Vestiges of the Cold War in Libya’s “Arab Spring”: Revisiting Libya’s Relations with the Soviet Union

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Abstract: Although Muammar al-Qaddafi was known to fanatically adhere to a broad set of zealous principles, when threats and challenges to his political survival mounted, sporadic breaches in the country’s rigid wall of ideology in regard to Libya’s international relations appeared, evincing Qaddafi’s ability to demonstrate pragmatism when required in order to maintain his grip on power. This article will explore Libya’s strategic-military alignment with the USSR and offer a retrospective analysis of one of the lesser-discussed chapters in Tripoli’s tempestuous and belligerent foreign policy during the height of the Cold war era, spanning the period of 1974-1989.

Key Words: Cold War and post Cold War; Arab Countries and the “Arab Spring”; The Soviet Union; Libya; The Superpowers’ Middle East Policy

The developments in the Libyan “Arab Spring” may be regarded as a case study that demonstrates that the Western military intervention enthusiastically launched against Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime in 2011 was largely based on Cold War patterns, notwithstanding the disappearance of the superpowers’ rival bipolarity more than two decades earlier. Noteworthy among the

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scholars arguing for the “surprising survival” of Cold War features and their active manifestation in the “Arab Spring” conflicts, including the one in Libya, is Theodor Tudoroiu, who claimed that “Western support for the incumbent regime or for its adversaries was not based on a choice between democracy and authoritarianism [but] rather, it was motivated by a pattern of amity and enmity inherited from the Cold War period” (Tudoroiu, 2013: 304-320).

This argument has provoked another discussion, one revolving around Russia’s abstention from any military counter-intervention against Western powers, which were determined to remove Qaddafi from power once and for all and bring about regime change in Tripoli to benefit what the Western powers considered to be their essential interests. Seemingly modeling their response largely on vestiges of the Cold War, Western powers reverted to the patterns of the 1970s-1980s, ignoring Qaddafi’s significant contribution to the West, relating to his regime as it was during the Cold War era – an important pillar in the strategic and military alignment with the Soviet Union. Those among Qaddafi’s circles who expected Russia to counter Western powers and support his regime in Tripoli as it came under assault from the West were, however, sorely disappointed. Without getting into an in-depth discussion of the Russian considerations on how to handle the Libyan crisis, a subject that lies beyond the scope of this article, the Libyan “Arab Spring” watershed offers a timely opportunity to revisit the relations between Libya and the Soviet Union during a significant part of the Cold War era. This unique chapter in Tripoli’s foreign policy played a significant role in its domestic affairs as well.

This study will also shed light on broader and closely-related regional and global relationships at the time, offering a retrospective analysis primarily from a Libyan vantage point of one of the lesser-discussed chapters in Tripoli’s tempestuous and belligerent foreign policy during the height of the Cold war era, spanning the period of 1974-1989. More specifically, it will analyze the motives of the tightly controlled Libyan decision-making machinery in abandoning its rigid ideological principles in the case of the USSR to establish its strategic rapprochement with this superpower, thus affecting the life of the state, its regime and its position in the
international community to an extent unparalleled in scope and essence by any other case of foreign affairs. The study will also explore why the Libyan-Soviet alignment ultimately disintegrated about a decade after its inception, before the demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War.

Firmly in control of his country’s ideologically and militantly driven foreign policies, Qaddafi – the ruler of Libya from 1969 to 2011 – was known to fanatically adhere to a broad set of zealous principles. Yet, when threats and challenges to Libya mounted, especially when they affected the regime’s number-one priority – its political survival – sporadic breaches in the country’s rigid wall of ideology in regard to Libya’s international relations were known to appear, evincing Qaddafi’s ability to demonstrate pragmatism when required in order to maintain his grip on power. A review of Libya’s international relations during Qaddafi’s 42-year regime reveals two such important chapters, although each had substantially different implications for Libya’s domestic and foreign systems during the Cold War era. Both of these extraordinary chapters took place outside the geographic scope of Tripoli’s Arab environs, with the first involving collaboration with pro-Western and pro-Israeli Middle Eastern Turkey (Ronen & Yanarocak, 2012: 1-15), and, the second, a strategic-military alignment with the Soviet superpower. Interestingly, the inception of these two different sets of non-Arab and Cold War relationships occurred in close proximity, in the mid-1970s. Yet, each of these two relationships ended at a different juncture in time and under substantially different circumstances.

In stark contrast with Qaddafi’s strict guiding principle of not allowing any foreign state with a known history of imperialist ambitions and current actively interventionist policies to be involved in the affairs of the Jamahiriyya®️, Tripoli’s strategic alignment with the Kremlin indeed evinced a dramatic departure from Libya’s otherwise consistent ideology and practices in external affairs. Moreover, this

1 Jamahiriyya is a term originally coined and exclusively implemented by Qaddafi from the mid-1970s onward to highlight what he had perceived as Libya’s unique political revolutionary system – the “People’s Power,” a form of alleged participatory democracy, which, he claimed, enabled the people to rule themselves.
departure, which proceeded apace from its earliest inception, soon became a major feature informing Libya’s domestic life, in addition to its influence on the state’s standing in regional and world politics, to an extent completely disproportionate to its real power. Libya’s domestic and foreign policies, particularly its relentlessly hostile relations with the United States and to say nothing of the position of the regime in Tripoli, might have developed in an entirely different direction had Qaddafi’s Libya not been staunchly buttressed by the Soviets, only to be entirely deserted by them about ten years later.

The last section of this article will discuss the dramatically adverse implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Cold War order for Libya and the Qaddafi regime. Yet, this section of the article will be relatively short; it will nevertheless clearly outline the critical impact of the demise of the Soviet Union – Qaddafi’s one and only powerful supporter in the international arena. From that time forward, Libya was exposed to an increasing threat from its archenemy – the United States – with the US-led New World Order from the early 1990s on becoming Qaddafi’s political nightmare. This most dramatic upheaval in Libya’s international situation indirectly and gradually eroded the state order in Libya and its regime’s political prestige, perilously exemplified by the escalating economic crisis and the dramatic rise of a vigorously active Islamist opposition which widely infiltrated Libyan army circles, and most significantly by the United States’ tightening of its diplomatic and economic stranglehold on Libya. This combination of domestic and foreign dangers served to hasten Qaddafi’s fall from power. Eventually, on August 20, 2011, the Libyan “Arab Spring” rebellion terminated Qaddafi’s regime, hurling the Libya into a dizzying maelstrom of unprecedented violence and havoc.

