

Introduction

The 2011 intervention in Libya marks a critical turning point in the history of 21st century international security. Executed under the umbrella of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973¹ and the then-emerging Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, Operation “Unified Protector” was initially presented as an urgent humanitarian response to halt violence against the civilian population. This normative principle, R2P, designed to compel the international community to act when a State is unable to prevent mass atrocities against its own population, suffered an irreversible legitimacy crisis in Libya. Its rapid shift into a tool for regime change was interpreted by Russia, China and much of the Global South as a geopolitical instrumentalization of human rights². This perception has had a devastating diplomatic cost, as the “Libyan precedent” is the argument that Moscow and Beijing have systematically used to veto any subsequent resolution in the Security Council (notably on Syria), paralyzing Western humanitarian interventionism under the premise that R2P has become a “Trojan horse” to infringe upon national sovereignty.

More than a decade later, and with the perspective afforded by the geopolitical landscape of 2025, the Libyan case stands as a paradigmatic case study on the limitations of military power when applied disconnected from a comprehensive political strategy. The fall of the Libyan State not only generated an internal power vacuum, but also detonated a chain reaction that destabilized the Sahel region and transformed the Central Mediterranean into a vector of hybrid threats. For Spain and the European Union as a whole, the consequences of this “systemic failure” are direct and tangible, ranging from the migration flow crisis and energy insecurity to the emergence of strategic competitors in NATO's

¹ Resolution 1973 (2011) authorized in its paragraph 4 “all necessary measures” to protect the civilian population but explicitly excluded “a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory.” This legal restriction created an operational paradox, allowing NATO to destroy the regime’s state capacity but preventing it from deploying the ground forces necessary to ensure immediate order after the collapse, thus guaranteeing the power vacuum.

² See House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. “Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK’s future policy options”. Third Report of Session 2016–17. The report explicitly concludes that the threat to civilians was exaggerated and that the limited political objectives of the intervention devolved into an opportunistic policy of regime change.

Southern Flank³.

The objective of this analysis is to examine the strategic inconsistencies that defined the intervention and its aftermath. Through a geopolitical approach, the gap between the military means employed and the political ends achieved will be evaluated, analysing how the absence of post-conflict planning facilitated the atomization of the country and the penetration of external powers. Far from being a merely historical exercise, this analysis seeks to extract operational lessons and underscore the need to rethink crisis management models in the European strategic neighbourhood.

Internal and regional context prior to the intervention

To analyse the impact of the 2011 intervention, it is necessary to first examine the political and socioeconomic configuration of the Libyan State at that time. The prevailing system, officially termed *Jamahiriyah*⁴, was based on a non-conventional political structure that dispensed with political parties and a formal constitution, organizing administration through a network of People's Committees and Basic Congresses. In practice, this architecture meant the non-existence of state bureaucratic institutions comparable to those of Western democracies or other autocratic regimes in the region.

On the socioeconomic level, 2010 indicators reflected a situation of macroeconomic stability sustained by hydrocarbon revenues. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of that year, Libya ranked 53rd globally and first on the African continent. The State maintained a practically zero level of external debt and managed a sovereign wealth fund, the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA), with assets estimated at 67 billion dollars.

In terms of infrastructure and basic services, data showed significant development

³ See Government of Spain. "National Security Strategy 2021". The document identifies instability in the Maghreb and the Sahel as one of the main threats to national security, underlining the interconnection between conflicts at the "Advanced Border" and European internal security.

⁴ Arabic neologism translatable as "State of the masses," coined by Muammar al-Gaddafi in his Green Book (1975) to define the political structure of Libya. Based on the so-called "Third Universal Theory," this system formally abolished representative democracy and political parties, under the premise that "representation is a fraud," in favor of a supposed direct democracy exercised through People's Committees.

compared to previous decades. The literacy rate, which hovered around 25% in 1969, had risen to 89.2% in 2010. Likewise, the “Great Man-Made River” project, a hydraulic engineering network designed to transport water from fossil aquifers in the south, supplied 70% of the urban population in the coastal strip. These benefits formed part of an implicit social contract in which the distribution of oil rent guaranteed social peace and the loyalty of the various tribal confederations.

