and implemented. Indeed, the main social characteristic of the country is a profound and fierce tribal fragmentation, a rivalry exacerbated by the uneven distribution of the revenues coming from the fossil fuel market (which is the main source of income in Libya) through the years. Due to the presence of militias and their role within the conflict, the Libyan theatre has become a highly militarised context. This is due also to the foreign supply of weapons, as international stakeholders of the conflict keep violating the UN-promoted arms embargo and cease-fires. Six months after the Berlin conference, i.e. the last attempt from international stakeholders to manage the conflict at the negotiation table, the match is still open, with renewed escalation between the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Sarraj and officially backed by the United Nations, Qatar, Italy and Turkey and the Libyan National Army (GNA), led by Field Marshall Haftar and officially backed by France, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and the Russian Federation.

What lacks in the Libyan crisis-management approach seems to be an attention to the needs of the locals, who do not seem to trust neither Haftar nor

Sarraj very much. This is why, the former UN Special Envoy for Libya, Ghassam Salamé, already in 2017, proposed a Libyan national conference, to pacify first and foremost the national context through a comprehensive local solution. The event was scheduled for April 2019, yet it never took place, as Haftar launched his Western offensive ten days prior to the scheduled date for the conference, turning the Libyan tables.

A further game-changing element came in December, when the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed a Memorandum of Understanding with al-Sarraj. From that moment on, Turkey started playing a more active role in the Libyan conflict, supporting the GNA with weapons and soldiers. At present much has changed on the field and very few has changed in principle, since the Libyan conflict is undergoing a new phase of escalation, with a more assertive role of the regional stakeholders, such as Turkey and Egypt.

The United Nations have tried to manage the conflict since the eruption of the earliest uprisings in 2011, through a number of resolutions and through the renewal of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) mandate and the establishment of the Libyan Political Agreement in 2015. The UN aims at supporting Libya in its transition towards a democratic, independent and united future, through reconciliation of the parties and the promulgation of a new constitution. The main obstacle encountered from the United Nations at a local level lays in the fact that Libya is not a national state, as the tribal rupture among the different groups of the population hinders the building of a unitary Libya.

On the regional and global point of view the participation of a high number of foreign players, all holding their specific stakes, represents a consistent obstacle for a concerted action towards Libya. This is particularly evident with the UN Security Council, where disagreement about Libya does not allow the Member States to produce legally binding documents, regulating the situation in the country. The role of the Permanent Five and their use of veto power on controverted issues constitutes an obstacle as well, as it entails the de facto inaction of the UN body.

The main regional and European stakeholders of the Libyan crisis have tried to tackle the issue through the organisation of a number of international summits, gathering actors involved at different levels. The aim of those summits is the mediation of the conflict; yet the general top-bottom approach implemented so far is not sufficient in responding to local needs. Furthermore, those summits often see separate talks among the different parties or the exclusion of some stakeholders, therefore the measures put in place turned out to be ineffective.

The European Union also has a role in the Libyan crisis with its high stakes in seeing the stabilisation of the Maghreb and the Sahel regions and also in regulating the migration flows from Northern Africa. The main obstacles to a concerted action of the Union are represented by the diverging national interests of its Member States. A further issue lays in the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty concerning the boarder between the EU foreign policy implementation and the national authority of its member states.

Chapter IV describes the interests of the Russian Federation and the Italian Republic in the Libyan crisis. In the last part of the chapter, Moscow's and Rome stakes are compared to answer the main research question, which is looked at from a broader point of view in the conclusions.

The author followed a precise scheme in depicting Russia's and Italy's priorities in Libya, i.e. a compared analysis of the strategic, economic and political field; verifying their future projection on the short, medium or long term. This helps to delineate a clearer and more transparent structure of the work, as well as delivering the most possible accurate compared analysis of interests and priorities, coherent with what stated in Chapter I and Chapter II about Russia's and Italy's foreign policy strategies in the MENA region.

As far as the Russian Federation is concerned, its priorities on the strategic and political field concern the settlement of the conflict, through a all-comprehensive national agreement for Libya. This would help, on the long-term to foster the stability in the area, confirming Moscow's ability of leading MENA negotiator and perhaps would foster Russia's model for conflict

settlement and for interpretation of its vision over the R2P principle before the eyes of the international community. This said, Russia does not regard Libya as a priority issue, that is why its most important stakes in this conflict are of an economic nature. Indeed, Moscow would benefit from the restoration of Libya's economic tissue through the implementation of holdings and investing in the fields of agriculture and infrastructure building.

