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Abstract

This thesis examines the European Union's response to the Libyan crisis as a critical test of the post-Lisbon Common Foreign and Security Policy framework (CFSP), revealing how the Union's persistent credibility challenges stem primarily from internal structural and political dynamics rather than external constraints. Despite the EU's ambition to assert itself as a unified and credible geopolitical actor, the CFSP's intergovernmental architecture, marked by unanimity-based decision-making, voluntary participation, and limited supranational authority, has systematically constrained the Union's capacity to act coherently and decisively. These institutional limitations have been exacerbated by strategic competition among key member states, notably the Franco-Italian rivalry, which has persisted due to the permissiveness of intergovernmentalism, resulting in unilateral initiatives that circumvented EU frameworks and weakened collective European action.

By mobilizing insights from new intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and constructivism, this study demonstrates that institutional design, domestic politicization, and the absence of a shared strategic culture jointly shape the EU's capacity to act as a credible foreign policy actor. The Libyan case illustrates how structural permissiveness within the CFSP not only enables divergence among member states but also institutionalizes incoherence in EU crisis management. Empirically, the analysis reveals a systematic pattern of fragmentation in the EU's engagement in Libya, where informal groupings and selective member state initiatives have become normalized, ultimately limiting the EU's ability to project a unified and credible international identity.

The findings underscore that the EU's credibility deficit in Libya, and beyond, cannot be dissociated from the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP. By privileging national sovereignty over enforceable coherence and failing to mitigate the effects of politicization and strategic divergence, the CFSP framework has not only limited the EU's operational effectiveness but also weakened its normative authority. This thesis concludes that the Union's aspiration to become a credible geopolitical actor hinge on its ability to discipline internal divergence, cultivate a shared strategic culture, and reform the governance structures that currently undermine its capacity to act decisively in crises.

Introduction

In less than a decade, the international scene has undergone profound transformation across economic, political, and social dimensions. The post-Cold War world is no longer assured due to a current reset of global powers, marked by shifting alliances, growing instability, economic pressure and multipolar competition. This momentum is destabilizing the liberal international order and causing Western powers, along with their models and values, to lose their preeminence amid the rise of numerous powers such as China, Turkey, Russia, India or the Arabic peninsula. In parallel, the traditional Atlanticism, advocating a close alliance between North Americans and Europeans on political, economic, and security matters, seems to be vanishing (Bergmann, 2025). As observed by the French President E. Macron, describing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as experiencing “brain death” (BBC News, 2019), the traditional defense alliance between Europeans and the United States (US) is eroding.

2025 is emerging as a milestone in this ongoing reconfiguration of the world order, notably with the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the US. The latter, running a second mandate, launched a global tariff war directly affecting the European Union (EU) and its members, conditioned US compliance with NATO's mutual defense commitment (Forbes, 2025), and leads a return to unilateralism. Amid major global tensions, from instability in the Middle East to the return of war on European soil, the EU has appeared increasingly ill-prepared to act autonomously and decisively in the absence of genuine American support.

Recent developments exposed the urgency of achieving greater strategic autonomy while simultaneously revealing a growing erosion of the Union's geopolitical credibility. The increasing anti-western sentiment parallelly to the rise of Russian and Chinese influence or the growth of populist, sovereignist movements in Europe and globally, intrinsically opposed to the promoted European model, contradicts Europe's claim of being a normative power. The “Brussels effect” (Bradford, 2019)¹ appears to be insufficient. Despite being a unique political entity uniting twenty-seven states, the world's largest trading bloc in combined goods and services, the largest global provider of foreign aid, and an ambitious normative international

¹ The Brussel effect refers to the unilateral ability of the EU to influence global market regulations. The Union can shape international standards and business environment leading to a Europeanization of global trade without cooperation with third countries nor passing through international organizations.

power, the EU nevertheless appears to be increasingly struggling to assert itself convincingly on the global stage (Momtaz, 2025): US withdrawal of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the renewal of sanctions or the unilateral 2025 U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear sites without consultation of Europeans, marginalized the EU and nullified its important previous diplomatic work. The Iranian Foreign Ministry even described the Europeans as American proxies “doing what Trump dictated to them” and as negotiating partners devoid of credibility (The Guardian, 2025).

Similarly, the war in Ukraine has been ongoing for nearly four years, during which Europeans have found themselves increasingly sidelined and ineffective (European Parliament, 2025). Persistent internal divisions, recently over the prospect of funding Ukraine through Russian frozen assets or limited post-conflict deployment as a security guarantee, have left the EU largely paralyzed, while the few negotiations underway have taken place primarily between the Trump administration and Russia (The Washington Post, 2025). Furthermore, the US president publicly humiliated on multiple occasion its traditional allies, framing Europe as an impotent actor (Mason & Cooke, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025), underscoring the gradual discrediting of the EU’s international standing, even among historical partners, in the midst of a war on European ground.

Yet, this geopolitical incapacity goes beyond external pressures or EU’s dependence on the US. Instead, it stems from deeper and more entrenched structural roots. Indeed, for several decades Europe has been developing a dedicated framework and instruments to establish a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a process that was further institutionalized with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. This framework was designed to present the EU as a united and credible actor on the international stage, capable of acting coherently, projecting reliability and authority, and, where necessary, exercising deterrent influence in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. The former High Representative for the Union, Joseph Borrell, even stated in 2023 that “since the war in Ukraine, Europe has become a geopolitical power” (European External Action Service, 2023). However, as previously discussed, this assertion remains subject to debate. The fundamental parameter of the Union’s geopolitical credibility is the cohesion of its member states as the EU’s capacity to act decisively depends primarily on their willingness to coordinate through Union institutions (Genini, 2025). Experience over the past decades demonstrates that such cohesion is sporadic at best. A recent example is the attempted EU sanctions on Israel: although the High Representative Kaja Kallas

presented concrete measures, key member states such as Germany and Hungary opposed them, preventing the EU from implementing actions, like suspending free trade, that requires unanimity under EU law (Euronews, 2025). Once again, European actors were largely excluded from meaningful diplomatic engagement on this conflict. This episode illustrates that decision-making process and internal divisions, rather than external constraints, often constitute the decisive limit on the Union's geopolitical actorness and thus credibility, both on internal and external scales (Beake, 2025).

Another great example of member state division hindering EU action and the EU's geopolitical credibility erosion is the Libyan crisis. This declining credibility has been recently illustrated when the EU delegation visit to eastern Libya in 2025, including representatives from Italy, Greece, and Malta, which aimed to renew cooperation with Libyan authorities and manage migrant departures. The visit was cancelled at the last moment by eastern authorities which even declared persona non grata a part of the delegation, including EU Migration Commissioner Magnus Brunner, highlighting Europe's diminished standing and capacity to act effectively in its southern neighborhood (European Times, 2025; Politico, 2025; MidiaGovLibyan, 2025). Ongoing for more than a decade, the conflict has persisted despite EU engagement from its outset, and Libya's inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), highlighting its strategic significance for the Union. Since 2011, several member states have been in persistent disagreement on a multitude of issues, being diplomatic engagement or strategic priorities. These divisions were apparent since the beginning of the conflict, when Germany opposed military intervention, drawing widespread criticism, particularly for undermining the development of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) (Osw, 2011). Hence, this declining geopolitical influence cannot be understood without examining the EU's internal foreign policy structure and dynamics.

The object of this study will thus be the post-Lisbon functioning of the European CFSP and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and its geopolitical consequences. Concretely, it will focus on the intergovernmental nature of the Lisbon CFSP/CSDP framework and try to analyze its efficiency and its repercussions on EU geopolitical weight, with a particular focus on EU action in the Libyan crisis. The purpose of this thesis is to assess the limitations the CFSP framework structure by examining how its functional design and practical outcomes affect the capacity of the European Union and its member states to act consistently and credibly on the international stage. In other words, this study will try to understand to what extent does the legal

structure of the Lisbon Treaty's CFSP framework undermines the European Union's ability to act as credible actor on the international scene, as illustrated by the member state strategic competition during the Libyan crisis.

This research is situated at the junction of debates on European integration and EU external action by linking the institutional design of the CFSP to concrete foreign policy outcomes, thereby bridging legal-institutional analysis with empirical crisis studies. More specifically, it seeks to illuminate how institutional design, political coordination, and normative coherence interact to shape the European Union's geopolitical credibility (Missiroli, 2001). Rather than approaching credibility as an abstract concept, the analysis considers it as an outcome conditioned by decision-making structures, intergovernmental dynamics, and the consistency between stated objectives and practical engagement. In this sense, the study also speaks to broader political and societal concerns, as the EU's ability to respond effectively to crisis, notably in its immediate neighborhood, at a time of growing instability, migration pressures, and geopolitical competition, has direct implications for regional stability and for the Union's longer-term ambitions of strategic autonomy and affirm itself as a credible security and diplomatic actor (De Zan, Tessari & Venturi, 2016).

Theoretical Framework and Research Hypothesis

Although the Common Foreign and Security Policy falls within the realm of “high politics” and has consequently been deliberately preserved as an intergovernmental domain under Member State control, its functioning and limitations cannot be adequately understood without reference to European integration theory. More specifically, integration theories allow this thesis to move beyond event-driven or state-centric explanations of EU behavior and to situate the Libyan case within broader structural and political dynamics shaping the Union’s external action. The CFSP’s intergovernmental nature, the prevalence of unanimity, and the limited role of supranational actors are not contingent anomalies, but outcomes of deliberate integration choices made by member states over time.

By mobilizing contemporary integration frameworks, this study is able to capture how institutional design, domestic politicization, and identity-based constraints jointly condition member-state behavior, thereby explaining both the persistence of cooperation and its recurrent failures. In this sense, European integration theories provide a necessary theoretical bridge between legal and institutional analysis and the empirical observation of political fragmentation, member state unilateralism, and the resulting erosion of EU credibility in external action, notably in Libya.

While historically, European integration theory has mainly opposed neofunctionalist (Haas E. B., 1958) and intergovernmentalist (Hoffmann S., 1966) approaches, it now seems quite evident that neither framework alone is in capacity to adequately explain the post-Maastricht and, particularly, post-Lisbon European dynamics. Classical intergovernmentalism effectively accounts for why states may halt cooperation when national interests diverge, notably in the realm of “high politics”, framing integration as the outcome of rational bargaining among sovereign governments that often leads to deadlock in the face of conflicting preferences (Moravcsik, 1998; Hoffmann, 1966). However, it struggles to explain why member states continue to cooperate despite deep divisions, as seen in the Eurozone and migration crises, where institutional path dependencies, domestic politicization, and supranational pressures have compelled sustained collaboration rather than fragmentation (Kleine & Pollack, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Similarly, neofunctionalism, with its emphasis on spillover, where integration in one sector creates functional pressures for further advancement, has usefully

explained the institutional evolution following the 1957 Treaty of Rome (Haas, 1958). Yet it appears increasingly outdated in today's context of resurgent sovereignty claims, rising nationalism, and Euroscepticism, which disrupt the assumed automatic deepening of integration (Kaplan, 2017; Wellings, 2023). These forces, exemplified by Brexit and the growth of Eurosceptic movements, reveal the limits of spillover logic and highlight the enduring power of national identities and politicized resistance (Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Godowska, 2012).

Hence, this thesis draws on three contemporary frameworks, namely postfunctionalism, new intergovernmentalism, and constructivism, to analyze the current dynamics of European integration in the CFSP field. The aim is not to contrast them, but to combine their insights to offer a multi-level explanation and thereby to identify how structural, political, and normative constraints contribute to the Union's persistent lack of credibility as a foreign and security actor.

Given that credibility constitutes the central dependent concept of this study, it is necessary to clarify how it is understood and operationalized within the analytical framework. Rather than treating credibility as a vague or self-evident attribute of international actorness, this thesis conceptualizes it as a theoretically grounded and empirically assessable variable. Defining credibility at this stage allows for a systematic linkage between European integration theories and the mechanisms through which institutional design, politicization, and normative coherence condition the EU's capacity to act as a reliable and influential foreign and security actor.

As former US Senator John McCain points out, "credibility is a nation's greatest asset in international affairs. It is the hardest to earn and the most difficult to maintain, but once possessed it makes it possible to compel changes in behavior" (McCain, 2002). Credibility thus constitutes a crucial factor that serves as a lever, enabling states to transform their power into influence, thereby allowing them to achieve their objectives and promote their interests at a lower political and strategic cost (Cohen & Bremmer, 2023).

Credibility refers to the perceived reliability and predictability of an actor, reflecting the extent to which its actions align with its stated goals, principles, and commitments, thereby enhancing its capacity to influence others and outcomes through deterrence or assurance (Schelling, 1966). For the European Union, the 2016 Global Strategy for EU Foreign and Security Policy emphasize that credibility "hinges on our unity, on our many achievements, our enduring power of attraction, the effectiveness and consistency of our policies, and adherence to our values"

(EEAS, 2016). Therefore, it encompasses internal cohesion, policy coherence, demonstrated capabilities, adherence to norms and values, and a reputation for delivering on promises.

In other words, credibility is central in geopolitics, as it determines the extent to which an international actor can influence others and the future path of the world order by being perceived as trustworthy, respected, and/or feared. It is widely acknowledged as essential for converting integration and normative ambition into effective external action (De Zan, Tessari & Venturi, 2016). Hence, when coherence, continuity, and consistency are lacking, credibility suffers, which in turn undermines the EU's ability to act effectively on the global stage (Missiroli, 2001). In the current geopolitical context, marked by increasing global instability, assertive diplomacy by competing powers, and growing challenges to the Union's normative model, the EU's credibility is consequently particularly relevant.

Rather than adopting a single, unified theory of credibility, this study develops an analytical framework that synthesizes insights from multiple scholars to assess the EU's external action under the CFSP. Building on this conceptualization, credibility is treated as a multidimensional and relational variable, operationalized through four interrelated criteria. First, credibility is examined through consistency and adherence to commitments, understood as the degree of alignment between stated objectives, legal mandates, political discourse, and concrete policy implementation. This criterion is notably adapted to capture the intergovernmental decision-making structure of the CFSP and the gaps that may emerge between declared goals and actual implementation

Second, credibility is assessed through effectiveness and capabilities, referring to the extent to which CFSP instruments generate tangible, sustained, and expected outcomes. This reflects the performance of EU diplomatic initiatives, CSDP missions, and other foreign policy tools.

Third, credibility is examined through a reputation for resolve, understood as the perception by other actors that the EU is determined to sustain engagement, bear political and strategic costs, and adapt its policies in response to challenges rather than retreating or repeating ineffective approaches (Yarhi-Milo, 2024).

Finally, credibility is assessed through normative influence or power of attraction, understood as the EU's ability to preserve moral authority and legitimacy by maintaining coherence

between its proclaimed values, such as human rights, rule of law, and multilateralism, and its actual practices on the ground.

Together, these criteria provide the analytical lenses through which the relevance of European integration theories for assessing EU external action can be systematically examined.

Table 1 – Credibility Assessment Criteria

Criteria of Credibility	Definition	Key Indicators
1. Consistency & Commitment Adherence	Alignment between declared objectives, legal mandates, political discourse, and actual policy implementation.	Gap between rhetoric and practice; coherence of decisions; continuity of positions; implementation of agreed mandates.
2. Effectiveness & Capabilities	Capacity of CFSP instruments to produce tangible, sustained, and intended outcomes.	Achievement of mission objectives; adequacy of resources; measurable impact on conflict dynamics.
3. Reputation for Resolve	Perception that the EU is willing to sustain engagement, bear costs, and adapt rather than retreat.	Response to crises; willingness to absorb political costs; adaptability to failure; capacity to maintain long-term engagement.
4. Normative Influence / Power of Attraction	Ability to maintain moral authority and legitimacy through coherence between proclaimed values and actual behavior.	Respect for human rights and rule of law in practice; consistency with multilateral commitments; legitimacy in the eyes of partners.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, new intergovernmentalism has identified a form of “integration without supranationalization,” (Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016) whereby member states prefer consensus-based coordination within the European Council or ad hoc organizations rather than transferring authority to supranational bodies such as the Commission or the EEAS (Bickerton, Hodson & Puetter, 2015). This pattern is particularly evident in post-Lisbon EU politics, where the European Council has assumed a central leadership role in defining strategic priorities for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), while preserving intergovernmental control and limiting supranational involvement in this sovereignty-sensitive domain.

Postfunctionalism complements this perspective by demonstrating how domestic politicization and national identity increasingly constrain governments’ capacity and willingness to deepen integration in sovereignty-sensitive domains such as foreign policy. Hooghe and Marks (2009)

conceptualize this shift as a transition from a “permissive consensus” to a “constraining dissensus,” where domestic contestation, Euroscepticism, and identity politics outweigh functional pressures for cooperation, leading to fragmented or stalled EU external action, even in a post-Lisbon era marked by institutional innovations.

Constructivism, meanwhile, explains the EU’s persistent weaknesses in external action through the absence of a shared strategic culture and common foreign policy identity among member states. Rather than attributing limitations to institutional or material constraints, constructivist scholars argue that the CFSP’s shortcomings stem from diverging national norms, historical experiences, and differing conceptions of Europe’s global role (Christiansen, Jørgensen & Wiener, 1999; Tonra 2011). As Manners (2002) suggests, while the EU aspires to act as a “normative power”, i.e. shaping international norms through influence, this ambition remains fragmented by competing national identities and moral visions of external action, undermining normatively cohesive policy output in the post-Lisbon framework.

By situating the CFSP within the lenses of new intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and constructivism, and basing the assessment of credibility on the aforementioned definition and criteria, this thesis argues that the European Union’s persistent institutional shortcomings, together with strategic competition among key member states and recurrent normative inconsistency, directly weaken the geopolitical credibility of the Union and therefore its actorness. As it will be discussed, despite the institutional consolidation introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the CFSP remains structurally constrained by post-Lisbon intergovernmentalism, characterized by unanimity-based decision-making, voluntary participation, the limited authority of supranational actors and the absence of genuine European unity and identity. These characteristics fragment EU decision-making and prevent the Union to act as a coherent and effective foreign policy actor, particularly in crisis contexts.

Drawing on new intergovernmentalism, this study conceptualizes CFSP as a domain of “integration without supranationalization” (Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016), in which member states continue to coordinate primarily through intergovernmental forums, based on consensus, rather than empowering EU institutions to act autonomously, as illustrated by the decision-making process of this framework with limited possibility of QMV. While this model has allowed cooperation to persist in sovereignty-sensitive areas, it has enabled national strategies to persist anchoring structural coordination deficits by producing lowest-common-denominator

outcomes, delays in decision-making, and frequent discrepancies between declared objectives and concrete implementation. Consequently, it limited policy coherence while constituting a major constraint on the effectiveness and credibility of EU external action.

Beyond institutional design, the thesis emphasizes the role of strategic competition among member states, which further weakens collective action. In line with postfunctionalism, domestic politicization, national identity considerations, and electoral constraints increasingly shape foreign policy preferences, reducing governments' willingness to compromise at the EU level or to undertake long-term engagement. In this context, member states often prioritize national interests over collective strategies, leading to unilateral or bilateral initiatives that circumvent EU frameworks. Rather than compensating for these divisions, the CFSP's intergovernmental structure often strengthens them, as the absence of binding mechanisms allows divergent national agendas to prevail. The case of Libya is expected to illustrate these dynamics: instead of projecting joint European influence, EU's response to the crisis has been weakened by competing national strategies, most notably between France and Italy (Durand de Sanctis, 2019; Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy [AIES], 2018), as well as by the limited capacity of EU institutions to impose coordination. These dynamics have not only reduced the effectiveness of CFSP instruments but have also contributed to the marginalization of the EU in key diplomatic processes, to the benefit of competing external powers, consequently weakening external perceptions of the EU's resolve, ultimately undermining its credibility.

Finally, the thesis highlights recurrent normative inconsistency as a fourth source of credibility erosion. Drawing on constructivist insights, this inconsistency can be understood as a consequence of the absence of a shared strategic culture and a coherent foreign policy identity among Member States. Constructivism emphasizes that foreign policy behavior is shaped not only by formal institutions but also by socially constructed norms, historical experiences, and competing visions of Europe's role in the world (Christiansen, Jørgensen & Wiener, 1999; Tonra, 2011). Hence, these divergences among member states result in inconsistent interpretations of EU values and role, producing fragmented approaches in policy implementation. This gap between proclaimed principles and actions on the ground weakens the EU's moral authority and legitimacy, thereby eroding its credibility in the eyes of local actors and international partners.

In the case of Libya, the EU publicly framed its actions as supporting democracy, human rights, and multilateral principles. Yet, in practice, it prioritized short-term stability, migration control, and security cooperation with unreliable actors, often deviating from its normative discourse. This gap between principles and practice, highlights how differing national norms and identities undermine the EU's capacity to act consistently, weakening its legitimacy and reliability in the eyes of local actors and international partners.

This study acknowledges that external constraints, notably international power competition dynamics or the highly fragmented and instable Libyan political landscape, have significantly shaped the context in which the EU has acted in Libya and will be addressed throughout the empirical analysis. However, the primary analytical focus remains on internal CFSP dynamics as the main explanatory lens for understanding the structural limitations that have conditioned EU's effectiveness and credibility.

Together, these theories provide a solid, multi-level analytical framework that allows this study to assess how institutional constraints (new intergovernmentalism), domestic politicization of European policy (postfunctionalism), and the lack of a shared strategic culture (constructivism) interact in the specific case of Libya to erode the EU's geopolitical credibility within the post-Lisbon CFSP framework. Building on this theoretical background, this paper advances the hypothesis that the CFSP's failure in Libya is not primarily due to external constraints, but results from the interplay of post-Lisbon intergovernmental structures, strategic rivalry among member states, and persistent normative inconsistencies. By highlighting these dynamics, the study situates the erosion of EU credibility within broader debates on integration and external actorness

Research Design, Methodology and Sources

Given the objective of examining the interaction between institutional, political, and normative factors, this study adopts a qualitative, case-study approach focused on the EU's CFSP implementation in the context of the Libyan crisis.

