

Russia Wants to Be a Deal-Maker in Libya

If the Kremlin's strongman restores a Gaddafi-light dictatorship in Libya, Russia will reap an economic – and geopolitical – windfall

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Reports that Russia has deployed special forces to a military base in Egypt to assist Libyan National Army general Khalifa Haftar come as no surprise. Nor are Russia's official denials surprising. After all, media coverage of covert action is traditionally guided by the George Schultz rule: "If the CIA denies it, it's denied."

But the reports ring true. Russia has made little secret of its support for Haftar, a maverick Libyan military officer who worked with Muammar Gaddafi during the 1969 coup, fell in and out with both the Soviets and the CIA, and in 2011 acted as a spoiler of Western efforts to stabilize Libya.

By 2017, Haftar had reinvented himself as a fighter against “radical Islamic terrorists” and commander of the Libyan National Army — a force controlling most of Eastern Libya. The force is loosely aligned with the breakaway Libyan parliament in Tobruk (elected in 2014) that does not recognize the authority of the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli led by Fayed Al-Serraj.

In July and November 2016, Haftar made high-profile visits to Moscow. There he received the red carpet treatment and met with key policy makers, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev.

The details of their discussions have not been released, but it is clear that they discussed backing Haftar’s forces to gain control over all of Libya and restore stability and central governance under some form of a military dictatorship.

What Russia wants in return — arms and energy deals — may have come up too. Moscow is still hurting over the loss of military and commercial contracts with Gaddafi worth over 4 billion brokered by Putin in 2010.

On Jan. 11 Haftar boarded the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov on her return voyage from bombing runs in Syria to sign a host of undisclosed agreements with the Russian military. While aboard the ship, he held a video conference with Shoigu. It was a clear-cut designation of Haftar as the primary Russian asset in Libya.

Moscow’s military foray into Libya makes sense from a policy perspective. If Haftar wins out in Libya and restores a Gaddafi-light dictatorship there, it would be a stunning reversal of the 2011 Libyan uprising and the Western military intervention that toppled the dictator over Russian objections. What could be a better demonstration of Russia’s ability to thwart Western efforts at regime change and democracy promotion?

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But is Haftar the right bet? Moscow is trying to sell its support for Haftar to the West as the best way to restore stability, suppress the Islamic State and al-Qaeda and stop the flow of refugees to Europe and arms to terrorist groups in Africa.

It is also trying to convince Europe that Haftar is the short-cut solution to effective border control.

But the general’s reach may be limited. His Libyan National Army is neither an army nor national. The loose coalition of local ragtag militias based around Benghazi has no clear path to victory over the government in Tripoli.

A Haftar victory in Libya would require a massive Russian train-and-equip program, insertion of Russian special operations forces and military advisors on the ground to coordinate airstrikes. All of that would currently be illegal.

Haftar from this perspective is a “rebel” and a “spoiler.” Key international players are likely to view Haftar’s potential military offensive on Tripoli as a recipe for full-blown civil war

which would push refugees toward Europe.

The EU and Algeria have reached out to Russia to help broker a deal between Haftar and the GNA government that would recognize Haftar as the defense minister. Serraj pitched the plan in February and Russia signaled interest. But Haftar refused to play ball. Now Moscow has upped the ante with its deployment of special forces operators to support Haftar.

Russia appears to be running two separate Libya policies. The Foreign Ministry seems to be more inclined to pursue the EU-backed “reconciliation option” where Haftar is part of the solution, not “the solution.”

The Defense Ministry and some in the Kremlin are “bravely” pushing for a full scale military support program for Haftar to secure his sole control over the entire country. This would marginalize the West and maximize Russia’s future “monetization options.”

The two approaches are somewhat in conflict with each other, unless the MFA works simply to provide cover for the MOD’s “operators.” We are about to find out.

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