



From Stabilization to Risk Mitigation: Italy's Foreign Policy Adaptation to A Fragmented Libya (2020–2024)

Flavia De Lucia Lumeno

Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Law and Social Sciences, Niccolò Cusano University, Rome, Italy.

Article Details

Article Type: Research Article

Received date: 06th December, 2025

Accepted date: 26th February, 2026

Published date: 28th February, 2026

***Corresponding Author:** Flavia De Lucia Lumeno, Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Law and Social Sciences, Niccolò Cusano University, Rome, Italy.

Citation: De Lucia Lumeno, F., (2026). From Stabilization to Risk Mitigation: Italy's Foreign Policy Adaptation to A Fragmented Libya (2020–2024). *J Poli Sci Publi Opin*, 4(1): 134. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jpspo1100134>.

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Abstract

The collapse of the 2021 Libyan electoral process led to the solidification of a state of institutional bicephalism, thereby transforming a transient crisis into a permanent state of instability. This paper explores the manner in which Italian foreign policy adapted to this entrenched fragmentation between 2020 and 2024, thereby raising questions regarding the strategic sustainability of Rome's recalibration. The study utilizes a structural analysis of institutional mandates alongside quantitative metrics regarding energy imports and migratory flows to evaluate the transition from multilateral stabilization to risk mitigation.

The analysis indicates that Italy significantly augmented its energy interdependence to facilitate "de-russification" post-2022, resulting in Libya emerging as its primary crude oil supplier, responsible for 22.3% of total national imports by mid-2024. Concurrently, Rome pivoted toward the offshore energy dimension, exemplified by a landmark \$8 billion gas agreement signed in 2023, which was designed to insulate vital extraction from land-based militia volatility. Moreover, the paradigm of migration management underwent a transition, evolving into a model of transactional diplomacy with non-state actors serving as gatekeepers. This transformation was particularly evident in Cirenaica, which by early 2024 had become the origin of over 60% of irregular departures.

Theoretically, the research contributes to the development of the concept of "strategic mitigation", described as a posture that enables medium powers to prioritize the resilience of their vital interests within the context of failed states. This approach circumvents the necessity of a unified central authority, a feature that is typically associated with the maintenance of order and stability in international systems.

The paper's conclusion posits that while such mitigation effectively safeguards short-term assets, it risks institutionalizing the very structural instability it seeks to manage.

Keywords: Italy – Libya – civil war – oil – gas – Mediterranean Sea – security – migrations – European Union

Introduction

The historical relationship between the Italian Republic and Libya is fundamentally anchored in geographical proximity, a shared colonial legacy, and a deep-seated structural interdependence regarding energy security and Mediterranean stability. From 2020 to 2024, the relationship underwent a profound transformation as Libya transitioned from a state of temporary crisis to a condition of "stable instability" [1]. The present study investigates the strategic recalibration of Italian foreign policy, arguing that Rome has moved away from an ambitious, multilateral strategy of systemic political stabilization toward a more pragmatic, bilateral model centered on risk mitigation and damage control. This adaptation was necessitated by the realization that Libya's internal fragmentation has shifted from a transient phase of civil war to a permanent structural norm, where institutional bicephalism and the weaponization of economic nodes have become the baseline of Libyan politics [2, 3].

The collapse of the unified national army, the proliferation of militia violence, and the absence of a governmental monopoly on the legitimate use of force [4] are deeply rooted in the Muammar Qadhafi era, during which institutions were systematically dismantled to prevent challenges to centralized power. This has left Libya without the resilience to withstand the shocks of the 2011 uprising and subsequent external military interventions [5, 6].

Consequently, post-2011 Libya has been characterized by an institutional void, wherein core state functions such as the redistribution of oil wealth and the provision of security have been co-opted by competing regional and tribal entities [3, 7]. This fragmentation has transformed the nation into a "proxy conflict" arena for global powers such as Russia and Turkey, further eroding the possibility of a unified sovereign authority [4].

The chronology of Italy's policy adaptation is marked by pivotal occurrences of institutional collapse and geopolitical upheaval. In the aftermath of the 2020 Berlin Conference, which established a framework for peace, the October 2020 permanent national ceasefire engendered a transient period of optimism. This sequence of events culminated in the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU) under the leadership of Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in March 2021. Italy initially endorsed the GNU as a means to promote systemic stabilization [8, 9]. However, the decisive turning point occurred in December 2021, when national elections were indefinitely postponed due to profound constitutional disagreements and the mobilization of armed groups [10, 11]. This failure led to the consolidation of Libya's institutional bicephalism, as the House of Representatives (HoR) in the East declared the GNU's mandate to be expired and appointed Fathi Bashagha to lead a rival government in February 2022 [12, 13]. This political deadlock was immediately exploited through the "weaponization" of economic infrastructure. Throughout 2022, oil blockades led by the eastern powers caused national production to plummet to 100,000 barrels per day, signaling that stabilization was no longer a viable short-term objective for Rome [2].