The analytical timeframe extends from starting in 2011 with the outbreak of the crisis until 2021 a critical stage in the EU's engagement in Libya. By this time, all key CFSP instruments, including Operation IRINI as well as earlier civilian and military missions, had been fully deployed, enabling a comprehensive assessment of their effectiveness and their impact on EU actorness and credibility. 2021 also marked the culmination of multilateral European-led diplomacy in Libya through the Berlin and Paris conferences, which sought to coordinate member states and international partners to stabilize the country and advance the UN-backed transition. At the same time, the scheduled December 2021 Libyan elections indefinite postponement underscored the limitations of both EU intervention and multilateral diplomatic efforts, providing a meaningful empirical endpoint for the study. Although political negotiations and international engagement have continued after 2021, and that the EU adopted its Strategic Compass for security and defense in 2022, Libya has been unable to reach a new stable political agreement. Moreover, the EU has not deployed any additional significant CFSP tool on the ground since then. Repeated delays in constitutional reform, ongoing fragmentation between rival institutions and security actors, and the absence of a consolidated national governance framework mean that post-2021 developments represent a continuation of structural instability rather than a distinct new phase of the Libyan crisis. This reinforces the analytical relevance of the 2011–2021 timeframe, as it encompasses the initial deployment and testing of EU CFSP instruments and the concentrated period of European diplomatic engagement without conflating it with later protracted political deadlock.

The analysis centers on the decision-making processes, the deployment of CFSP and CSDP instruments, and the political and normative discourse surrounding EU action, in order to understand how the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP, persistent normative gaps, and competition among member states shaped the EU's credibility and effectiveness. By combining the legal and institutional framework of the CFSP, contemporary European integration theories,

and empirical evidence from the Libyan case, the study evaluates the explanatory power of the theoretical framework and its capacity to account for observed outcomes.

The study relies primarily on primary legal sources, including the Lisbon Treaty and related CFSP provisions, as well as scholarly literature addressing EU external action and the Libyan case, to examine institutional constraints and the impact of national competition. In addition, reports and analyses produced by EU institutions, and policy observatories, together with media coverage, are used to assess the political and normative discourse of EU actors, as well as internal and external perceptions of the Union's performance and credibility.

This methodological approach provides a solid basis to examine how CFSP institutional design, member-state competition, and normative tensions have shaped the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor in the Libyan crisis.

To address the research question and situate the analysis within a coherent analytical framework, the first chapter sets the contextual foundations of study by covering the literature and the institutional framework. It examines the legal and institutional architecture of the Lisbon-set CFSP, combining treaty analysis with a critical review of the relevant academic literature on EU external action, highlighting the persistence of intergovernmentalism and its implications for European foreign policy. It subsequently justifies the selection of Libya as a critical case for assessing European actorness and credibility, before concluding with the research design, methodology, and sources supporting the empirical analysis.

Building on these foundations, the second chapter provides a chronological and empirical analysis of the European Union's response to the Libyan crisis through the CFSP framework. It examines the deployment of EU instruments, using the Libyan conflict as an empirical test to assess their effectiveness, normative consistency, and impact on the European Union's capacity to project itself as a credible geopolitical actor.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on the member state strategic divergences and their repercussions at EU level as a critical illustration of member state competition dynamics within the CFSP framework. By analyzing unilateral initiatives, institutional bypassing, and competing diplomatic strategies, this chapter seeks to understand the structural limitations of the CFSP

explaining the existence of national rivalry undermining collective European action and contributing to the erosion of the EU's credibility as a foreign policy actor.

Chapter I – Institutional Foundations of the Post-Lisbon CFSP: the Structural Roots of the EU's Limited Credibility

1. European Union External Action Instruments: The Lisbon CFSP Framework or the Perpetuation of Intergovernmentalism

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007 and entering into force on 1 December 2009, marks a milestone in the history of European integration. Building on these pre-existing frameworks, the Lisbon Treaty represented a decisive step in strengthening the EU's external action. By amending the two foundational treaties of the Union, the Treaty of Rome (1957, also known as Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, TFEU since 2007) and the Treaty of Maastricht (1992, said Treaty on European Union, TEU since 2007), it brought changes signing a significant step towards supranationalism. One of its most important contributions is the removal of the pillar structure, previously introduced by the Maastricht Treaty, which led to the granting of the legal personality to the EU (Article 47, TEU). It implies that the Union is a fully-fledged political and economic entity with its own identity and will, holder of rights and duties, and, particularly relevant for our study, with the authority to sign international agreements on its own behalf, hence strengthening significantly EU's negotiating role and power.

Furthermore, by abolishing the pillar structure, the Lisbon Treaty institutionalized the CFSP, representing a significant transformation in the Union's approach to foreign and security affairs. To appreciate its impact, it is necessary to recall the roles of the CFSP and the CSDP. The CFSP, established under the Maastricht Treaty, seeks to preserve peace, prevent conflicts, and enhance international security in line with the Union's values and interests (Article 21(2) TEU), while its legal framework (Articles 21–46 TEU) defines the Union's foreign policy objectives, decision-making procedures, and instruments. The CSDP, framed under Articles 42–46 TEU, constitutes the operational arm of the Union's external action, providing the structures necessary for the EU to conduct civilian and military missions in support of the political goals set within the CFSP (Article 42(1) TEU) and ultimately aiming to “lead to a common defense” (Article 42(2) TEU). Hence, by constitutionalizing the CFSP, the EU further constitutionalized its willingness to “act globally as the beacon of democracy” (Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023), committing its external policy to respect and promote its founding values.

The Treaty brought substantial institutional transformations to fulfill this aim. Indeed, it created the Foreign Affairs Council, part of the Council of the European Union, which brings together foreign affairs ministers of all member states and is responsible for the external action of the Union. It is presided by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (also called High Representative or HR), which results from the merging of the former High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Commissioner for External Relations. He is the equivalent of a foreign affairs minister but for the Union, by also being one of the five vice-presidents of the European Commission, by having the mandate to represent the EU on the global stage on CFSP matters (Article 27 TEU) and ensuring the implementation of foreign policy decisions (Article 18 of the TEU).

To support its work, the Lisbon Treaty provided the Union with its own diplomatic body: the European External Actions Service (EEAS), introduced in 2010, which is the common bureaucratic machine on which the HR rely (Article 27.3 TEU). It is composed of officials from the European Commission, the Council and the member states. Hence it ensures “horizontal coherence” (between EU institutions) and “vertical coherence” (between the EU and the member states). The HR plays a central role in European external policy by ensuring its consistency, by seeking consensus among member states and proposing restrictive measures towards third parties to the Council.

Yet, the capability-expectation gap (C. Hill, 1993) often limits the EU’s ability to consistently translate these principles into effective action on the international stage. Since the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union’s CFSP and CSDP have repeatedly struggled to deliver dynamic and effective external action (Smith, 2020). The forward integration dynamic launched by the Lisbon Treaty has been particularly limited regarding what it is commonly named “high politics”, i.e. domains that are traditionally the competence of states such as foreign policy. Indeed, despite the many transformations the treaty brought, a key element has not been changed: the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP/CSDP.

Intergovernmentalism refers to cooperation between fully sovereign states, where national governments retain ultimate authority. In contrast, supranationalism involves the transfer of certain powers to a higher entity, which has authority on the member states and can make binding decisions in specific policy areas (Zaharia & Pozneacova, 2020). Hence, the

intergovernmental or supranational character of an entity is understood through the way the latter and its member states interact to take decisions and on the nature of the decisions it is empowered to adopt. While supranationalism has been introduced in diverse fields, notably in external policy such as the Common Commercial Policy (trade), the CFSP and CSDP where not included in this process of deepening integration. Indeed, EU external action is mainly driven by its intergovernmental bodies: the European Council and the Council of the EU.

On the one hand, the European Council, the collegial body composed of heads of state (Article 15 TEU), defines the EU's strategic interests and objectives (Article 22 TEU) sets general guidelines, political directions, priorities (Article 26 TEU) that the Commission (including HR) will have to follow, and takes decisions unanimously (Article 42 TEU). Moreover, while the High Representative is mandated to represent the EU on foreign policy matters, the President of the European Council also performs a representational role in this field (Article 15(6) TEU), resulting in a multi-layered external representation system hence detrimental to the coherence and effectiveness of EU diplomacy and external action (Hoffmeister, 2017).

On the other hand, The Council, composed of national ministers in various configurations including the Foreign Affairs Council (Article 16 TEU), also plays a key role by implementing the CFSP through the adoption of decisions and positions based on European Council guidelines through unanimity (Article 26 TEU), adopting sanctions and ensuring coherence among member states (Articles 28, 29, 33 TEU). Thus, the European foreign policy relies on the unanimity of the European Council and of the Council, i.e. unanimity of the member states. Furthermore, the adoption of legal acts is excluded in this field (Article 25 TEU).

While CSDP missions are adopted on the same basis of CFSP, they are implemented by the Political and Security Committee (PSC) (Article 38 TEU). The latter is composed of member state ambassadors and presided by the EEAS. By monitoring international security developments, preparing Council decisions, and ensuring coherent implementation of CFSP and CSDP actions, it plays a key role of political control and strategic direction for EU external action. Hence, the CFSP and CSDP of the EU still are intergovernmental. Moreover, if a member state abstains during a Council vote but the decision is adopted, it is not required to implement it. It just should not take any actions "likely to conflict with or impede Union action" (Article 31 TEU). Thus, the effectiveness of the CFSP continues to hinge on the willingness of

member states to cooperate and align their foreign policy objectives, but unfortunately, so far, there is a clear lack of unity among them. (Filipec, 2017, Smith, 2020).

It must be said that the TEU provides for exceptions allowing the use of qualified majority voting (QMV). It applies when the Council adopts actions based on European Council strategic guidelines, when the HR proposes a measure requested by the European Council, when implementing previously agreed CFSP positions, and when appointing Special Representatives. However, a member state may block the vote by invoking vital national interests, prompting the High Representative to seek a compromise. Failing this, the matter is referred to the European Council for unanimous decision. The European Council may unanimously extend QMV to other CFSP areas, but never to decisions with military or defense implications. Furthermore, participation in CFSP and CSDP operations are voluntary based (Articles 41 and 42 TEU) as no binding act can be adopted. Thus, member states retain full control over their military and financial contributions.

The Treaty also introduced Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Article 42(6) TEU and Protocol No. 10) which entered in force in 2017. It is an intergovernmental framework, directed by the Council, allowing groups of member states to deepen military cooperation through joint capability projects and operational commitments. Although PESCO contributes to strengthening the EU's crisis-response capacity through increased interoperability and pooled capabilities, it is driven by member state, and their participation continues to rest on a voluntary basis. Several scholars argue that the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP and CSDP, combined with voluntary participation and the limited use of qualified majority voting, generates persistent coordination gaps (Fabbrini, 2014; Amadio Viceré & Veneri, 2023, Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). In this context, PESCO has been conceptualized as a form of differentiated integration, understood as the coexistence of varying levels of participation and commitment among Member States, which allows flexibility in response to national strategic heterogeneity (Houdé & Wessel, 2022). However, this differentiated structure has tended to reinforce fragmentation, as it relies on political commitments rather than binding obligations, sustains consensus-based decision-making, and limits coherence, interoperability and collective capability development.

Building on these limitations, it is argued that the EU's inability to overcome member state divisions results in internal forms of differentiated integration within the CFSP, further

undermining EU capacities (M.G. Amadio Vicerè, 2022). High disagreement among member states, coupled with limited EU capacity has fostered the emergence of competing informal centers of decision-making. Even in cases where EU capacity is relatively high, it may still be insufficient to establish the Union as the central forum for coordinating member states' foreign policy, despite the institutional tools introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. These informal groupings constitute another form of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy, further reinforcing fragmentation rather than unity (M.G. Amadio Vicerè, 2022) and thereby exacerbating the incoherence of the EU's external action. These dynamics have been demonstrated empirically, notably through the analysis of the EU's response to the Libyan conflict, highlighting that the incoherence of the latter resulted from the shortcomings of post-Lisbon institutional reform, which failed to compensate for the fragmentation of Member States (Koenig, 2011).

Due to the intergovernmental nature of the framework, the supranational bodies of the EU have been mainly marginalized. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has no jurisdiction in this field (Article 24 TEU). It has the competence to review procedural and competency compliance but cannot review the substance of CFSP measures (Article 40 TEU and Article 275 TFEU). While its consent is mandatory to sign Association Agreements, the European Parliament is excluded from the decision-making process in CFSP (Articles 227 TEU and 218 TFEU) and satisfies democratic accountability only through its budgetary control (Article 14(1) TEU), by expressing non-binding opinions and being regularly informed and consulted by the HR on the main developments (Article 36 TEU).

Finally, the European Commission has also a limited role in this field. As the institution responsible for promoting the general interest of the Union (Article 17 TEU), its main role is to ensure coherence with other areas of EU external actions (Article 21 TEU) notably through the structural link created by granting the role of Vice-President of the Commission to the High Representative. Although it does not hold the right of initiative in CFSP, it can submit proposals jointly with the High Representative when foreign policy intersects with other external competences (Article 22 TEU). The Commission is also responsible for administering the civilian aspects of the CFSP budget, while, as previously said, defense-related expenditure remains outside the EU budget (Article 41(2) TEU).

Thus, this choice to sideline EU supranational institutions from the CFSP framework highlights the willingness of member states to maintain their control on "high politics", refusing to further

integrate external action at a European scale (European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], 2023). Despite the elevated legal status of the EU (for instance its legal personality) or the removal of the pillar structure, thereby implicitly strengthening the external policy frameworks, including CFSP, the Lisbon Treaty did not tackle nor the prevalence of unanimity in decision-making nor the restricted CJEU jurisdiction on the latter, hence maintaining the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy (Wessel, 2016). This nature has been widely blamed in the academic literature, particularly in relation to the Libyan conflict, arguing that by perpetuating member states' control over CFSP, EU internal divisions undermined EU action in Libya, especially between France and Italy, demonstrating how bilateral rivalries exacerbate institutional weaknesses (Akamo, Bedin, and Cristiani, 2023). S. Fabbrini (2014) further developed these statements by identifying four enduring structural dilemmas: insufficient military resources, diverging national preferences, ineffective decision-making, and weak democratic accountability, notably exposed during the 2011 Libyan intervention.

Furthermore, not only has the treaty been criticized for its ineffectiveness, but the EU has also been decried for its “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999). While publicly defending standards such as human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, values that are formally embedded in the CFSP and that the EU is mandated to promote and protect externally, using them to legitimize its actions, the applications and their consequences have frequently contradicted these principles. In particular, the prioritization of stability, security and border management has led the EU to support authoritarian regimes or to overlook human rights violations (Youngs, 2002; Del Sarto, 2015).

In addition to the legal and institutional foundations of the CFSP, credibility has gained increasing attention in both international relations (IR) and EU studies as a concept that captures how external actors perceive and respond to an actor's foreign policy commitments and behavior. In IR scholarship, credibility is often discussed alongside reputation and resolve, with scholars arguing that reputational assessments shape how states or organizations are expected to act in future interactions. Recent work in this area highlights that past actions influence observers' beliefs about an actor's potential future behavior, and that reputation for resolve can significantly affect international outcomes (Yarhi-Milo, 2024; Jervis, Yarhi-Milo & Casler, 2021). Recent reviews of the literature show a renewed scholarly interest in reputation and credibility, while noting conceptual challenges such as the tendency to focus narrowly on

reputation for resolve and the limited integration of psychological, contextual, or dispositional factors (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo & Casler, 2021).

Within EU studies, scholarship on credibility is less widespread but intersects with debates on actorness, normative power, and the capability-expectations gap. Previously mentioned Christopher Hill's capability-expectations gap framework remains influential in highlighting how the EU's ambitious external policy goals often exceed its institutional capacity to implement them, thereby undermining credibility (Hill, 1993). Similarly, discussions of the EU as a normative power emphasize the challenges of aligning the Union's values-based rhetoric with external practice, especially when member states pursue divergent interests (Manners, 2002; Reinfeld, 2024; Peng, 2025). Since credibility is partly constituted by perceptions of normative coherence and behavioral consistency, this literature underscores both the potential and the limits of the EU's influence as a values-driven actor (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021).

The benefits of using credibility as an analytical lens include its ability to capture both material and ideational dimensions of external action, linking institutional capacities, policy choices, and external perceptions, thereby offering a more comprehensive assessment of the EU's foreign policy performance than focusing on capabilities alone. However, scholars also caution that credibility is a relational and multidimensional concept that is difficult to operationalize consistently across contexts, and that its measurement often relies on indirect indicators such as perceptions, signaling behavior, or reputational assessments. This has led to debates about conceptual clarity and empirical tractability (Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo, 2015).

By situating credibility within both IR and EU scholarship, this study adopts a framework that synthesizes insights from these strands of research, drawing on reputation and resolve literature in IR and on debates about the EU's actorness and normative influence to develop criteria suited to the analysis of the CFSP in crisis contexts such as Libya.

Building on the legal framework and the literature, three interconnected faultlines emerge in EU external action: institutional limits rooted in post-Lisbon intergovernmentalism, strategic competition among key member states, and recurrent normative inconsistency in the Union's behavior. While these studies provide valuable explanations for the EU's limited actorness, what remains under-explored, and becomes the focus of this thesis, is how these institutional, political, and normative gaps interact in concrete crises such as Libya to produce not only

operational paralysis or failure but also a deeper erosion of credibility. By focusing on these interactions, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how the CFSP's institutional design and member state behavior collectively affect the EU's perceived reliability, coherence, and influence, thereby filling a gap in both the literature on EU foreign policy and the broader scholarship on credibility.

2. The Libyan Crisis: A Critical Case for European Actorness and Credibility

The Libyan conflict provides a particularly relevant example of the European Union's external action in real-world conditions. This relevance stems not only from its chronological fit with the Lisbon Treaty, entered into force in 2009 shortly before the outbreak of the crisis in 2011, but also due to its simultaneous illustrating capacity of several structural and political dynamics that shape and influence EU foreign policy (Fabbrini, 2014; Koenig, 2011).

As a conflict unfolding in the EU's immediate neighborhood and involving a multiplicity of regional and international actors, Libya reflects the growing complexity of contemporary geopolitics and the challenges facing the Union in asserting a coherent collective response, particularly in a context of crisis and competition.

While under the Qaddafi regime Libya was a destination country for migrants, since 2011, Libya has emerged as a major hub for migration flows transit towards the European shores (Kuschminder, 2020). This dynamic increased exponentially, reaching its peak during the 2015-2016 migration crisis, with 300,000 people attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017; Girault, 2023). Consequently, migration has been portrayed as a threat and has become a theme central in political debates at both domestic and European levels. This development has exacerbated the internal politicization of foreign policy, directly affecting their willingness to coordinate at the EU level and reinforcing the constraints identified by postfunctionalist and intergovernmentalist perspectives (Lovato, Walter-Drop, Noutcheva, & Dijkstra, 2021). These dynamics make Libya a particularly valuable empirical case for examining the securitization of the EU's CFSP approach, which, prior to the 2016 EU Global Strategy, was largely characterized by a normative and civilian-focused engagement emphasizing democracy promotion, human rights, and development assistance. Since then, the CFSP has increasingly prioritized security, stability, and crisis response, and this securitized approach has been mirrored in the Southern

Neighborhood dimension of the ENP (EEAS, 2016; Tocci, 2016), illustrating the relevance of the ENP for this study (Henökl, 2017).

Therefore, given its strategic importance, Libya has been subject to the deployment of several CFSP and CSDP instruments, including civilian and military missions such as EUBAM Libya, EUNAVFOR missions, humanitarian and development funds, as well as diplomatic initiatives (Marcuzzi, 2022). This makes Libya an appropriate case for evaluating the effectiveness of a foreign policy framed by the Lisbon Treaty, so of the efficiency of an intergovernmental mechanism in a crisis context. Parallely, the conflict exposes the persistent competition of national foreign policies between key members, most importantly France and Italy, whose divergent strategic interests and unilateral initiatives undermined collective European action (Akamo, Bedin, and Cristiani, 2023).

Furthermore, Libya's inclusion in the EU's Southern Neighborhood dimension, as defined under the broader European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) framework, contributed to framing the country as a space of strategic responsibility for the EU, by including it within a regional area in which EU is expected to bring peace, stability and prosperity and wield its normative power. While the ENP is not included within the legal nor analytical framework of this thesis, this geographical and political categorization is relevant since it shaped both EU ambitions and external expectations regarding European engagement. Indeed, although the ENP does not alter the CFSP's intergovernmental structure or decision-making logic, it primarily contributes to the discursive and strategic framing of EU external action in the neighborhood, hence influencing the environment in which CFSP and CSDP instruments are deployed, justified, and evaluated, thereby acquiring a context-shaping relevance that is central to assessing the capability–expectation gap, essential to the EU's credibility challenge in Libya.

Finally, Libya's transformation into a proxy conflict involving major regional and global stakeholders provides a particularly revealing setting to assess the extent to which the European Union is able to maintain credibility and influence in a highly contested and strategically challenging environment. The growing influence of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and particularly Russia and Turkey, notably through direct military support or mercenary deployment, has, in a sense surprisingly, often amplified the differing national strategies and affected the efficiency of CFSP instruments as well as the Union's diplomatic capacity in the country (Mezran & Miller, 2017).

In such a context of intensified geopolitical competition, the Union's fragmented decision-making, limited coercive capabilities, and internal divisions have reduced its ability to shape outcomes or enforce compliance with its own positions, notably regarding ceasefires, arms embargoes, and political transition frameworks. Libya thus constitutes a critical test case for evaluating whether the EU can operate as a credible geopolitical actor, when confronted with assertive external powers willing to act unilaterally and decisively in its immediate neighborhood. Consequently, the Libyan conflict offers a uniquely valuable lens for examining how institutional constraints, member-state rivalry, and normative tensions interact under the CFSP framework in a practical crisis context, and evaluating whether the EU, through this framework, can operate effectively and uphold its credibility as a geopolitical actor.

Building on the legal grounds and the literature, established in the first chapter, combined with the theoretical, and methodological foundations provided earlier, the following chapter turns to an empirical examination of the European Union's response to the Libyan crisis under the CFSP framework. Providing a chronological overview from 2011 to 2021, it traces the evolution of the EU's engagement from the initial intervention geared towards democratization in 2011 to the subsequent securitization phase in 2015-2016, examining the deployment of CFSP and CSDP instruments, their efficiency, and their normative coherency. By doing so, i.e. assessing the outcomes of these instruments and their consistency with the EU's stated objectives and values, and their impact on EU's resolve, the second chapter evaluates how CFSP implementation in Libya has affected the Union's credibility in a context marked by instability, external competition, and internal constraints.