I. Libya’s Status Plunges in the Arab World: Tripoli Desperately Seeks a New Foreign Ally

After Qaddafi ascended to power on September 1, 1969, the 27-year-old military officer and politically inexperienced head of state wasted no time and rushed headlong into his country’s immediate geopolitical Arab-Muslim environs. Considering Egypt to be the jewel in the Arab crown, Qaddafi enthusiastically followed its suit and waved the banners of pan-Arabism, Arab unity and anti-Western “imperialist” involvement in the Arab region. For Qaddafi, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (who led Egypt from 1952 to 1970) was the ultimate model of Arab nationalist leadership, and he became Nasser’s willing acolyte. Zealously toeing Nasser’s militantly nationalist line which espoused the eradication of the West’s foothold in Egypt during the 1950s-1960s, Qaddafi uprooted any and all traces of the British and American military presence, as well as that of Italian colonialism in Libya\(^\text{1}\), and already in his first year in power, Qaddafi nationalized all tangible symbols of the abhorred Western “imperialism,” including Western banks, property and oil distribution networks (Vandewalle, 2006: xvi-xvii). Clearly, this policy injected strong doses of enmity into Libya’s relations with Western countries.

Yet, Qaddafi’s ideological admiration for Nasser was overshadowed by Egypt’s extensive strategic, military and political dependency on the Soviet Union, which was especially salient during the war of attrition that Nasser fought against Israel (March 1969-August 1970). Despite his pan-Arab nationalistic fervor and intoxication with Egypt’s military campaign against “the Zionist

enemy,” Qaddafi appeared concerned, however, by the Soviet Union’s increased involvement in Egypt – the country that the new regime in Tripoli and other Arab capitals regarded as the “elder sister (al-Shaqaqa al-Kubra)” in the Arab family of states (Zaytar, 1989: 469). Not only did Qaddafi fear Soviet strategic and military presence near his oil-rich country’s long and undefended border to the east, but he was also troubled by the obvious contradiction and ongoing erosion of both the ideology of Arab nationalism and Nasser’s nonalignment policy. This was the policy that Nasser had already adopted in the mid-1950s following the April 1955 Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries, which committed to the principle of neutralism in relations with the two Cold War superpowers. (While waving the banner of neutralist activism, Nasser officially signed an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, with the USSR behind the scenes, shortly after the Bandung event). Moreover, the apprehension of the Libyan head of state was further aggravated when the Egyptian-Israeli war of attrition stepped up the erosion of Nasser’s military and political prestige, which in turn caused Nasser to further rely upon the Soviet Union. Another major aspect of Cairo’s military and political collaboration with Moscow was the fact that the Soviets rebuilt Egypt’s decimated army, which Israel had defeated during the June 1967 war. At that juncture, Nasser enabled the Soviets to further increase their already strong foothold in Egypt’s affairs, even at the expense of Egypt’s sovereignty, with Nasser granting Moscow unprecedented military privileges on Egypt’s soil. The Soviets rebuilt Egypt’s air defense system, which included surface-to-air missiles. Not only did the Soviet personnel operate what was at the time a state-of-the-art missile system, but in some cases, Soviet pilots even flew the Soviet planes on operational missions. The number of Soviet military experts in Egypt in the late 1960s is estimated at 15,000-20,000 (Sela, 2002: 284-286). Thus, the unprecedented Soviet strategic-military interventionist policies in Libya’s immediate geostrategic backyard, as well as Nasser’s now tarnished nationalist and political image, dealt a painful blow to the pan-Arab ideology and its vision, which dominated Libya’s core foreign interests at the time.

Qaddafi’s failed attempts to establish unionist ties between Libya
and other Arab countries, with Egypt always a much-desired pillar of the planned pan-Arab edifice, further intensified the Libyan leader’s dismay and disappointment. Nasser’s sudden death in September 1970 and Qaddafi’s self-perception as Nasser’s natural heir in pan-Arab politics and devoted guardian of the Arab unionist vision spurred Qaddafi’s drive to form unionist Arab frameworks. Within this context and after realizing that the 1971 unionist “Federation of Arab Republics (FAR),” composed of Libya, Egypt and Syria was virtually defunct, the tireless Qaddafi mobilized several thousand Libyan citizens in July 1973 to march toward Cairo in a “holy march and historic procession,” aimed at delivering a call for union inscribed in the “blood of Libyan citizens” – once again to no avail (Radio Tripoli, 1973: July 17). However the procession quickly deteriorated into violence, severely undermining relations between Libya and Egypt, now with Anwar al-Sadat, Nasser’s political heir, at the helm. Egypt’s fear of Qaddafi’s ideological belligerence and political subversion dominated Tripoli-Cairo relations – the heart of Qaddafi’s foreign-policy ideology in the early 1970s. Sadat, who vehemently denounced Qaddafi’s interventionist behavior in Egyptian affairs and who later portrayed Qaddafi as a “disturbed person” and “spoiled child” (Radio Cairo, 1977: September 28), gradually disassociated his country politically from Libya, to the latter’s immense dismay.

Qaddafi, however, continued to vigorously employ whatever measures he saw fit to promote his unionist vision, which represented a threat to other Arab states, particularly Egypt’s Sadat. It is then no wonder that Sadat and his partner, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, concealed their October 1973 war plans against Israel from Qaddafi. The Libyan head of state who considered himself an especially staunch supporter of the Arab cause and a sworn opponent of Israel’s right to exist and therefore, fully committed to the military annihilation of the “Zionist entity,” was stunned and deeply affronted by the secret exclusion of Libya from the Arab war campaign (Ronen, Y., 2004: 85-98). Moreover, this concealment policy formally terminated the unionist framework of the FAR, whose constitution stipulated that war against Israel could only be decided by a unanimous vote taken by Libya, Egypt and Syria (Article 14/8).
Trying to save face and while eulogizing the FAR as an “imaginary union which died a comic death” (Al-Dustur, 1974: April 29), the humiliated Libyan leader furiously disassociated himself from the 1973 battlefield, stating, “This war is not my war…. Even if Egypt and Syria were to defeat Israel [which they did not], I cannot lend my name to a comic opera war” (Arab Report and Record, 1973: October 16; Le Monde, 1973: October 22).

Yet whatever efforts Qaddafi made to hide his ideological and political bankruptcy in the Arab world – the sole focus of identification in Libya’s foreign affairs in the early 1970s – he himself was aware that his standing in the Arab world had reached a dead end, exposing Libya’s vulnerable isolation in foreign affairs. Qaddafi feared that the adverse implications of this seclusion on both Libya’s regional and international fronts might consequently spill over to its domestic affairs too.