The problem statement for Italian diplomacy was further complicated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which fundamentally altered the hierarchy of Italian priorities. Faced with the urgent necessity to decouple from Russian gas, which previously accounted for 40% of imports, Italy was compelled to rethink its "energy-security nexus" [14, 15]. Libya's emergence as a pivotal alternative supplier coincided with its persistent instability, a factor that invariably jeopardized Italy's primary energy assets due to the proximity of a potentially collapsing neighbor [12, 14]. The geopolitical puzzle addressed in this paper is the following: what are the reasons and mechanisms that have led to Italy's significant intensification of its energy interdependence with Libya, precisely as the Libyan state achieved its highest level of fragmentation and its sovereignty became "shredded" by external proxy interference? Notwithstanding the volatility in Libyan production, evidenced by the 2024 Sharara field blockage and the Central Bank of Libya crisis, Italy has emerged as Libya's primary crude oil partner. In early 2024, Italy accounted for 22.3% of Libya's total national imports [2, 16].

The response to this puzzle can be found in the institutionalization of "strategic mitigation," which is most clearly evidenced by the launch of the "Mattei Plan for Africa" in 2023. This initiative exemplifies a shift toward a "sovereigntist pragmatism" approach, which conceptualizes Libya as a network of disparate entities to be administered through horizontal, "non-predatory" collaborations rather than a state to be restored through a top-down, institutional-building process [17-19]. A central element of this mitigation strategy is the prioritization of the offshore dimension of energy extraction, exemplified by the landmark \$8 billion gas agreement signed between Eni and the National Oil Corporation (NOC) in January 2023 [2].

By prioritizing maritime assets, Italy aims to ensure the uninterrupted flow of energy resources while mitigating the potential risks associated with civil unrest and military interference on land [20]. Concurrently, Italy has been engaging in "transactional diplomacy" with non-state actors, such as the network of Khalifa Haftar, to manage irregular migration flows [18, 21]. This engagement signifies a notable deviation from established diplomatic norms, as Rome is increasingly recognizing the eastern strongman as a pivotal "gatekeeper" for both energy stability and border control in Cirenaica, where his network has facilitated over 60% of irregular departures since 2023 [21].

The present investigation is structured around four foundational research questions, the answers to which are designed to interrogate the mechanics of Italy's strategic recalibration within the contemporary Libyan landscape. First, the study examines how the institutional collapse surrounding the aborted December 2021

elections served as a critical juncture, facilitating Libya's transition from a perceived transient crisis into a permanent structural norm defined by entrenched fragmentation and institutional bicephalism [3, 10, 13]. Second, it explores the specific ways in which the 2022 global energy shock precipitated by the invasion of Ukraine reconfigured the "energy-security nexus" in Italian diplomacy, leading to the prioritization of offshore extraction as a strategic hedge against land-based militia volatility [14, 22]. Thirdly, the research evaluates the extent to which the "Mattei Plan for Africa" represents a sustainable strategic paradigm for engaging a neighbor that has effectively ceased to function as a unitary sovereign entity, or whether it merely institutionalizes a model of "resilient" but fragmented partnership [17].

Finally, the study assesses the long-term systemic risks inherent in a mitigation strategy that relies on transactional arrangements with non-state gatekeepers who increasingly weaponize energy resources and human mobility to extract political and financial concessions [18, 23, 24]. By methodically addressing these inquiries, this paper assesses the evolution of Italian foreign policy across the successive Conte II, Draghi, and Meloni administrations, documenting the definitive transition from a strategy of "Europeanized" multilateralism and systemic stabilization toward a "realist" framework primarily anchored in strategic damage control and interest-based pragmatism [8, 9].