The security architecture, a key factor in understanding the subsequent collapse, was characterized by an operational duality. On one hand, the regular Armed Forces were deliberately kept limited in capacity and equipment. On the other, the effective defence of the system relied on elite paramilitary units, such as the 32nd Brigade (led by Khamis Gaddafi), and on internal intelligence apparatuses. This configuration sought to avoid the concentration of autonomous military power that could challenge the political leadership. Consequently, the Libyan State of 2011 did not operate through impersonal and hierarchical institutions, but through a centralized network of personal relationships and tribal balances that converged exclusively on the figure of the leader. This structural characteristic implied that the state apparatus lacked autonomous functioning mechanisms; the removal of the system's apex would not simply entail a change of government, but the functional dismantling of the country's security, administration and territorial control mechanisms.

Military intervention and international legitimization

It was precisely upon the scenario of institutional fragility described above where an international intervention, designed under premises that ignored the sociopolitical reality on the ground, struck in March 2011. While the dissolution of the *Jamahiriyah* required a complex systemic replacement and a robust security commitment, the Western response opted for a minimalist approach, deeply conditioned by the war-weariness of public opinions after the long campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The legal framework for this response was established on March 17 with the approval of Resolution 1973 of the United Nations Security Council. The text, drafted under the logic of the humanitarian emergency, authorized “all necessary measures” to protect the civilian population, but explicitly excluded the deployment of a foreign occupation force.

This ambiguity in the mandate allowed for a rapid evolution of strategic objectives on the fly. What technically began as the imposition of a no-fly zone to stop the advance of the regime's armoured columns toward Benghazi, was transformed de facto into an offensive air support campaign aimed at facilitating regime change.

Under the NATO umbrella and the operational designation Unified Protector, the Atlantic Alliance executed a high-intensity air campaign that lasted for seven months. The final statistics illustrate the magnitude of the kinetic effort deployed. More than 26,000 air sorties were recorded, of which approximately 9,600 were direct attack missions. Western technological superiority was absolute from the very first stages, achieving the total suppression of Libyan anti-aircraft defence in the first 72 hours and the systematic dismantling of the command, control and logistics nodes of the forces loyal to Gaddafi.

However, this undeniable tactical and technological effectiveness hid a deep doctrinal flaw known as “light footprint”. This doctrine, primarily defended by the Obama administration under the slogan of “leading from behind”, was based on the outsourcing of ground combat to proxy local forces. The strategy erroneously assumed that the rebel militias, a heterogeneous amalgam of defectors, armed civilians and Islamists, could organically coalesce into a national security force once the dictator was eliminated.

This approach generated an immediate strategic distortion, the problem of “moral hazard”. By providing unlimited air cover to non-state actors without imposing a unified chain of command or mechanisms of political accountability, NATO decisively altered the military balance, but lost the capacity to influence the conduct of the victors. The Alliance destroyed the coercive capacities of the State from the air, but by lacking a physical presence on the ground, it was left without levers to avoid reprisals, summary executions, including that of Muammar al-Gaddafi himself in Sirte, and the massive looting of state arsenals.

The ultimate consequence of denying the deployment of a post-conflict stabilization force (boots on the ground) was the irreversible fragmentation of the monopoly of legitimate force. At the moment of victory, political legitimacy did not fall upon the National Transitional Council (NTC), but upon the hundreds of katibas or armed brigades that had physically occupied the territory and the institutions.

In short, the 2011 intervention demonstrated that precision technology allows for winning asymmetric wars, but is incapable by itself of building peace. The light footprint doctrine managed to overthrow the regime with a minimum Western cost in lives and resources, but it did so at the price of transferring all security risk to the Libyan civilian population, condemning the country to a power vacuum that, as will be analysed below, quickly metastasized into a threat to the entire region.