Chapter II – Strategy and Implementation of the Intergovernmental CFSP: Libya as a Credibility Test

The aim of this chapter is to examine the EU's engagement in Libya as a collective actor: what the Union sought to achieve, the instruments it deployed, and how these efforts confronted the realities on the ground. This perspective allows us to identify the operational, strategic, and contextual limitations that shaped EU action and to assess how these limitations contributed to a credibility gap, affecting the Union's capacity to influence the Libyan conflict effectively. Establishing this EU-level baseline is essential before turning, in Chapter III, to the role of individual member states to explore whether these shortcomings reflect deeper structural and intergovernmental constraints. By first analyzing what the EU did and why it fell short, we can then trace the origins of these failures to persistent national rivalries and intergovernmental dynamics that undermine both EU cohesion and credibility in practice.

1. Setting the Stage: Libyan Context and EU Strategic Interests

1.1- Libya since 2011: Historical and Political Developments

Before delving into the core subject of this paper, it is necessary to outline the historical and political evolution of the Libyan conflict, ongoing since 2011, and the EU's interests at stake, in order to provide a necessary comprehensive contextual framework for analyzing the deployment and effectiveness of EU's CFSP instruments in Libya. The complex and prolonged nature of the Libyan crisis, marked by institutional collapse, armed conflict, and significant external interference, has profoundly shaped the environment in which the EU has sought to act as a security provider, mediator, and normative actor.

Since the military coup of 1969, Libya had been ruled by Muammar Gaddafi, who established an authoritarian political system combining elements of Arab nationalism, socialism, and his self-proclaimed "Third Universal Theory" (Romanet Perroux, 2019; Almuammari, 2021). Formally transformed into the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1977, the regime rejected conventional state institutions in favor of a highly centralized and personalized system of power. Political authority was deliberately fragmented and mediated through informal

networks, revolutionary committees, and security services directly loyal to the leader, resulting in the absence of durable state institutions (Romanet Perroux, 2019). This institutional vacuum, which endured for more than four decades, would later constitute a critical structural constraint on international post-conflict stabilization efforts, including those pursued by the European Union.

On February 15, 2011, in Benghazi in eastern Libya, inspired by the previous revolutions that had erupted several months earlier in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyans took to the streets demanding the fall of Gaddafi's regime (Melcangi, 2021). As the authorities responded with violent repression, firing live ammunition at the crowds, the protests rapidly transformed into direct armed confrontations between civilians and state security forces. Following the seizure of Benghazi by opposition forces, the National Transitional Council (NTC), the first independent Libyan government, was established as a political body claiming to represent the uprising and to serve as the legitimate authority of Libya. The emergence of the latter revealed the aspirations for political transition of the Libyans (Melcangi, 2021).

As violence intensified, the situation escalated into a full-scale civil war opposing forces loyal to Gaddafi to a fragmented coalition of rebel groups composed of civilians, defected military personnel, tribes and local militias. The use of heavy weaponry by the regime and direct attacks against civilians raised international concern, leading to the adoption of the Resolution 1970 (United Nations Security Council, 2011a) and the subsequent Resolution 1973 (United Nations Security Council, 2011b) by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), respectively on February 26 and March 17, 2011. The latter resolution authorized the use of "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, including the establishment of a no-fly zone. It paved the way for the NATO-led military intervention, under the leadership of two EU member states: the United Kingdom (UK) and France, with significant operational support from the US. The intervention was decisive, altering the balance of power on the ground. In August, rebel forces entered Tripoli, and in October 2011 Muammar Gaddafi was captured while fleeing, and killed, marking the formal end of his regime (Melcangi, 2021).

However, the intervention did not establish a viable post-conflict security architecture, leaving Libya in turmoil without any relevant stabilization efforts nor arms control mechanisms to prevent arms proliferation and the establishment of trafficking networks (Clyde, King and Overton, 2025). Furthermore, despite the temporary alliance among diverse militias and tribes

and the establishment of the NTC, the collapse of the regime did not result in political stabilization. Instead, the absence of strong state institutions, the proliferation of armed groups, and deep-seated regional and ideological divisions plunged Libya into a prolonged period of fragmentation and insecurity (Melcangi, 2021). In an attempt to manage the transition, the NTC established the General National Congress (GNC), a legislative authority, to ensure the interim of power. Nevertheless, the GNC proved unable to consolidate power due to the fragmentation of its members and its lack of authority over revolutionary armed forces which refused to disarm and split into subgroups competing for power and territory through the force of arms (Melcangi, 2021).

Libyan first free elections took place in July 2012 bringing the National Forces Alliance party (NFA) to power. Yet, the transitional process was rapidly undermined by the state's inability to monopolize violence, the growing influence of militias, and the expansion of jihadist organizations, as illustrated by the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi (BBC News, 2012). Rising tensions between secular and Islamist political actors further weakened institutions and hindered the prospects for a peaceful democratic transition, and progressively constrained international assistance efforts (Melcangi, 2021).

By 2013, the multiplication of political assassinations, kidnappings, energy supply blockades, clashes among militias and institutional paralysis ultimately resulted in the outbreak of a second civil war (Melcangi, 2021). The following year marked the rise of General Khalifa Haftar, who positioned himself as the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), a coalition of regular military units, tribal forces, and militias that emerged as one of the most structured armed actors in Libya (Melcangi, 2021). On 16 May 2014, the general announced the launch of Operation Dignity, officially aimed at eliminating terrorist groups from Libyan territory, presenting himself as the anti-Islamist bastion in Libya. In practice, however, the operation blurred the distinction between jihadist organizations such as Ansar al-Sharia and Islamist political and armed actors, including those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, even when they formally adhered to the democratic process (Akamo, Bedin, and Cristiani, 2023). This operation significantly intensified political polarization between Islamist and non-Islamist actors, even worsened when the NFA and other secular forces expressed their support for Haftar, while Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political forces strongly opposed him (Melcangi, 2021). Consequently, this deepened polarization further complicated the task for external mediation efforts.

Simultaneously, the Libyan conflict became increasingly internationalized. Haftar and the LNA, by fighting against political Islam, gained substantial military and political support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with backing from Saudi Arabia, while Qatar and Turkey backed Islamist-aligned factions (Melcangi, 2021). These alignments reflected broader regional tensions and turned Libya into an arena where external powers compete to exert their influence. In the same year, parliamentary elections held resulted in a victory for non-Islamist political forces. However, the Islamist block refused to hand-over the power, contesting the legitimacy of the results and rejected the newly elected House of Representative (HoR), (Melcangi, 2021). Armed confrontations erupted in Tripoli leading to the emergence of two rival parliaments: the HoR, which relocated to Tobruk in eastern Libya, and the GNC, supported by Islamist forces, which remained in Tripoli (Melcangi, 2021). This split resulting in two opposing political authorities fragmented diplomatic recognition on the international scene.

In December 2015, following the establishment of institutional dialogue led by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), also known as the Skhirat agreement, was signed (UNSMIL, 2015). It established a Presidential Council tasked with forming a government of unity backed by both parliaments. It resulted with the establishment of the Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by Prime Minister Fayeze Al-Saraj, recognized internationally as the legitimate Libyan authority, including by the UN and its member states (UNSC, resolution N°.2259, 2015; UNSC, resolution N°.2278, 2016). However, although initially accepted by both parliaments, the Tobruk-based HoR soon withdrew its support, perpetuating the existence of two rival administrations (Melcangi, 2021).

In 2016, the LNA, led by Haftar and backed by the Tobruk-based authorities, made significant territorial advances over terrorist groups, consolidating its control, and seized most Libya's key oil facilities in the Oil Crescent region. These gains were achieved largely through the provision of substantial military assistance from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt (Melcangi, 2021). Control over oil infrastructure strengthened significantly the LNA's bargaining position both domestically and externally, allowing Haftar to impact directly Libyan economic resources. Indeed, Libya relies principally on hydrocarbons exports, constituting over 90% of total government income (World Bank, 2023). Through repeated oil blockades and illicit export of petrol, Haftar acquired a powerful political leverage, significant income resources, but also reshaped the calculations of international actors (Polat, 2025; Mezran & Toaldo, 2016).

2019 constituted a milestone year for the Libyan conflict. In April, emboldened by previous successes, General Haftar launched an offensive targeting Tripoli in an attempt to seize the capital and ultimately assert control over the entire country. This offensive further deepened the internationalization of the conflict: As a response, the GNA sought for support and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Turkey enabling the deployment of Turkish military forces and Syrian fighters on the Libyan soil to halt LNA's progress, in exchange for the agreement of the GNA on new maritime demarcation granting Turkey the possibility to drill for energy resources in Cypriot and Greek revendicated Mediterranean areas (United Nations, 2019). Meanwhile, Egypt, UAE and Russia increased their support to the LNA through the sending of Sudanese, Chadians and Russian (Wagner) mercenaries, transforming the Libyan conflict into a full-fledged proxy war (Burke & Salih, 2019; Kimpel, 2024).

The failure of the offensive, principally due to the direct military involvement of Turkey, forced Haftar and its allies to resume diplomatic path, culminating in the 23 October 2020 ceasefire agreement (United Nations, 2020). In February 2021, resulting from a UN-led process, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), the Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed, headed by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, mandated to organize presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2021 (Melcangi). However, its creation did not resolve political tensions and rivalries. The elections were indefinitely postponed and the HoR voted a motion of no-confidence against the GNU (Al Jazeera, 2021). As Dbeibah refused to dissolve his government (Reuters, 2022), on March 2022 the HoR approved a new rival cabinet led by Fathi Bashagha (currently by Osama Hamad), the Government of National Stability (GNS), based in Tobruk following its failed attempt to establish itself in Tripoli. Since then, Libya has remained deeply fragmented with two parallel rival authorities contesting each other's legitimacy, fueling division and violence (Al Jazeera, 2022a; Al Jazeera, 2022b, The Libya Observer, 2022).

The Libyan situation cannot be reduced to a simple binary eastern-western confrontation. Power is also exercised by numerous local militias, armed groups and tribal actors whose alliances are fluid, opportunistic and driven by shifting political, economic, and security interests, rendering the situation all the more chaotic (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018; World Organization Against Torture, 2024). Hence, Libya forms a complex landscape of overlapping authorities, significantly undermining state construction and governance centralization process.

This fragmentation was recently illustrated in May 2025 when clashes erupted within Tripoli between militias theoretically aligned with the same political authority, further exacerbating the instability plaguing the country (UN, 2025; Middle East Monitor, 2025).

More broadly, Libya has increasingly consolidated its role as a prolonged proxy conflict arena, in which external actors continue to exert decisive influence over domestic dynamics through sustained military, political, and economic support to competing factions. Furthermore, no national elections have been held despite multiple attempts, owing to disputes over electoral laws, candidate eligibility or security matters, further deepening political paralysis, undermining governance efficiency and perpetuating cycles of instability and violence. In this context, it is commonly believed that any lasting resolution to the Libyan crisis requires a comprehensive international settlement that addresses both internal divisions and external interference (United Nations Security Council, 2025).

This prolonged fragmentation, characterized by competing centers of authority, the entrenchment of armed non-state actors, and sustained external interference, has profoundly constrained international crisis management efforts. These structural features of the Libyan conflict constitute the operational environment in which the EU has deployed its CFSP instruments. Understanding this context allows this paper to assess both the scope and the limitations of EU engagement in Libya.

1.2- Key Interests of the European Union in Libya

Beyond the persistent chaos that has characterized Libya since 2011, the country remains a land of strategic importance. There is a broad convergence within the Union on why Libya matters for Europe. From its vast energy resources to its role in regional security, member states perceive, at diverse degrees and for diverse reasons, Libya as a critical strategic area for European foreign and security policy. Divergent exposure and interests in the country might result in diverging national positions. But these differences do not negate the existence of an EU position, they reveal the cumulative nature of EU preferences: the Union's overall stance in Libya is a composite of overlapping national interests that converge on certain strategic and normative priorities, ultimately resulting in foreign policy engagement at the European level.

From a geographical perspective, Libya lies at the center of the Southern Mediterranean region, facing European shores. Developments within the country thus have a direct cross-sectoral impact for the EU, particularly in the fields of security, migration, trade and political stability (El-Gomati, 2019). Furthermore, Libya shares borders with six countries, namely Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt, making it a bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and North Africa, the Sahel and sub-Saharan regions on the other. This geographical position has made Libya a central transit point for migration flows from Africa to Europe, mainly reaching Italian and Maltese shores, but also towards Greece and Cyprus, further increasing its strategic importance for the EU and its members regarding migration management (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015).

Parallely, Libya's geographic position together with the prolonged collapse of state authority, has pushed Libya to become the host of jihadist and foreign armed groups acting in the region. Factions of Ansar Al Sharia, Islamic State in Libya, Al-Qaeda affiliates, or Chadian rebel groups have taken advantage of the chaos, operating with relative impunity, establishing shelters, particularly in southern regions, or even taking control of several territories (Eaton and al, 2020). Consequently, Libya's instability has substantial regional repercussions, likely to exacerbate insecurity in neighboring states and throughout the region, particularly the Sahel (Rivlin, 2015). The country represents a source of considerable concern for the EU and its member states, as it could impact on their interests in the region, particularly for France which has been actively engaged in the region. Consequently, the Libyan crisis has become a crucial challenge for the Union in its efforts toward regional stability, counter terrorism, arms trafficking, and migrant smuggling networks.

Another critical aspect of Libya's strategic relevance lies in the energy sector. Indeed, Libya holds Africa's largest proven oil reserves and significant natural gas resources (Hartnett, 2024), making it a potentially key energy supplier for European markets, at a time when Europe is seeking to diversify its supply chains and reduce its energy dependence on other global powers (Paron, 2018; Kassios, 2025). Several European companies have invested in this sector and have a longstanding presence in the country such as the French TotalEnergies or the Italian ENI the latter even being the co-owner, together with the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC), of the Greenstream pipeline, the longest undersea pipeline of the Mediterranean, connecting Libyan gas fields with the Italian gas market, linking Mellitah port on Libya's western coast to Gela in Sicily (TotalEnergies, n.d. ; Greenstream BV, n.d.). Besides hydrocarbons, Libya also

represents significant economic opportunities. Libya's needs notably in reconstruction and infrastructure development could translate into substantial trade partnerships for the Union, creating lucrative opportunities for European companies (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2025).

Beyond economic and security interests, Libya also occupies a normative dimension of EU foreign policy. As part of the EU's Southern Neighborhood dimension of the ENP framework, Libya is included in a geographical area in which Europe has the ambition of fostering stability, security and prosperity, and advancing its normative values, in particular democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and free and fair trade (articles 3.5 and 8 TEU). By positioning Libya within this framework, the EU formally recognized the strategic importance of Libya and underscored its ambition to exert normative influence and establish mutually beneficial relations. By supporting governance reforms, the strengthening of institutions, and promote human rights standards in Libya, the EU not only seeks to advance its own security and economic priorities, but to export its normative model in order to create a neighboring space more integrated at the European level and thus more favorable to the Union and its members.

However, the ambitions of Europe in its neighborhood is challenged: Libya is perceived by many regional powers, including some EU member states, as a key arena in the broader challenge of political Islam rise in the Mediterranean region, notably fostered by Turkey and Qatar in Libya, while combated, notably through support to Haftar, by Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia or France (Ouafa & Sedlab, 2025). Additionally, competition among external actors has increased exponentially since the outbreak of the Libyan crisis, with a wide range of regional players seeking to expand their influence and advance their interests. As a result, Libya has become a theatre of geopolitical competition, further enhancing the strategic relevance of the country for the EU while challenging its capacity to spread its norms in the region, as the latter faces increasing pressure to assert its role and maintain credibility in its neighborhood.

2. From Stabilization to Securitization: The Deployment of EU Strategy and Instruments in Libya

2.1- Early European Response to the Libyan Crisis:

Following the outbreak of the Libyan Arab Spring, the immediate reactions from the EU and its members were cautious (Fabbrini, 2014). On 20 February 2011, few days following the outbreak of the protests, the former EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, made the first official declaration of the Union expressing its concern regarding the repression carried out by Qaddafi's regime and calling Libyan authorities to refrain from the use of arms and violence against civilians (European Union, 2011a). As the call was not listened by the regime, a first divisions within the European institutions arose. Indeed, while Herman Van Rompuy, former President of the European Council, supported regime change, HR Ashton adopted a more cautious stance, avoiding any military support for the insurgents (European Council, 2011).

The European Council took the lead by adopting restrictive measures, freezing the assets of the regime's main economic institutions such as the Central Bank of Libya or the Libyan Investment Authority (Council Implementing Regulation (EU) N°. 233/2011, 2011). It issued a declaration on 11 March 2011 asserting a firmer stance by calling on Qaddafi to "relinquish power immediately" affirming it has lost legitimacy and welcoming the NTC as a "political interlocutor" (European Council, 2011). Yet, the European sanctions have not deterred the Libyan leader. Furthermore, while the UN passed its resolutions 1970 (imposing an arm embargo, visa bans and economic sanctions against the country) and 1973 calling the international community to use "all necessary means" to protect Libyan civilians, the EU proved incapable of implementing the latter due to intra-institutional lack of consensus, the fear to be accused of engaging itself in a "colonial warfare", but also simply to the military unpreparedness, lacking operational means (Marcuzzi, 2022).

A first military intervention was launched on 19 March 2011 under the lead of France, the UK and the US. While the French and British forces conducted most of the strikes, several EU member states, including Italy, Denmark, Belgium, and Spain later joined the operation playing a supportive role (Jeremiah Gertler, 2011). In April, the military intervention passed under a European-led NATO command which turned out to be purely symbolic, with the US providing 80% of refueling, intelligence, and satellite support, highlighting the absence of permanent structured European cooperation and the Union's dependence on American military power (Fabbrini, 2014).

When the rebels reached Tripoli, the EU HR announced European readiness to unfreeze Libyan assets to the benefit of the NTC and Union's officials started to prepare a strategy (Fabbrini, 2014). In parallel, the EU attempted to deploy its own military operation through CSDP instruments. In April 2011, the Council adopted Decision 2011/210/CFSP establishing the EUFOR Libya, aiming to support humanitarian assistance missions. However, its deployment was conditioned to the formal request by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which was never expressed. At the same time, the draft of a common strategy to support post-Qaddafi Libya has been too slow, and new armed skirmishes erupted before the High Representative was able to propose one (Fabbrini, 2014).

Nevertheless, despite its absence and lack of capacity on the military field, the EU has been very active on the civilian, humanitarian and political ones. It must be highlighted that the EU sought to adapt its strategy in reaction to the profound changes reshaping Libya and the region in general. In a post-revolution context, the EU shifted its focus from stabilization to the promotion of democracy, rule of law and socio-economic reforms, the latter being considered essential prerequisites for long-term stability and prosperity by the Union (European Commission & High Representative, 2011). The Arab uprisings were perceived by Europeans as a "democratic momentum" that the EU had to seize, whether for its own interests or its foreign policy and normative discourse consistency (European University Institute, 2013). Hence, following two joint communications of the HR and the Commission, respectively named *A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean* and *A new response to a changing Neighborhood*, the ENP was reviewed putting at the core of its new approach "deep democracy", "sustainable economic and social development" and support to civil society while establishing the "more-for-more" approach, rewarding reforms fostering democracy, rule of law and free trade with greater European support and integration (European Commission & High Representative, 2011; European Parliament, 2011).

In line with this approach, the High Representative opened an EU office in Benghazi in May 2011, establishing a formal EU delegation and political dialogue with the NTC (European Union, 2011b). It pursued its ambition by actively supporting the political and constitutional process resulting in the 2012 and 2014 elections. In cooperation with the UNDP, the EU provided technical and financial assistance for the electoral periods, as part of its broader commitment to democratic institution-building (European Union Election Assessment Team, 2012; European Union Election Expert Mission, 2014). European presence and actions

illustrated EU's serious willingness to accompany political transition in Libya and to assert itself as a normative power.

Moreover, the EU engaged significant economic and humanitarian resources. After six months of civil war, it had become the largest humanitarian donor, contributing over €150 million in humanitarian assistance (€80 million directly funded by the Commission), through the activation of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation (ECHO) (European Commission, 2011). Following Qaddafi's regime fall, the Union progressively mobilized financial instruments to support Libya's transition and promote socio-economic stabilization, governance reform and conflict prevention, in line with the revised ENP framework. Under the 2014–2020 European Neighborhood Instrument, Libya received €98 million, while the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace allocated €82 million over the same period (European External Action Service, 2022a).

Furthermore, even though still of civilian character, a first CSDP mission was deployed in Libya in May 2013: the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM), based in Tripoli (Council Decision 2013/233/CFSP). It was established to support the Libyan authorities in developing border security and management through a capacity-building mandate, in line with the EU's Integrated Border Management (IBM) concept². Its objective was to foster security at both land and sea frontiers by strengthening institutional capacities. It further reflected the Union's willingness to support the development of a proper new administration (Amadio Viceré, 2022).

EUBAM Libya, however, rapidly encountered significant operational and contextual constraints. Its broad mandate, combined with limited resources and an evolving security environment, complicated its implementation (Marcuzzi, 2022). The mission was deployed in a context characterized by fragmented authority, weak institutional structures, and the absence of a unified security apparatus, which posed challenges to cooperation with Libyan counterparts and to the application of the Integrated Border Management model (Christensen et al., 2018). Moreover, the expectations of Libyan actors, expecting immediate security provision, did not

² Integrated Border Management (IBM) refers to a coordinated and multi-level approach to border governance in which all relevant authorities work together to facilitate the legitimate movement of people and goods while ensuring an adequate level of security. It is structured around three core pillars: intra-service cooperation within individual administrations, inter-agency cooperation among different national authorities involved in border management, and international cooperation with foreign authorities and international organizations. (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2024; EUBAM Libya, n.d)

always align with the EU's emphasis on governance reform and capacity-building (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023).

The timing of the mission further constrained its effectiveness. Launched nearly two years after the fall of Qaddafi, EUBAM entered a rapidly deteriorating environment marked by escalating violence and political fragmentation, culminating in the outbreak of the second civil war in 2014. The worsening security situation ultimately forced the evacuation of mission personnel and the suspension of field activities (IECEU, 2017; EEAS, 2017). These developments highlighted the challenges faced by the EU in deploying civilian CSDP instruments in highly unstable and fragmented post-conflict settings.