The paper's intended contribution to the field of International Relations and geopolitics is twofold. Firstly, it contributes to the extant body of research on "migration diplomacy" by proposing a "triangular analysis" that accounts for the simultaneous pressures of domestic constituencies, European institutional constraints, and the leveraging of human mobility by non-state actors in contested spaces [23, 25]. Secondly, it proposes the concept of "strategic mitigation" as an analytical framework for medium powers dealing with "permanent failed states." In contrast to the binary choice between "intervention versus disengagement," strategic mitigation delineates a posture in which an external state prioritizes the resilience of its vital interests such as the Greenstream pipeline and maritime border integrity through horizontal partnerships that circumvent the necessity for a unified central authority [17]. This study provides a critical evaluation of the "Mattei Plan" as a prospective framework for ensuring energy security in the Mediterranean region. In a contemporary global landscape marked by multipolarity and fragmentation, medium-sized powers are compelled to address the "overspill of insecurity" emanating from their neighboring regions [4, 20].

This research posits that, while Italy's present mitigation strategy effectively safeguards short-term assets and curtails migration arrivals, it is, in essence, a reactive posture that addresses the symptoms of state failure rather than its underlying causes. By legitimizing parallel military structures and entrenching a rentier system that empowers fragmented elites, Italy risks institutionalizing the very instability it seeks to mitigate [2, 24]. The ensuing sections will provide a detailed structural analysis of the risks Italy faces, a comparative study of the policy shifts between the Draghi and Meloni governments, and a quantified evaluation of the energy and migration metrics that define the Libyan landscape.

Materials and Methods: A Multi-Dimensional Analytical Framework

The present study utilizes an extensive array of primary and secondary sources to construct a "structural analysis" of the evolution of Italian foreign policy toward Libya from 2020 to 2024. The validity and reliability of the research are contingent upon the integration of four distinct categories of materials. Firstly, the study draws extensively from the annual reports on Italian foreign policy published by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). These institutions

provide a rigorous chronological record of diplomatic initiatives and legislative milestones. These are supplemented by the UNDP's Independent Country Programme Evaluation (2020–2025), which offers a critical "performance rating" of institutional effectiveness within Libya's volatile context, providing an essential benchmark for measuring the gap between stabilization rhetoric and operational reality.

This assertion is corroborated by empirical evidence from two distinct sources: the Italian Ministry of the Interior's daily statistical dashboards, which provide data on irregular arrivals, and the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), which offers insights into Libyan oil output fluctuations. Moreover, the study incorporates some energy-focused research, specifically the IAI-Eni Strategic Partnership papers, to quantify the deepening "energy-security nexus" and the structural impact of ENI's \$24 billion regional investment portfolio.

The methodology of structural analysis is operationally defined in this research as a comparative evaluation of the mandates, tools, and institutional constraints that define Italian engagement in a bicephalous state. In contrast to an examination of individual diplomatic gestures, structural analysis examines the underlying "architecture of interdependencies." This involves mapping the Theory of Change (ToC) behind Italian initiatives like the Mattei Plan for Africa, analyzing the assumptions that horizontal economic partnerships can create stability in the absence of a unified central authority. Furthermore, the study utilizes a "contribution analysis" approach to infer causality between Italian strategic shifts such as the renewals of the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya and the resulting concentration of migration risks along specific logistical lines managed by non-state actors.

By employing this structural lens, the research transcends mere descriptive reporting, aiming to elucidate the mechanisms through which the "vicious circle of fragmentation" in Libya defined by institutional bicephalism and the weaponization of economic nodes has compelled Italian policy to perpetually engage in reactive adaptation. The analysis appraises the "Multidimensional Vulnerability Index" (MVI) of Libya, observing that a considerable degree of structural vulnerability and an absence of resilience in Libyan governance have converted stabilization from a viable objective into a remote aspiration. This necessitates a transition toward a model of "strategic mitigation". This methodological approach guarantees that the findings are not merely anecdotal but are firmly rooted in a systemic understanding of how external states manage vital interests within the framework of an entrenched failed state. Consequently, the "structural analysis" furnishes a rigorous framework for examining the interplay between Italy's domestic political transitions from Conte II to Draghi and Meloni and the objective constraints imposed by the Libyan situation.

Research Results: Empirical Evidence on Energy, Migration, and Transnational Risks

The empirical context of the Italian-Libyan relationship from 2020 to 2024 is characterized by a series of quantitative shifts and chronological milestones that indicate a deepening structural interdependence in the face of institutional collapse. This section provides a detailed account of the data and facts concerning the energy sector, migratory movements, the illicit political economy, and the presence of foreign military actors, as recorded in official reports and academic assessments.