II. Entering the Soviet Orbit: The “Marriage of Convenience” between Tripoli and Moscow

Qaddafi’s dire need to enhance his regime’s eroded prestige at home and shatter Libya’s isolation in foreign affairs, in addition to Qaddafi’s fervent desire to translate his country’s oil-rich potential into maximum military, technological and economic might and thus further consolidate his political hold on power soon produced some major achievements. Most important among them was the establishment of an alliance between “the Soviet Union and the Arab nation” as the Libyan leader still preferred to officially refer to his country in the mid-1970s (Al-Jihad, 1976: November 25). Rather than allow his fierce ideological repudiation of Communism or Soviet involvement in the internal affairs of other Arab countries to create an obstacle on his road to Moscow, Qaddafi interpreted the newly developing rapprochement with Moscow as being precisely what Libya most needed at that time in order to offset its defeats and the threats to the state’s domestic, but particularly foreign affairs. Following the crushing blow dealt by the October 1973 war to both his position at home and Libya’s standing in the Arab world, and as a
result of the alarmingly escalating tension with the United States due to Washington’s support of Egypt and Israel and the consequent growing American proactivism in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as exemplified by the US-led mediation between Israel and Egypt, Qaddafi’s strategic choice to align Libya with the USSR was in fact the only available option to significantly shore up Libya at that distressing juncture in the Cold War during the 1970s.

In the dramatically altered Mideast climate of that time, after Sadat had expelled the Soviet advisers from Egypt in 1972 and become a pivotal leadership component in the American-oriented triangle of Arab states, together with Sudan and Saudi Arabia, Libya considered the USSR to be the only available – and most effective – counterweight to the “detested” West, and no less so its Arab allies, which Libya equally abhorred at the time. Notwithstanding the stark ideological and political differences between Libya and the USSR, to say nothing of their substantially disparate economic, technological and military capabilities, and markedly dissimilar status and ambitions in global affairs, the two states shared a series of crucially important strategic, political, economic and military interests. Most noteworthy among them was the burning desire they shared to remove Sadat’s pro-American regime from power and reinstate a regime espousing a different regional and international agenda in its stead, in addition to curbing the United States’ escalating strategic and diplomatic involvement in Egypt and its broader Mideast environs, particularly in the areas near the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, where Cold War rivalry was on the rise.

The convergence of Soviet and Libyan interests generated an unprecedented exchange of top-echelon officials between Moscow and Tripoli, the most prominent among them being the respective visits of Libyan Prime Minister Abd al-Salam Jallud in May 1974 and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin in May 1975 (Morison, 1978:33-38). Jallud’s visit produced breakthrough results and culminated in the signing of “comprehensive cooperation” agreements in political, economic and military areas based on “sincere friendship.” Accordingly, the Soviets committed to supply Libya with tanks, aircraft and even Scud surface-to-surface missiles, all to be paid for with Libyan hard
currency derived from its plethora of oil revenues. As a result of the
talks, the Soviets further agreed in principle to supply Libya with a
10-megawatt nuclear facility for peaceful atomic energy. In addition to
this $1.2-billion arms deal (Gera, 1979: 1-17; Campbell, 1979: 1-17), the
Soviets further concluded an agreement in December 1974 to provide
Libya with TU-22 supersonic bombers (until then provided only to
Iraq), Mi-8 helicopters, SA-3 and SA-6 SAM missiles, anti-tank missiles
and MIG-23 Floggers, the first 13 of which were delivered in early May
1975, shortly before Premier Alexei Kosygin’s visit to Tripoli. The
value of the 1974 contract – US$2.3 billion – was said to be almost “a
billion dollars higher than the total of all military purchases by the
[Libyan] regime until that time” (Anderson, 1985:34). With this arms
purchase, Moscow replaced France as Qaddafi’s major weapons
supplier. “For years,” noted John Wright, “Libyans tried to see arms
supplies in the same light as any other commercial transaction”
(Wright, 1982: 170). Yet, from the Libyan point of view, the arms
transactions with the USSR in the Cold war era, unprecedented in size
and sophistication, in addition to the escalating military tension with the
US, were of unmistakable political and strategic-military significance.

Following Kosygin’s visit, hostile Egyptian sources, with al-Ahram
in the lead, reported the conclusion of yet another Soviet arms deal
with Libya – this one valued at $4 to $12 billion – in return for Libya
allowing the Soviets to use military bases on Libyan soil (Pajak, R.,
1980-81: 52). This claim, whether correct or not, starkly contrasted with
Qaddafi’s refusal of an earlier Soviet request to use Libyan military
facilities following the evacuation of British and American forces from
Libya in 1970 (Wright, 1982 169-170). Whatever the credibility of these
reports on the arms sales and the handing over of the Libyan facilities
to the Soviets, particularly those disseminated from Cairo, their role
was instrumental in fuelling the war of nerves between the conflicting
Arab “clients” and their respective Cold War superpower “patrons,”
and reflected the seeming or real conditions of the Arab states’
military empowerment. In this spirit, Western officials reported in
mid-1975 that the Soviet arms sales arrangement also included six
F-class diesel attack submarines, as well as assistance in the rebuilding
of World War II submarine servicing-and-repair facilities at the Libyan
ports of Tobruk and Benghazi, along with the dispatch of about 100 Libyan naval personnel to the Soviet Union for submarine training and the arrival of an expected 600 Soviet military advisers in Libya (Pajak, 1975: June 30; 1975: July 20). Whatever the real extent and essence of the allegedly huge arms sales, they appeared to largely exceed Libya’s objective needs and ability to “digest” the new massive and sophisticated weaponry, let alone to maintain and operate them.

With its total armed forces numbering some 42,000 in 1977-78, far below Libya’s immediate needs to employ the new arms consignments, in May 1978, Qaddafi promulgated a compulsory conscription law, which he packaged in ideological wrapping, although its real purpose was to immediately and considerably augment the size of his army.①

These mammoth arms deals, unprecedented in scale and quality, and their consequent effect on Libya’s military and political euphoria paved the way for Qaddafi’s first trip to the USSR on 6-9 December 1976. The Soviets seized the occasion to demonstrate their public support of Libya in its conflict with Egypt, signaling the nadir in Egypt’s rifts with both Moscow and Tripoli. In fact, the fierce enmity that Libya and the USSR shared toward Egypt, along with their keen interest in the termination of Sadat’s rule, which they hoped would change inter-Arab and international politics in the broader Middle East, served as a powerful force in further cementing relations between Qaddafi and the Kremlin and in further strengthening Libya’s bellicosity toward Egypt. In Libya, the exposure in mid-1975 of the failed coup initiated by Umar al-Muhayshi and two other members of the Libyan Revolutionary Command Council – the top-echelon body of officers who had overthrown the monarchical regime in 1969 and ruled Libya since – shook the foundations of Qaddafi’s political confidence. His conviction that the United States and Egypt had been complicit in the attempted coup spurred Qaddafi to further bolster his reliance on the USSR.