Strategic consequences

The fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime did not mean the end of violence or the advent of an orderly democratic transition, but rather the beginning of a power atomization that overwhelmed the capacities of the new transitional authorities. The strategic decision to dismantle the State's security apparatus without having a cohesive replacement force caused the monopoly on violence to fragment into a myriad of militias, tribal groups and Islamist factions. This dispersion of authority prevented the consolidation of an effective central government, transforming Libya into a failed State where political legitimacy was subordinated to the capacity for armed coercion by non-state actors, perpetuating a cycle of instability that disabled any attempt at institutional reconstruction during the subsequent decade.

This internal implosion had an immediate and devastating impact on the regional environment, confirming fears about the permeability of North African borders. The massive looting of Libyan state arsenals, estimated at thousands of tons of conventional weaponry and man-portable air-defence systems, fuelled an unprecedented arms proliferation that flowed freely towards the Sahel strip⁵. This uncontrolled flow of military capabilities acted as a force multiplier for insurgent groups and jihadist organizations in neighbouring countries, precipitating severe security crises such as the Tuareg rebellion and the subsequent coup d'état in Mali in 2012⁶. In this way, the security vacuum in Libya

⁵ See Conflict Armament Research (CAR). "Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel". EU-funded Report. This field research traces the "chain of custody" of the weaponry, demonstrating that the lack of physical security mechanisms and post-conflict arsenal management in Libya was the determining factor for the rearmament of AQIM and other non-state actors in the region.

⁶ See United Nations Security Council. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya" (S/2012/163). The report exhaustively documents how man-

ceased to be a contained problem and became the epicentre of an arc of instability that has gravely compromised European stabilization efforts in the Sahel and increased pressure on Europe's southern borders.

A decisive contributor to this security vacuum was what could be defined as a “strategic cacophony” within the European Union. The community's inability to project stability was not due solely to a lack of instruments, but to a profound divergence of national interests that paralyzed the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). France and Italy, the two powers with the greatest historical influence in the area, were widely perceived, according to multiple analyses, as *de facto* backing opposing sides. While Rome tended to support the Tripoli government, partly to safeguard migration management and the assets of the energy company ENI, Paris provided political and intelligence support to Marshal Haftar in the east, whom several observers viewed as a potential bulwark against jihadism in the Sahel, in a context where energy interests linked to Total were also at stake. This European paralysis transformed the Central Mediterranean into a zero-sum scenario, where the lack of Western cohesion not only weakened Brussels' negotiating position but also cleared the way for external actors to fill the political vacuum.

Thus, the most profound long-term consequence has been the transformation of Libyan territory into a theatre of competition between powers external to the Atlantic alliance. The aforementioned absence of a Western stabilization plan generated a strategic vacuum that evolved drastically over the last decade. The cartographic translation of the post-2011 state collapse reveals a scenario of extreme atomization that lasted well into the civil war. Towards the end of 2018, the absence of an effective central authority had transformed Libya's political geography into a mosaic of local fiefdoms. While coastal areas remained disputed by the two rival governments, the vast southern region of Fezzan operated as an ungovernable “hinterland”⁷. In this vacuum, tribal militias and

portable air-defense systems and light weaponry from Gaddafi's arsenal were transferred to armed groups in the Sahel, acting as a direct catalyst for the MNLA Tuareg rebellion and the subsequent takeover of northern Mali by jihadist groups in 2012.

⁷ Geopolitical term of German origin (Hinterland, literally “back country”) that designates the territorial depth or zone of influence located behind coastal nerve centers. In the analysis of the Libyan conflict, the concept refers to the vast desert expanses of Fezzan and the southern strip which, due to their distance from the political and economic power centers of the coast (Tripoli and Benghazi), historically operate with dynamics

transnational armed groups managed the territory and illicit trafficking with total autonomy, separate from the dispute between Tripoli and Tobruk, facilitating the permeability of the borders with the Sahel.

