Libya’s Pan-African Policy

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Rapporteur: Lesley Anne Warner

On 25 October 2010, CNA’s Center for Strategic Studies organized a workshop to examine Libya’s role in Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel under Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi. Panelists and workshop participants were drawn from academia, think tanks, and the U.S. government. During the workshop, the following themes emerged:

• Libya’s Africa policy has evolved over the course of the Qadhafi regime.
• In recognition of the fact that the Arab world will never accept him as a pan-Arab leader, Qadhafi has attempted to exert his influence as a pan-African leader since 2000. Qadhafi’s shift toward Africa can also be attributed in part to the fact that while many Arab leaders abandoned him during the sanctions regime, many African leaders maintained their relations with Libya.
• Having originally used political subversion as a tactic, Qadhafi has transformed Libya into a pragmatic investor in emerging African economies. This does not mean, however, that he will not use Libya’s economic interests as leverage.
• Qadhafi has also adopted the roles of an intermediary between Europe and the rest of Africa and as a mediator of African conflicts.

Libya’s Role in Africa: A Historical Overview

Libya as the Exporter of Revolution (1980s to mid 1990s)

In 1969, the Free Officers’ Movement deposed the monarchy of King Idris in a coup d’état. As chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), Qadhafi sought to export Libya’s revolution worldwide – first using diplomatic means. However, it soon became apparent that diplomatic efforts would not bear fruit; consequently, subversion and coup-making became Qadhafi’s modus operandi. During the 1980s, Libya established guerrilla warfare training camps in Libyan territory which were attended by trainees from Africa, including the Sahelian countries of Mali, Niger, and Senegal. However, only in the case of Liberia’s Charles Taylor did a trainee from Libyan camps forcefully overthrow an African government.

This CNA workshop, convened at CNA headquarters in Alexandria, VA with U.S. Government funding, was held as part of CNA’s ongoing efforts to bring the expertise of global scholars and experts to Washington’s policymaking community.
A U.S. victory in the First Gulf War (1990-1991) and the end of the Cold War left the long-time Libyan rival, the United States, as the sole superpower, raising Qadhafi’s concerns vis-à-vis his regime’s longevity. After intense lobbying from the United States and the United Kingdom, the United Nations (UN) imposed sanctions on Libya in 1992. Around the same time, Qadhafi began to feel threatened by the rise of Islamist political and militant movements in the region. In 1989, the National Islamic Front (NIF) took power in neighboring Sudan. By 1995, Qadhafi was waging an all out war against the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) while Algeria was fighting Islamist rebel groups during its civil war (1991-2002).

From Subversion to Pragmatism: the Pan-African Era (late 1990s to present)

The sanctions period (1992-2003) was a watershed in the way in which Qadhafi attempted to advance his interests and assert Libya’s regional leadership. While Qadhafi felt that Libya had sacrificed on behalf of the Arab states, they had betrayed Libya by complying with the West’s sanctions regime. African leaders, on the contrary, largely ignored sanctions, which encouraged Qadhafi’s sense of solidarity towards the rest of the continent. From the late 1990s, Libya began to move away from supporting subversion and violence in other African countries and attempted to redefine itself as a country with pan-African interests. This shift was not only a reaction against the betrayal of the Arab world during the sanctions regime, but also a realist calculus. While Libya would never possess the money or the influence of the Gulf States in Arab matters, there was a vacuum to be filled in African states – which Libya filled with investments in agriculture, gas stations, hotels, telecommunications, and transportation. Although these investments could be characterized as sound and rational business investments, there is political utility to them as well. In speeches, Qadhafi has issued veiled threats to withdraw sovereign wealth funds if countries do not adhere to a pan-African ideology. So far, Libya has not yet acted on such threats. Qadhafi now has economic levers to get what he wants. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that this focus on foreign investment over violence or political subversion may represent a tactical, not an ideological shift.