The new Libyan-Soviet strategic and military alliance bore out its

① This compulsory conscription, aimed at strengthening the regime’s security, paradoxically provoked strong popular discontent, fostering opposition to Qaddafi’s rule.
importance for Libya already in the armed conflict between Libya and Egypt that flared up on July 21-24, 1977, which involved the engagement of both aircraft and ground forces. Egypt, which started the hostilities, wishing to curb and further deter Qaddafi’s subversion against Sadat and to ignite political insurgency against the Qaddafi regime, mounted intense attacks on both military and civilian targets deep in Libya. The Soviets seized on this conflict to further demonstrate the strategic and military advantages embodied in Moscow’s “patronage” for the Libyans as well as for the other Arab states, and offered Tripoli diplomatic and military support, jamming Egyptian radar installations and providing Libyan reconnaissance of the Mediterranean area with naval helicopters operating out of Libyan bases. On the opposite side of this Arab-international Cold War constellation, the United States buttressed its Egyptian ally with diplomatic and combat intelligence, with both Cairo and Washington pleased with the Egyptian air force’s destruction of Soviet-operated radar station in Cyrenaica, which had “observed not only the movements of the Egyptian army, but also the U.S. Sixth Fleet and NATO forces in the Mediterranean” (Cooley, 1982: 121-122). Eventually, after less than a week of fighting, the military conflagration ended thanks to foreign mediation, highlighting Cairo’s failure to undermine either Qaddafi’s rule or Soviet influence in Libya. In fact, the Soviets’ support of Libya during the war, even if less effective than Qaddafi had wished, along with the Soviets’ subsequent supply to Libya of new arms consignments to replace those destroyed during the fighting, which included 10 aircraft, 30 tanks – including “new T-62 tanks equipped with laser range finders and Soviet medium-range missiles with a 160-mile range” (Cooley, 1982: 123; Pajak, 1980-81: 53) – further cemented the military collaboration between Tripoli and its superpower ally. Indebted to the Soviets for their support, Qaddafi allegedly allowed the Soviets to use Libyan bases as staging areas for Soviet military flights to Ethiopia (Pajak, 1980-81: 54; Campbell, J., 1980: 30-32). Although Moscow was cautious regarding the degree of its involvement in Haile Mariam Mengistu’s military campaigns in Eritrea, at the same time, it left no doubt about its commitment to Addis Ababa, to which it was linked by a Treaty of
Friendship and Cooperation since November 1978.

Meanwhile, the shared Libyan and Soviet antagonism towards Sadat’s US-backed peace initiative with Israel, which Sadat first announced in public on July 16, 1977 on the eve of the military conflagration between Egypt and Libya, further fuelled the affinity between Tripoli and Moscow. Sadat’s dramatic declaration that he was willing for the first time to make peace (Salam) with Israel within the context of the Egyptian-Israeli conflict, whereas earlier he had spoken only in terms of “ending belligerency” (Radio Cairo, 1977: July 16), inflamed Qaddafi’s pan-Arab passions. Moscow, motivated by reasons of its own, joined Tripoli in vehemently rejecting the Egyptian peace initiative. Clearly, Libya’s steadily escalating conflict with the United States, as demonstrated by Washington’s backing of anti-Libyan and anti-Soviet Egypt in the July 1977 war and by Washington’s ranking of Libya fourth – after the Soviet Union, China and North Korea – in the United States’ 1977 annual list of potential enemies, with Cuba ranking fifth, coincided with the USSR’s increased apprehension of the United States’ dominant role in Egypt’s geopolitical Arab environs. Not surprisingly, this newly added element – their shared opposition to the peace process – strengthened military ties between Libya and the USSR. This was explicitly attested to by the fact that Libya appeared to be the biggest Arab client for Soviet arms and military personnel in the final years of the 1970s, following only Iraq and Syria.

Sadat’s historic visit to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977, which both the Kremlin and the Libyan leadership virulently denounced, with the latter vilifying it as a “crime against the Arab nation” (Radio Tripoli, 1977: November 19), further boosted the Libyan-Soviet relationship. The arrival of the Chief of the Soviet General Staff Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov for a working visit in Tripoli on December 19-22, 1977, followed by a reciprocal working visit paid by Jallud, the second highest official in the Libyan political hierarchy, to Moscow on February 19-22, 1978, brought Libyan-Soviet cooperation to a new strategic-military high. That the Soviets pledged to supply Libya with a 440,000-kilowatt nuclear power plant – Libya’s second Soviet reactor but its first nuclear one – further attested to the flourishing bilateral
ties. This found further expression a short while later in the summer of 1978, when Libya boasted that it had more than 1,000 aircraft, including planes that “only the USSR and Libya possess – long range strategic bombers,” namely, MiG-25 Foxbat supersonic fighters (Radio Tripoli, 1978: June 11). It may be assumed that these aircraft, among the most sophisticated Soviet interceptors at the time, were maintained and piloted by Soviet personnel while Libyan pilots and maintenance staff were undergoing training, which was long and demanding.

The Camp David agreements of September 1978, which reflected the progress of the peace process between Egypt and Israel, pointed to the Soviet-Libyan failure to rein in the peace efforts and erode the centrality of the impact of the United States on Arab and broader regional Middle Eastern politics in pursuit of Washington’s vital interests, primarily those pertaining to security and oil. Having the backing of Moscow for its vehement opposition of the peace process, Libya diligently fuelled the militancy of the Arab “Front of Steadfastness and Resistance,” which was composed of pro-Soviet forces in the region: Libya, Algeria, Syria, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) also joined this front. The USSR, angered by the pivotal role the United States was playing in the peace process, supported this Arab front, in which Libya’s Qaddafi played a particularly belligerent leading role.