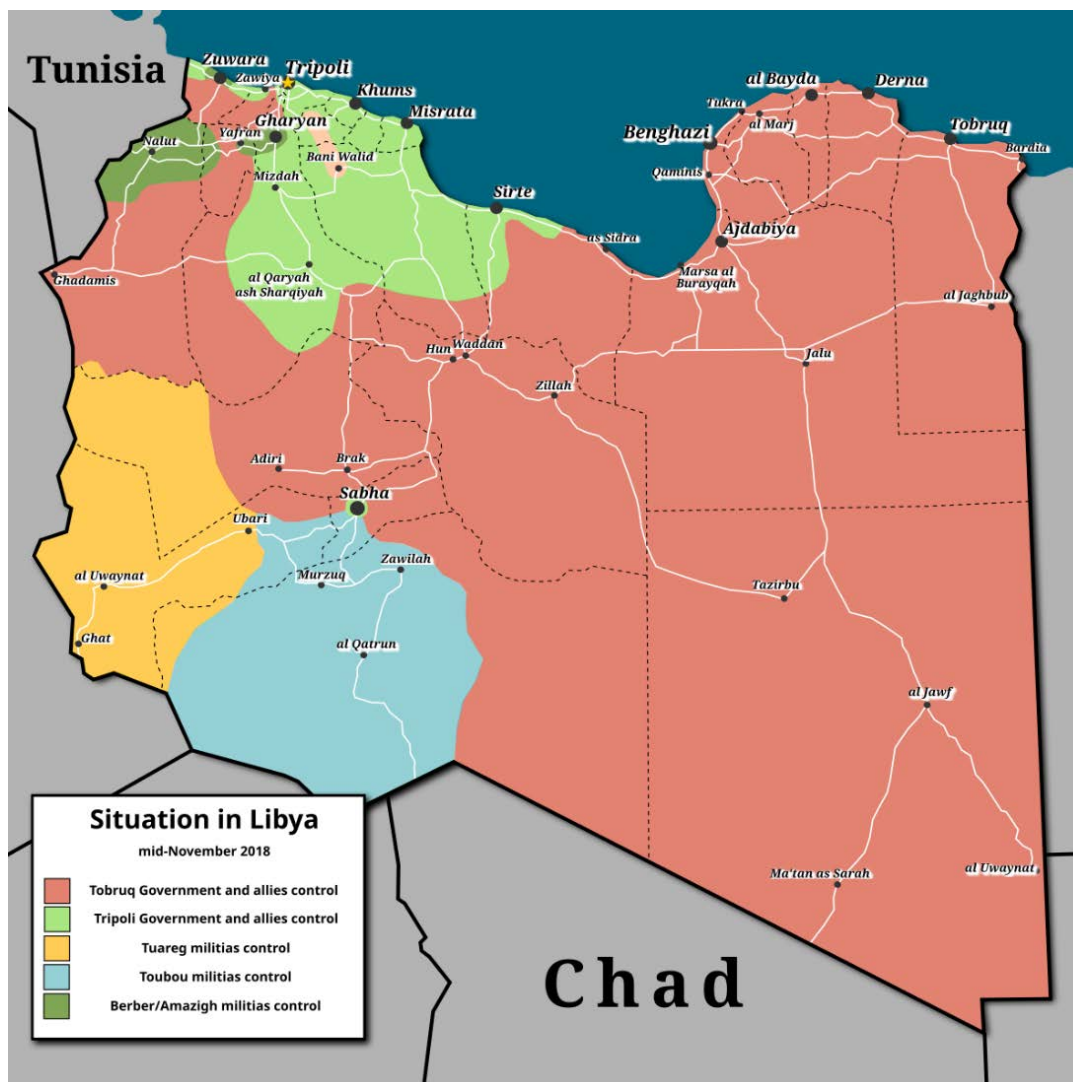


Illustration 1. Map of territorial fragmentation in November 2018. Available on Wikimedia Commons. URL: <https://w.wiki/GbN3>

of tribal autonomy and scant penetration of state authority.