Against this backdrop, the normative and civilian approach initially adopted by the EU in Libya seemed increasingly disconnected both from the rapidly changing reality on the ground and from the achievement of its objectives. From 2014 onwards, Libya's descent into renewed civil war, the consolidation of armed factions, and the expansion of jihadist groups transformed the country into a major source of regional instability (Eaton et al., 2020). At the same time, the spillover effects of the general destabilization of the region, particularly the escalation of irregular migration flows and a series of terrorist attacks on European soil between 2015 and 2016, profoundly reshaped the perception of the Union and its members of the Mediterranean (Biscop, 2016). These developments exposed the limits of an EU external action primarily focused on democracy promotion, institutional reform and civilian-focused engagement in contexts of acute insecurity. As a result, from 2015–2016 onwards, the EU progressively reoriented its engagement in Libya towards a more pragmatic lens based on securitization, prioritizing migration control and border management as core objectives of its CFSP and CSDP action.

2.2- 2015-2016 Securitization shift: A Milestone for the EU approach to the Libyan conflict

While the Mediterranean had long constituted a major migration route, the 2015 refugee crisis marked a turning point in EU foreign and security policy. In that year alone, 1.3 million asylum applications were registered in Europe, while over 3,500 migrants lost their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016). Concurrently, a series of terrorist attacks on European soil between 2015 and 2016 intensified

perceptions of insecurity, reinforcing the framing of migration as a strategic challenge linked to broader regional instability (Europol, 2016; Huysmans & Argomaniz, 2022).

Europe had to react quickly to these challenges, resulting in a reform of its foreign policy approach to the Mediterranean area, therefore to Libya which had become both a key transit hub for migrants and a site of expanding jihadist activity (IOM, 2015; Europol, 2016). This revision was ultimately enshrined in the new 2016 EU Global Strategy, presented by the HR Federica Mogherini (European External Action Service, 2016), in response to growing regional instability, shifting from a normative to a security-based approach.

The preceding European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 (European Council, 2003) set the goal for EU external action to promote democracy and rule of law, particularly in its neighborhood, as it acknowledged that a "world of well-governed democratic states" was the ultimate protection for European security on the long term. The EU had the ambition to assert itself as a normative, civilian power, convinced that promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law would be sufficient to prevent any threat to its integrity while allowing it to build closer ties with its neighbors (Henökl, 2017). However, this approach has reached an impasse when faced with crises requiring urgent responses, in contexts of fragmented power or high insecurity.

In reaction, the 2016 Global Strategy embraced a new approach of "principled pragmatism", a kind of "European Realpolitik" (Biscop, 2016), implying that the EU had to focus on the defense and promotion of its own interests but still respecting and defending its core values (Henökl, 2017). This strategy is guided by four principles: unity in action of Europeans to ensure coherence, fostering EU engagement externally, responsibility in promoting peace and security beyond EU borders, and partnership with non-European actors to foster cooperation and responsibility-sharing. Additionally, it identifies five priorities: strengthening the security of the Union, fostering the resilience of states and societies in the EU's eastern and southern neighborhoods, pursuing an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, promoting cooperative regional orders, and supporting global governance. Furthermore, it stresses the vital importance of credibility to fulfil its goals (European External Action Service, 2016).

For this purpose, the Union shall foster defense cooperation and seek to establish strong European defense industry, essential for Europe's autonomy in decision-making and action

(European External Action Service, 2016). The Global Strategy framed energy security, terrorism, state fragility, and hybrid threats as main security threats for the EU. While migration is considered as a key challenge, not explicitly a direct security threat, it still promoted a securitarian approach through the emphasis on border management and externalization of migration control (Loschi and Russo, 2020; Sanahuja, 2020). By doing so, the Global Strategy placed the promotion of security, defense, and resilience at the core of the EU's renewed approach to foreign policy, framing these objectives, together with unity among the EU and its member states, as essential conditions for a more coherent, effective, and thus credible Union on the geopolitical stage.

Although the Global Strategy enshrined securitization within the new external action approach (Barbé & Morillas, 2019), the EU had already begun to pursue this path. This strategic shift was already visible through the 2015 revision of the ENP, which placed increased emphasis on stability, security cooperation, and migration management, while maintaining reference to the EU's normative commitments (European Commission, 2015b; Furness & Schäfer, 2015). Together, these frameworks structured a security-first approach that would shape subsequent EU engagement in Libya.

In this context of refugee crisis, migration containment emerged as the most urgent and consensual priority among member states (Megerisi, 2020). This urgency facilitated the launch of the EU's first military CSDP mission in the Mediterranean: EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia, established in 2015 (Council Decision 2015/778). It aimed to prevent loss of life at sea, combat human trafficking and disrupt smugglers' business model by conducting Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, and providing support in detection and monitoring of migration flows, information gathering and patrolling. In 2016, its mandate was expanded to include training of the Libyan Coast Guard and contribution to the enforcement of the UN arms embargo (Council of the European Union, 2016; UNSC Resolution 2292).

Operation Sophia marked a significant expansion of EU security engagement, combining military assets with capacity-building objectives. Its replacement in 2020 by EUNAVFOR MED Operation Irini reflected further adaptation to evolving dynamics, notably the intensification of foreign military involvement and repeated violations of the arms embargo. Irini's mandate prioritized embargo enforcement, with migration-related tasks relegated to a secondary role (Council Decision 2019/1595; Council Decision 2020/472; Alagna, 2020).

The new operation also constituted a response to the growing presence and significant engagement of foreign powers. Indeed, both eastern and western Libyan armed structures received increasing military support, notably since the Haftar attempt to seize the Libyan capital resulting in the 2020 GNA-Turkey MoU (Wehrey, 2020; Kimpel, 2024). By establishing EUNAVFOR MED Irini, the EU sought to assert itself as a military deterrent power, capable of enforcing international law in its immediate neighborhood, in coherence with its Global Strategy, thereby sending a clear message to rival regional actors engaged in the Libyan conflict about its ambition to act as a credible security provider in the region.

Alongside military engagement, the EU extended civilian and financial instruments, including the reinforcement of EUBAM Libya (Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/207), the mobilization of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) (European Commission, 2015a; European External Action Service, 2022a), and targeted sanctions against actors undermining the political process (Council Decision 2015/133; Council Regulation (EU) 2016/44; Council of the European Union, 2016). While the EUTF is not part of the CFSP framework, this fund aimed to tackle the root causes of migration and instability, and fight irregular migration by directing the fundings towards the strengthening of Libyan Coast Guard's operational capacities, capacity-building in border and maritime surveillance, assistance to detention and reception facilities, and cooperation with international organizations for the management of migration flows and returns (DG NEAR, 2021).

Finally, in the context of an open conflict between the GNA and the LNA with the UAE, Egypt, Russia and Turkey, to a greater or lesser extent, directly involved (Kimpel, 2024), the EU sought to consolidate its efforts to stabilize Libya through the diplomatic path. Its efforts culminated in strong EU support for UN-led initiatives such as the Berlin Conferences (or Process) of 2020 and 2021 (UNSMIL, 2025; UNSMIL, 2021), reaffirming the Union's commitment to multilateral conflict resolution and political stabilization.

However, despite the range of instruments deployed, the persistence of instability, political fragmentation, and external interference underscored the complexity of translating EU strategic objectives into tangible outcomes. The persistence of high instability, fragmentation, human trafficking and external interference raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness, coherence, and adequacy of CFSP instruments. It is this apparent gap between policy ambitions,

and empirical results, that requires further examination, which leads this study to analyze these dynamics through the lens of credibility, assessing how structural, strategic, and operational constraints have shaped perceptions of the EU as a political and security actor in the Libyan context.

3. Assessing CFSP Limitations: Strategic and Operational Failures and EU Credibility in Libya

As a reminder, this study understands credibility as the perceived reliability and predictability of an actor resulting in its ability to shape outcomes in a defined context. Its assessment relies on an examination of policy consistency, operational effectiveness, reputational effects from past actions, and the coherence between proclaimed norms and actual practices and outcomes. In this regard, Libya constitutes a crucial test case for the EU, particularly since the 2016 Global Strategy explicitly framed the construction of a “credible Union” as a central objective of European external action (European External Action Service, 2016).

It is commonly acknowledged that the EU’s engagement in Libya, through the deployment of CFSP instruments, has largely failed to achieve its stated objectives (Fabbrini, 2014; Marcuzzi, 2022; Megerisi, 2020). While the first phase of EU engagement after 2011 already revealed significant shortcomings, the second phase, post-2015, despite adopting a more pragmatic and security-oriented approach, was equally unable to address the structural drivers of instability. This persistent gap between ambitions and outcomes has not only undermined the EU's effectiveness but also eroded its credibility by signaling a lack of coherence and consistency in following through on commitments, thereby diminishing the perceived reliability of the Union as a security and normative actor in its neighborhood (European External Action Service, 2016b).

Paradoxically, one of the explaining factors of the general failure of CFSP might be the securitization dynamic guiding EU foreign policy since its 2016 Global Strategy. Indeed, rather than addressing root causes of instability and migration in practice, the securitization approach, by framing issues as urgent threats, narrowed EU’s strategic possibilities by privileging short-term goals, resulting in recurrent strategic miscalculations (Alsteen, 2025). This securitization

has been accompanied with externalization³ and outsourcing⁴ processes of European border management which has even worsen the situation, only increasing danger for migrants (Espriu, 2024; Doctors Without Borders, 2025).

Although the EU presented EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia as a success, emphasizing on the rescue of nearly 49,000 migrants at sea and combating human trafficking, its actual results fell short from its initial objectives (Campbell, 2019). As previously noted, Operation Sophia was intended to address irregular migration and human smuggling off the Libyan coast, with secondary tasks including support for the implementation of the UN arms embargo and training of Libyan security forces. However, its operational effectiveness was fundamentally constrained by the limits of its legal mandate, insufficient assets, and an inadequate strategic alignment with the realities of the Libyan conflict (Alagna, 2020; Marcuzzi, 2022).

Due to resource insufficiency and contextual factors, the operation has been too slow to conduct its activities, and too limited to dismantle organized smuggling networks. While the struggle against human trafficking was its core mission, notably passing through capacity-building and training aimed at enhancing Libyan capabilities, after almost two years of deployment the operation had trained only 89 members of the Libyan Coast Guard. A total manifestly insufficient to confront organized and heavily armed smuggling networks operating along the Libyan coast (Marcuzzi, 2022).

The succeeding expansion of its mandate, incorporating the enforcement of the UN arms embargo, further revealed a misalignment between the operation's design and the realities of arms trafficking in Libya. Indeed, although it had been provided with the possibility to intercept and seize vessels to limit smuggling networks at sea, most of the weaponry directed to Libya, in particular destined to the LNA, adversary of the internationally recognized Libyan government, passed by land and air, which lay entirely beyond the operation's reach (Alagna, 2020). This miscalculation combined with its inability to act on Libyan soil and sea, as Libyan

³ Externalization is the process of extending border and migration controls beyond a country's territory through collaboration with other countries or non-state actors to manage migration flows extraterritorially and reduce direct responsibilities.

⁴ Outsourcing consists in the transfer of border control and migration management tasks to third-party countries or entities to manage migration flows more efficiently and at a lower cost (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022).

authorities did not grant consent to operate within Libyan territorial waters, prevented the operation to progress beyond high seas monitoring, leaving both arms and human smuggling networks largely intact and resilient to naval interdiction (Alagna, 2020).

The subsequent EUNAVFOR MED Operation Irini faced comparable issues. While it focused on the implementation of the UN arms embargo, the mission remained naval and still operating exclusively in high seas. Although it was mandated to inspect vessels and enabled to seizure if military assets are being transported, its capacity was not only undermined by the lack of sufficient resources to conduct activities, but also by the “compliant boarding” principle, accordingly to the UN Security Council resolution 2292 (Akamo, Bedin and Cristiani, 2023). The principle implies that an inspection presupposes an authorization by the flag state of the targeted vessel, hence directly limiting its operational capabilities and deterrent power.

These operational limitations not only reproduced structural weaknesses already visible in previous EU engagement in Libya but resulted in an externalization process which outcomes are widely criticized, affecting the perceived sincerity of its official stance. Indeed, due to mandate constraints, miscalculations or the need to obtain outcomes on the short-term, operations were forced to rely on unreliable Libyan players, providing for funds, training and capacity-building activities, to act on Libya’s ground, questioning the sincerity of the EU.

Despite the EU's official discourse affirming its determination to prevent the loss of migrant lives (Council of the European Union, 2015), the numerous calls for action by member states and NGOs, the daily tragedies at sea, or the numerous fatalities done by Central Mediterranean migration route (from Libya and Tunisia towards Italy and Malta) in previous years, did not incentivized the EU to act quickly. The Operation Sophia was only launched in the 2015, following the particularly deadly shipwreck of 18 April 2015 between Libya and Italy, which claimed more than 800 lives, leading to many critics on its delayed response (BBC News, 2013; UNHCR, 2014; Zichi, 2025).

Furthermore, while the EU presented its border management efforts as successful through the reducing number of migrants arrival on the European soil, the SAR activities that were conducted by Operation Sophia were excluded from the mandate of Operation Irini, being progressively delegated to Libyan Coast Guards, despite the rising death per arrival ratio between 2017 and 2019, and the latter significant role by intercepting and returning migrants

to Libya hence increasing the risk of re-trafficking (Fine & Megerisi, 2019; Akamo, Bedin and Cristiani, 2023).

The fight against human struggling, which constituted the core mission of the former operation, was relayed as a secondary task and conducted only through information gathering and aerial patrolling above high seas (Alagna, 2020, Council of the European Union, 2020). As a solution, the EU turned towards Libyan authorities, despite multiple trustworthy evidence of their unreliability. Indeed, a Frontex report in 2016 asserted that some Libyan Coast Guard's members, while receiving training from the European mission, were directly implicated in human trafficking business. Moreover, the UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) added that ONG representatives and migrants were subjected to "life-threatening interceptions by "armed men believed to be from the Libyan Coast Guard" (UNSMIL & UNOHCHR, 2016). The transfer of EU border management and migration control, through externalization and outsourcing, to private entities, notably armed militias and smugglers, only resulted in making the Central Mediterranean route the most dangerous for reaching Europe's shores while being the most active (Martini and Megerisi, 2023). By outsourcing migration control to actors implicated in the very practices it claimed to combat, the EU not only weakened the operational coherence of its mission but also contributed to weakening its reputation for resolve by casting doubt on its willingness and capacity to sustain coherent action when confronted with political and operational constraints.

Additionally, through instruments such as the EUTF (European Commission, 2015a; DG NEAR, 2021), substantial resources were allocated to strengthen the Libyan Coast Guard, border surveillance capacities, and detention infrastructures. By 2021, the EUTF had mobilized €455 million for projects in Libya, bringing total EU financial support to approximately €700 million (European Commission, 2021). However, in a context characterized by fragmented authority and militia-based power structures, these allocations often produced counterproductive effects. Indeed, it resulted in the emergence of a "migration industry" involving significant number of private actors bringing border and migration management into a mercantile logic (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Not only compromising transparency and accountability, the allocation of resources and equipment by the EU to the Libyan authorities, awarding border security actors with equipment and fundings, transformed migration into a lucrative sector for militias. It pushed some Libyan armed groups, sometimes actual migrant smugglers, to be recognized as legitimate migration industry actors by officially turning to anti-

smuggling activities to attract European funding (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Rather than dismantling trafficking networks, EU funding risked reinforcing war-economy dynamics and empowering actors embedded in militia structures, since funds provided were hijacked by armed groups (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023).

Beyond reinforcing war-economy dynamics, this strategy undermined democratic accountability in border management and weakened the perceived authenticity of EU discourse, further eroding its normative credibility (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Furthermore, it provided Libyan actors, notably Khalifa Haftar, official adversary of the international community in this conflict, with political leverages against Europe, weaponizing migration to obtain diplomatic habilitation, political support, partnerships or funds (Martini and Megeresi, 2023; Fasanotti, 2023).

Hence these developments illustrate a persistent capability–expectation gap. Delayed deployment and constrained mandates of the operations combined with SAR responsibilities delegation to unreliable Libyan authorities and deals and fundings provided to Libyan militias, some of which fueling human trafficking, resulted in counterproductive outcomes and in increased number of accusations of complicity of human rights violations, exposing a significant deficiency of effectiveness and a profound normative contradiction between the EU’s discourse on human rights, migrant protection, stabilization promotion, and the realities of cooperation on the ground (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022; Amnesty International, 2025; Vox Europ, 2025). The recurrence of such shortcomings suggests not isolated operational miscalculations but a structural inability to adapt instruments to local realities, weakening perceptions of resolve and consistency.

These contradictions resonates with Krasner’s conception of “organized hypocrisy”: While the EU’s rhetoric legitimizing the deployment of CFSP in Libya was based on the stabilization of the country, the protection of civilians, and the promotion of its core values and principles, in practice CFSP instruments ended up guided by securitization and the urgent need to stop migratory flows at any cost, although it did not match Libyan demands (Alsteens, 2025; Akamo, Bedin and Cristiani, 2023). The result was not only reputational erosion but also reduced moral and deterrent credibility.

The financial instruments deployed by the EU for promoting institutional and economic stabilization also faced profound miscalculations. The Union placed significant expectations on economic assistance, based on the assumption that economic growth and diversification would gradually foster stabilization. Yet, Libya's economy was not only underdeveloped but also structurally distorted by decades of authoritarian governance, rent distribution, institutional opacity, and, today, fragmentation of power (Marcuzzi, 2022). Hence, despite the significant financial support provided by the Union, distributed across humanitarian aid, institution-building, and conflict-prevention programs (European Commission, 2021), Libya lacked the capacity to absorb these efforts. National authorities had no control over key economic and financial institutions and Libya had never developed a functional bureaucracy under Qaddafi's rule (Akamo, Bedin and Cristiani, 2023).

On the contrary, key economic institutions such as the Central Bank of Libya, the National Oil Company, and the Libyan Investment Authority rapidly became central stakes in the conflict by being crucial sources of power and enrichment, making them the target of various conquests (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018; Politico, 2024). The EU did not adapt its strategy to this Libyan reality, ultimately resulting in EU's financial commitment often strengthening rather than curbing Libya's war economy, indirectly reinforcing the power of armed groups that controlled access to economic channels or migration flows. It also further exacerbated local fragmentation compromising both the EU's short-term objective of stabilizing and securing the country and its long-term objectives of state consolidation, democratization, and rule-based governance, casting doubt on the EU reliability to act coherently thus contributing to cumulative credibility erosion (Akamo, Bedin and Cristiani, 2023).

Besides, EU has also shown limitations on a diplomatic perspective. The current situation in Libya easily illustrates the failure of both Berlin Conferences. The main objective of this initiative was to gather international involved actors to align their position on fostering a Libyan political process free from foreign political and military interference (UNSMIL, 2025; UNSMIL, 2021). It represented an important opportunity for Europe to shape the future Libyan political and institutional landscape.

Instead, the conferences highlighted the limited European leverage in the crisis, failing both to produce significant political results and curb decisively foreign interference. Indeed, the LPDF ended up in an impasse and the two rival Libyan political system are still competing.

Furthermore, while Europe exerted insufficient deterring pressure during the conferences on actors such as the UAE regarding support for Haftar (Megerisi, 2020a), other actors increased continuously their influence in the country.

Since the signing of the 2019 MoU with the GNA, Turkey widely expanded its influence both locally and regionally as it made it the only substantial military support for the GNA, while enabling it to exploit hydrocarbon resources in maritime areas in Eastern Mediterranean contested by EU member states, thereby introducing a competing legal and geopolitical framework in the Eastern Mediterranean further compromising regional stability, EU territorial integrity and its interests (Government of the Republic of Turkey & Government of National Accord-State of Libya, 2019; European External Action Service, 2022b).).

Parallely, Russia, supporting the eastern authorities, has also become a crucial actor in the Libyan landscape, both diplomatically and militarily, even increasingly since the Berlin Conference by expanding its military presence on Libyan soil through private entities (Lacher, 2021). It is even the influence of these two major European rivals that enabled the 2020 Berlin Conference to take place as the preceding ceasefire resulting in the latter had been reached without European diplomatic involvement, but through Turkish and Russian mediation and signed in Moscow (Megerisi, 2020b).

These alternative players to the EU present pragmatic approach without principles to Libyan actors, proposing military, political and economic support without normative conditionality making them attractive partners (Skare, 2023). Although Libya is a direct neighbor of the EU, and therefore part of a strategic area considered vital to the security and stability of the Union (European External Action Service, 2016a), and despite Europe's substantial humanitarian, political, financial and military involvement in the country, both actors were able to affirm their reliability, deploying effective military assets on the ground and placing themselves as relatively successful mediators. They succeeded in consolidating their influence “in Europe’s backyards”, while they are both framed as strategic geopolitical competitors by Europe, Russia even being considered a threat to European security order (Yildiz, 2020; Reuters, 2025a).

Taken together, the assessment of CFSP instruments in Libya reveals a systematic erosion of EU credibility across all four analytical criteria employed in this study.

Policy consistency has been undermined by the recurrent gap between stated objectives and the design, timing, and implementation of CFSP instruments shaped on misunderstandings of the Libyan evolving reality.

Operational effectiveness has remained limited, as missions and financial instruments failed to deliver sustained outcomes and even proved counterproductive to some extent.

The EU's reputation for resolve has been eroded by constrained mandates, perpetuation of past-policy shortcomings, or progressive delegation of core responsibilities to unreliable local actors, projecting limited willingness to bear political and strategic costs or to adapt decisively in the face of failure.

Finally, normative influence, as illustrated by the rise of external players and limited European leverage, has been increasingly compromised by persistent contradictions between the EU's proclaimed values of human rights, protection of migrants, or rule-based governance, and practices on the ground, including the externalization and outsourcing of border control, cooperation with militias implicated in abuses, and the securitization of migration at the expense of European principles.

As a result, EU action in Libya has produced a credibility deficit, reducing the Union's capacity to shape outcomes, influence local actors, and compete with alternative external powers in a highly contested geopolitical environment. Despite having tried to adjust its foreign policy strategy to the evolving context, the latter failed to provide an adapted and coherent response and ultimately to build a "credible union" despite it was designed a crucial goal. Importantly, the deterioration of credibility trapped European foreign policy into a vicious circle by prompting Libyan actors to shift away from Europe, opening the doors to other actors hence further undermining operationality and influence of the EU in the crisis.

While this chapter has demonstrated how CFSP instruments in Libya failed to deliver consistency, effectiveness, reputation for resolve, and normative influence, these shortcomings cannot be understood solely as the result of defective mandates or operational miscalculations. Rather, they point to deeper structural and political constraints embedded within the EU's CFSP architecture, where intergovernmental dynamics and competing national interests shape both decision-making and implementation. To account for the persistence of these failures and the resulting erosion of EU credibility, the analysis must therefore move beyond instruments and outcomes to examine the role of member states, in fragmenting EU action, marginalizing European institutions, and undermining the Union's capacity to act as a coherent and credible

foreign policy actor in the Libyan context. The following chapter addresses this dimension by combining insights from new intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and constructivism to explain how institutional design, politicization, and competing national interests have structurally constrained CFSP effectiveness and credibility in Libya.