Following what had by then become routine in the Libyan-Soviet relationship, in late 1978, Moscow expressed its support for Libya by providing the militarily intoxicated and oil-rich Libyan leadership with huge arms consignments, which included 60 tanks, two squadrons of military aircraft and a considerable quantity of Scud surface-to-surface missiles (Al-Anba, 1978: November 18). Qaddafi’s subsequent announcement a short while later that he was considering allowing Soviet warships to sail from Libya’s highly important strategically located ports on the Mediterranean Sea might have been a reflection of his discussions with the Soviets (Al-Nahar Arab Report and Memo, 1979: May 28), or might have served as yet another measure Libya was resorting to in order to both deter and intimidate the
United States, Egypt and the other US allies in the Arab world.

At that juncture, the psychological war between Libya and Egypt, each with its own respective superpower supporter, escalated to new heights. In February 1980, Egypt claimed that the Soviets had established a major naval base on the Libyan coast, northeast of Benghazi (Al-Ahram, 1980: February 15). This unconfirmed claim was soon followed by an additional catalogue of unconfirmed reports, claiming that the Soviets had dispatched Cuban troops and North Korean pilots from pro-Soviet Ethiopia and Angola to Libya during the period of late 1978-spring 1979 (Al-Sayyad, 1978: December 7; Foreign Report, 1979: May 2). President Fidel Castro’s stopover in Tripoli on his way home from Ethiopia in September 1978 for talks with Qaddafi served to fuel this rumor mill too. The effect of these allegations, which were further stoked by claims that 2,000 to 5,500 Soviet military advisers were present in Libya, also inflamed the war of nerves raging between the conflicting Arab camps and their respective East-West Cold War supporters. Whether or not these data were indeed indicative of the scope and commitment of the Soviet support for Libya, projecting just such an impression already served the latter by reinforcing its political standing at home and abroad, despite the troubling issues that continued to threaten it. Domestically, the most worrisome challenge for Qaddafi was the exposure of his fierce political rivalry with his second-in-command Jallud, who had joined forces with other Libyans nursing political grievances. The accumulating tensions in Libya’s foreign affairs also disconcerted its leadership, particularly the conflict with the United States and with Egypt, which to the dismay of both Libya and the Soviet Union signed a peace agreement with Israel on March 26, 1979. Also marring Libya’s foreign affairs and further increasing anti-Qaddafi sentiments at home was the Libyan army’s disastrous military fiasco in the spring of 1979 in Uganda, where Libya fought to prop up Idi Amin’s regime against its belligerent domestic and Tanzanian- and Egyptian-backed opposition. The fatal blow Libya suffered there in terms of crushing losses of both personnel and weapons (Ronen, Y., 1992: 173-183), in addition to Libya’s military involvement in neighboring Chad, was immediately translated into political troubles on its domestic front and
in its relations with the USSR.

Desperately in need of all the military and political assistance he could obtain from the USSR, Qaddafi deepened Libya’s dependence on Moscow. Yet, to his dismay, the Kremlin’s political and strategic empathy towards Libya started to wane from the summer of 1979 onwards. Furthermore, Moscow even publicly criticized Libya’s military intervention in Uganda to the point of refusing to sell Qaddafi the weapons and military equipment he so urgently needed to make up the heavy losses sustained in the war in Uganda. This Libyan military debacle, which indirectly tarnished the reputation of Soviet weaponry at the stage when the Libyan military was deepening its military incursion into Chad with the primary aim of annexing its uranium- and oil-rich Aouzou Strip, provoked Moscow’s discontent, particularly because the Libyans were finding it increasingly difficult to pay for their arms in hard currency. The Soviets’ misgivings worried Qaddafi, whose regime was facing a series of coup attempts, with one of the most serious coming from the army – traditionally considered to be the mainstay of the regime’s survival.

In late summer-fall 1979, Libyan-Soviet relations degenerated into a “quiet crisis” (Al-Ray al-Amm, 1979: August 1), fuelled not only by Soviet considerations pertaining to the value of its Libyan ally but also by what was even more significant: a Soviet reassessment of its interests in the Middle East as a whole and its broader geostrategic environs.

III. Changed Priorities in Moscow’s Foreign Policy: Tripoli Pays the Price

The USSR’s interests in the Middle East and that part of the Indian Ocean that abuts the Persian Gulf underwent substantial changes in the aftermath of Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeyni’s annihilation of the Shah’s pro-American monarchy in Iran and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in its stead in early 1979. The dramatic upheaval in Iran, which was fraught with considerable danger and involved high stakes for the Soviet Union, dramatically reshuffled the USSR’s strategies as became apparent in the deepening Soviet involvement in
the Persian Gulf and the Southern Asia sub-regions. Concurrently, the importance for Moscow of other traditional arenas of strategic collaboration in the Arab world, including Libya, largely declined.

Moscow’s changed priorities in foreign affairs, which placed a new emphasis on its neighboring geostrategic Persian Gulf and Southern Asia environs, came about because these areas had become a major theatre of the East-West conflict and as a result of Moscow’s fear of the effects of Iranian radical Islam spilling over to the Soviet Muslim populations and thus endangering the Soviet Union’s secular Communist character and political order. Aware of Khomeyni’s fanatical goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution to neighboring Islamic countries, the Soviet Union feared religious-political insurrections in its own territories bordering Iran, and even in the neighboring Islamic state of Afghanistan, where a Communist regime was in power. In late December 1979, less than a year after Khomeyni’s dramatic ascent to power, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in an attempt to fend off the mounting threats (Becker, A. & Fukuyama, F., 1981: 59-67).

Meanwhile, there was little Libya could do as it helplessly and worryingly saw its importance on the Soviet foreign-policy agenda decline, concurrently aware, however, of the United States-Egypt’s growing hostility toward it. At this difficult hour, Qaddafi was cautious to neither further strain his relations with the USSR, and refrain from denouncing the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan which ran starkly contrary to his oft-declared ideological principles, nor to support the invasion and thereby provoke the enmity of the Muslim Arab states, providing them with additional ammunition to seek his removal. In the summer of 1980, however, Qaddafi surprisingly abandoned this ambiguity and came out in defense of the Soviet invasion by arguing that it had been carried out "at the official request of the Afghani government" (Jamahiriyya Arab News Agency, 1980: June 25; Radio Tripoli, 1980: September 5). In retrospect, it became clear that the new Libyan position was well orchestrated tactically and perfectly aligned with Tripoli’s feverish preparations to conduct a military invasion of neighboring Chad, where it used a similar argument to legitimize its own military
encroachment. However, in the case of Chad, the parallel Libyan argument did not refer to an invitation from the government in N’Djamena, but rather to one extended by the Chadian Muslims, who were fighting against the Western-oriented Chadian government. The belated Libyan legitimization of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was further aimed at placating the Kremlin, with an eye to reinvigorating the lifeline of Soviet military support of Libya on the eve of its new military campaign in Chad.