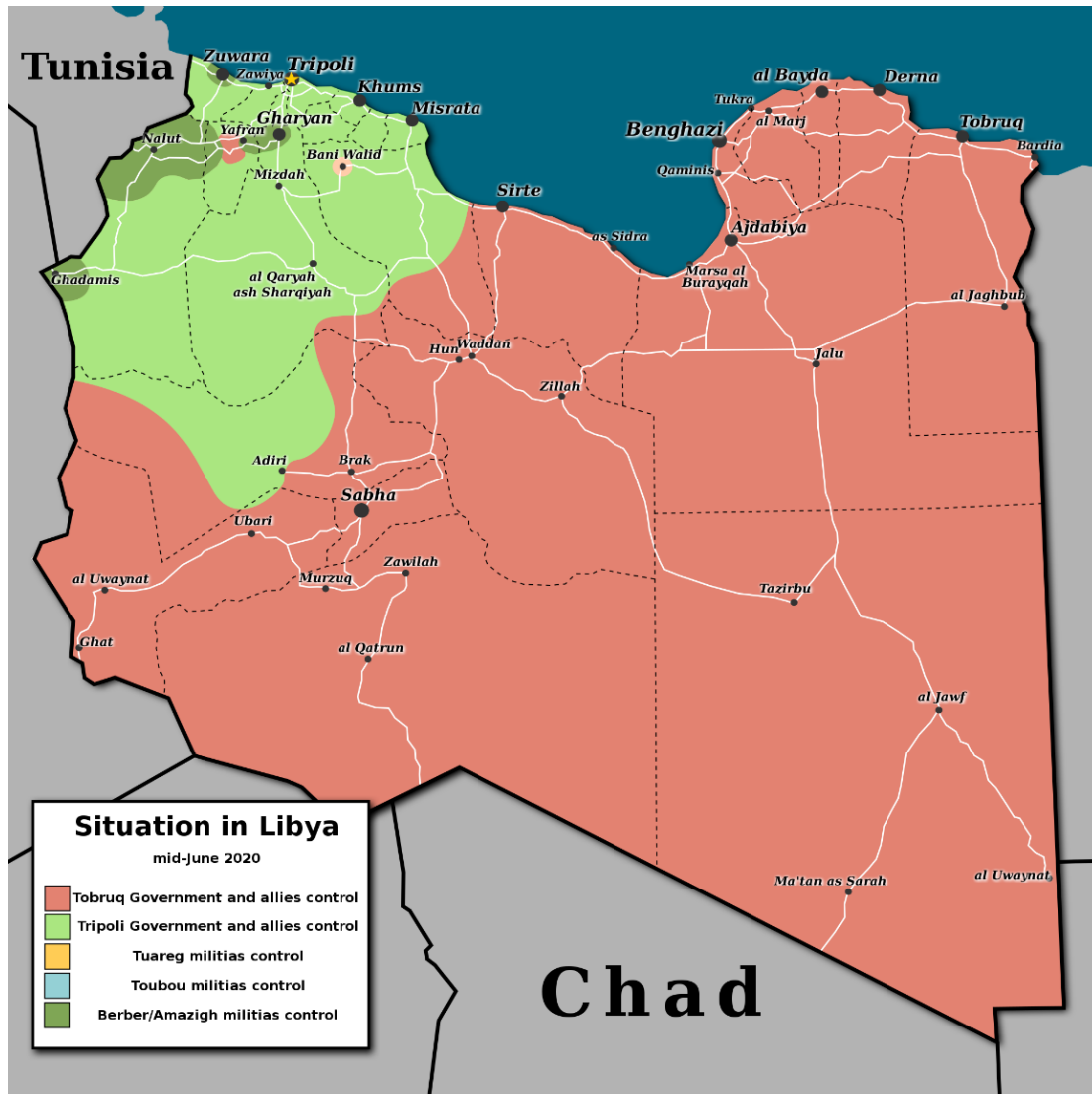


Illustration 2. Map of territorial fragmentation in June 2020 after the internationalization of the conflict. Available on Wikimedia Commons. URL: <https://w.wiki/GbMt>