Energy Interdependence and Infrastructural Volatility

The role of Libyan hydrocarbons in Italy's energy mix underwent a substantial quantitative reorientation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 [14]. Prior to this event, in 2021, Russia was Italy's primary gas supplier, providing approximately

29 billion cubic meters (bcm) or 40% of national imports [14, 15]. However, by the first half of 2024, data from the Unione Energie per la Mobilità (UNEM) confirmed that Libya had emerged as Italy's principal crude oil supplier, delivering 7.39 million tonnes between January and July 2024, which accounted for 22.3% of total national crude oil imports [16, 26]. This represented a 28.6% increase in Libyan oil imports compared to the first half of 2023 [27]. In the gas sector, Libya stands out as a distinctive partner for Italy, given its status as the only European nation with a direct pipeline connection to the country, namely the 11-bcm capacity Greenstream infrastructure [14]. Notwithstanding this capacity, actual flows have been consistently below the nameplate limit, dropping from 3.2 bcm in 2021 to 2.6 bcm in 2022, reaching its lowest average since 2011 [2, 14, 22].

The reliability of these supplies is perpetually undermined by what has been termed the "weaponization" of economic nodes. The Libyan economy is a rentier structure, with oil and gas revenues constituting 56.4% of the national GDP [2, 3]. In April 2022, eastern-based factions initiated a coordinated blockade of oil fields and terminals that persisted for several months, resulting in a precipitous decline in national production from a consistent 1.2 million barrels per day (mb/d) to approximately 100,000 bpd [2, 3]. A subsequent institutional realignment in July 2022 led to the appointment of Farhat Omar Bengdara as the head of the National Oil Corporation (NOC), a compromise that enabled the resumption and subsequent stabilization of production at 1.28 mb/d by late 2024, marking the highest level in eleven years [2]. Nevertheless, the level of volatility remained high. In January 2024, local factions once again blocked the Sharara field, Libya's largest. In August 2024, a crisis regarding the governorship of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) led to a 50% collapse in production, with average exports falling to 458,000 bpd in September 2024 before an agreement was reached on October 2, 2024 [2].

The Italian state energy company Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI) maintains a dominant presence, holding a stake in nearly 50% of Libya's total oil and gas output [4]. In 2020, ENI's annual Libyan production included 21 million barrels of oil and condensates and 6.2 bcm of gas [12]. On January 28, 2023, during a high-profile visit to Tripoli by Prime Minister Meloni, ENI and the NOC signed an \$8 billion investment agreement for the development of "Structures A&E" [18]. This project, the largest in Libya for two decades, involves the development of two offshore fields with a production capacity of 22.6 million cubic meters of gas per day, scheduled to commence in 2026. The gas is intended for both domestic consumption and export through the Greenstream pipeline [2, 22].

Quantitative Trends in Irregular Migration and Route Reconfigurations

An examination of data reveals a consistent upward trend in migratory pressure along the Central Mediterranean route during the early years of the decade. Notably, Libya has emerged as a primary departure point for migrants traversing this route. Statistical dashboards from the Italian Ministry of the Interior document a marked increase in irregular sea arrivals, from 34,154 in 2020 to 67,477 in 2021 and 105,131 in 2022 [21]. This trend reached its zenith in 2023 with 157,651 arrivals, marking the highest figure recorded since 2016 [27]. However, a significant decline in total irregular entries was observed in 2024, with the number dropping to approximately 66,317 by the end of the year [12]. Despite this overall decrease, a significant shift in the geographic origin of departures was observed. While Tunisia was the primary departure point in 2023, Libya reclaimed this role in 2024, accounting for over 60% of all journeys toward Italy.

The data also reveals a qualitative shift in the "logistics of smuggling." Since the beginning of 2023, the eastern region of Cyrenaica, under the military control of Khalifa Haftar, has become

a significant nexus for "hybrid" smuggling systems. These systems utilize legal or semi-legal flights from countries such as Bangladesh, Syria, and Egypt to eastern Libyan airports (like Benina), from which migrants are then transported to coastal zones for maritime departure. Intelligence assessments indicate that the Haftar network facilitated over 60% of irregular human trafficking to Italy during specific periods of 2023 and 2024. In response to these developments, Italy has upheld the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on migration, which was tacitly renewed on November 2, 2022, for an additional three-year period [25, 28]. In accordance with this framework, Italy persisted in its provision of assets to the Libyan Coast Guard, including 14 fast patrol boats delivered in October 2022 as part of an EU-funded project implemented by the Ministry of the Interior [25].