While Qaddafi was moving full steam ahead in the direction of Chad, in late September 1980, another war broke out, this one between Iran and Iraq – the latter being a signatory with Moscow to a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The war diverted the attention of both the Soviets and Americans to the Persian Gulf. Moscow did the minimum necessary to honor its obligations toward its ally in Baghdad, while tilting, where possible, toward Iran. Alarmed, Libya hurried to establish unity with Syria and express support for the Syrian-Iranian axis, thus sharing yet another dimension of common interests with Moscow.

With Moscow’s international strategies primarily concentrated on its military entrenchment in Afghanistan and the war in the Gulf region, and with the West’s preoccupation with the same issues, on top of the American hostage crisis in Iran and the increasing importance for Washington of the Persian Gulf as a petroleum, financial and strategic theatre, Qaddafi took advantage of the situation and staged a military invasion of Chad in late 1980. By mid-December of that year, Libyan troops and tanks had already entered the Chadian capital of N’Djamena. Western sources claimed that Soviet advisers had helped the Libyan military to formulate its strategy and that Soviet pilots were flying some of Libya’s Soviet-made air force planes (Le Monde, 1980: November 26; Africa Research Bulletin, 1980: November 1-30; Washington Post, 1981: January 7, 8, 15). No confirmation or refutation of these claims was issued by either Moscow or Tripoli and the Western sources may have been exaggerating the situation. Whatever their truth, these claims reflected the well-entrenched patterns characteristic of the first years of the Libyan-Soviet alignment and its related East-West Cold War nature.
Yet, Libya seemed to be intentionally concealing the stalemate in its military ties with the USSR, which had sunk to such an alarming low that Qaddafi had to personally travel to Moscow on April 27-28, 1981 to persuade the Kremlin of the urgency of his country’s need to be rearmed by the Soviets. The welcome Soviet president Leonid Brezhnev gave Qaddafi at the airport and the Soviet host’s praises of Libya’s “positive role” in Chad during the visit were no more than diplomatic lip service (TASS, 1981: April 29). Clearly, at that stage, and in contrast to an evaluation that “Libya’s relations with the USSR during 1981-1982 became stronger than they had been at any time in the past” (ElWarfally, 1988: 147), relations between Tripoli and Moscow were in fact considerably strained.

With no public information on new arms sales available, Qaddafi appeared to have returned home empty-handed. The growing bellicosity with the United States, as indicated by the shooting down in the summer of 1981 of two Libyan warplanes in the Gulf of Sirte over which Libya claimed sovereignty and Libya’s intensifying military involvement in Chad, urged Qaddafi to dispatch a high-level military delegation headed by Jallud to Moscow in June of that year, hoping it would produce tangible results. A month later, two Soviet warships paid a visit to the port of Tripoli – the first ever by a Soviet naval taskforce to the capital’s port. Yet, to Tripoli’s alarm, this exchange of visits did not culminate in any new arms transactions. Direly searching for other alternatives, yet closely related, channels to Moscow and having its blessing, Qaddafi’s signed a triple alliance with Soviet-aligned Ethiopia and the PDRY on August 19, 1981. This triple alliance agreement, signed the same day that American planes shot down two Libyan fighter aircraft in a dogfight over the Mediterranean, should be viewed primarily in the context of the escalating crisis between Libya and the United States, rather than as a sudden burst of affinity with the Soviets. Clearly, Qaddafi would have preferred to sign a treaty of friendship with Moscow rather than with its allies on the periphery of the Middle East and Africa, but to his growing frustration, the Kremlin had no interest in such a move. Needing an immediate counter-move to enhance his political prestige at home following the loss of the Libyan Su-22 fighters and the
growing attacks by “American terror and imperialism” (Radio Tripoli, 1981: August 19; The Jamahiriyya Mail, 1981: August 22), Qaddafi signed the tripartite agreement, and after arriving in Addis Ababa from Aden two days later, he dramatically declared that Libya would continue to defend its interests against US terror “even if it means the death of the last Libyan man and woman…[and] even if it means a third world war” (Jamahiriyya Arab News Agency, 1981: August 21).

As Libya’s war in Chad intensified, the Libyan war machine’s desperate need of new Soviet arms to replace those worn out or destroyed during the battles increased accordingly. Furthermore, the generous military support extended by the United States, France and the pro-US Arab states of Egypt and Sudan to the anti-Qaddafi forces in Chad further intensified Libya’s dire need for the Soviets’ military aid to serve as a counterweight (Wright, J., 1983: 91-95; Ronen, Y., 157-179). The Libyan head of state even raised the possibility of Libya’s formal accession to the Warsaw Pact in order to further encourage Moscow’s support. Unfortunately for Libya, its military relations with the Soviet Union remained in a state of relative stalemate. Qaddafi’s series of visits to Soviet Bloc states in 1982 and 1983 – which only served to emphasize his skipping of Moscow, which had presumably clarified its lack of desire to officially host him further underscored Libya’s reduced value in the eyes of the Soviet Union. But it was not only Libya’s decreased strategic-military value that cooled the Soviets’ interest in Libya; the inability of oil-exporting Libya to pay in cash for its Soviet arms purchases as a result of the dramatic drop in global oil prices at a time when the Soviets needed hard currency further diminished Tripoli’s attractiveness for Moscow. After the USSR rejected Libya’s offer to pay in oil for future arms deals, as it remained concerned about Tripoli’s inability to pay its already existing debt of $1 billion in mid-1982 (Newsweek, 1982: August 16; al-Watan al-Arabi, 1982: October 1-10), it became clear that the USSR’s collaboration with Libya had lost its momentum.

Libya’s rebuke of Soviet policies in the Middle East in mid-1982, with Qaddafi going as far as to call into question the credibility of the USSR as an ally of the Arabs due to its “apathy” towards the Israeli military invasion of Lebanon (Jamahiriyya International Report, 1982:
July 9), was a clear symptom of Libya’s indignation at those that just few years earlier had been considered Libya’s staunchest supporters. On March 16-18, 1983, lacking any other alternative source of military equipment and weapons and facing mounting military blows in Chad, Qaddafi desperately dispatched his politically “frozen” rival Jallud, who had made friendly inroads in the Soviet capital, to Moscow in an attempt to reinvigorate the bilateral relations and mobilize the urgently needed arms consignments. Neither the Soviet Union nor Libya publicly revealed the details of the results of Jallud’s visit, although an agreement in principle to sign a treaty of friendship, similar to the one already signed between the Soviet Union and Syria, the PDRY and Iraq, was announced in a joint communiqué issued at the culmination of the visit (Radio Tripoli, 1983: March 19). Yet, this agreement remained unimplemented, further signifying the moribund nature of the relations.