The Italian Republic has profound national interests in the economic field, as Libya used to be its main gas supplier before Gadhafi's fall. At present, ENI still has numerous facilities in Libya and remains among the few foreign companies trusted by the locals. Italy as well would benefit enormously from the restoration of Libya's legal economy, mostly in terms of hydrocarbons supply, thanks to regular production and sell of fossil fuel products - and pipelines building. On the strategic point of view, the settlement of the Libyan conflict would mean contributing to the stabilisation of the Maghreb and the surrounding area, entailing potential benefit on the management of the migration flows across the Central Mediterranean route. Looking at the political point of view, a prominent role for Italy in tackling the Libyan crisis would mean strengthening Rome's role in the Mediterranean, as well as within the multilateral regional frameworks Italy is a part of and is extremely committed to, i.e. NATO and the European Union.

To respond to our research question, the Italian Republic and the Russian Federation are potentially stronger together in the Libyan context, as they could both benefit from a more stable and economically stronger Libya. Indeed, both of them have been keeping an open dialogue with all the parts in Libya. Despite at a first glance it could be said that they back opposite factions (respectively Italy Sarraj and Russia Haftar), both Rome and Moscow believe in the need to settle a comprehensive national agreement, following a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to crisis management. This is not surprising, considering the friendly bilateral relations between the two on the one hand and considering the fact both were entertaining decent relations with Gadhafi's Libya before 2011.

What profoundly divides the Italian Republic and the Russian Federation, though, is Italy being part of NATO, an alliance that has been created at the scope of contrasting the Soviet Union firstly and of acting as a shield from the Russian Federation lately. It is true that NATO's role has evolved over the years and the Atlantic Alliance has now broadened its scope; yet there are elements that are still profoundly anti-Russian.

Another consistent difference in between Russia's and Italy approach lays in the order of their foreign policy agenda. Indeed, if for Rome the MENA region and Libya are among the highest priorities, for Moscow they come after Russia's relations with the post-Soviet space, Europe and Eastern Asia.

Furthermore, Italy seems to have stepped aside in the shadow lately with regards to the Libyan conflict, due to the urgency of ensuring the national security and the safety of its citizens in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. Once more, the internal issues, have overstepped the foreign policy agenda, even though the pandemic did not strike Italy alone, the point lays in the fact that Rome has been having an inward-looking attitude for the past three months, while the other stakeholders in Libya have not stopped. In particular, the Italian role as supporter of the Government of National Accord has been obscured by Turkey's renewed assertiveness on the Libyan chess-board. The fact that Turkey is seeking for a stronger role in the MENA region (with potential hegemonic aspiration) is not fresh news. Nevertheless, their growing involvement in Libya could be damaging for Italy's national interest and for Rome potential mediation tandem with Russia. Indeed, Putin and Erdogan gained concerted experience in conflict mediation in a hostile, complex and fragmented environment through the negotiations at the Syrian table.

For those reasons, the author believes that Italy could play a key role in the broader Mediterranean as a prominent player within the European Union context. This is particularly true in consideration of the future of the MENA region, which experts describe as likely to remain uncertain and characterised by social unrest. This translates in the existence of the current challenges for the European Union member states and for the MENA states (such as

competition for natural resources, different levels of development in different regions and disaggregation). As the theory of multilateralism suggests, it is difficult for single states to respond efficiently to a threat that can potentially concern them all.

To conclude, in a broader perspective of analysis, the Russian Federation is likely to maintain its role of off-shore mediator of the MENA region, following the pragmatic approach that has characterised it over the last twenty years. The Italian Republic, on the other hand, will perhaps be facing the trade-off between high stakes and low involvement in the broader Mediterranean region. This said, a closer and more united European Union - showed as a more likely future scenario on the long run, seen the approach it used in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic over the past few months - would represent an occasion to better handle the MENA issues. Furthermore, Rome can play the role of the bridge between the EU and the Russian Federation, in consideration of the friendly relations Italy and Russia have enjoyed for long time. For this to be possible, the European Union should opt for a more unitary, closer and more independent version of itself, letting aside its internal fragmentation, due to divergent national interests.