Chapter III – Member States Strategic Competition in Libya: Intergovernmental Permissiveness and the Erosion of EU Foreign Policy Credibility

While the operational, contextual and strategic limits of CFSP instruments deployed have been highlighted, the failure of the CFSP to produce a coherent EU approach in Libya was closely tied to structural constraints. As stated in the first chapter of the study, the CFSP intergovernmental nature has been maintained by the Lisbon Treaty, making its efficiency dependent on member states readiness to act together. The Libyan crisis exposed this structural characteristic of the CFSP: the persistence of divergent national interests and strategies among member states. By tracing the mechanisms through which strategic divergence, unilateral diplomacy, and domestic politicization interacted, this chapter demonstrates how intergovernmentalism, compounded by competing national interests, shaped EU behavior and eroded its reputation as a credible actor in Libya. The theoretical perspectives derived from new intergovernmentalism, post-functionalism, and constructivism are applied to explain the institutional, political, and normative dimensions of these dynamics.

1. Driven by National Conflicting interests: Member States Strategic Discrepancy in Libya

1.1- Member States Diverging National Interests

Divergences on the strategy to adopt in response to the crisis emerged between Europeans as soon as the outbreak of the crisis with the 2011 military intervention. While France and UK strongly supported military action against the Gaddafi regime, Italy and Germany opposed, the latter abstaining in the UNSC vote, reflecting a more cautious strategic posture (Rödder, 2024; Brummer & Oppermann, 2021). Italy, with deep economic ties with Libya, initially hesitated before ultimately joining the NATO operations. These early divergences revealed the absence of a unified European strategic assessment of Libya.

The emergence of competing national strategies in Libya cannot be understood merely as the result of episodic disagreements or diplomatic frictions, but rather as the consequence of structurally diverging interests, threat perceptions, and strategic priorities. Despite their shared membership in the EU and formal alignment within common international frameworks, member states approached Libya through distinct lenses shaped by historical legacies, economic interdependence, geographic exposure, and domestic security concerns. These factors led each state to prioritize different threats and objectives resulting in increasingly incompatible approaches on the ground. Analyzing these underlying divergences is therefore essential to understand how a shared European framework failed to produce policy convergence and instead allowed national strategies to evolve in parallel and, ultimately, in competition.

Economic and energy interests constituted a first axis of divergence. Italy has a historic relationship with Libya. While it colonized the country at the beginning of the 20th century, the post-independence period still led to strong ties. Indeed, before the Libyan revolution toppling Qaddafi's regime, in 2010 Libya constituted the main Italian supplier of crude oil and the third of natural gas (Varvelli, 2012). Furthermore, as aforementioned, the Italian energy enterprise ENI has a longstanding presence in the country, conducting activities since 1959 (ENI S.p.A, n.d.). These links are still strong as Italy represent an important supporting actor for the Tripoli-based government and constitutes its first trade partner (Libya Review, 2023). These connections provide Italy with a significant influential power, enabling it to advance its interests in diverse fields such as finance, energy, communication or construction (Marcuzzi, 2022). Hence, Libya represents for Italy a strategic pillar for its energy security and economic power. This strategic relevance has been repeatedly demonstrated in practice. Italy relies heavily on gas flows from the Mellitah complex and the Greenstream pipeline in Western Libya, making Libyan stability directly linked to its domestic energy security. Indeed, during Haftar's 2020 oil blockade, production disruptions led to substantial losses at the Mellitah facility, temporarily affecting supplies and highlighting how developments on the ground in Libya carry immediate strategic and economic consequences for Italy (Fasanotti, 2023).

France also maintains substantial economic interests in Libya. Indeed, the French company TotalEnergies has been also very active, conducting onshore and offshore oil exploration and production in the country since 1956 (TotalEnergies, n.d.; TotalEnergies SE, 2026). The coexistence of ENI and TotalEnergies generated structural competition over concessions, access and influence (Eljarh, 2020a). As Ilardo (2018) underlines, the rivalry over Libyan oil

intensified after the 2011 intervention, when France challenged what had largely been an Italian-dominated status quo. Furthermore, this competition extended beyond corporate negotiations. Armed fighting for the control over oil infrastructures and export terminals, particularly in the Oil Crescent region, have been partly fueled by Franco-Italian rivalry and became intertwined with political alignments, as France and Italy supported opposing Libyan factions battling for legal control over hydrocarbon exports (Ilardo, 2018). Oil thus became not only an economic asset but also a geopolitical lever, linking commercial interests with diplomatic positioning and support.

For Greece and Cyprus, economic interests in Libya were more indirect but became increasingly relevant in the context of Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics (Grigoriadis, 2022). The 2019 Turkey–GNA maritime delimitation agreement, which redefined maritime boundaries in ways perceived as infringing upon Greek and Cypriot claims, elevated Libya's importance within their strategic calculations (United Nations, 2019; Grigoriadis, 2022). Thus, while not initially central actors in the Libyan file, Greece and Cyprus became increasingly attentive to Libyan developments insofar as they affected regional maritime and energy disputes.

However, this degree of economic exposure was not shared across all members of the Union. Germany, and most Central and Eastern European member states did not possess comparable energy stakes in Libya. For them, Libya did not represent a cornerstone of national energy security. This asymmetry reduced incentives for sustained and proactive engagement.

Beyond energy, Libya's geographic position makes it strategically relevant in diverse ways for different members. Since 2011 and the resulting collapse of state authority and the proliferation of armed militias, Libya has become a major hub for migration flows (IOM, 2015; Kuschminder, 2020). By being located directly in the central Mediterranean, facing Italy and Malta, both countries were placed at the frontline of post-2011 migration flows. Italy and Malta faced enormous pressure on border management system, asylum structures and have fueled intense domestic political debates over migration policy (IOM, 2015). As a result, Italy in particular had a strong incentive to engage actively in Libyan affairs, not only to stabilize the country and curb irregular migration flows at the source, but also to maintain influence over local authorities and militias that control key migration routes.

France, by contrast, framed Libya's instability through a different strategic lens. As Libya has become a shelter for many regional armed groups, including terrorist organizations, largely influencing the whole regional stability, particularly of the Sahel (Eaton and al, 2020), its strategic relevance particularly increased in the eyes of France. Indeed, since 2013, the latter has been directly engaged militarily in the region, beginning with Operation Serval in Mali, launched to halt the advance of Islamist insurgents toward Bamako, and replaced in 2014 by Operation Barkhane, a broader and long-term counterterrorism initiative, which intervention area was extended to the G5 Sahelian countries, namely Mauritanie, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad (Ghanem-Yazbeck, Barras Tejudo, Faleg & Zoubir, 2018), two of them bordering Libya. Parallely, France suffered numerous terrorist attacks on its soil claimed by jihadist groups, creating a particular incentive to further counterterrorism as framed as an existential direct threat to France's integrity. As Islamist factions that it combatted in the Sahel found refuge in Libya, establishing bases and expanding their territorial control, especially in the southern region of Fezzan, counterterrorism was elevated as a central national priority and integrated Libya into France's broader security continuum. (Trégarot, 2023; Ghanem-Yazbeck, Barras Tejudo, Faleg & Zoubir, 2018).

Germany's threat perception differed again. While deeply affected by the 2015 migration crisis as a major destination country, but also touched by terrorist attacks on its territory, Berlin maintained a strategic culture characterized by military restraint and preference for diplomatic and multilateral crisis management (Ley, 2022). Libya was perceived as a destabilizing factor in the broader Mediterranean and migration context, but not as a theatre requiring unilateral or security-driven engagement (Megerisi & Wildangel, 2019).

Finally, for many Central and Eastern European member states, such as Hungary, Poland but also Sweden, Libya's relevance was primarily indirect. These states were less geographically exposed to Mediterranean dynamics and had limited economic ties to Libya. Their primary concern centered on migration governance at the EU level, particularly opposition to mandatory relocation mechanisms (Kottász, 2024). Libya was thus viewed largely through the prism of border control and externalization, rather than as a geopolitical arena requiring direct national involvement.

Taken together, these asymmetries in economic exposure, geographic vulnerability and security framing did not remain confined to national assessments but progressively shaped how each member state sought to project its priorities onto the Libyan arena.

1.2- Strategic Rivalries and Competing Approaches in Libya

These divergence of national interests and threat perceptions translated into strategic divergences or even direct competition between European states through increasingly incompatible strategies. While Italy and France perceived Libya as a strategically central crisis, albeit through different framing, other member states assigned it secondary or indirect importance due to differentiated exposures to migration, terrorism, economic stakes or diverse crisis-management approach. The absence of a shared threat perception and common prioritization constituted the structural foundation for subsequent divergences in strategy.

Italian strategy in Libya cannot be reduced to formal support for the Tripoli-based authorities alone. While Rome consistently endorsed the internationally recognized GNA and later the GNU, its engagement was primarily driven by a pragmatic and security-oriented objective: the rapid containment of irregular migration across the central Mediterranean, as illustrated by its unilateral naval mission deployed early in 2013, called *Mare Nostrum*, aimed to conduct SAR operation and fight illegal migration (Megerisi, 2025). This willingness to reduce drastically migration towards its shores on a short-term notice resulted in the adoption of a flexible approach, engaging not only with official institutions but also with any actor exercising effective control over territory and migration routes in western Libya, regardless of their ideological orientation or formal status (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). Through its involvement, Italy sought to externalize and outsource migration control and thus consolidate the authority of the Tripoli-based government to ensure the efficiency of its strategy (Zambiasi & Albarosa, 2024).

This strategy was formalized early with the signing of a MoU with GNA authorities in February 2017 on migration cooperation to enhance border control, information exchange, and joint efforts to counter trafficking networks (Republic of Italy & Government of National Accord of Libya, 2017). The agreement includes capacity-building with Italy committing to provide the GNA's authorities and Libyan Coast Guard with training, technical, and financial support, to

enhance interception capabilities and build reception center for arrested migrants. This MoU resulted from Rome's sustained efforts, between 2017 and 2018, to secure international recognition of Libya's Search and Rescue Zone. Italy has been intensively engaged diplomatically in international forums to push the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to formally recognize the Libyan authorities in Tripoli, hence the Libyan Coast Guard, as competent to manage a SAR zone in the central Mediterranean (Minbar Libya Tribune, 2025). This recognition was symbolically and politically significant, as it conferred a degree of sovereign legitimacy on Libyan authorities while empowering them to legally intercept and return migrants to Libyan territory, enabling Italy to externalize its own SAR operations.

Amid institutional instability and fragmented power, compromising Italian support efficiency to foster the Libyan government's ability to control borders and migration, Italy tried to strengthen the internationally recognized government at national level through informal diplomacy and agreements with non-state actors, notably militias (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). Indeed, rather than limiting itself to Tripoli's central authorities, Rome simultaneously cultivated direct and informal relations with policymakers and armed groups to operationalize migration containment at the grassroots level. For example, in 2017, Italy approached Haitem al-Tajouri, then leader of the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB), a powerful militia faction, to persuade him to align more closely with the GNA's objectives to strengthen GNA power and to leverage his influence over local checkpoints and smuggling routes (Raineri, 2017). Furthermore, Italian authorities pursued verbal agreements with local militia networks in key embarkation points, notably with the al-Ammu militia (affiliated with the GNA Defence Ministry) and Brigade 48 (under the Interior Ministry) in Sabratha, one of the most important coastal hubs for migrant departures (Michael, 2017). These local agreements sought to incentivize militias, which were primarily involved in human trafficking, to reduce migration flows in exchange for financial resources, officially provided by the GNA but suspected to originate from European funds granted to Sarraj for that purpose (Michael, 2017), furthering externalization and outsourcing of its border management.

France, by contrast, adopted a strategy aligned with its counterterrorism priorities. While Libyan instability, directly threatening its operations and interests in the region, notably menacing allied regimes, France turned to the Libyan actor who seemed most aligned with its positions and best able to resolve the situation in the short term. Hence, while officially supporting Tripoli's government, France informally supported the western forces led by Khalifa

Haftar, considering him as the actor which could potentially bring stability in Libya and contribute to its fight against terrorism in the region (Lebovich & Megerisi, 2019; Trégarot, 2023). The latter, with whom France had already allied itself in 2011 in the fight against the Qaddafi regime, presented himself as the resistance against Islamic extremism, which naturally led France to support him once again (Trégarot, 2023).

Furthermore, on a broader geopolitical perspective, France maintains important ties with the main political and military backers of the LNA, namely Egypt and the UAE, with whom it shares the struggle against political Islam influence and, more importantly, both represent major customers for French weapons and military equipment (Thiébaud, 2020; Trégarot, 2023). Indeed, France had engaged in intensive military collaboration with both countries, including a permanent French naval base in Abu Dhabi (UAE) since 2009, and between 2014 and 2017 concluded several lucrative arms deals (Thiébaud, 2020). Overall, arms orders from the Emirates to France amounted to €4.7 billion between 2010 and 2019, reflecting the strategic and economic significance of France's partnerships with these regional actors (Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, 2020). This strategic approach combined with its alliances led France to be significantly involved in the Libyan conflict, actively supporting Haftar forces.

Hence, the French support materialized first through covert and indirect unilateral military involvement, placing France at odds with both EU positions and the UN framework. Although Paris consistently denied violating the UN arms embargo and guaranteed its support for the international position and efforts, the French involvement on the ground became progressively visible, both through the allocation of human resources and military equipment (Trégarot, 2023).

This presence was firstly acknowledged, in July 2016, when a helicopter crashed near Benghazi, a western city under LNA's control, killing three French intelligence agents, creating massive suspicion of French military engagement with Haftar (Bensimon, Zerrouky, & Bobin, 2016). The French Ministry of the Armed Forces was obliged to confirm France presence but affirmed it was limited to intelligence operations. Furthermore, In May 2017, Egyptian airstrikes against alleged terrorist camps in Derna were reportedly conducted using Rafale fighter jets delivered by France, while in June 2019, damaged French-made Javelin anti-tank missiles were discovered in an LNA-controlled base in Gharyan, highlighting the at least indirect role of

French arms exports in Haftar's military consolidation (Disclose, 2019; Libya Observer, 2019; Trégarot, 2023). Similarly, French Mirage aircraft maintained by French companies were used by the UAE to conduct airstrikes, some of which being suspected of having caused civilian casualties in Libya (Rouget, 2020; Trégarot, 2023).

Paris justified its position by invoking the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2214, which urges member states to combat terrorist groups operating in Libya, affirming that these arms were not sent to the LNA but "were intended for the self-protection of a French detachment deployed to carry out counter-terrorism intelligence missions" (United Nations Security Council, 2015; Assemblée nationale, 2019). France also denied accusations of violating the UN embargo, arguing that Resolution 1970 does not prohibit arms transfers to third countries. However, it did so even if these arms are subsequently used in Libya and being totally aware since 2015 of the delivery of weapons by the UAE to Haftar's forces (Trégarot, 2023; Disclose, 2021).

Alongside their divergent operational strategies, Italy and France also engaged in increasingly direct competing diplomatic initiatives in Libya, each seeking to position itself as the primary political broker of the Libyan conflict, in order to strengthen the position of the camp they support and advance their own interests in the country. France was the first to adopt an assertive and largely unilateral diplomatic approach. Its strategy aimed at legitimizing Khalifa Haftar as a central political actor and a necessary interlocutor in any stabilization process. While officially reaffirming its support for UN-led peace initiatives and recognizing the GNA as the legitimate authority, the former French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian simultaneously emphasized the need for a rapprochement between Fayez al-Sarraj and Haftar, presenting them as "the two key figures in the country" (Assemblée nationale, 2016), despite widespread international reluctance to grant Haftar diplomatic legitimacy.

This strategy materialized concretely in July 2017, when President Emmanuel Macron convened Sarraj and Haftar at La Celle-Saint-Cloud. The meeting resulted in a joint commitment to a ceasefire, national reconciliation and elections, allowing France to present itself as a key diplomatic intermediary while, most importantly, formally elevating Haftar's status on the international stage by conferring him political legitimacy, sending a strong message to the international community (Trégarot, 2023). This initiative immediately triggered concern in Rome. The Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano openly expressed reservations

about France's mediation efforts, fearing that unilateral French initiatives could delegitimize or short-circuit the work of the UN Special Envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, and weaken the multilateral framework supported by Italy (Paci, 2017). Its reaction revealed Italy's perception of French diplomatic efforts not as complementary, but as a direct challenge to both the UN process and Italy's own traditional role in Libya, the latter fearing to be sidelined and lose its influence on the country (Lacher, 2021; Trégarot, 2023).

In parallel, French official discourse presented an increasingly assertive stance in favor of the LNA leader. In 2017, French Defense Minister, Le Drian, publicly thanked Khalifa Haftar for its key role in the fight against the terrorist organizations in Libya while stating that despite being recognized internationally, GNA's head, Fayeze Al-Sarraj, "is unable to establish his authority beyond the city of Tripoli" (Assemblée nationale, 2017). This dynamic culminated in the May 2018 Paris conference, which brought together representatives of both Tripoli and Tobruk alongside major international stakeholders and produced an ambitious roadmap envisioning the adoption of a constitutional framework by September 2018 and the scheduling of Libyan general elections in December (Duclos, 2018). However, the rapid collapse of this process, illustrated by Haftar's offensive on Tripoli only a few months later, exposed the limited impact of France's diplomatic efforts.

Italy's diplomatic engagement must therefore be understood both as an attempt to reassert itself as a central European interlocutor and as a direct response to France's growing diplomatic activism (Trégarot, 2023). These dynamics resulted in high diplomatic tensions between both member states, revealing the bilateral influence competition taking place in the Libyan context. Indeed, Italian officials reacted sharply to the Paris summit, with Interior Minister Matteo Salvini openly accusing France of bearing responsibility for Libya's destabilization, arguing that Paris had "no interests in stabilizing the situation" and was neither listening to its European allies nor to Libyan local actors (La Repubblica, 2018). His declarations escalated tensions between the two member states with France summoning Italian ambassador for clarifications (Cafiero, 2019). Salvini explicitly affirmed that "Italy must be the protagonist of pacification in Libya," clearly framing Rome's diplomatic ambitions in competition to those of Paris.

In this context, Italy organized the Palermo International Conference on Libya in November 2018 under Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, seeking to reclaim diplomatic leadership by convening Fayeze al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar alongside a wide range of international actors,

including France, Russia, the United States and key regional powers (Pedde, 2018). Through this initiative, Italy sought not only to counterbalance France's earlier diplomatic activism but also to reposition itself as the primary European interlocutor capable of engaging with all relevant Libyan actors. By inviting Haftar, despite his ambiguous institutional status and his rivalry with the UN-backed GNA, Rome aimed to demonstrate that it could speak to both internationally recognized government and eastern Libyan authorities, thereby projecting an image of pragmatic mediation and strategic inclusiveness. Importantly, this also marked a partial departure from Italy's previous diplomatic posture, which had until then privileged official engagement with the UN-recognized authorities in Tripoli and avoided formal political recognition of Haftar (Fasanotti, 2023). This recalibration reflected Italy's attempt to adapt to shifting realities on the ground while preserving its influence across Libya's fragmented political landscape and safeguarding its security and energy interests. However, while the conference produced highly visible symbolic gestures, including public handshakes between Libyan rivals, above all it failed to generate concrete political outcomes or alter the trajectory of the conflict, highlighting both the limits of Italy's diplomatic leverage (Minbar Libya Tribune, 2025).

Beyond high-level diplomatic competition, the Franco-Italian rivalry also unfolded geographically within Libya itself, most visibly in the Fezzan region in the country's southwest. Located at the crossroads of Algeria, Niger, and Chad, Fezzan constitutes a strategic corridor linking the Sahel to northern Libya and ultimately to Europe. Long marginalized from central authority and characterized by porous borders, tribal fragmentation, and institutional weakness, the region functions simultaneously as a major hub for migrant smuggling networks, illicit trafficking, and jihadist activity. Consequently, securing Fezzan became strategically crucial both for migration containment and for counterterrorism objectives, thereby transforming the region into a theatre where Rome and Paris projected their partially competing priorities (Ilardo, 2018).

For Italy, whose primary objective remained the rapid reduction of irregular migration flows across the central Mediterranean, stabilizing Fezzan meant disrupting smuggling routes upstream and engaging local tribal actors in migration management arrangements. Rome therefore moved beyond engagement with Tripoli-based authorities and sought to cultivate direct relations with sub-state actors in the South. In February 2017, Italy hosted ten mayors from Fezzan cities, including Sabha, Ghat, Murzuq, and al-Jufrah, in official discussions aimed

at crafting localized agreements to curb departures for Europe. These meetings underscored Italy's willingness to engage political figures beyond Tripoli in order to disrupt smuggling networks at their source (La Stampa, 2017). More broadly, Rome promoted intra-tribal dialogue and reconciliation initiatives aimed at transforming local armed groups into anti-smuggling partners aligned with its migration containment strategy.

France instead approached Fezzan through a broader Sahelian security lens, linking developments in southern Libya to its counterterrorism operations in Niger and the wider Sahel region. Diplomatic mediation efforts among southern Libyan tribes, sometimes conducted under French auspices in Niger, intersected with Italy's parallel initiatives, reinforcing competitive dynamics. At the same time, Italy's attempts to expand its military presence in Niger encountered resistance in a context where France maintained longstanding strategic influence (Ilardo, 2018).

In this sense, Fezzan illustrates how the Franco-Italian competition extended beyond elite diplomatic summits and translated into overlapping stabilization, mediation, and security initiatives on the ground. Rather than constituting complementary contributions within a coordinated European strategy, these parallel engagements reflected distinct national threat perceptions and regional priorities, while both shared the same objective of stabilizing the region. Fezzan thus became a localized expression of broader structural dynamics identified in this thesis, where strategic competition persists limiting the possible existence of a shared European strategic culture.

While the Franco-Italian rivalry is the most visible and consequential seeing their active engagement on the Libya crisis, both diplomatically and on the ground, it constitutes an illustration of a wider European fragmentation in this crisis. Indeed, other EU member states, although less involved operationally, developed selective strategies reflecting their own threat perceptions and priorities.