The financial turnover for these criminal enterprises is substantial. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), the annual revenue generated by human trafficking in Libya ranges from €250 million to €300 million (Manfredi Firmian, 2024b). On a broader scale, the aggregate turnover resulting from human trafficking along the entire transnational route is estimated to exceed €2 billion [12]. The management of these profits is facilitated by the hawala system, an informal financial network that connects Libya, Italy, and the Arabian Peninsula, enabling the execution of billion-euro transactions that are difficult to trace [11, 12].

The Illicit Political Economy: Petroleum, Gold, and Narcotics

The security vacuum in Libya has enabled the institutionalization of vast illicit economies that function alongside or within state structures. Petroleum smuggling continues to be the most lucrative sector. The diversion of fuel subsidies, which results in domestic prices being among the lowest in the world, creates significant arbitrage opportunities. According to estimates, petroleum smuggling operations generate an annual illicit turnover of over €2 billion [12, 29]. Italian law enforcement officials documented a sophisticated smuggling corridor involving gasoil from Zawiya and Zuwara to Sicily via Malta. The smugglers utilized small tankers that deactivate their radio transponders to avoid detection [29, 12].

Concurrently, other sectors have undergone analogous expansions. In May 2024, Libyan authorities apprehended the Director General of the Customs Authority and the head of customs at Misrata airport for attempting to traffic 26 tons of gold bars, with a market value of approximately \$2 billion [12]. Gold smuggling has emerged as a pivotal strategy for various factions to generate revenue for their parallel military operations and circumvent international financial sanctions [2]. Furthermore, Libya has solidified its role as a regional transit hub for drug trafficking, particularly Captagon and cannabis resin. According to Savina [16], criminal networks in Tripoli, Misrata, and Benghazi have come to dominate the narcotics sector in these cities, with an estimated annual value of €400 million. This integration into the global illicit market is reflected in Libya's ranking of 20th globally and first in North Africa on the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index (Manfredi Firmian, 2024b).

Military Presence and Geopolitical Competition

The period between 2020 and 2024 was characterized by the permanent stationing of foreign military proxies, which resulted in the freezing of the internal conflict along the Sirte-Al Jufra axis. In the aftermath of Yevgeny Prigozhin's demise in August 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense has formally established its presence in the East through the Africa Corps, formerly known as the Wagner Group. Moscow maintains a military presence in Libya, with at least 1,800 soldiers and mercenaries stationed at key locations, including the port of Tobruk, the Al-Khadim airbase, and the Brak al-Shati base in the Fezzan region [11, 12]. These bases function as logistical hubs for Russian operations in the Sahel and Sudan, where Russian-backed Libyan factions are reported to provide fuel and weapons to the

Rapid Support Forces (RSF) [12]. Additionally, ongoing negotiations for the establishment of a formal Russian naval base at Tobruk have been reported, with the provision of advanced air defense systems to the LNA being a key component of these negotiations, as indicated by Manfredi and Firmian [12, 27].

Turkey's military presence in western Libya is notable, with a concentration of forces at the Al-Watiya airbase and naval facilities in Misrata and Khoms [2, 20]. Ankara's involvement is established through a series of memoranda of understanding (MoU), including the 2019 maritime boundary agreement and the October 2022 energy MoU, which authorizes exploration in areas claimed by Turkey [4, 11, 20]. The formation of a Turkish-Russian "condominium" has resulted in a military stalemate, thereby preventing large-scale open warfare while also impeding political unification.

Macroeconomic Indicators and Institutional Fragility

The internal socio-economic conditions in Libya are indicative of the failure of institutional stabilization efforts. The Libyan dinar has experienced a depreciation of over 7% since 2021, resulting in a substantial reduction in purchasing power [3]. Inflation reached 3.4% in 2023, primarily driven by rising costs for food, housing, and water [3]. While the official unemployment rate stands at 18%, the situation is more acute among the youth population (ages 15–24), where the rate approaches 49% [3]. For young women, the unemployment rate is recorded at an astounding 68% [3].

The absence of a National Development Plan since 2011 has resulted in the deterioration of public services. The infrastructure for water and electricity is particularly vulnerable. Libya is ranked as the sixth most water-stressed country globally, with potability relying on non-renewable fossil aquifers [3]. Notwithstanding these systemic failures, over 90% of the formal workforce remains employed by the public sector, a model sustained only by the distribution of oil rents [3]. Moreover, the country plays host to an informal migrant labor force of approximately 2 million people, nearly equivalent in size to the formal Libyan workforce [3]. The November 16, 2024, municipal elections in 58 municipalities revealed a crisis of legitimacy, with voter turnout as low as 15% in major cities like Misrata [3, 30]. The findings of this study provide an empirical foundation for the examination of the reactive shift in Italian foreign policy.

