

Mediterranean Equilibria: Italian-Turkish Balancing and Competition over Libya

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E S S A Y P R I Z E

Italy has recently revamped its engagements in the Mediterranean, an area that has acquired renewed strategic importance due to growing geopolitical competition and transnational threats to Italian and European interests. Turkey is similarly expanding its involvement within this polymorphous space, prompting many to question whether the two NATO allies and close commercial partners are destined to clash over the Mediterranean, or rather if a degree of cooperation can mitigate potential competition between Rome and Ankara.

Geopolitical equilibria in the Mediterranean have experienced profound transformations over the

past decade. After shedding some of its geopolitical clout with the establishment of the transatlantic route, the Mediterranean space has experienced a phase of revived protagonism due to an array of partially interconnected variables. To begin with, the 2008 economic crisis contributed to a worsening of economic conditions on both shores of the Mediterranean, triggering protest waves and the rise of populist or anti-establishment politics in many countries.¹ Then came the

¹ Examples include the Indignados movement in Spain, anti-austerity protests in Greece and the rise of populist political parties in multiple European states, including the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) in Italy. In the southern Mediterranean, examples

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so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011, which fundamentally altered the regional balance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The collapse of the Libya state and the severe weakening of the one in Syria created security vacuums, with subsequent humanitarian emergencies and involuntary displacements resulting in major migration flows towards Europe and Turkey. Meanwhile, the successive discovery of major gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean starting in 2009 led to increased maritime disputes among riparian states, stoking fears of isolation in Turkey.

This geopolitical mutability provided actors such as Russia, China and the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula the opportunity to expand their own engagements in the area. Faced with these developments, both Italy and Turkey have embraced more proactive policies, most notably over the Libyan dossier, where instances of alignment have also mixed with examples of competition.

Why Libya?

Libya held strategic importance for Italy and Turkey long before the demise of Gaddafi. As a result of long-standing historical and economic ties, in 2010, Italy was the first destination country for Libyan exports, accounting for 42 per cent of Libyan export earnings that year.²

include the Gafsa movement in Tunisia as well as the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt.

² World Bank WITS database: *Libya Trade Summary 2010*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>

Likewise, in the same year, Ankara’s enduring economic relations with the Libyan regime resulted in Turkey being Libya’s first trade partner, accounting for 10,59 per cent of total Libyan imports.³ By early 2011, Turkish companies held over 20 billion dollars of construction, engineering and energy contracts in the country, although most of these remained unpaid due to the revolution.⁴

As a consequence of these flourishing economic relations, both Italy and Turkey were reluctant to join the NATO-led intervention in 2011. Indeed, Turkey initially opposed the operation, as Erdoğan sought to persuade Gaddafi to step aside and negotiate a peaceful political transition. The Italian government also initially opposed the intervention, albeit it did finally join the military operation – together with Ankara and other allies – after command of the mission was handed to NATO.⁵

The collapse of central authority in the wake of the intervention, led to a surge in irregular migration towards Italy and Europe and threats to Italian energy

[CountryProfile/en/Country/LBY/Year/2010/Summarytext](https://www.countryprofile.org/en/Country/LBY/Year/2010/Summarytext).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jalel Harchaoui, “Why Turkey Intervened in Libya”, in Tolga Demiryol et al., *The Eastern Mediterranean and Regional Security. A Transatlantic Dialogue*, Philadelphia, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2020, p. 41-51, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya>.

⁵ Ansa, “Missione Libia 2011, le operazioni ‘tenute nascoste agli italiani’ rivelate dal generale Giuseppe Bernardis. 1900 raid e 456 bombardamenti”, in *Huffington Post*, 28 November 2012, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2012/11/28/missione-libia-2011_n_2206585.html.

interests in the country. Meanwhile, the growing influence of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Libya led to concern in Turkey, both with regards to its goal of protecting commercial interests and due to its growing isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean and post-Arab uprisings Middle East.

Both Rome and Ankara thus advocated for a political resolution to the Libyan crisis, supporting the UN-led diplomatic process and pursuing bilateral policies aimed at protecting their respective interests. In 2015, both countries endorsed the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) driven by common economic and security objectives.⁶

Italy prioritised bilateral engagements to stem migratory flows from Libya. This was done via a 2017 bilateral agreement with the GNA in Tripoli⁷ and the provision of funding and training to the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. On the other hand, fearing isolation, Turkey enhanced its support for Tripoli in the context of the military clashes that erupted in April 2019 as the self-styled Libyan general, Khalifa Haftar,

launched a military assault on the GNA from eastern Libya. The military campaign was supported by Egypt and the UAE (as well as France and Russia), two of Turkey's regional rivals, raising further concern in Ankara. The Turkish intervention effectively turned the tide of the conflict, allowing the GNA to push back against Haftar, leading eventually to a ceasefire agreement in October 2020.

