

Russia officially recognises the National Transitional Council in Libya

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On August 31, the Russian government recognised the National Transitional Council of the NATO-backed rebel forces as the only legitimate government in Libya.

In March, Russia had abstained from voting for the United Nations (UN) resolution that paved the way for the imperialist war in Libya, and had been acting as “mediator” between the Gaddafi regime and the rebels since the end of May. By recognising the Transitional Council, it is now signalling that it will not stand idly by while the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) powers seize all the booty from the war.

The Russian government justified its recognition of the Transitional Council as follows: “We assume that the contracts and bilateral commitments, previously made by the Russian Federation and Libya, will continue to apply to relations between the two countries and will be conscientiously fulfilled”.

A day earlier Anwar Faituri, the transport and communications minister, had publicly declared that the validity of contracts with Russia would be reviewed, warning that the refusal of the Russian government to recognise the Transitional Council could have a negative impact on the outcome of this review.

Mikhail Margelov, Russia’s representative in North Africa, declared on the Russian RT television channel on September 1: “We want to continue our current work in Libya. Our policy concerning economic cooperation with the country in no way depends on what particular political regime the Libyan people choose for the future”. He also claimed that the concept of Russian-Arab friendship and cooperation was not limited to the era of dictators and totalitarian regimes, and was as relevant today as it was 50 years ago.

NATO’s military intervention in Libya was directed not least against the growing influence of China and Russia in North Africa. This view was also reflected in the Russian press. A commentary in the August 30 edition of the *Vzglyad* newspaper stated it was “obvious” that the war was not waged for the sake of democratic ideals, “but due to a desire

to redistribute Libya’s energy resources, and thereby deny them to (the West’s global) competitors, China and Russia”.

After Algeria, Libya was Russia’s main trading partner in North Africa. Losses suffered by the Rosoboronexport arms supplier alone due to the embargo amount to \$4 billion. Weapons contracts worth about \$2 billion are still pending. In 2008, Russian Railways signed a contract to build a rail link between Sirte and Benghazi—a project whose total value amounts to an additional \$2.2 billion.

In April 2008, the Russian energy giant Gazprom signed a contract with the Italian energy concern ENI, sealing Russia’s entry into the “major league” with a share of 33 percent. The value of the project, which involves the supply of some 68 million tons of oil, amounts to almost \$2 billion. According to the corporation’s figures, the annual volume of oil extracted in Libya for Gasprom before the war was 6 million barrels. In those years, Gazprom expanded its involvement in Algeria—the fourth largest gas supplier in the world—and Nigeria, investing several billion.

At the same time, the Russian energy company concluded a deal providing for more intensive cooperation with the Libyan National Oil Cooperation. Compared to Russia, their western rivals—especially France and England—were increasingly left behind. Like Shell and the Algerian state company Sonatrach, Gazprom increasingly won tenders for funding projects, while French, British and Japanese firms dropped out of the picture.

The growing presence of Russia in North Africa was viewed particularly by the European Union (EU) with mounting suspicion. The *Handelsblatt* business publication of April 18 quoted Igor Tomberg of the Moscow Institute of World Economy and International Relations as saying: “While Europe sleeps, Gazprom is snapping up contracts worldwide and becoming a global player which is tightening its grip on Europe.... Gazprom is surrounding Europe geopolitically”.

Around the same time in 2008, Russia and Libya were intensifying their military collaboration. Commenting on discussions about access of the Russian fleet to a

Mediterranean port at Benghazi, the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* noted: “Russian military presence will ensure that Libya is not attacked by the US”.

During a meeting with then-President Vladimir Putin, Gaddafi said, “The development of our bilateral partnership is a very positive move in relation to the international situation.... It helps to restore the geopolitical balance”.

Although the war obviously amounted to an attack on Russian interests in North Africa, Russia refrained from vetoing the UN resolution on March 17, thus allowing the war to begin. The question of the appropriate attitude to the war sparked bitter conflicts within the country’s ruling elite. While Prime Minister Putin argued for a vote against the resolution, President Dmitry Medvedev decided on an abstention and sharply attacked Putin’s statement that the war against Gaddafi resembled a “crusade”. This open disagreement discharged in tandem caused quite a sensation, and was seen by many commentators as a sign of mounting government crisis.

Russia’s position continued to be extremely ambivalent over the next few months. At the G8 summit in late May, Medvedev’s offer of Russia’s readiness to act as an intermediary between the Gaddafi regime and the rebels was intended to ensure that Russia did not remain completely out of the conflict.

All options were thus to be kept open. Mikhail Margelov was consequently sent to Libya as Russia’s North Africa representative. It remained unclear whether the rebels, even with the aid of NATO forces, would be able to overthrow Gaddafi. Although Medvedev’s course has come to gain wide support, Putin’s position won the backing of broad sections of the ruling elite at the beginning of the war.

Another reason why Russia was unwilling to support the war was the widespread outrage it provoked in the Russian population. A survey conducted on March 24 revealed that 78 percent of respondents opposed the war in Libya.

Russia’s refusal to vote against the UN Security Council’s Libyan resolution was bound up with fears that a veto would have led to the country’s political isolation on the world stage and brought it into conflict with the US and the EU—an outcome the Russian government could ill afford for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the Russian economy is extremely dependent on energy exports to the West, especially to the EU. Tensions between the US on one hand, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia on the other, are certainly increasing. However, Russia remains unwilling to form a close alliance with China, although the two countries sometimes take the same positions on economic and political issues against the US.

Secondly, the last six months in Russia have been distinguished by increasing political and social uncertainty.

The economic crisis is bringing poverty and misery to more and more people, and leading to an extreme polarisation of society. According to a survey of the *joblist.ru* web site, more than a fifth of the population are financially unable to provide their family with wholesome food. Only one in ten families can afford to take an annual vacation. In a poll taken in June, some 49 percent said they were willing to participate in protests. It had been only 38 percent in the previous month.

While the differences between Putin and Medvedev are increasingly being made public, it remains unclear who will stand for president in the elections next year. Within the ruling elites, conflicts exist in regard to both foreign policy orientation and how best to enforce further devastating attacks on the social rights of the population. Given the growing social polarisation in Russia, the ruling class is deeply disturbed by the events in the Arab world, fearing social unrest may spread quickly to neighbouring countries in Central Asia and Russia itself.

The war in Libya, itself an expression of the shifting international balance of power, will greatly exacerbate inter-imperialist conflicts, and further polarise the relationship between the West and the BRIC states (rapidly developing states of Brazil, Russia, India and China). At the moment, Russia’s greatest concern is the possibility of a NATO military intervention in Syria and Iran. As far as Moscow is concerned, both countries are of even greater economic and geopolitical importance than Libya.

Regarding the Syrian crisis, the Kremlin has until now acted as a defender of the Assad regime, while the EU has imposed an oil embargo on the country and President Obama has publicly declared that Assad has lost his legitimacy as ruler. In the event of Western intervention in Syria, Russia has already announced its intention to exercise its right of veto in the UN.



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