Discussion: The Strategic Shift from Stabilization to Mitigation

The classification of Libya as a failed state is substantiated across multiple dimensions, including the collapse of the Libyan army and the proliferation of militia violence [31], the lack of a monopoly on security by the governing authorities [32], the implosion into regional and tribal entities [33], and the absence of functioning state institutions to redistribute oil wealth. The extant studies identify both deep structural causes and immediate triggers. Qadhafi's personalistic authoritarian regime systematically dismantled institutions that could limit his power, leaving Libya with a state lacking authority, legitimacy, and institutional capacity [6]. The ongoing tribal divisions and pervasive identity politics, which were strengthened under Qadhafi and subsequently unaddressed during post-2011 transitions, have impeded the formation of a central authority [7, 34]. The external interventions particularly the 2011 NATO-led military action and subsequent proxy warfare involving regional and international actors triggered the collapse of already weakened structures [31, 35]. However, Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux [36] contends that despite the failure of international intervention, security fragmentation is deeply rooted in domestic economic, cultural, and political factors.

The evidence indicates a fundamental disagreement concerning the most suitable analytical frameworks and solutions. A number of studies have been published that emphasize institutional deficits requiring constitutional processes and democratic reforms [31]. In contrast, other studies argue that conventional state failure frameworks

overlook the central role of identity politics and tribalism in shaping Libya's fragmentation [7]. Siyum Adugna Mamo [37] posits that liberal peace, founded upon hegemonic Western values, is incongruent with Libyan tribal society and disregards indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms. Claudia Ferrotti [7] advances the concept of hybrid political orders, emphasizing the recognition of Libya's inherent identity pluralism rather than the imposition of rigid nation-state frameworks. The extant evidence suggests that Libya's state failure is the result of a combination of long-term structural weaknesses created by authoritarian rule, tribal fragmentation that prevents national cohesion, and external interventions that activate latent vulnerabilities. However, studies diverge on the relative weight of these factors.

The evolution of Italian foreign policy toward Libya between 2020 and 2024 signifies a paradigm shift from a strategy of ambitious systemic political stabilization to a pragmatic, defensive model of risk mitigation. This transition was precipitated by Libya's consolidation as an entrenched failed state. In academic and diplomatic discourse, the reasoning behind this shift is rooted in the acknowledgment of a "vicious circle of fragmentation," where internal power groups prioritize clientelistic control over national wealth, rendering top-down liberal institutionalist reforms such as the UN-led 2021 electoral roadmap largely ineffective [4]. Consequently, Italian policy has adapted by prioritizing mechanisms for damage limitation over the increasingly elusive goal of national reunification. This shift is marked by a transition from multilateral state-building to a "transactional diplomacy" that aims to anchor Italian national interests within specific, functional nodes of power, irrespective of their democratic legitimacy [18].

During the second government of Giuseppe Conte (2019–2021), Italian policy was marked by a "low profile" multilateralism that sought to "re-Europeanize" the Libyan dossier in the aftermath of the 2019–2020 offensive on Tripoli by Khalifa Haftar. This posture was largely reactive and passive, as Rome subverted its historical bilateral leverage to the UN-led Berlin Process, which established the Joint Military Commission (5+5) in January 2020 [9]. During this period, the prevailing rationale was that Italy, devoid of the inclination for military engagement, could only assume the role of a "stability financier" as opposed to a direct military "participant." In essence, Italy functioned as a "catalyst state" within a multilateral framework [15]. However, the failure to hold national elections in December 2021 exposed the "multilateralist ceiling," as foreign proxies, such as Turkey and Russia, institutionalized the internal divide through permanent military footprints [4]. Italy's inability to dictate security terms compelled a shift in policy towards a wait-and-see approach, supporting the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in early 2021 as a final attempt at systemic stabilization before the focus shifted entirely towards mitigation [8].

The transition to the Mario Draghi administration (2021–2022) marked the emergence of "technocratic realism," where the energy-security nexus became the primary driver of foreign policy. Draghi's initial approach was proactive and propositional, as evidenced by his selection of Tripoli as the site for his inaugural international visit in April 2021. This visit underscored economic reconstruction and the "Peace Dividend" [8]. During this phase, Italy leveraged its technological expertise in energy and telecommunications as soft power instruments to maintain its influence [20]. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, served as a significant geopolitical catalyst that profoundly reshaped Rome's hierarchy of priorities [14]. Confronted with the imperative to disengage from Russian gas, which constituted 40% of imports in 2021, Draghi's diplomatic efforts shifted towards reactive mitigation. The preservation of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI)'s extraction capabilities and the maintenance of the Greenstream pipeline were deemed of paramount importance. This shift in focus led to the

adoption of a strategy of long-term economic hedging, wherein relations with functional entities such as the National Oil Corporation (NOC) were prioritized over the increasingly remote prospect of political reunification [12].