The designation of a new interim authority – the Government of National Unity (GNU) – in mid-March 2021 and the commitment to hold new national elections by the end of December, was welcomed by both Rome and Ankara. The new government sought to inaugurate a process of national reconciliation, providing space for reconstruction efforts that carry significant political and economic opportunities for regional and international actors involved in Libya.

Ankara's decisive role in halting the military assault on Tripoli translated into remarkable influence in Tripolitania, where Italian influence is also concentrated. This is mirrored in the configuration of the GNU itself, given Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah's close ties to Turkey. Ankara was chosen as Dbeibah's first foreign visit in April, reinforcing the relationship through bilateral agreements on security, health, energy, infrastructure and construction.⁸

⁶ Crisis Group, "The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset", in *Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 170 (4 November 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/4691>.

⁷ Italy and Libya, *Memorandum d'intesa sulla cooperazione nel campo dello sviluppo, del contrasto all'immigrazione illegale, al traffico di esseri umani, al contrabbando e sul rafforzamento della sicurezza delle frontiere tra lo Stato della Libia e la Repubblica Italiana*, 2 February 2017, <http://itra.esteri.it/vwPdf/wfrmRenderPdf.aspx?ID=50975>. An unofficial English translation is available at: http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM_translation_finalversion.doc.pdf.

⁸ Muhittin Ataman, "In Every Field Turkey and Libya Take Steps for Future", in *Daily Sabah*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/in-every-field-turkey-and-libya-take-steps-for-future>.

More importantly, the GNU confirmed a controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Turkey signed in November 2019 by the previous GNA that had created much consternation in Europe as well as Italy.⁹ In exchange for military support, the MoU effectively recognised Turkish claims over a 16-nautical mile-wide corridor stretching from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya, that was defined as a Turkish exclusive economic zone (EEZ) but ignored parallel claims by Greece and Egypt over portions of the same area.

On the Italian side, the first foreign visit by Prime Minister Mario Draghi also revolved around Libya, with the new Italian leader visiting Tripoli to meet with Dbeibah in April. Draghi's visit was preceded by other bilateral meetings among political and business elites, eventually resulting in an 80-million euro deal for the reconstruction of Tripoli airport, among other accords.¹⁰

Italy's Mare Nostrum and Turkey's Mavi Vatan

The above interactions between Italy and Turkey over Libya have been shaped by their respective securitisation of maritime borders in

the Mediterranean, which historically defined the reach of their regional ambitions. In doing so, they also forged different discursive frames for their respective understandings of the Mediterranean.

Italy traditionally formulates its foreign policy around three core pillars: Atlanticism, Europeanism and the greater Mediterranean. Since 2013, however, irregular migration from North Africa has gradually emerged as the primary foreign policy priority for Italy, leading to a progressive securitisation of Italian approaches to the Mediterranean.¹¹ The government response was to entrust the navy with a military-humanitarian mission aimed at saving migrant lives and apprehending human traffickers across the central Mediterranean route.¹²

Interestingly, the name given to the mission, which ran until the 2014 launch of the EU-led Operation Triton, was *Mare Nostrum*, thus evoking memories of Ancient Rome's domination over the Mediterranean Sea. The expression also recurred during the Fascist era, used to underscore the revival of Rome's imperial project, during which Italy's colonial presence in Libya was often referred to as Italy's "fourth shore" (*Quarta Sponda*) in the Mediterranean.¹³

⁹ Giuseppe Dentice and Matteo Colombo, "L'accordo Turchia-Gna sui confini marittimi e i riflessi nelle dinamiche trasversali del Mediterraneo orientale", in *Focus Mediterraneo allargato*, No.12 (February 2020), p. 75-88, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/node/25158>.

¹⁰ Lorenzo Cremonesi, "L'Italia torna in Libia, il primo passo: riaprire l'aeroporto di Tripoli", in *Corriere della Sera*, 5 April 2021, https://www.corriere.it/esteri/21_aprile_05/italia-torna-libia-primo-passo-riaprire-l-aeroporto-tripoli-74eec8ec-964a-11eb-be24-00f922b4e853.shtml.

¹¹ Silvia Colombo and Anja Palm, *Italy in the Mediterranean. Priorities and Perspectives of a European Middle Power*, Brussels/Rome, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Fondazione EYU, 2019, <https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/649>.

¹² Italian Navy website: *Mare Nostrum*, <https://www.marina.difesa.it/cosa-facciamo/per-la-difesa-sicurezza/operazioni-concluse/Pagine/mare-nostrum.aspx>.