Claiming a vision to bring Africa out of its underdeveloped state, Qadhafi promoted African unity and financed summits on the continent. In 1998, he spearheaded the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), with a Secretariat in Tripoli, to enhance regional integration. Since this time, 617,000 citizens of CEN-SAD’s 28 member states have acquired legal citizenship in Libya. Qadhafi also began to advocate for reviving the Organization of African Unity (OAU) as the African Union (AU). In September 1999, the Fourth Extraordinary Session of the OAU Assembly of African Heads of State and Government issued the Sirte Declaration calling for the establishment of the AU. (The declaration was named for the city of Sirte, which was the location of the meeting as well as Qadhafi’s birthplace). The OAU was subsequently reborn as the AU in 2002. Since this time, African leaders have allowed Qadhafi to reform the AU and play a leadership role within it, but they have also been able to sideline and manage most of his ambitions. Seeing that the AU was not advancing his agenda, he became an advocate for a “United States of Africa” in 2007, but this concept has not been well-received in Africa. In Ethiopia in particular, there have been concerns that Qadhafi is using this as a pretext to move the seat of the AU from Addis Ababa to Tripoli.
Another way in which Qadhafi has sought to expand his influence across Africa is by getting involved in mediating African conflicts. In many of these cases, Qadhafi has insisted on creating his own direct channel of negotiations – even when there is an ongoing peace process. In only one case has Libya’s entree into conflict mediation been successful. In 2000, Libya was able to play a helpful role in ending the break in diplomatic relations between Djibouti and Eritrea. Some cases of Libya’s unsuccessful attempts at conflict mediation include:

- Libya has attempted to mediate Sudan’s North-South and Darfur conflicts. However, due to the fact that Libya hosts Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) leader Khalil Ibrahim in Tripoli, Sudan sees Libya as destabilizing to the Darfur peace process.
- Qadhafi tried without success to mediate a dispute between Sudan and Eritrea in 1995, which centered on support for opposition groups in each other’s country.
- In the 1990s, Qadhafi made numerous attempts to mediate the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict, but Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi was uninterested in separate negotiations, making it clear that any mediation of the conflict should be within the context of the OAU framework agreement. Qadhafi even went so far as to propose a Sahelian-Saharan peacekeeping force, to which Eritrea agreed and Ethiopia did not. Qaddafi subsequently helped finance Eritrea’s military campaign against Ethiopia.
- In 2008, Eritrea initiated a border conflict with Djibouti. Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerki appealed to Qaddafi to resolve the dispute, but Qadhafi was again unsuccessful.
- In 2009, Libya invited the leaders of insurgent groups in Somalia to come to Tripoli where Libya agreed to try to mediate their differences, but this initiative did not succeed.

Both its oil wealth and relationships with rebel leaders have facilitated Libya’s attempts to play the role of peacemaker in Africa. Yet, it is unclear whether Qadhafi genuinely wishes to resolve conflicts, as he would lose leverage over the combatants in the process. Libya has provided refuge to and maintains relations with a number of African rebel leaders, and is thus empowered to encourage them to act up or calm down according to what Qadhafi perceives to be in Libya’s best interest, making Qadhafi both a public peacemaker and private provocateur.

There has been domestic Libyan opposition to Qadhafi’s outreach to Africa – especially on issue of immigration. Fleeing civil strife and poverty, thousands of sub-Saharan Africans have immigrated to Libya – either as a destination itself or en route to Europe. Despite Libya’s open immigration policy in the 1990s, Qadhafi imposed quotas following anti-immigrant riots in 2000 which killed over 600 hundred migrants. The domestic resistance to Qadhafi’s immigration policy illustrates the tension between Qadhafi’s desire to champion African unity and the Libyan population’s resentment of the African migrant community. Given immigration concerns within the European Union regarding African immigrants, Qadhafi has been able to insert Libya as an interlocutor between the EU and Sahelian countries such as Mali and Niger.
Libya’s Relationship with Sudan and the Horn of Africa