The visual comparison between the theatres of operations in 2018 and 2020 illustrates the drastic evolution of the conflict, which evolved from this phase of militia atomization toward a high-intensity conventional civil war. The offensive launched by the Libyan National Army (LNA) in January 2019 to secure the southern oil fields forced a realignment of loyalties, absorbing local actors under Marshal Haftar's command structure and eliminating tribal “grey zones”. This strategic movement, a prelude to the siege of Tripoli in April 2019, polarized the country into two monolithic blocks. However, the direct military intervention of Turkey in 2020 reversed the LNA's advance, pushing the front back toward the centre of the country. In just two years, Libya went from being an

archipelago of city-states to becoming a binary scenario of geopolitical competition, where the autonomy of local actors was subordinated to the logistics and interests of their international sponsors.

The stagnation of the front line on the Sirte-Jufra axis, as it was consolidated in mid-2020, represents the crystallization of two spheres of foreign influence in the Central Mediterranean. On one side, the UN-recognized GNA in Tripoli survived thanks to Turkey's direct military intervention, which deployed drones and advisors to protect its maritime interests in the Mediterranean. On the other, Marshal Haftar's LNA, based in the east (Tobruk/Benghazi), consolidated its offensive thanks to Egypt's logistical support and the shock force of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, the spearhead of the Kremlin's strategy to establish itself on NATO's southern flank. This new configuration establishes advanced military capabilities and area denial systems (A2/AD) just a few kilometres from Europe, granting these strategic competitors an unprecedented capacity for political pressure through the instrumentalization of migratory flows and energy resources⁸.

While the 2011-2020 period was characterized by kinetic violence, the subsequent five-year period (2021-2025) can be defined as a phase of “systemic stagnation.” The hope for a democratic transition definitively collapsed on December 24, 2021, the date on which presidential and parliamentary elections were to be held but were suspended *sine die* due to a lack of constitutional consensus. This failure reactivated the executive bicephaly, crystallizing the division between the GNU in Tripoli, led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, and the GNS in the east, appointed by the House of Representatives and aligned with Marshal Haftar's LNA.

This new fracture has not resulted in a total civil war thanks, paradoxically, to the “balance of terror” imposed by external sponsors. Turkey and Russia have ceased to be mere

⁸ See Megerisi, T. (2019). “Libya’s Global Civil War”. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). The author documents how the diplomatic and military vacuum left by the European Union and the U.S. allowed for the consolidation of a “Russian-Turkish condominium” in Libya. Both powers now manage the intensity of the conflict to maximize their regional influence, displacing Europe to a role of irrelevant observer on its own southern border.

interveners to become the guarantors of the *statu quo*. Moscow, in particular, has institutionalized its presence. Following the dissolution of the Wagner Group, its assets have been absorbed by the Africa Corps, reportedly integrated into structures under the Russian Ministry of Defence, consolidating a platform for strategic projection toward the Sahel and the Central Mediterranean that no longer depends on private contractors, but on the Kremlin's state foreign policy.

However, this paralysis is further compounded by a financial bicephaly that acts as a driver of institutional stagnation. The dispute over legitimacy and control of the National Oil Corporation (NOC) and the Central Bank of Libya constitutes the country's true strategic centre of gravity. In the absence of a unified budget or transparency mechanisms, political elites from both factions have found a lucrative interest in the institutional blockade. This financial disarticulation prevents hydrocarbon revenues from being translated into basic services, fostering instead a war economy where access to foreign currency is used to secure the loyalty of militia networks, leaving the State as a hollow structure incapable of managing its own territory.