With both Libya’s financial and military resources exhausted and his political prestige steadily losing altitude, Qaddafi, who came to realize that his country had overextended itself in Chad, appeared helpless as he watched the rising political opposition at home, with members of his military involved in attacking his headquarters and residence in the Bab al-Aziziyya barracks in Tripoli on May 8, 1984 and in recurrent military mutinies throughout 1985 (Ronen, 1985: 583-587; 1987: 561-562).

Qaddafi decided to seize the opportunity presented by the changing of the guard among the top Soviet leadership and arrived in Moscow on October 10-14, 1985 to hold official talks with new Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev (in power since March 1985). To Qaddafi’s dismay, the visit proved to be a crushing failure as the Soviets refused to commit to new arms deals or build the long-promised nuclear power station in Libya, let alone sign a treaty (Al-Dustur, 1985: October 21; Africa Confidential, 1985: November 13). More than anything else, Qaddafi’s failed visit reflected what he found difficult to accept, that the Soviet Union had lost all interest in maintaining ties with Libya. Libya’s increased vulnerability was noted not only by the United States but also by Libya’s neighbors: Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Its conflict with its two Maghrebian neighbors
Tunisia and Algeria escalated, almost to the point of military confrontation, with some reports claiming that Algerian troops had been moved along the Tunisian-Libyan border to protect Tunisia’s security (*Al-Dustur*, 1985: September 6; Maddy-Weitzman, B., 1986: 129-134; Ronen, Y., 1986: 564-566).

In late 1985-early 1986, when the antagonism between Tripoli and Washington peaked, the Soviets supplied Libya with SAM-5 missiles and 2,000 additional military advisers (*Al-Ahram*, 1985: December 22; *International Herald Tribune*, 1985: December 23), with the aim of creating an air-defense “umbrella” against what both Tripoli and Moscow feared to be an imminent American air attack on Libya (Ronen, Y., 2008: 29-32). Although no verifiable details are available, one may presume that Qaddafi mobilized the requisite hard currency to repay Moscow. On April 15, 1986, the military attack on Libya that Qaddafi had long feared was carried out by the United States, with American aircraft strategically bombing key targets in Tripoli and Benghazi. These targets included Qaddafi’s headquarters and residence in Bab al-Aziziyya, thus indicating that the political liquidation of the Libyan leader was a high priority of the assault.

Qaddafi’s shock at the American air raid, as well as his continued distress later in the year, was dramatically exacerbated by the fact that the Soviet Union was withholding diplomatic and military support from Libya at its most difficult hour. Qaddafi feared that the Soviets were sacrificing him at the altar of the Kremlin’s desired rapprochement with the United States. Although the USSR paid lip service to its ties with Libya and depicted the American air raid as “barbaric” and “piratical” (*Pravda*, 1986: April 16), it refrained from making any further commitment to Libya. Pathetically, Qaddafi remained a captive of his country’s past patterns of relations with the Soviets, even when it appeared that they were already irrelevant, hoping to deter the United States by threatening to join the Warsaw Pact, becoming another Cuba and replacing the teaching of English with Russian (*Al-Ittihad*, 1986: May 1; *al-Mawqif al-Arabi*, 1986: May 30; *Jamahiriyya Arab News Agency*, 1986: May 22). Moreover, exempt from the hitherto need to deal cautiously with Libya, Gorbachev exerted increasing pressure upon Qaddafi just a short while after the US attack.
on Libya, demanding that Libya repay Moscow its debt of $5 billion ([The Guardian], 1986: June 17). However, even if it had desired to do so, Libya was unable to pay the debt in cash as its economy was severely strained in 1986 by the continuing drop in world oil prices, with the state’s annual oil income falling from a peak of $22 billion in 1980 to $10 billion in 1985 ([The Economist], 1986; [The Times], 1986: January 27). There was little else to brighten Libya’s bleak economic horizon that year either: Foreign reserves in cash and gold were down to $5.9 billion-$2-3 billion, from a peak of about $13 billion in 1980. Libya’s external debt was estimated in 1985 at about $6.5 billion ([Middle East Economic Digest], 1986: April 12; [New York Times], 1986: May 2).

Tragically from Qaddafi’s political perspective, his regime had reached one of the most dangerous junctures on its political road: Socio-economic and political dissent was on a perilous rise and his frustrated army in Chad was being dealt a series of successive painful blows. Acting in emergency mode, the Qaddafi sent his political rival Jallud to Moscow again in late May 1986, tasking him with convincing the Soviets to urgently consign military equipment and weaponry, but once again to no avail. If Libya needed further confirmation that it had lost its source of arms supplies along with its “patron” in the international politics of the Cold War, Jallud’s failed mission clearly provided it. Libya’s distress was further augmented in view of the fact that it had no other alternative sources of arms purchases and strategic support, and at a time when Libyan materiel in the Chadian war zone was being severely depleted. The concurrent unceasing flow of Western financial and military assistance into Chad, including Stinger shoulder-launched missiles (Ogunbadejo, 1986: 33-68; [New York Times], 1987: November 6), which thus empowered the anti-Libyan forces, clearly pointed to an imminent Libyan debacle in Chad. And indeed, in 1987, Libya was forced to withdraw its defeated troops from Chad. Thus, while Libya was hemorrhaging from its political and military wounds as it tried to suppress the alarming activism of the anti-Qaddafi Islamist militant dissidents, it also escalated its militant hostility towards the United States. At the same time, the USSR was itself forced to contend with ethnic unrest and major domestic political change, in addition to its momentous reorientation in foreign policy,
the consequent East-West reconciliation and the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, after suffering a crushing military debacle of its own.

The collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in 1989, the consequent end of the Cold War in 1990 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 put the lid on the by now-defunct Libyan-Soviet alignment. From that dramatic juncture forward, deep into the 1990s, Libya, which had persistently viewed the United States as its “worst enemy,” now found itself part of an unprecedented scenario, entirely subordinate to the dominant US-led “New World Order.” Refusing to alter its traditionally bellicose collision course with the “policeman of the world,” as the Libyan leader frequently portrayed the United States, Libya quickly found itself in a twilight zone, during which the Qaddafi regime moved from one severe crisis to another. The UN-imposed Lockerbie sanctions, which went into effect in 1992-1999, paralyzed the country’s economic and political life and endangered the regime’s hold on power. Most strikingly, Libya’s Lockerbie nightmare signified its nadir in the international theatre of the post-Cold War era, making it easy prey for Western powers. Notwithstanding Qaddafi’s success in eventually extricating his country from the chokehold of the Lockerbie sanctions, Libya still had to undergo an arduous process of rehabilitation both at home and abroad. The visit to Tripoli in mid-April 2008 by President Vladimir Putin, the highest-ranking Russian official to ever visit Libya, and the ensuing Russian arms sales and Moscow’s agreement to write off the

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¹ For more details on the end of the Cold War era, which lies beyond of the scope of this article, see e.g., Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, “Understanding Change in international Politics: The Soviet Empire’s Demise and the International System,” in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., International Relations Theory and The end of the Cold War, New York: Chichester, 1995, pp.127-65.

² In 1991, the United States and Britain officially accused Libya of responsibility for the bombing of a Pan-American passenger plane that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, killing all 259 people on board and 11 on the ground. They demanded that Libya extradite the two Libyan nationals suspected in the bombing in order to stand trial but Libya adamantly refused. Only after seven years of UN-imposed sanctions did Libya hand them over, leading to the suspension of the crippling sanctions.
remaining Libyan debt of $4.5 billion (Katz, 2008: 122-124) came at a
time when Libya’s economy had begun to recover after a long period
of stagnation. Despite this encouragement and Qaddafi’s Herculean
efforts to strengthen its hold on power, the Libyan regime found itself
slowly sliding down a slippery slope into a political abyss, a process
that culminated in August 2011.

IV. Conclusion

The establishment of the alignment between the Soviet Union and
the Libyan beneficiary at the height of the Cold War period illustrates
how a conjunctural, yet essentially crucial convergence of interests on
the part of two states of asymmetric global political power and of
substantially different societies in almost every facet of life, projected
an extraordinary collaboration. Yet, precisely because they were such
strange bedfellows, the very same conjunctural nature that underlay
the formation of this alignment played a crucial role in terminating it a
few years later. The moment the Kremlin’s strategic and military
priorities changed, causing it to shift its focus to regions other than the
core of the Arab Middle East, the regime in Tripoli lost its attraction
for Moscow and the alignment between the two countries dissolved.

Being the pivotal player in the alignment, it was the Soviet Union
that dictated the alignment’s scope and essence both in its heyday as
well as later during its death throes, up until its final demise. Libya,
notwithstanding its leader’s vigorously militant and activist nature,
maintained an uncharacteristically passive position in this somewhat
odd equilibrium of powers, although Qaddafi never hesitated to
vociferously demand ever larger arms deliveries.

The starkly different impact of the alignment on each of the two
parties – on the local, regional and international levels – was further
reflected in their respective post-alignment posture in these areas,
particularly on the international scene. The USSR perceived the
alignment as a tactical course aimed at leveraging its strategic, military
and economic interests. Thus as soon as Moscow perceived the
alignment to be a liability, it melted the glue holding it together,
relating to it as no more than a passing phase, one of its many
transitory relationships in the Middle East and Africa. For its part, however, Libya had an entirely different perception of the alignment and the post-alignment relations, and found it difficult to disentangle itself from the spirit and structure of its all-embracing ties with the USSR. Clearly, the watershed in Libya’s relations with the Soviet Union came in the aftermath of the dramatic vicissitudes in Iran and in the Gulf region during 1979-80, although this was not yet completely apparent at that specific juncture. It was the first time since the early 1950s that the possibility of a major conflict between the USSR and the United States in the area north of the Persian Gulf and outside Europe had arisen. To this war contingency, other dimensions of threats and challenges to the Soviet interests were added. These were not necessarily connected with Libya, but rather with other foreign actors in the Cold War theatre. Concurrently, Tripoli’s chronic inability to pay the USSR for its arms consignments with hard currency rather than oil shipments, which the Soviets flatly rejected, played a significant role in the dissolution of the alignment.

The Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was the most obvious marker of Moscow’s changed priorities to the detriment of other traditional geostrategic environs of collaboration such as the Arab Middle East, including Libya. With the Soviet Union diverting the bulk of its foreign attention to the Persian Gulf region and to that part of the Indian Ocean that abuts the Persian Gulf, Libya lost its strategic-military and financial value.

The reshuffling of the strategic-military cards of the Cold War with the collapse of the USSR dramatically affected Libya. Yet, to its great misfortune, Qaddafi’s extremely inflexible steering of his country’s internal and foreign policies prevented him from grasping the overwhelming strategic changes in the Soviet Union and its international environs. Qaddafi adhered to the handling of Libya’s affairs as if he expected strategic-military collaboration with the Soviets to regenerate itself at a later phase, thus pulling Libya ever deeper into its regional and international quagmire. The Libyan head of state completely failed to internalize the depth of the changes in the USSR and in global politics in the late 1980s-early 1990s. The US-led “New World Order” which came in the wake of the Cold War, put
Libya on an increasingly perilously collision course, exposing it to the dominance of its sworn enemy – the “wicked American policeman of the world” as Qaddafi persistently referred to the Government in Washington. Unable to fend off the perilous threats of the post-Cold War international politics and lacking any significant source of foreign support to counter or even to assuage the American belligerence against Libya, Qaddafi eventually grasped that the Soviet Union was gone and that his quixotic conflict with the West was no longer relevant in the now non-existent East-West Cold War.

In retrospect, the breakdown of the Soviet Union was crucial to the sea change in Libya’s foreign policy, and consequently its domestic politics too. Yet, all the diplomatic, economic and military rehabilitation that Qaddafi and the West produced, with Libya’s declared relinquishment of its WMD as their most formidable achievement, apparently came too late to halt the regime’s slide down into the abyss. Severely eroded politically and socioeconomically from within, Qaddafi’s regime had lost its legitimacy to rule. Its support base was now too narrow to successfully suppress the broad and diversified opposition to the regime, even with the help of the huge military arsenal it had acquired from the USSR or Russia and the former Soviet republics. On August 20, 2011, about two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and at the height of the tumultuous “Arab Spring” uprisings, Qaddafi’s regime was relegated to the dustbin of history.

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