Sudan

In the early years of his regime, Qadhafi believed he shared the pan-Arabism of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and the pan-Islamism of Sudan’s Gaffar Nimeiri. Within the first two years of taking power, Qadhafi proposed a union with Sudan, but Nimeiri flatly rejected Qadhafi’s proposal out of fear of further alienating the southern Sudanese. From the mid-1970s, tensions arose between the two countries, as Libya increasingly gravitated towards the Soviet Union and Sudan gravitated towards the West. In 1976, Libya backed a failed coup against Nimeiri, which increased Libyan animosity in Sudan. In 1980, Libya invaded Chad – a move which pushed Sudan further into the West’s camp. However, Nimeiri was ousted in a coup in 1985, which allowed Qadhafi to post troops in Darfur to support the war in Chad until the defeat of Libyan forces in Chad in 1987. Today, Libya is concerned about the impact that Southern Sudan’s potential secession may have on regional security. Qadhafi fears that an independent Southern Sudan could come under the influence of the United States, China, and others. He likewise fears that Sudan’s Darfur region could eventually emulate the south by fighting for independence, which could further expose the region to instability and outside influence. Lastly, Qadhafi fears that further destabilization of Sudan might enable the expansion of al-Qaeda activity in the region.

Ethiopia

Following the 1974 overthrow of Haile Selassie, Qadhafi began to give financial assistance to the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia. Largely as a response to “American imperialism,” Libya signed the Tripartite Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Ethiopia and South Yemen in 1981. However, Qaddafi’s decision in 1984 to engage in a short-lived union with Morocco and cease support for the Polisario’s efforts to obtain control of the Western Sahara embarrassed Mengistu, who was at the time the head of the OAU and a strong supporter of the Polisario. Due to his ideological differences with Mengistu, Qadhafi was unable to expand Libya’s influence in the Horn of Africa. In 1991, Meles Zenawi removed Mengistu from power, and Ethiopia has pursued a careful relationship with Libya ever since.

Eritrea

Libya was a strong supporter of Eritrean nationalists including Isaias Afwerki’s Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, from 1969 through 1975. Following the 1974 coup in Ethiopia and Mengistu’s takeover of the government, however, Qaddafi ended his support for Eritrean liberation groups and switched his support to the Ethiopian government. Following Eritrean independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Libyan-Eritrean relations slowly began to improve. Since the 1998 border conflict with Ethiopia, there has been a steady improvement in Eritrea’s relations with Libya – mostly due to Isaias’ desire to use his relationship with Qaddafi as leverage against Ethiopia.
**Djibouti**

Former Djiboutian president Hassan Gouled Aptidon was the first sitting African leader to violate the UN sanctions and visit Libya in 1998. Nonetheless, Libya’s efforts to maintain good relations with both Eritrea and Djibouti presented a dilemma for Libya, due to Eritrea’s incursion along its border with Djibouti in 2008. In 2010, Djibouti and 13 of the 15 members of the UNSC strongly supported sanctions against Eritrea for its support of extremist groups in Somalia and its aggressive actions along Djibouti’s border, while Libya was the only UNSC member to vote against the resolution. This infuriated Djibouti, and the country’s foreign minister declared that his country was freezing membership in CEN-SAD. His Libyan counterpart arrived in Djibouti two weeks later in an effort to undo the damage to the relationship. Although it is not clear what Libya promised Djibouti, the Djiboutian foreign minister subsequently reversed course, and announced that Djibouti had “no problem with Libya’s relations with Eritrea.”