The most tragic consequence of this political paralysis is not diplomatic but humanitarian. The collapse of the Derna dams following Storm Daniel in September 2023, which caused thousands of deaths, was not a natural disaster but the empirical result of the "Hollow State". The negligence in the maintenance of critical infrastructure, a result of corruption and the dispute over competencies between the two rival administrations, evidenced that the strategic failure of 2011 continues to claim lives. The inability to coordinate a unified emergency response demonstrated that, beneath the facade of a frozen conflict, the erosion of state capacities has reached a point of no return.

Conclusions

The cycle of conflict in Libya (2011-2025) constitutes a paradigmatic case study on the limits of Western military intervention in the 21st century. Fourteen years after Operation "Unified Protector", the evidence confirms that the fall of the Gaddafi regime through a "Light Footprint" strategy was an operational mirage, where an indisputable tactical success ended up precipitating an absolute strategic failure. Although the operation demonstrated NATO's capability to project air power with precision and halt an imminent

threat against civilians, the strategic vacuum that followed the fall of the Gaddafi regime revealed a fatal disconnection between military planning and post-war management. The decision to dismantle state structures without having a stabilization plan did not liberate Libyan society, but rather condemned it to violent atomization, demonstrating that the removal of a dictator is an insufficient condition for democratization if it is not accompanied by a replacement institutional architecture and a long-term security commitment.

The current reality of Libya is no longer that of a disputed transition, but of an institutionalized stalemate. The failure of the 2021 elections and the consolidation of the bicephaly between the GNU in Tripoli and the GNS in the east of the country confirm that political elites have found a lucrative *modus vivendi* in mutual blockage. However, the cost of this “endless stalemate” is paid by the civilian population and the very viability of the State. The Derna tragedy in 2023, where political negligence and the lack of maintenance of critical infrastructure cost thousands of lives, serves as the most painful reminder that a territory without a unified State is incapable of protecting its citizens, turning natural threats into humanitarian catastrophes.

From a geopolitical perspective, the vacuum left by European and American irrelevance has been occupied by revisionist powers. Libya has gone from being an area of interest for NATO to becoming a beachhead for Russian influence in Africa. The transformation in 2024 of the Wagner Group into the Africa Corps indicates that Moscow no longer seeks only economic benefits through mercenaries, but a permanent military projection on the Alliance's southern flank, controlling key air bases and energy routes.

On the global normative level, the management of the Libyan crisis inflicted severe damage on the R2P doctrine. The perception that the humanitarian intervention protected by Resolution 1973 was used as a pretext to execute regime change eroded the diplomatic trust necessary for future multilateral actions. This precedent has been systematically used by powers such as Russia and China to veto resolutions in the United Nations Security Council in subsequent crises, such as Syria, arguing that R2P had become a tool for Western political engineering. Consequently, the intervention in Libya not only failed to stabilize the country, but substantially weakened the international

consensus on civilian protection mechanisms, leaving a legacy of diplomatic paralysis that persists to this day.

The operational lesson from Libya is that technology and air superiority are not viable substitutes for political strategy. The “remote warfare” model may be effective for punitive missions or selective counterterrorism, but it is structurally inadequate for regime change operations or civilian protection, where control of the territory and management of the population are the determining variables for success.

For the European Union, and specifically for Spain, the lessons are severe but inescapable. Mediterranean security cannot depend on fragile balances agreed upon by third-party actors. National interests are tangible and go beyond migration control; the resilience of strategic companies such as Repsol, which has resumed its exploratory activity in the Murzuq basin despite the uncertainty, demonstrates that Libya remains an indispensable energy partner. Consequently, future strategy must not be limited to threat containment, but rather move toward a realistic diplomacy that demands the reunification of financial institutions, especially the Central Bank and the NOC, as a prior and indispensable condition for any assistance. It must be understood that the recovery of a single treasury is not a mere administrative formality, but the cornerstone for restoring a legitimate monopoly on the use of force; without this centralized financial control, Libya will lack the internal incentives for stability and will remain a net exporter of insecurity for the entire region.

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