In particular, Berlin can also be considered a crucial player in the Libyan context. After a prolonged period of limited engagement, Germany emerged recently as a key diplomatic actor engaging itself to contain the Libyan conflict through multilateral mediation rather than unilateral partisan support for specific Libyan factions or unilateral operational deployment, promoting a UN-led solution. Berlin hosted and played a central role in convening the Berlin

Conference on Libya in January 2020, an initiative that sought to reinforce a ceasefire, uphold the UN arms embargo, and bring external actors into a coordinated negotiation framework (Council of the European Union, 2020a). Germany also co-organized a second Berlin conference in June 2021 aimed at consolidating earlier agreements and supporting a political process that included scheduled elections, albeit with limited long-term results (German Federal Foreign Office, 2021). Such actions showed German real commitment to support the UN-led political track, its willingness to create an international consensus while affirming itself as a capable neutral mediator for the conflict (Lacher, 2021).

Other Mediterranean member states' engagement with Libya was shaped by their immediate regional concerns, levels of exposure, and strategic capacities. In particular, Malta's front-line position regarding irregular migration, coupled with its limited strategic leverage, defined its engagement. Although not a major actor in Libya's internal politics, Malta's concerns over departures from Libyan shores strongly influenced its stance within EU migration debates (Hot Malta, 2025). In 2021, Libya remained one of the main countries of departure toward Malta via the central Mediterranean route, underscoring Valletta's interest in managing migration flows at source.

While also being concerned by migration flows coming from Libya, Greece and Cyprus were more concerned by Turkish expansion in the region. They framed Libya through the lens of Eastern Mediterranean maritime security, reacting particularly to the 2019 Turkey–GNA maritime agreement, which threatened their Exclusive Economic Zone claims (Tziarras, 2020). Their engagement was primarily diplomatic, seeking to prevent the consolidation of Turkish influence rather than intervene directly in Libya's internal affairs and trying to maintain contact with both Western and Eastern Libyan authorities to defend their interests (Reuters, 2025).

Finally, Central and Eastern European member states generally remained peripheral regarding direct engagement with Libya's internal conflict. Their main involvement was primarily through broader EU policy debates, resisting EU migration solidarity policies like relocation obligations (Börzel & Risse, 2018) and other measures they perceived as potential pull factors for migrants. With little interest in Libya, their main fear was thus that the massive influx of migrants into European Mediterranean states would have repercussions in their own country, forcing them to share the burden of this crisis.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how divergent national interests translated into increasingly incompatible strategies in the Libyan conflict. This reflected an absence of a shared European strategic culture at the foreign policy level. Rather than converging through European coordination, member states' policies evolved in parallel and often in tension with one another, producing fragmented external engagements and contradictory political signals.

While these strategies were primarily driven by domestic priorities and regional considerations, they were also embedded in distinct national understandings of what constituted legitimate and effective foreign policy action, the consequences of which extended beyond bilateral relations and directly affected the functioning of the EU's CFSP. The following section examines how these divergences and competition among member states resonated at the European level, contributing to CFSP paralysis, institutional incoherence, and a progressive erosion of the EU's credibility as a unified foreign policy actor in Libya.

2. From National Divergence to CFSP Fragmentation in Libya

2.1- Intergovernmental Permissiveness and the Projection of National Priorities

The CFSP is built on the premise that EU member states share common foreign policy objectives. However, by designing it as an intergovernmental framework, the EU deliberately treated foreign policy as "high politics," allowing states to retain a high degree of autonomy in their external actions (European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], 2023). Because the CFSP relies on unanimity for decision-making, its effectiveness depends on the alignment of all twenty-seven member states' positions, a condition that is particularly difficult to achieve. In this sense, unanimity does not merely complicate decision-making; it institutionalizes the persistence of national sovereignty in foreign policy. Consequently, rather than constraining member states, the CFSP's design empowers them to externalize domestic and strategic priorities at the European level, knowing that collective action cannot proceed without their consent, often undermining collective coherence and the EU's ability to act decisively in a crisis-context (Fabbrini, 2014; Amadio Viceré & Veneri, 2023).

A crisis like the Libyan one, located in the EU's neighborhood, posing concrete security threats and affecting strategic interests such as the promotion of its shared principles of democracy,

rule of law, and free trade, might suggest a high potential for convergence. Instead, deep divisions emerged between members. EU foreign policy in Libya has been marked by strategic competition and divergences among member states, most notably by the French and Italian interests and strategic struggle, with significant consequences for both the evolution of the Libyan conflict since 2011 and EU engagement (Fabbrini, 2014; Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). In consistency with new intergovernmentalism, this reflects the centrality of state preferences in shaping EU foreign policy outcomes, rather than constraints imposed by supranational institutions. This rivalry not only fragmented European action on the ground but also constrained the EU's ability to act as a coherent and effective actor, undermining its reputation for resolve as external actors faced competing national strategies instead of a unified European position, hence further eroding the Union's credibility in Libya.

The intergovernmental functioning of the CFSP shaped the role of EU institutions and instruments in this crisis. With no binding authority to compel coordination, European bodies were relegated to marginal and symbolic roles, reflecting an institutional design that prioritizes state autonomy over centralized strategic capacity. This framework allowed multiple, often conflicting discourses and actions to coexist among member states, preventing the emergence of a shared narrative at the European level which, from a constructivist perspective, further undermined the EU's normative influence and its power of attraction as a credible actor.

Empirical examples from the early Libyan crisis illustrate these structural patterns: in 2011, disagreements between European countries were clear, with France and the UK favoring military intervention while others, principally Germany and Italy, opposed it due to political and economic interests. This disagreement was further reflected through the contrasting positions taken by the High Representative and the President of the European Council, creating a coherence-gap at institutional level (Fabbrini, 2014). The subsequent military intervention undertaken by France and the UK without a common European decision, the unilateral recognition of the NTC by France as Libya's sole legitimate representative while the European Council only recognized it as a political interlocutor, or the blocking of EUFOR Libya operational planning (first planned CSDP mission in Libya) by Sweden, further highlighted the EU's inability to act united and coherently revealing the lack of a common strategic culture (Fabbrini, 2014).

While claiming to constitute a united and potent actor guided by normative principles, the lack of solidarity and cohesion between members sparked initial doubts regarding the capacity of the Union to bypass state's divisions and find a common ground enabling it to deploy efficient and coherent instruments in the crisis. This episode underscores the CFSP's institutional logic: rather than aligning European foreign policy, the framework allows member states to project independent strategies. By allowing strategic competition and unilateral initiatives to coexist with formal declarations of unity, the intergovernmental permissiveness resulted in fragmentation and inconsistency at European level which was therefore not incidental but structurally embedded in the design of European foreign policy cooperation.

2.2- Domestic Politicization and Operational Paralysis of CFSP Instruments

As the situation evolved, Europeans divisions perpetuated and significantly impacted the operational capacity of deployed CFSP instruments, revealing the limits of the Lisbon-set framework. These divisions were not merely strategic but increasingly politicized at the domestic level. Libya, and particularly the issue of migration, became highly salient in national political debates, transforming foreign policy choices into electorally sensitive matters. In such a context, governments were incentivized to prioritize short-term domestic legitimacy over collective European commitments. Within an intergovernmental framework based on unanimity, domestic political pressures could therefore be directly projected onto the EU level, constraining operational flexibility and facilitating institutional deadlock. A dynamic that aligns with postfunctionalism, where politicization constrains supranational coordination by amplifying national sensitivities.

Indeed, Germany's opposition to the 2011 intervention already exemplified how member states adopt strategies driven by national interests despite potentially damaging European unity. This decision can be understood through two lenses: first, a culture of military reluctance dominating German foreign policy since post-1945, but also the result of electoral calculations that relied on replicating the political dynamics of 2002, when the government, having refused to intervene in Iraq with the international community, was subsequently reelected (Gotkowska, 2011).

Similarly, domestic politicization shaped early EU migration responses. Following the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, Italy launched the Mare Nostrum operation as a unilateral

humanitarian naval initiative to conduct SAR missions and fight human trafficking (Senato della Repubblica, 2023) illustrating how domestic priorities could bypass EU coordination. While the operation reflected European normative principles, it received limited political and operational support from other member states. On the contrary, it was criticized, notably by key member states such as Germany and the UK, for being a bridge towards Europe and creating pull factors for migration. The lack of backing combined with the cost of the mission led Italy to withdraw it (Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023; Megerisi, 2025).

Despite not having answered to the Italian request of endorsing a CSDP mission earlier, the EU finally succeeded in deploying the Triton Operation, implemented in 2014 under Frontex, to replace Mare Nostrum. The latter serves as a key illustration of how domestic politicization constrained EU-level action. Indeed, diverging preferences among member states resulted in a mission with lower ambition, fewer resources, and narrower operational scope than its unilateral predecessor, despite growing migration flows. Critically, Triton deprioritized SAR activities, the core humanitarian objective of Mare Nostrum, in favor of border management and information gathering, reflecting a political compromise to accommodate national sensitivities rather than operational needs or European normative commitments (European Commission, 2014; Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023). This gap between EU discourse and operational reality demonstrates how domestic electoral pressures can directly shape CFSP missions, undermining effectiveness, adherence to commitments, and thus its credibility.

These dynamics were not isolated but recurrent and consistent, as further evidenced by the two military missions carried out under the CSDP framework. As stated by the TEU, CSDP-related resolutions are decided at unanimity of the Council of the EU and operations deployed rely on the voluntary provision of assets by member states (Article 42, TEU) hence potentially significantly limiting the adaptability and the resources of the missions if members are not willing to participate (Fabbrini, 2014). Unsurprisingly, divergences in national preferences regarding Libya not only led to insufficient financial and military resources for these missions to fulfill their mandates but also exposed how the intergovernmental system allows member states to leverage their participation for domestically motivated political gains. As foreign policy decisions became politically salient at home, the incentives to compromise at the European level diminished. In unanimity-based settings, even a single government facing domestic electoral pressure could strategically withhold consent or assets, transforming

domestic political constraints into effective veto power and thus into operational paralysis, a great manifestation of both new intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism in practice.

Indeed, in March 2019 a crisis erupting between EU member states regarding the extension of Operation Sophia's mandate, further highlighted these structural gaps. The latter operation mandate was coming to an end, and while members were supposed to vote for its renewal, disagreements and tensions arose, threatening the existence of the operation.

Former Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, pursuing a political agenda aimed at reducing the number of migrants arriving on Italian territory and framing migration as a threat to national security, decided to close Italian ports to NGO vessels rescuing migrants. He made Italy's acceptance of the boats in his ports conditional on a prior agreement at European level stipulating that all rescued migrants would be distributed among European members, triggering further tensions (Mantini, 2019; Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023). In reaction, Germany decided to withdraw its contribution to the Sophia operation, condemning the decision of Italy for putting a key instrument for saving lives and combat human trafficking at risk (InfoMigrants, 2019). Parallely, Hungary and Austria, both pursuing national agendas aimed at blocking migration flows into their territories, notably through consistent opposition to EU relocation and solidarity mechanisms, opposed the deployment of European naval assets in the Mediterranean claiming that such operations risk creating 'pull factors' for migrants (Barigazzi, 2020; Karolewski & Benedikter, 2018). As a result, although the mandate for the naval operation was renewed for six months, no vessels were provided, rendering it operationally obsolete, ultimately leading to its termination.

Its successor, Operation Irini, was launched in this context of eroded consensus. Consequently, both its mandate and geographical scope were reduced. Since its deployment, the operation continuously struggled with member state disagreements over resources and operational priorities (Mantini, 2019; Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023).

Furthermore, unilateral actions conducted outside the EU framework, particularly by France and Italy, significantly undermined both European cohesion and the effectiveness of CFSP instruments in Libya. Driven by domestic imperatives such as containing migration flows or securing national integrity through the strengthening of counterterrorism activities, these states pursued national strategies that bypassed collective coordination and worsened Libyan

situation. Their rivalry exacerbated the very Libyan fragmentation and instability that constrained EU missions on the ground hence directly undermining EU operational capacities.

Indeed, by politically legitimizing opposing factions and supporting them through the provision of equipment, funding, and capacity-building assistance, member states contributed to prolonging the conflict, thereby worsening the security environment in which EU missions operated. Furthermore, France's indirect export of military assets to Haftar directly weakened the credibility of the EU arms embargo regime, later embodied in Operation Irini, undermining the Union's ability to present itself as a neutral enforcer, reducing compliance incentives, ultimately demonstrating how domestic-driven unilateralism can directly weaken adherence to commitments, enforcement capabilities and EU credibility.

Moreover, competition over hydrocarbon access, materialized on the ground by fueling Libyan actors fighting for the control of these infrastructures, and strategic influence in the Mediterranean further entrenched divisions, preventing the EU from articulating a unified political line. The absence of a coherent strategic position translated into weak political guidance for CSDP missions and diluted mandates designed to accommodate internal disagreements rather than maximize effectiveness.

In this sense, intra-European politicization actively worsened Libyan instability, transforming the EU from a potential stabilizing actor into a divided stakeholder whose internal rivalries manifested in constrained enforcement, limited operational impact and reduced credibility.

Consequently, European operations in Libya remained limited in scope, resources, and political backing, not due to a total lack of interests by European, as they have been deployed, but to the inability of the CFSP to discipline member state behavior. It demonstrates that the failure of CFSP instruments cannot be limited to a simple understanding of contextual factors as member states themselves have constituted key factors of it. In Libya, CFSP instruments did not fail for lack of tools, but because those tools became embedded in domestic political competition, making collective action politically costly and institutionally fragile. Hence, by prioritizing domestic electoral considerations and ranking internal political outcomes over collective commitments, member states metamorphosed CFSP instruments into arenas of political contestation rather than tools of coordinated crisis management. Furthermore, this operational weakness eroded both the EU's coercive credibility, limiting its ability to enforce mandates like

the arms embargo, and its normative credibility, as member state competition signaled to Libyan actors and external powers that EU commitments could be selectively applied.

The restricted mandates, limited resources, and slow deployment identified in the previous chapter thus appear less as contextual shortcomings than as inherent flaws rooted in the design of the CFSP legal framework. Its intergovernmental nature proves to be too permissive for states, allowing them to instrumentalize EU missions in pursuit of national priorities, or even to paralyze them completely when collective action conflicts with national political constraints or unilateral strategies. In this sense, operational shortcomings reflected the projection of domestically driven political constraints onto the EU level, a dynamic that the intergovernmental architecture of the CFSP is structurally unable to discipline. This dynamic illustrates a broader post-functional logic whereby the politicization of integration constrains governments' room for maneuver, ultimately reducing the scope for supranational coordination. In the Libyan case, the CFSP did not really fail due to the lack of instruments, but because those instruments became embedded in domestic political competition, rendering collective action politically costly and institutionally fragile.

2.3- European Diplomatic Fragmentation: Member-State Rivalry and the Hollowing Out of EU Coordination

It must be stressed that, although the Lisbon Treaty preserves foreign policy as an intergovernmental domain, the EU legal order nevertheless provides a constitutional safeguard aimed at ensuring unity of action through the “duty of cooperation” enshrined in Article 32 TEU (Schütze, 2019; Amadio Viceré, 2022). Member states are required to consult one another before undertaking external actions that may affect the Union's interests and to coordinate their activities within the Council and with the High Representative. This emphasis on unity was also strongly reaffirmed within the European political discourse, notably at the strategic level, as the 2016 Global Strategy declared that “forging unity as Europeans has never been so vital nor so urgent,” insisting that “there is no clash between national and European interests” (EEAS, 2016). In practice, however, member state strategic divergences combined with the Franco-Italian competition in Libya hollowed out this mechanism.

Italy's direct engagement with Libyan authorities through their 2017 MoU and with militias to externalize migration control alongside France's substantial contribution to UN-supported GNA's failure through covert military and increasingly assertive political support to Haftar's forces, directly undermining EU objectives, were pursued outside EU coordination frameworks, and in some cases even without the knowledge of European member states and institutions (Major, 2021).

This erosion of the duty of cooperation became particularly visible during key diplomatic junctures of the Libyan conflict, where French unilateral positioning openly conflicted with emerging EU consensus and constrained collective European diplomacy, as exemplified by the Celle-Saint-Cloud and the Paris meeting, legitimizing Haftar at the diplomatic scale. Even more threatening for EU position was the stance taken by France in April 2019, when Khalifa Haftar launched his offensive against Tripoli. While the High Representative drafted an EU statement condemning the attack and calling on LNA forces to withdraw, warning that the offensive endangered civilians, disrupted the UN-led political process, and risked regional escalation, France initially blocked its adoption, standing in opposition to all other EU member states (Baczynska & Guarascio, 2019; Major, 2021). Although Paris ultimately associated itself with a weakened version of the text, this episode exposed the fragility of EU diplomatic unity and further demonstrated how a single member state could neutralize collective EU action, reinforcing the post-functionalist insight that domestically anchored national preferences can override common positions.

Beyond political obstruction, this episode revealed the absence of a shared normative and strategic understanding among member states regarding legitimate authority, acceptable partners, or the appropriate use of diplomacy in Libya, reflecting deeper divergences in national strategic cultures and role conceptions, in line with the constructivist argument. In turn, these unresolved national divisions translated into visible diplomatic incoherence, reinforcing external perceptions of a fragmented EU lacking resolve to sustain a unified diplomatic line in the face of strategic costs, further weakening its credibility as a neutral, coherent and consistent foreign policy interlocutor.

France was not alone in pursuing nationally framed diplomatic initiatives. Italy, in its influence struggle with France, also sought to reclaim strategic leadership over the Libyan file through the organization of the Palermo Conference in November 2018, presented as an attempt to

restore political dialogue under UN auspices. While formally aligned with multilateral objectives, the initiative was widely interpreted as a response to France's earlier Paris summit and as part of a broader competition for diplomatic primacy in Libya (Pedde, 2018). The conference exposed underlying intra-European rivalries, as disagreements over participation formats, sequencing of elections, and engagement with Haftar reflected competing national priorities rather than a coordinated European strategy. Rather than consolidating EU diplomatic coherence, Palermo illustrated how parallel national initiatives fragmented mediation efforts and reinforced perceptions of a divided Europe unable to articulate a unified political roadmap.

Similar dynamics unfolded during the Berlin Conference process initiated in late 2019 under German leadership and UN auspices. Rather than reinforcing the EU's collective objective of enforcing the UN arms embargo and curbing foreign interference, France played a key role in shifting the diplomatic focus toward pressuring the GNA to make political concessions as a precondition for ceasefire arrangements while limiting pressure on its ally, the UAE (Major, 2021; Trégarot, 2023). This approach not only diluted the EU's normative stance but also undermined the credibility of the Berlin Process itself, by hollowing out EU coherence in a multilateral framework.

Despite European efforts to present the conference as a diplomatic success, foreign interventions by Turkey, the UAE, and Russia intensified in its aftermath, while the EU did not translate the summit agreements into effective intervening action on the ground as no robust military or civilian intervention was deployed subsequently. Furthermore, The Berlin communiqués themselves lacked binding enforcement mechanisms. They called for respect of the UN arms embargo and for ceasefire implementation but did not establish credible monitoring or punitive follow-through (Bibbo, 2025; Aydemir, 2021).

The inability of the EU to project a unified and enforceable intervention strategy has been evidenced through the continuation and escalation of foreign military involvement by non-EU actors in Libya after the conferences. Turkey's military intervention on behalf of the Tripoli-based GNA, undertaken outside the framework of EU consensus and in direct violation of Berlin commitments, decisively halted the offensive of Khalifa Haftar and reshaped the conflict's balance of power in 2020, enabling the occurrence of the Second Berlin Conference (Major, 2021; Wehrey, 2020).

Consequently, European influence over the conflict continued to decline, with responses limited to diplomatic engagement without powerful value, illustrating how the inability of the EU to overcome member state divisions created strategic openings for external powers, particularly Turkey and Russia, to expand their influence at Europe's immediate periphery, further eroding the Union's credibility and strategic influence (Wehrey, 2020; Megerisi, 2020b; Megerisi, 2020c).

Moreover, France's diplomatic posture during this period further strained relations with Tripoli-based authorities. In 2019, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian publicly acknowledged France's support for the LNA's counterterrorism operations in southern Libya, while French diplomats repeatedly obstructed EU attempts to explicitly condemn Haftar's actions (Le Figaro, 2019). These positions prompted Libya's Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha to announce the suspension of all cooperation with France, explicitly accusing Paris of supporting "the war criminal Haftar" (Trégarot, 2023).

Parallely, despite its actions and active support to Haftar and its tolerance regarding UAE military equipment provision to the LNA, France emerged as one of the most vocal critics of Turkey's 2019 intervention. While the latter consisted in the only legally based military intervention in Libya and defending the internationally recognized government, France accused it of violating both UN arms embargo and Berlin Conference commitments, further reinforcing perceptions of European hypocrisy through selective norm enforcement and strategic inconsistency (Reuters, 2020). Such reactions underscore how unilateral diplomatic engagement not only fractured European coordination internally but also damaged the EU's external credibility as a neutral, normative and coherent actor in the eyes of Libyan stakeholders.

It was only after Haftar's failure to capture Tripoli that France began to temper its stance, seeking to restore its image as a mediating power (Trégarot, 2023). This shift materialized in the joint Franco-Italo-German statement of June 2020 calling for de-escalation, respect for the arms embargo, and renewed support for UN-led mediation (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2020). While this episode demonstrates that diplomatic coordination between member states remains possible, it also highlights that EU diplomacy might be considered a last resort convergence, emerging only when national strategy has proven unsuccessful. It further highlighted the degree of permissiveness characterizing

intergovernmentalism, letting a state taking publicly a contradictory stance and defending the actual adversary of the European block.

Taken together, these developments reveal that European diplomatic fragmentation in Libya was not limited to disagreement within the EU institutions but evolved into competitive diplomatic entrepreneurship among member states. Rather than strengthening coordination through Article 32 TEU, national initiatives such as the Celle-Saint-Cloud, Paris and Palermo conferences materialized rivalry at the diplomatic level. The duty of cooperation thus proved its lack of constraining force, as member states increasingly privileged national visibility, strategic positioning, and bilateral leverage over collective coherence. In practice, EU diplomacy became reactive and secondary to parallel national tracks.