**Somalia**

As Somalia and Ethiopia have historically been enemies, Qadhafi’s establishment of an alliance with Ethiopia’s Mengistu in 1981 angered Somali leader Siad Barre. Somalia subsequently broke relations with Libya and did not restore them until 1985. Since the fall of the Barre regime in 1991, Libya and Sudan have been the only countries to maintain an official diplomatic presence in Mogadishu. Somaliland’s former president, Mohammed Ibrahim Egal, made a made a major effort to cultivate Libya in the hopes of attracting diplomatic recognition for his unrecognized country. However, Libya saw Egal as a “factional leader” which underscored the importance of Somalia’s unity for Libya. After numerous efforts to reconcile the Somali factions and the leaders of Somaliland and Puntland, Qadhafi had apparently tired of Somali by 2007. He declared that “people want us to wait until Somalia unites and ends its problems. Somalia has split into three or four countries. Uniting Somalia is a challenge and it might not unite.” The answer, he said, is to create his United States of Africa, which will circumvent all of these lesser issues.

**Libya’s Involvement in the Sahel**

**Mali and Niger**

Libya has long meddled in the internal affairs of Sahelian countries. Patronage funneled through traditional leaders has been a means by which Qadhafi has been able to influence tribal politics abroad, as these communities have historically been marginalized. Yet, as countries like Mali and Niger have an economic need for Libyan assistance, they have tried to maintain smooth relations. Qadhafi has also used Sahelian minorities such as the Tuaregs as power levers. Due to droughts in Mali and Niger, many Tuaregs immigrated to Libya in the mid-1970s. Qadhafi gave many of these migrants military and financial assistance, which was then turned on the governments in their home countries. Nonetheless, Tuaregs in the Sahel have become suspicious of Qadhafi due to unkept promises.
Chad

From the 1970s, Qadhafi sought to create a client state in Chad so as to expand his influence in Central Africa and mitigate French influence in the region. During the ensuing Chadian-Libyan conflict (1980-1987), Libya backed the government forces of Goukouni Oueddei, who was fighting Hissène Habré, who was backed by the United States, France, and Egypt. Libya’s 1987 defeat was a watershed for Qadhafi’s previous policy of subversion. Qadhafi subsequently realized that there was a political cost to this type of adventurism, and that it was no longer in Libya’s favor.

Algeria

Libya has competed with Algeria for regional hegemony in Mali and Niger, with Libya occasionally stepping on Algeria’s toes when it attempts to carve out a new sphere of influence in these countries. Yet, the two countries share an interest in countering terrorism, curbing the influence of political Islam in the region, and countering the flow of narcotics through Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Due to Algeria’s experience countering Islamic extremism during the 1990s, counterterrorism is one area where Libya is willing to accept Algerian leadership. However, in general, Qadhafi dislikes fora in which Algeria is in the lead and in which he does not speak from a position of power.

Conclusions

During Qadhafi’s tenure, Libya’s Africa policy has shifted as a result of his changing desire to export his revolutionary ideals, his ambitions to advance Libya’s interests, and his abandonment by the Arab world during the sanctions regime. Having abandoned his ambitions to be a leader in the Arab world, Qadhafi has been able to exert some degree of influence as a pan-African leader. Although Libya no longer relies on political agitation and subversion to shape African countries, Qadhafi remains interested in exerting political influence on the continent. This influence is often exerted primarily through economic means, and Qadhafi has threatened to use this influence as a lever against those who oppose him. As a result, many African leaders pursue cautious relations with Libya, paying requisite deference while offering resistance when possible. For example, while they have given him leeway to reform the AU, they have also resisted some of his aspirations for greater continental unity.

Looking forward, Libya’s Africa policy is unlikely to change in the near future. Despite his reputation for unpredictability, Qadhafi is not likely to abandon his focus on Africa, nor is he likely to take up the cause of violent revolution at the expense of Libya’s economic investments. In the long term, however, the trajectory of Libya’s Africa policy is uncertain. As many of Libya’s goals are of personal interest to Qadhafi, there is no guarantee that his successor would continue his legacy in Africa as conflict mediator, private investor, and interlocutor to Europe. In fact, following Qadhafi’s death or departure from the political scene, the momentum that has been driving Libya to expand its relationship with African countries could diminish as potential successors focus on consolidating internal power.