The government of Giorgia Meloni (2022–2024) has formalized this shift through the implementation of the "Mattei Plan for Africa," which signifies a proactive endeavor to position Italy as a Mediterranean energy "bridge" [17]. Meloni's policy is predicated on "sovereignist pragmatism," a doctrine that acknowledges Libyan fragmentation as a fundamental structural premise [18]. A critical juncture has been the explicit and direct engagement with Khalifa Haftar in the East, regarding him as a necessary "gatekeeper" for both energy stability and migration control in Cirenaica. This engagement represents a response to empirical data indicating that Haftar's network has facilitated over 60% of irregular human trafficking to Italy since early 2023 [21]. While the policy has been proactive in economic terms as evidenced by the \$8 billion gas deal signed in January 2023 it has been reactive to the security vacuum, trading the ideal of democratization for the immediate necessity of border containment [18]. The Mattei Plan functions as a sophisticated damage-control mechanism, utilizing horizontal industrial partnerships, such as the recent agreement on the Port of Misrata, to secure vital assets within a permanently broken institutional structure [20].

A pervasive continuity has been observed across all three administrations, with a consistent reliance on the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Migration. This agreement was tacitly renewed on November 2, 2022 [28]. This document constitutes the foundational element of Italy's "pullbacks" strategy, entrusting search and rescue operations to the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) despite documented human rights violations within Libyan detention facilities [25]. The prevailing rationale among governments asserts that constraining flows within Libya constitutes a "vital national interest," despite the evolution of migration routes into intricate "logistical lines" orchestrated by non-state actors [23]. This continuity indicates that the externalization of border control has evolved from a provisional emergency measure to a permanent component of the mitigation model. Critics contend that this "transactional approach" leaves Rome vulnerable to "political blackmail" from Libyan factions who exploit both energy taps and migrant departures as instruments to extract financial and political concessions [24].

An evaluation of Italy's policy toward Libya reveals a combination of proactive economic diplomacy and passive political mediation. Proactive moments include Draghi's early re-engagement with the GNU and Meloni's substantial offshore gas investments, which serve as a strategic "hedge" against land-based conflict. However, Italy has adopted a largely passive stance regarding the resolution of the underlying political conflict, thereby compromising its interests in favor of the military stalemate maintained by Turkey and Russia [4]. The predominant threat is the militarization of energy and migration in a region where the Russian Africa Corps maintains a permanent presence at strategic nodes like Tobruk and Al-Khadim [11]. In the final analysis, while the strategy of mitigation successfully safeguards short-term Italian assets with Libya providing 22.3% of crude oil imports by 2024 it leaves the "fourth shore" in a state of permanent instability, where Italy's vital interests are conditioned by the erratic shifts of its fragmented neighbor [11].

The rationale underlying the transition from stabilization to mitigation is elucidated by the divergent interpretations of Libya's "failed state" status. One theoretical framework posits that Libya's inability to transition effectively stems from the "shallow state" model that prevailed during the Qadhafi era, a model that failed to establish a robust institutional framework for such a transition [7]. This perspective substantiates the implementation of a mitigation strategy, positing it as the sole viable response to a society devoid of

a centralized political apparatus. Conversely, other analysts posit that the current fragmentation is exacerbated by the very mitigation tools used by external powers, such as the direct funding of local militias to stop migration [23]. This "triangular migration diplomacy" engenders a paradox wherein Italy's endeavors to mitigate risks in the short term paradoxically serve to exacerbate the structural fragmentation that hinders long-term stabilization [4].

Additionally, the "Mattei Plan" introduces a new layer of proactivity by attempting to move beyond purely extractive relationships. The Meloni government's proposal of "non-predatory" horizontal partnerships in sectors such as health, education, and agriculture aims to cultivate a degree of "local resilience" that could potentially diminish the necessity for constant risk mitigation [17]. However, the efficacy of this proactive outreach is impeded by the prevailing circumstances of "kleptocratic boom" and systemic corruption [27]. The absence of a cohesive national development plan in Libya signifies that proactive investments by Italy may be diverted or weaponized by competing factions [3].