This progressive weakening of coordination within formal EU structures proved the incapacity of the Union to discipline its member states, even on the diplomatic level. It is within this context of eroded institutional discipline that processes of informalization and differentiated cooperation began to take root, member states relying on ad hoc coalitions and informal formats when common positions proved difficult or politically inconvenient, further marginalizing EU institutions in the management of the Libyan crisis. Moreover, the erosion of diplomatic unity intensified operational limitations. By pursuing competing bilateral agendas, member states undermined the political consensus necessary for setting robust mission mandates, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of fragmentation

2.4- Circumventing EU Institutions: From Informalization and Differentiated Cooperation to EU Marginalization

This persistent inability to overcome member state divisions within formal EU CFSP structures has created conditions conducive to informal and differentiated coordination mechanisms, as theorized by Amadio Viceré (2022). When intra-EU disagreement is high or collective capacity is insufficient, member states establish parallel or informal groupings to pursue national priorities while partially aligning with EU frameworks. Even in cases of relatively high EU capacity, this may still prove insufficient to make the Union a forum capable of coordinating member states' foreign policy (Amadio Viceré, 2022). This dynamic reflects a broader post-Lisbon pattern identified by new intergovernmentalism, whereby member states

intensify coordination while deliberately preserving intergovernmental control and limiting supranational empowerment in sovereignty-sensitive domains such as foreign and security policy.

In Libya, such patterns of fragmentation and differentiated engagement emerged from the very outset of the conflict. In 2011, EU member states were deeply divided over the appropriate response to the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi. While France and the United Kingdom advocated for military intervention, Germany and Italy opposed it, reflecting both strategic and domestic political considerations (Koenig, 2014). This high level of intra-European disagreement, combined with the EU's limited operational capacity at the time, prevented the Union from articulating a unified strategy, undermining its coherence as a foreign policy actor.

In this context, an informal coalition of EU member states, including Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, began cooperating with third-party actors through the Libya Contact Group, also known as the Friends of Libya Group. Established in March 2011 with strong involvement from then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the group aimed to coordinate international action and to secure recognition of the NTC as Libya's legitimate representative (U.S. Department of State, 2011). While European institutions formally approved the group (Council of the EU, 2011a; Council of the EU, 2011b) they were actually sidelined from this negotiation and coordination mechanism. This group ultimately only aimed to produce legitimacy for armed operation which ultimately occurred only through unilateral initiatives undertaken by France and the UK despite the absence of consent from other members and European supranational institution and thus of legitimacy at least at European level (Amadio Viceré, 2022; Fabbrini, 2014).

The emergence of this informal framework reflected the inability of the EU to act collectively within its institutional structures. Rather than operating through the CFSP, key member states pursued negotiation and coordination in ad hoc and externally anchored formats, effectively bypassing the Union's formal mechanisms. Emerged in reaction to high intra-EU disagreement on military intervention and EU's limited capacity, the group created forms of differentiated

competition⁵. Rather than deepening integration through supranational channels, member states preserved control over diplomatic direction. This reflects precisely the preference structure identified by new intergovernmentalism: cooperation is maintained, but authority is retained at the intergovernmental level.

Furthermore, discussions on Libya's political transition remained primarily UN-led, particularly within the framework of the UNSC. Although EU institutions supported the political process in Libya, notably through the launch of the EUBAM, conducting capacity-building activities, and active political backing for the creation of a national unity government, the Union lacked the diplomatic leverage necessary to drive high-level negotiations independently (EEAS, 2014; Toaldo, 2016). As a result, coordination increasingly shifted toward informal formats centered around the UNSC, most notably the P3 (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

The emergence of these formats reflected a specific configuration: relatively low disagreement among EU member states regarding the objective of fostering a national unity government, but insufficient European capacity to impose political pressure on Libyan factions or curb interference by regional actors (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016; Toaldo, 2016). In practice, this meant that diplomatic steering occurred primarily within UN-based coalitions rather than through EU institutional channels.

Following the outbreak of the second Libyan civil war in 2014, expanded formats such as the P3+5 and later the more durable P3+2 emerged. The latter, composed of the P3 plus Italy and Germany, became particularly influential in shaping European diplomatic positioning (Amadio Viceré, 2022). Although these groupings remained formally anchored to EU coordination, in the sense that outcomes were often reflected in EU foreign policy actions, they operated through restricted, informal circles rather than through the Council or the EEAS.

⁵ Competitive differentiation refers to a situation in which high intergovernmental disagreement and low EU capacity block collective EU action, leading informal groupings of member states to operate outside formal EU frameworks and compete with EU institutions while still exploiting EU legitimacy and influence (Amadio Viceré, 2022).

Consequently, while the EU was formally involved in supporting the Libyan Political Agreement of December 2015 and the subsequent GNA, it remained dependent on the “good faith” and diplomatic leverage of UNSC actors to sustain negotiations (Toaldo, 2016; Marcuzzi, 2022). These arrangements generated a form of combinative differentiation⁶: member states coordinated in smaller diplomatic coalitions that were partially embedded within, yet not really controlled by, EU structures. Rather than consolidating European leadership, such formats reinforced institutional marginalization, as strategic steering occurred outside formal CFSP mechanisms (Amadio Viceré, 2022; Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). Moreover, it resulted in further European fragmentation and marginalization of European institutions on the diplomatic stage, by pursuing negotiations only between a small number of member states and limiting the relevance of the EU as a political interlocutor (Amadio Viceré, 2022; Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). Member states, favoring other frameworks and ad hoc coalitions, due to national preferences or weak European capacity, bypassed EU institutional coordination mechanisms, being the Council or the EEAS (Karlsrud & Reykers, 2020; Amadio Viceré, 2022). Furthermore, by depending on UNSC actors, Union’s effectiveness and resolve were therefore mediated by external actors, limiting its capacity to shape outcomes autonomously and reinforcing perceptions of strategic dependency.

Ultimately, the Berlin Conference emerged in a context characterized by renewed high levels of disagreement among EU member states, particularly between France and Italy as illustrated by the significant diplomatic tensions that erupted between the two European states, combined with relatively strong diplomatic capacity at the European level. Launched in September 2019 at the initiative of the German government and in coordination with the UN Special Representative, the Conference sought to restore diplomatic momentum after the escalation of the 2019–2020 civil war and Turkey’s direct military intervention (Marcuzzi, 2022; Megerisi, 2020). Although formally embedded within the UN framework, Germany insisted on including the EU alongside key international stakeholders, thereby reintroducing a European dimension to high-level negotiations.

⁶ Combinative differentiation occurs when low disagreement among member states coincides with a low level of EU capacity, allowing political approval of collective EU action while preventing the EU from acting alone. This situation leads informal groupings of member states to coordinate ex ante with EU institutions and complement EU policies through their own capabilities (Amadio Viceré, 2022).

However, the structure of the Berlin Process reflected differentiated cooperation⁷, rather than centralized EU leadership. Strategic steering occurred within a restricted circle of key member states, building upon earlier P3+2 configurations, while EU institutions were informed of outcomes ex post through Council debriefings (Council of the EU, 2020b; Amadio Viceré, 2022). This dynamic was exemplified by the creation of the Operation Irini. As reported by the Council, while being debriefed on the outcome of the Berlin Conference, it was informed that present member states reached a political agreement on launching a new Mediterranean operation to implement the UN arms embargo while the secondary tasks would be the fight against human trafficking (Council of the EU, 2020). In other words, the European CSDP operation deployed through the CFSP framework has been decided and even defined through diplomatic coordination within the Berlin informal framework rather than emerging autonomously from CFSP institutional planning.

Moreover, the mandate of Operation Irini itself reflected the compromises forged within these restricted intergovernmental circles. While its primary task was the enforcement of the UN arms embargo, member states explicitly agreed that the operation's potential impact on migration flows would be carefully monitored and could justify the withdrawal of maritime assets if deemed necessary (Council of the EU, 2020). This conditionality reveals how domestically sensitive issues were embedded directly into operational design, illustrating how informal political grouping shaped the scope and limits of EU action.

The creation of Operation Irini demonstrates that although the Union was formally represented, decision-making authority remained concentrated within informal intergovernmental formats rather than within the CFSP institutional machinery. EU institutions functioned primarily as implementing and communicative channels for decisions politically pre-negotiated elsewhere. The Berlin Conference thus exemplifies how differentiated diplomacy structured the production of CFSP instruments, reinforcing the centrality of member states while constraining supranational autonomy.

⁷ Differentiated cooperation occurs when high intergovernmental disagreement prevents collective EU action, prompting informal groups of member states to act independently while relying ex post on EU structures and resources. As a result, the EU is procedurally marginalized from negotiations and its capacities are instrumentalized by small groups of member states, hindering the emergence of a collective European response (Amadio Viceré, 2022).

At the same time, the EU did contribute substantively to specific technical domains. For instance, it played an active role in the economic working group, with the EEAS and the European Commission providing expertise, policy input, and economic analysis that individual member states could not deliver (Amadio Viceré, 2022). This suggests that European involvement operated through cooperative differentiation⁸: member states leveraged EU diplomatic authority and technical resources while retaining political control within smaller informal coalitions. This dynamic is particularly consistent with new intergovernmentalist expectations as strategic leadership increasingly gravitates toward intergovernmental forums, principally those involving major member states, while supranational bodies perform supportive or technical roles. Thus, cooperation persists, but within ad hoc or informal formats while supranational autonomy does not expand.

Nevertheless, the EU's role remained contested by external actors with Turkey openly criticizing the Union's involvement, notably in light of the launch of Operation IRINI, which Ankara perceived as politically biased, while Russia reportedly opposed explicit references to EU contributions in Berlin declarations (Amadio Viceré, 2022) hence constraining the EU's ability to assert autonomous leadership by reinforcing considerations of not being a relevant diplomatic actor, weakening both influential and deterrent credibility vis-à-vis external actors while weakening the EU's coherence as a unified diplomatic interlocutor.

Thus, the Berlin Conference illustrates not the absolute exclusion but the structural marginalization of the EU through informal governance. While the EU possessed diplomatic credibility and technical expertise, persistent national divergences combined with limited supranational authority led to the predominance of restricted intergovernmental formats limiting institutional centralization. As a result, European external action remained dependent on member state leadership and UN anchoring, reinforcing fragmentation and constraining the

⁸ Cooperative differentiation occurs when high disagreement among EU member states blocks collective action within formal EU forums, despite the Union having the capacity to respond. Informal groups then act outside the common framework and later integrate their initiatives into EU structures, relying on its resources and administrative support. Although prior consensus is lacking, other member states often tolerate this arrangement because they still share an interest in addressing the issue (Amadio Viceré, 2022).

Union's capacity to act as a unified strategic actor (Amadio Viceré, 2022; Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023).

Taken together, the Friends of Libya Group in 2011, the P3-centered diplomacy between 2014 and 2016, and the Berlin Conference culminating in the launch of Operation Irini reveal a constant pattern of informalization in the EU's Libya policy. Across phases of the conflict, when either disagreement among member states was high or collective capacity was insufficient, diplomatic coordination shifted toward restricted intergovernmental formats. These groupings did not emerge accidentally, on the contrary, they reflected the strategic preferences of key member states seeking to preserve influence over politically important issues while avoiding the constraints of full CFSP centralization, an outcome consistent with new intergovernmentalism and reinforced by postfunctionalist constraints when issues became politically sensitive.

In this sense, informal coalitions functioned as mechanisms through which national governments tried to reconcile domestic political considerations, geopolitical interests, and limited EU capacity. While they sometimes enabled European re-engagement, as in the Berlin Process, they also reinforced structural differentiation, concentrating decision-making power in small circles and limiting the autonomy of EU institutions. The cumulative effect was not the absence of European action, but its fragmentation as national interests of few member states structured diplomatic leadership and shaped the scope, timing, and ambition of collective instruments.

By circumventing EU coordination frameworks and pursuing national priorities through unilateral and informal channels, member states, notably France and Italy, created conditions that directly compromised the operational logic of CSDP missions, which rely on sustained political consensus, unanimous decisions, and voluntary participation. As a result, missions such as EUBAM Libya, Operation Sophia and later Irini suffered from chronic under-resourcing, restricted mandates, and limited adaptability.

Beyond coordination failures, Franco-Italian unilateralism also reshaped the conflict environment itself. By strengthening the opposing forces in the conflict, national actions only served to fuel instability and political fragmentation in Libya, which, as demonstrated in the second chapter, were key factors in the operational failure of CFSP instruments. This

competition, combined with broader member states differences, even provided leverage to Libyan actors against member states and European institutions, as divisions were actively exploited by Libyan actors themselves, who leveraged rivalries among member states to secure political recognition, economic resources, and diplomatic support from competing states (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023). Fragmentation thus became self-reinforcing as diminished coherence reduced EU leverage, which in turn further weakened its effectiveness.

Furthermore, the combined undermining of operational capacities and diplomatic marginalization of the EU, projecting an image of a fragmented Europe opened opportunities for external powers to establish their influence in the region, as previously demonstrated with the rise of Turkey and Russia, both at military and diplomatic scales (Lacher, 2021; Major, 2021). In this sense, operational paralysis or diplomatic marginalization were systemic rather than accidental. By allowing member state competition to persist unchecked, without providing European institutions with mechanisms to discipline its members, the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP has structurally constrained the EU's capacity to act effectively and present itself as a relevant, cohesive and neutral interlocutor, while enabling conflicting parties to take advantage of these divisions, consequently eroding its credibility as a security actor in its own neighborhood, preventing coherence, efficiency and deterrence of EU foreign policy.

Furthermore, these divisions prevented the emergence of a shared European strategic culture, in line with constructivist perspectives, limiting convergence on both the interpretation of the Libyan crisis and the selection of appropriate policy responses. In sum, the Libyan case shows how intergovernmental permissiveness, domestic politicization, and member state competition generate operational paralysis and diplomatic fragmentation, structurally marginalizing EU institutions and hindering the development of a shared strategic culture, ultimately constraining the Union's credibility as a security actor.

3. The Cost of Intergovernmentalism: EU Normative and Credibility Erosion

3.1- Normative Inconsistency and Organized Hypocrisy

Beyond questions of diplomatic and operational capacity, the EU's fragmented engagement affected its ability to uphold and project the values and principles it formally claims to promote in its external action. Indeed, the cumulative effect of unilateral member state

initiatives and differentiated European responses in Libya significantly weakened the Union's normative credibility, particularly its claim to act as a principled and rules-based interlocutor in conflict settings. Rather than reinforcing the EU's self-image as a promoter of multilateralism, democracy, human rights, and international law, European involvement in Libya increasingly appeared selective, inconsistent, and subordinated to short-term security imperatives. Although EU official documents and public statements consistently reaffirmed support to the UN-led political process and commitments to human rights, civilian protection, and respect for international law, member state practices frequently contradicted these principles, contributing to a dilution of the EU's normative stance in Libya. In credibility terms, this widening gap between declaratory commitments and actual practices weakened the Union's consistency and reduced its capacity to project normative authority in the Libyan context.

Indeed, France openly supported Haftar's forces and its assault on Tripoli despite warnings by EU institutions that it endangered civilians and the repeated allegations of violations of international humanitarian law by the latter (Lawyers for Justice in Libya, 2022; Amnesty International UK, 2019; Major, 2021) or the alleged involvement of French aircraft in Emirati airstrikes suspected of causing civilian casualties (Rouget, 2020). This selective adherence underscores a capability–expectation gap: while the EU projected normative commitments, it lacked the institutional means to enforce them internally or externally, reflecting structural constraints predicted by postfunctionalism, where domestic political pressures shape the limits of supranational action.

Critics have been made particularly on the migration matters and the securitization approach taken by both the EU and its member states. Despite the EU's formal endorsement of international refugee law and its self-presentation as a normative power, unilateral and European cooperations with Libyan authorities occurred in a context marked by systematic violence, arbitrary detention, and widespread abuses against migrants. Long before the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Italy and Libya was concluded, Italian practices in the country already clashed with core human-rights norms. In *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy*, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Italy's practice of pushbacks to Libya violated key provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights, including the prohibition of collective expulsions and the right against inhuman treatment, precisely because Libya could not guarantee fundamental protections for asylum seekers and migrants (European Court of Human Rights, 2012).

Although it has been demonstrated that the institutions and stability necessary to guarantee the protection and safety of migrants were never successfully established, this did not prevent member states and the EU from pursuing policies that facilitated returns to Libya or outsourced border and migration control to Libyan authorities. An OHCHR report published in 2016 explicitly documented calls by European governments to return migrants to Libya and to support the establishment of reception or detention facilities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights & UNSMIL, 2016).

Indeed, despite its legal precedent, Italy's 2017 MoU with Libya formalized a practice of externalization of migration by outsourcing SAR operations and border control to actors with weak institutions, limited accountability, and documented records of abuses. As already evidenced in the case of the EU operations, the academic literature analyzing this agreement asserts that outsourcing SAR to the Libyan Coast Guard, equipped and trained with Italian and EU support, increased the likelihood of deadly events in areas patrolled by those forces, precisely because Libya lacked the institutional capacity and legal safeguards to conduct humane rescue operations (Zambiasi & Albarosa, 2024). This memorandum and its practical outcomes have been widely criticized for facilitating violent “pullbacks”, systematic interception and return of migrants to Libyan detention centers, exposing them to torture, extortion, arbitrary imprisonment, and other abuses that human rights bodies consider close to crimes against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Ceretti, 2023).

Civil society campaigns and legal challenges have highlighted how externalization and outsourcing of border enforcement to militias and unaccountable Libyan forces entrenched human-rights violations while shielding European states from direct responsibility (Zambiasi & Albarosa, 2024; Ceretti, 2023). Such practices exposed a widening gap between normative commitments and operational behavior that the EU failed to prevent repeatedly, weakening EU's reputation for resolve.

By tolerating or failing to block policies that resulted in systemic violations of rights and principle enshrined in both international law and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU's moral authority has weakened, exposing a great gap between discourse and practice. Moreover, rather than correcting these practices, the 2016 EU Global Strategy arguably formalized and normalized them by embedding migration control and border externalization at

the core of the Union's security-oriented external action (Barbé & Morillas, 2019; Espriu, 2024). While the Global Strategy reaffirmed a commitment to a "principled" foreign policy, it simultaneously reframed migration primarily as a security challenge, thereby providing political and strategic justification for the aforementioned practices that ultimately conflicted with the EU's own legal and normative obligations (Martini and Megerisi, 2023; Espriu, 2024). This securitized reorientation did not emerge in a vacuum but reflected the growing politicization of migration across the European political landscape, marked by the rise of populist and nationalist movements and increasing domestic pressure on governments to demonstrate control over borders (Eljarh, 2020a). In this context, normative considerations were progressively subordinated to imperatives of deterrence and containment and were then echoed at European level. The sustained allocation of equipment and funding of Libyan Coast Guards, despite previously mentioned allegations, thus casts doubt on the Union's reputation for resolve regarding the protection of fundamental rights (DG NEAR, 2020; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Indeed, despite its awareness of these legal and humanitarian concerns, the EU neither suspended nor meaningfully conditioned its political and financial support for migration cooperation with Libya. This inconsistency reinforced the impression that the EU's engagement in Libya was motivated less by a determination to defend its proclaimed values than by the protection of its own interests, through a pragmatic acceptance of practices that would yield short-term political gains.

Hence these dynamics contributed to a pattern of organized hypocrisy at both member-state and EU levels, whereby normative commitments were maintained at the level of discourse while systematically compromised in implementation. Rather than resulting from a single policy choice, this EU hypocrisy emerged from the interaction between the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP, the politicization of external action within member states and the divergences in strategy and normative engagement, highlighting the explanatory power of constructivist approach alongside intergovernmentalist and postfunctionalist perspectives. As migration and security became increasingly salient in national political debates, normative considerations were progressively subordinated to short-term risk management at EU CFSP level, further weakening the coherence of the EU's normative posture in Libya. This erosion of normative consistency further undermined the EU's power of attraction and legitimacy in the eyes of civil society, affected populations, Libyan stakeholders and international partners, further eroding the credibility of EU's claim to be a normative power capable of reconciling security imperatives with fundamental rights.

3.2- Theoretical Assessment: The Structural Roots of Credibility Erosion

Taken together, the empirical findings developed throughout this chapter indicate that the EU's failure to act credibly in Libya cannot be attributed solely to strategic limitations or contextual complexity. Rather, they point to deeper structural and political dynamics embedded in the governance of the CFSP itself. By examining diplomatic fragmentation, operational paralysis, and normative inconsistency, Chapter III has demonstrated that the erosion of the EU's credibility in Libya was the cumulative outcome of permissive institutional arrangements, heightened domestic politicization spilling over to the European level, and the absence of a shared strategic culture among member states.

From the perspective of new intergovernmentalism, the Libyan case illustrates how the intergovernmental architecture of the CFSP generated a high degree of permissiveness toward unilateral national actions. Leadership of intergovernmental institutions, decision-making based on unanimity, combined with voluntary participation in CSDP missions, undermined the EU's capacity to impose discipline or to correct divergent national strategies once they emerged. This permissiveness was further reinforced by the weak justiciability of CFSP actions, with restricted judicial oversight, depriving EU institutions of effective enforcement mechanisms (Article 24 TEU; Wessel, 2016). Moreover, the CFSP's intergovernmental design is characterized by a pronounced deficit of democratic accountability, as decision-making within the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council largely excludes the European Parliament, while national parliaments exercise only limited *ex ante* or *ex post* control over their governments' foreign policy choices (Fabbrini, 2014). This dual absence of judicial and parliamentary constraints significantly lowered the political costs of unilateral or normatively problematic actions. Accountability gaps were further deepened by the externalization of sensitive policy domains, particularly in the field of migration, which effectively displaced responsibility away from EU institutions and member states despite the severe humanitarian consequences on the ground. As a result, member states were able to pursue competing diplomatic, military, and migration policies in Libya with limited institutional or legal constraints, even when these actions directly undermined collectively agreed objectives. Rather than fostering convergence, the CFSP framework tolerated fragmentation, illustrated by the key role played by informal groupings, thereby weakening the EU's ability to project a unified and credible external posture.

These institutional dynamics were exacerbated by the processes highlighted by postfunctionalism of domestic politicization, notably the growing politicization of migration and security issues, such as the expansion of terrorist groups in the region, within member states. As migration became an increasingly salient and polarizing topic in domestic political arenas, national governments faced strong incentives to prioritize short-term electoral considerations over long-term collective commitments. This politicization constrained the space for compromise at EU level and contributed to the securitization of external action, particularly in Libya. EU-level strategies, including the implementation of the 2016 Global Strategy, increasingly reflected these domestic pressures by framing migration primarily as a security threat, thereby normalizing practices that conflicted with the Union's normative commitments. In this context, the persistence of incoherent and normatively problematic policies was not simply a failure of coordination, but the consequence of sustained domestic contestation spilling over into EU foreign policymaking.