¹³ Samuel Agbamu, "Mare Nostrum: Italy and

Conversely, Turkey's isolation in the post-2011 regional balance triggered long-standing feelings of insecurity related to its relationship with neighbours, dating back to the Ottoman times and the birth of modern Turkey in 1923. As a result, some military officers, notably Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, have called for a more muscular maritime policy to enforce Turkey's sovereignty and interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and neighbouring regions, referred to as "Mavi Vatan" or Turkey's "Blue Homeland".¹⁴

First theorised by Gürdeniz in 2006, the Mavi Vatan doctrine has become a cornerstone of Turkey's proactive foreign policy towards the Mediterranean. By February 2019, as tensions mounted over the discovery of major gas resources, Turkey launched the Mavi Vatan Operation, a major naval exercise resulting in a show of force aimed at highlighting Turkish territorial claims over the area.¹⁵ It was in this context that Ankara moved to sign the above-mentioned MoU with the Libyan GNA in 2020, a clear effort to scuttle the evolving alliances among riparian states and ensure that Turkey's interests be taken into account in any effort to develop the maritime resources

the Mediterranean of Ancient Rome in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries", in *Fascism*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2019), p. 250-274, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00802001>.

¹⁴ Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Blue Homeland Doctrine: Signaling Perpetual Conflict in the Mediterranean and Rough Waters Ahead", in *The Turkey Analyst*, 26 August 2020, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/648>.

¹⁵ "Blue Homeland: Turkey's Naval Exercise", in *European Security & Defence*, 18 June 2019, <https://euro-sd.com/?p=13642>.

of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, Italian politicians and analysts tend to talk about the "enlarged Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo allargato*), an evolution of the previous *Mare Nostrum dictum* that encapsulates the expansion of Italian interests and threat perceptions across the broader Mediterranean and Middle East and notably includes a key emphasis on migratory routes. Conversely, and in line with the Mavi Vatan doctrine, Turkey now claims that its "continental shelf" – and thus its maritime jurisdiction – extends over broad areas of the Mediterranean Sea (189,000 square kilometres), the Aegean Sea (89,000 square kilometres) and the Black Sea.¹⁶

"Mediterranean" equilibria

Addressing Italian-Turkish relations and their modalities of interaction over Libya through a Mediterranean prism may be controversial as such frameworks tend to reflect Eurocentric perspectives. These have discursively constructed European identity on the basis of its supposed distinction from the Mediterranean "others" located on the opposite side of the sea.¹⁷

Yet, Italy and Turkey are Mediterranean countries not only due to their geographic position or historical

¹⁶ Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Blue Homeland Doctrine", cit.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, "Contesting 'EU as Empire' from Within? Analysing European Perceptions on EU Presence and Practices in the Mediterranean", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 25, Special Issue (2020), p. 109-130.

legacies, but also because they locate their national interests in a specifically “Mediterranean” space (albeit with different definitions thereof, as previously discussed). Moreover, they exert their influence through different strategies due to their different positioning in international power-dynamics.

On the one hand, Italian foreign policy is integrated in the European and Atlanticist frames; nevertheless, while remaining within this prism, Rome’s approach towards the Mediterranean is functional to boost Italy’s strategic relevance therein, presenting itself as a cultural mediator or bridge.¹⁸ On the other, Turkey’s growing frustration towards Europe and the US, particularly as a result of the now moribund EU accession process, has led to a more muscular and unilateral approach by Ankara.

Libya, with its 1,770 kilometres long Mediterranean coastline and multiple security crises and economic opportunities, stands out as an ideal case to observe how the strategic interests and geographical perimeters of Turkey and Italy are evolving. These have at times overlapped – as in the case of the political endorsement of the GNA, opposition to Haftar’s advance on Tripoli and support for the GNU and elections – and in other instances diverged, most notably over the maritime disputes and signature of the

Turkey-Libyan MoU.

Ultimately, however, Italy and Turkey do share common interests with regards to migration flows, energy supplies, trade and competition from powerful neighbours (France, Russia and Egypt). They also share a fundamental interest in a stable and functioning Libya. Hence, despite the growing media and political rhetoric pointing to an inevitable clash or competition between Rome and Ankara in a shared Mediterranean space, a more nuanced analysis will highlight room for pragmatic cooperation. This could also start from the development of a new constructivist framework to understand and commonly define the shared “Mediterranean” space.

Moreover, in this new phase of Libyan transition, both countries share an interest in ensuring the December elections regularly take place and define a legitimate government. The return of a legitimate government is a necessary precondition for the start of reconstruction work and the signing of trade and commercial contracts with Tripoli. Yet, while Rome and Ankara may ultimately be competing for political relevance in their relationship with Tripoli, economic competition between Rome and Ankara need not translate into an outright clash.¹⁹ Indeed, the respective interests can also be complementary, as Italy and Turkey are likely to occupy difference

¹⁸ See, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *The Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean. Stabilising the Crises and Building a Positive Agenda for the Region*, Rome, 2017, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/med-maeci-eng.pdf>.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Palazzo, “Libia e attori internazionali: nuova transizione, vecchi problemi”, in *CeSI Articles*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.cesi-italia.org/articoli/1336/libia-e-attori-internazionali-nuova-transizione-vecchi-problemi>.

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sectors in the Libyan market, with Ankara prioritising construction and trade, while Italy benefitting from its technological know-how in the energy and telecommunication sectors.

7 December 2021

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