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations inherent to the study. The underreporting of maritime fatalities and the irregular nature of migration routes introduce potential biases into quantitative estimates of the "deadly effect" of search-and-rescue externalization to the Libyan Coast Guard [24]. Moreover, the evaluation of institutional capacity in Libya is constrained by the absence of a National Development Plan and the deterioration of public service infrastructure, which complicates the assessment of whether proactive Italian investments under the Mattei Plan can achieve long-term resilience or will remain entrapped in a corrupted system [3, 27]. Nevertheless, it is conceivable to contend that while the prevailing strategy effectively mitigates immediate risks, the long-term efficacy of "contact-less" management in a fractured neighbor remains a pivotal uncertainty for prospective Italian foreign policy [20, 25].

The transition from stabilization to mitigation signifies Italy's endeavor to address the discord between its historical Mediterranean role and the challenging circumstances in Libya. While the Conte II government reached the limits of multilateral stabilization, the Draghi and Meloni administrations have built a "realist" framework centered on the energy-security nexus. This framework is proactive in its industrial and economic engagement; however, it remains reactive and passive toward the political root causes of the Libyan crisis. As long as Libya persists as a "bicephalous entity" in which sovereignty is "shredded," Italian policy is likely to remain anchored in this model of strategic mitigation. Under this model, the primary objectives of Italian policy are the protection of gas flows and the containment of migration. The increasingly utopian goal of a unified Libya is given low priority [20].

Conclusion

The analysis of Italian-Libyan relations between 2020 and 2024 confirms a definitive paradigm shift in Rome's strategic posture, moving from an ambitious pursuit of systemic political stabilization to a pragmatic model of strategic mitigation and damage control. This transition was necessitated by Libya's consolidation as an entrenched failed state, characterized by institutional bicephalism and a "shallow state" model that has proven resistant to top-down liberal institutionalist reforms.

The study's primary finding is that the failure of the 2021 electoral process served as a terminal turning point, transforming Libya's crisis from a transient phase into a permanent state of instability where fragmentation is the structural baseline. In this geopolitical landscape, Italian policy has recalibrated its priorities to focus on safeguarding vital national interests, particularly the energy-security nexus and the containment of migration, irrespective of the political legitimacy of the actors exerting control on the ground.

A critical component of this study is the documentation of Italy's deepening energy interdependence with Libya despite the surrounding institutional collapse. By the first half of 2024, Libya had regained its status as Italy's primary crude oil supplier, accounting for 22.3% of total national imports. This strategic decision, underpinned by the geopolitical imperative to decouple from Russian gas in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has compelled Rome to adopt a model of long-term economic hedging. This strategic realignment is evidenced by the landmark \$8 billion investment agreement signed by Eni in 2023, which underscores Italy's growing emphasis on the offshore dimension of energy extraction. This shift is motivated by a desire to mitigate exposure to land-based conflicts and the weaponization of economic nodes by local factions. The study's findings underscore the fact that while these investments ensure the procurement of critical supplies, they concomitantly serve to consolidate a rentier system that reinforces the very elites who profit from the ongoing fragmentation of the nation.

The significance of this research is further underscored by its comprehensive analysis of the logistical lines of instability concerning irregular migration. The study's findings indicate a transition in the management of the Central Mediterranean route to a "contact-less" system of border delegation, anchored by the tacit renewal of the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding in 2022. A salient finding is the qualitative shift toward direct engagement with non-state actors, particularly the network of Khalifa Haftar. This network has acquired substantial leverage as a "gatekeeper," managing over 60% of irregular departures from Cirenaica since 2023. This transactional approach, while reducing short-term arrivals, exposes Italian foreign policy to political blackmail and undermines long-term stabilization by legitimizing parallel military structures.

The Mattei Plan for Africa, in essence, signifies the institutionalization of this mitigation model, seeking to position Italy as a Mediterranean energy nexus through horizontal, non-predatory partnerships. However, the efficacy of this proactive outreach is significantly hindered by the escalating military presence of foreign proxies, particularly the Russian Africa Corps, and the pervasive integration of an illicit political economy. The study's findings indicate that, while the present strategy of mitigation offers a vital protective measure for Italy's economic and border security, it functions primarily as a reactive stance, addressing the manifestations of state failure rather than its underlying causes. As long as Libya remains a fragmented, bicephalous entity, Italy's vital interests will remain vulnerable. This will necessitate a more coordinated European response to prevent the permanent marginalization of Western influence in the central Mediterranean.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the content of this manuscript.

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