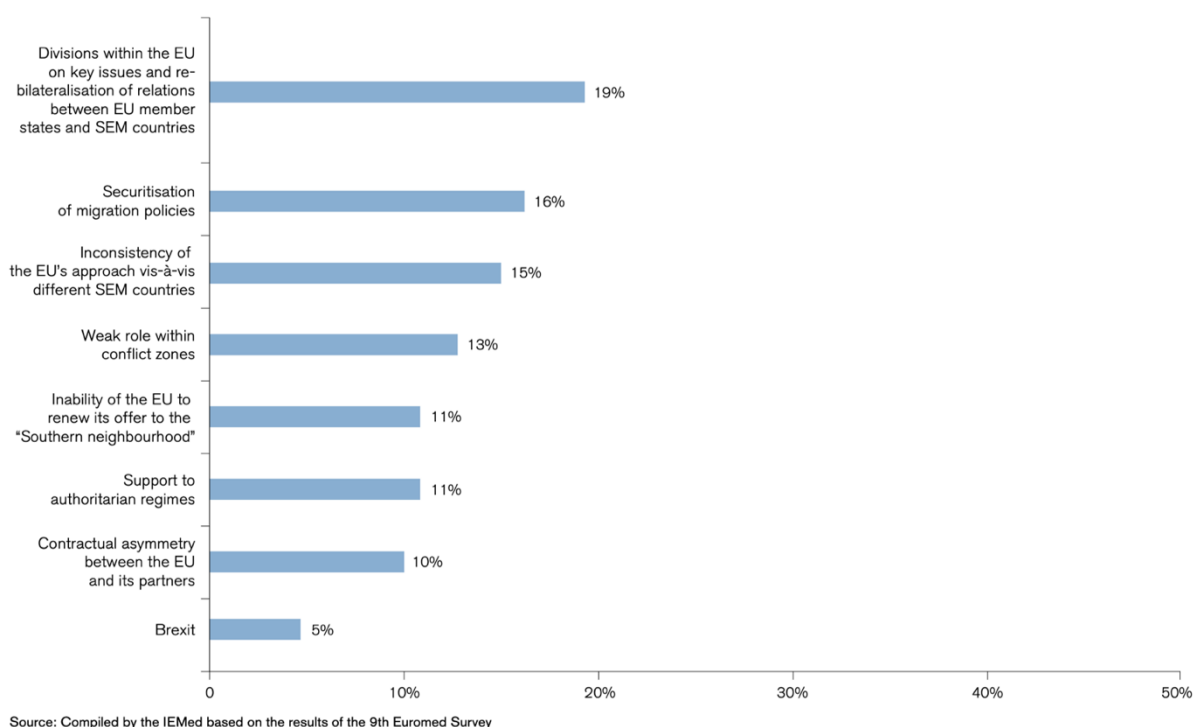
At the same time, a constructivist reading helps explain why these dynamics translated into a deeper erosion of the EU's credibility. The Libyan case revealed not only divergences in material interests, but also fundamentally different threat perceptions, historical experiences, national role conceptions among key member states. The absence of a shared strategic culture prevented the emergence of common interpretations of the conflict and of the EU's appropriate role within it. Instead of uniting member states into a coherent European security identity, the CFSP framework allowed competing strategic cultures to coexist and, at times, directly confront one another. These identity-based divergences did not merely generate episodic policy disagreement but evolved into systematic patterns of differentiated coordination, through which member states relied on informal, selective, and parallel frameworks to pursue their preferred interpretations of the Libyan conflict. This fragmentation, sustained through differentiated coordination and further reinforced by the Union's incapacity to align national divergences within a comprehensive and shared strategy weakened the EU's capacity to maintain a consistent narrative and undermined its claim to act as a unified, influential, principled, and reliable interlocutor, (Akamo, Bedin & Cristiani, 2023).

The interaction of these three dynamics had direct consequences for the EU's credibility. Fragmentation at the institutional level enabled unilateralism, politicization at the domestic level sustained it, and the absence of a shared strategic culture explained the existence of

member state divergences and prevented its resolution. Credibility, understood not only as consistency between discourse and practice but also as an externally perceived attribute, was progressively eroded as the gap between declared principles and objectives versus actual behavior and outcomes widened. Empirical evidence from regional perception surveys reinforces this conclusion. A Euro-Mediterranean survey data (see Figure A) identified divisions among EU member states, the securitization of migration policies and EU's approach incoherency as the three most significant factors undermining the Union's credibility in the Mediterranean, directly mirroring the dynamics observed in the Libyan case (IEMed, 2020). Furthermore, as previously stated, this credibility deficit also has substantial geopolitical consequences. Evidence from a MENARA project's survey (see Figure B) shows that the EU ranks behind global and regional powers, namely the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, Turkey and China, in perceptions of future influence in the MENA region (MENARA Project, 2019). This comparatively low ranking illustrates how credibility erosion directly translates into diminished external relevance, confirming that the loss of credibility observed in Libya reflects a broader structural weakness in the EU's external action rather than an isolated case.

Figure A

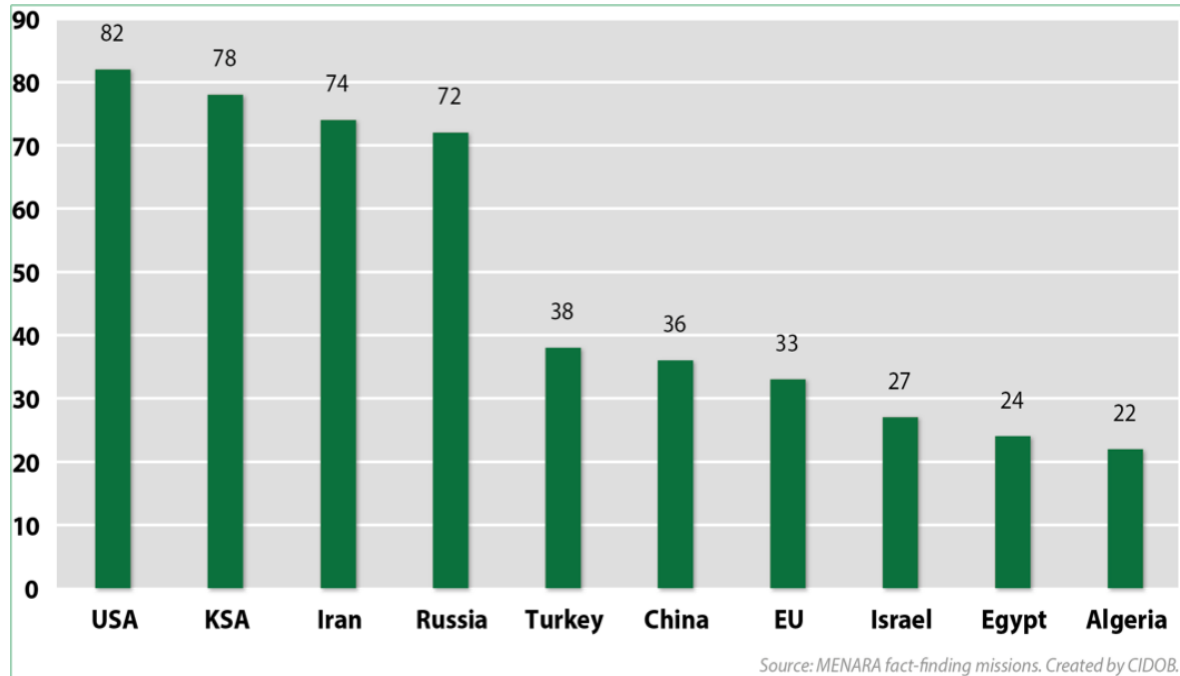
What is most likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean?



Graphic from IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020: *The state of Europe, descriptive report*.

Figure B

Which traditional or new actors will shape the future of the Middle East and North Africa?



Graphic from MENARA Project (2019): *Middle East and North Africa regional architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations.*

Ultimately, the Libyan case demonstrates that the credibility deficit affecting EU external action cannot be dissociated from the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP. By privileging national sovereignty over enforceable coherence, and by failing to mitigate the effects of politicization and strategic divergence, the CFSP framework not only limited the EU's operational effectiveness but also weakened its normative authority. Rather than reconciling security imperatives with its foundational values, the EU's engagement in Libya exposed the structural tensions at the heart of its foreign policy governance, with lasting consequences for its standing as a credible security and normative actor in its immediate neighborhood.

Conclusion - Lisbon Treaty or The EU's Damp Squib of Credibility

This thesis has examined the European Union's response to the Libyan crisis as a critical test of the post-Lisbon CFSP framework, demonstrating that the Union's persistent credibility challenges stem primarily from internal structural, political, and normative dynamics rather than external constraints. Despite the stated ambition to establish a credible geopolitical Union, the CFSP's intergovernmental architecture, characterized by unanimity-based decision-making, voluntary participation or limited supranational authority, generated enduring coordination gaps that systematically constrained the Union's capacity to act effectively and coherently. These institutional limitations were exacerbated by strategic competition among key member states, most notably the Franco-Italian rivalry, which were able to persist as a result of the permissiveness of intergovernmentalism, resulting in unilateral initiatives that circumvented EU frameworks, thereby weakening collective European action. At the same time, the absence of a shared strategic culture and persistent normative inconsistency undermined the Union's ability to project a coherent and credible international identity.

Rather than constituting isolated or ad hoc failures, these dynamics produced a systematic pattern of differentiated coordination, in which informal groupings and selective member state initiatives became normalized. While such arrangements occasionally enabled partial cooperation, they ultimately reinforced fragmentation, limiting the EU's ability to act as a unified actor and eroding its credibility in Libya and beyond. The Libyan case thus illustrates how structural permissiveness within the CFSP not only enables divergence among member states but also institutionalizes incoherence in EU crisis management.

However, while informal and selective cooperation among member states has been largely highlighted as a source of EU fragmentation in this thesis, it also reveals a more nuanced dynamic within the CFSP. In contexts where formal EU procedures are slow or gridlocked, these arrangements can serve as adaptive mechanisms, allowing member states to coordinate quickly, pool resources, or pursue partial solutions. Rather than representing absolute dysfunction, they reflect the intergovernmental system's capacity for flexibility and pragmatic problem-solving. The Libyan crisis illustrates this duality: initiatives such as the P3+2 enabled member states to advance operational or diplomatic objectives even when EU-wide consensus was absent. At the same time, the reliance on such informal mechanisms underscores the

structural trade-off inherent in the CFSP: they can deliver short-term effectiveness but risk entrenching divergent priorities and undermining long-term EU coherence.

In theoretical terms, this thesis has advanced the argument that credibility within the CFSP should be understood as an internally generated condition rooted in governance design rather than as a mere by-product of material capabilities or external recognition. By mobilizing insights from new intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and constructivism, the study has demonstrated that institutional structure, domestic politicization, and the absence of a shared strategic culture jointly shape the Union's capacity to act coherently. The Lisbon Treaty, while formally strengthening the EU's external action architecture, did not alter the underlying intergovernmental logic that privileges unanimity and preserves national sovereignty in matters of high politics. Consequently, crises do not automatically generate integrative spillover in foreign policy. Instead, under entrenched intergovernmental conditions, they tend to reproduce structural permissiveness and expose the limits of collective discipline. Credibility, therefore, emerges as a dependent variable conditioned by governance arrangements, political cohesion, and normative alignment over time.

Empirically, the Libyan crisis constituted a particularly revealing and longitudinal test case of these theoretical propositions. From the 2011 intervention and its immediate aftermath to the prolonged fragmentation of diplomatic and security initiatives, Libya exposed the structural weaknesses embedded within the post-Lisbon CFSP framework. Despite the deployment of sanctions, humanitarian assistance, civilian missions, naval operations, and sustained diplomatic engagement, the Union struggled to translate its broad range of instruments into a unified and strategically coherent approach. Divergent national interests regarding migration management, energy security, counterterrorism, and regional influence, most visibly illustrated through the rivalry between France and Italy, generated competing diplomatic tracks and parallel initiatives that frequently bypassed EU-level coordination. The Union remained present but not decisive, engaged but not influential.

Contextually to the Libyan case, the findings of this thesis demonstrate that the EU's credibility deficit was not primarily the result of insufficient resources or a lack of normative ambition, but of its inability to discipline internal divergence at decisive moments. While the Union maintained a visible institutional footprint and repeatedly affirmed its commitment to stability, democracy, and multilateralism, its fragmented diplomatic posture limited its capacity to shape

political outcomes or deter external interference. The coexistence of multiple negotiation formats, selective engagement by individual member states, and inconsistent prioritization between normative objectives and migration containment weakened the Union's leverage vis-à-vis Libyan actors and competing external powers such as Russia and Turkey. In this sense, Libya does not represent an anomalous failure but rather a paradigmatic illustration of how structural incoherence translates into diminished credibility on the ground.

Building on this analysis, this study demonstrates that the credibility of the Union as a geopolitical actor depends primarily on its ability to discipline its member states, swiftly in a crisis context. Such discipline would enable the EU to deploy its instruments in a manner consistent with its objectives while adhering to the normative standards it seeks to uphold and export, thereby strengthening its reputation as an actor capable of delivering on its commitments. Credibility, in this sense, is not merely reputational but rests on predictability, coherence, establishing deterrence or reliability. Only under these conditions can the Union project a consistent image that fosters both confidence and deterrence, thereby building a solid credibility that would support its aspiration to become a normative power capable of shaping the international arena to advance its interests at limited cost.

Beyond its empirical findings, this thesis contributes to existing scholarship on EU foreign policy by reframing credibility as an internally generated condition rather than only a function of material capabilities or external constraints. It demonstrates that credibility under the CFSP is contingent upon governance structures capable of enforcing coherence, managing strategic competition, and sustaining normative consistency over time. In doing so, the study challenges the assumption that successive crises will automatically drive integration, showing instead that, under conditions of entrenched intergovernmentalism, crises tend to reproduce and even entrench existing structural limitations.

The following table synthesizes the key findings of this thesis, linking empirical observations from the Libyan crisis with analytical arguments and the theoretical mechanisms derived from new intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, and constructivism. It highlights how structural design, domestic politicization, and normative divergence jointly shape the EU's credibility under the post-Lisbon CFSP framework.

Table 2 – Thesis Key Findings

Finding	Analytical Argument	Empirical Illustration (Libya)	Theoretical Mechanism Identified
Credibility is structurally conditioned by governance design	The EU's credibility deficit derives primarily from the post-Lisbon CFSP architecture, which preserves intergovernmental control, unanimity, and limited supranational authority, constraining coherent external action.	Repeated inability to adopt strong collective positions; diluted statements; limited enforcement of common strategies despite institutional innovations.	New Intergovernmentalism: "Integration without supranationalization" anchors coordination deficits; the European Council dominates while supranational actors lack autonomy, preventing disciplined collective action.
Structural permissiveness enables unilateralism	The intergovernmental nature of CFSP allows member states to bypass EU frameworks without institutional sanction, normalizing differentiated coordination and parallel diplomacy.	Franco-Italian rivalry; unilateral diplomatic initiatives; national engagement with Libyan factions outside EU coordination.	New Intergovernmentalism: Consensus-based coordination without supranational enforcement produces structural permissiveness, institutionalizing fragmentation rather than preventing it.
Domestic politicization constrains collective compromise	Exposure and threat perception divergence combined with high domestic salience of migration, counterterrorism, and national prestige reduced governments' willingness to compromise at EU level, reinforcing national preference projection.	Italy's prioritization of migration containment; France's strategic positioning; reluctance to align when domestic political costs were high.	Postfunctionalism: Transition from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus; national identity politics and electoral pressures override functional incentives for integration.
Crises do not generate integrative spillover in CFSP	Contrary to neofunctionalist expectations, the Libyan crisis did not deepen integration but reproduced existing structural constraints and divergences.	From 2011 intervention to Operation Irini, fragmentation persisted despite escalating instability.	New Intergovernmentalism & Postfunctionalism: Sovereignty-sensitive domains remain shielded from supranationalization; politicization blocks further delegation even under crisis pressure.
Absence of shared strategic culture undermines coherence	Divergent historical experiences, threat perceptions, and conceptions of Europe's global role prevented the emergence of a unified strategic approach toward Libya.	Conflicting interpretations of legitimate Libyan interlocutors; divergent approaches toward Libyan crisis; inconsistent engagement with Haftar.	Constructivism: Lack of common foreign policy identity and shared strategic culture fragments policy output beyond institutional constraints.
Normative inconsistency erodes legitimacy	The gap between declared EU values (democracy, multilateralism, human rights) and practical securitization process through prioritization of migration control and security at any cost undermined moral authority.	Cooperation with militias; prioritization of containment over democratic transition; selective engagement with controversial actors.	Constructivism (Normative Power Europe): Competing national moral visions and identities weaken normative coherence, damaging legitimacy and external perception.
EU presence without influence reflects internal incoherence	The EU maintained institutional visibility but failed to shape decisive outcomes due to internal fragmentation and limited collective discipline.	Sanctions, CSDP missions, diplomatic initiatives remained operational but did not prevent escalation or external interference.	Combined Framework: Governance limits (New Intergovernmentalism) + politicization (Postfunctionalism) + identity divergence (Constructivism) interact to weaken actorness and geopolitical credibility.
Credibility is a dependent variable shaped by internal interaction of institutions, politics, and identity	EU geopolitical credibility emerges only when governance design enables coherence, domestic politics allow compromise, and strategic culture aligns normative objectives.	Libya illustrates how misalignment across these dimensions produces diminished leverage vis-à-vis both internal and external actors (Russia, Turkey).	Integrated Theoretical Contribution: Credibility is not material but relational and internally produced through the interaction of institutional structure, politicization, and identity construction.
Without reform, structural incoherence will persist across crises	Absent significant governance reform (e.g., QMV), stronger supranational coordination, and cultivation of shared strategic culture, future crises will reproduce similar fragmentation.	Reinforcement of similar patterns in subsequent crises (e.g., Ukraine context referenced in conclusion).	Forward-Looking Implication: Overcoming credibility deficit requires institutional recalibration (New Intergovernmentalism), depoliticization/consensus-building (Postfunctionalism), and construction of common strategic identity (Constructivism).

Methodologically, the qualitative case-study approach adopted in this thesis offers important analytical advantages. By combining treaty analysis, integration theory, and detailed empirical examination of the Libyan conflict, the study bridges institutional design with concrete foreign policy outcomes. This multi-level approach enables a nuanced understanding of how abstract governance principles translate into operational constraints in external actions. Furthermore, conceptualizing credibility through multidimensional criteria, consistency, effectiveness, resolve, and normative coherence, provides analytical clarity to a concept frequently invoked in political discourse but rarely operationalized systematically.

However, this approach is not without limitations. The reliance on a single in-depth case study, while allowing for contextual depth, might limit the generalizability of the findings. Although Libya constitutes a critical and revealing case, other contexts may display different configurations of member state cohesion or external pressure. Moreover, the assessment of credibility remains inherently complex and relational: it depends not only on internal coherence but also on external perceptions, which are difficult to measure empirically with precision. Finally, while this thesis emphasizes internal structural dynamics as primary explanatory variables, external geopolitical competition and the agency of local actors also significantly shape outcomes, even if they do not constitute the principal focus of the analysis.

These limitations open avenues for future research. Comparative studies between diverse crisis contexts, for example examining similarities and divergences between Libya and the EU's response to the war in Ukraine, would allow scholars to test whether structural permissiveness consistently produces fragmentation or whether certain conditions foster greater cohesion. Could also be explore the possible extension of qualified majority voting within the CFSP, the strengthening of supranational institutions, being the Commission or the EEAS, or deeper defense integration through mechanisms such as Permanent Structured Cooperation, in order to assess whether gradual reforms could genuinely mitigate coordination gaps or simply reorganize them. Finally, investigation could move beyond diagnosing the absence of a shared European strategic culture and instead focus on identifying the concrete political, institutional, and sociological mechanisms through which such a culture could be constructed. Given that this study demonstrates how strategic divergence and unilateral initiatives directly undermine CFSP coherence, investigating how to cultivate common threat perceptions, shared strategic narratives, and coordinated decision-making practices appears central to reducing member state unilateralism and autocentrism and strengthening the Union's collective capacity to act. In this

sense, the consolidation of a genuine European strategic culture may constitute a precondition for a more disciplined, cohesive, and ultimately credible CFSP.

As evidenced throughout this study, the current nature of the CFSP, determined by the member states when enacting the Treaty of Lisbon, hinders the achievement of EU's normative influence ambitions, despite repeated political declarations of intent. Consequently, the findings of this thesis have broader implications for the EU's ambition to assert itself as a geopolitical actor. In 2024, The European Parliament published a report on CFSP implementation reiterating the need to adapt EU structures, instruments and decision-making process, advocating for the establishment of QMV in the Council, and called on member states to actively support EU foreign policy, in order to achieve a "genuine European defense union" based on loyalty and mutual solidarity (Stanicek, 2024). Without structural reforms that strengthen supranational coordination, mechanisms to manage strategic competition, and efforts to cultivate a shared strategic culture, the Union will continue to struggle in crisis contexts. Despite the rising semantic of European sovereignty, notably promoted by the French president E. Macron (2017), and the increasing use of the concept of strategic autonomy, the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP has remained unchanged, thereby perpetuating structural constraints across other areas of EU external action.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has further confirmed these enduring limitations. As argued by Genini (2025), the conflict has exposed the EU's persistent weaknesses as a security provider. Much like in the Libyan case, despite substantial financial contributions, extensive sanctions regimes, and expanded defense initiatives, the EU has struggled to deliver a predictable, coherent, and decisive strategic response tailored to the scale of the crisis. He shows that internal fragmentation, unanimity-based decision-making, and insufficient military and financial capacities have constrained the Union's ability to act autonomously and credibly, as illustrated by the aforementioned behavior of the US. In this sense, the Ukrainian conflict does not mark a rupture but rather reinforces the structural diagnosis advanced in this thesis: without substantive reforms to the CFSP's governance architecture, the EU's geopolitical ambitions are likely to remain misaligned with its capacity to act ultimately resulting in a systemic erosion of the EU's credibility.

As outlined in the introduction, the contemporary geopolitical environment has become increasingly aggressive and competitive, placing renewed emphasis on credibility as a vital

condition for effective international action. In this context, this thesis concludes that the evolution of the geopolitical reality generates an urgent need for member states to unite and overcome the structural limitations described along this study through a profound revision of the CFSP framework in order to finally make the European Union a credible a geopolitical actor able to assert itself in the rising struggle between global powers.

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