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From Stabilisation to Securitisation:
The EU in Libya

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Introduction

On the 8th of July 2025, a delegation of senior EU officials was declared 'persona non grata' and was asked to depart Libyan territory upon arriving in Benghazi, in the eastern part of the country (Giordano et al., 2025; Liboreiro, 2025). The group, made up of EU Migration Commissioner Magnus Brunner and ministers from Italy, Greece, and Malta, had planned to discuss efforts to control migration flows into Europe by meeting the UN-recognised government in Tripoli, and then travelling to Benghazi for talks with warlord Khalifa Haftar (Giordano et al., 2025). However, what was meant to be a mission to coordinate migration management instead turned into a political trap. Haftar and his government insisted that EU representatives appear alongside ministers from their unrecognised administration, which would have implied that the EU recognise their authority (Giordano et al., 2025). When the EU refused, the delegation was expelled. This diplomatic failure was not an isolated incident but part of a larger pattern. This highlights a trend that has been going on for over a decade: despite the launch of many CSDP missions, the EU has repeatedly struggled to implement its rhetoric of stabilisation into effective influence, revealing a deeper structural weakness of its crisis management model.

The aim of this paper is to use the securitisation of the EU's CSDP missions in Libya as a case study to reveal broader tendencies in the EU's crisis management. Although the EU's missions in Libya after NATO's 2011 intervention were aimed at stabilising the country and protecting civilians, in practice, they were dominated by securitisation logics, particularly around migration. This depicts broader implications in the way EU missions respond to crises. This article begins by providing context on NATO's intervention in Libya to situate the EU's subsequent CSDP missions and their stated aims, alongside an explanation of securitisation as a conceptual framework to analyse this topic. It then turns to Libya as a test case of crisis management, examining the structural weaknesses of the EU's approach, before drawing out the lessons this case offers for future EU crisis management. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of these findings.

1. Understanding the Libyan Crisis

1.1 *Intervention*

In March 2011, the United Nations Security Council authorised an intervention in Libya through the Responsibility to Protect Commitments (Mezran & Miller, 2017). Following a popular uprising in February 2011, the Libyan government led by Muammar Qaddafi responded violently, leading to more than 500 civilian deaths (GlobalR2P, 2022). Following this, the United Nations approved Resolution 1970 and 1973, allowing member states to take necessary measures to protect civilians in Libya (United Nations, 2011). Although NATO's intervention in Libya was launched under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, it quickly became clear that protecting civilians was not the only goal. The conduct of military operations showed that Qaddafi's overthrow was also a central objective (Mezran & Miller, 2017). After his overthrow, Libya saw a rise in conflict between rival governments and armed groups (GlobalR2P, 2022). After 2011, the Transitional National Council (TNC) claimed authority, but did not take into consideration the militias that had emerged during the uprising. In 2012, elections took place, appointing the General

National Congress (GNC). However, it also struggled to deal with the groups and instead became increasingly involved with them, allowing militias to gain influence in politics (Arraf, 2017; Weise, 2020). As a result, in 2014, violence escalated from the different armed groups and from then on, Libya was divided between two administrations: the House of Representatives, backed by warlord Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and the GNC based in the capital (Arraf, 2017). In 2015, a UN agreement attempted to reconcile the two sides by creating the Government of National Accord (GNA) (Arraf, 2017, 4; Libyan Political Agreement, 2015).

Following this, the GNA became the internationally recognised government, but it struggled to maintain legitimacy. Indeed, the Libyan Political Agreement failed to include several of the most important actors in the negotiations, one of them being the LNA (Pusztai, 2017). Additionally, there was controversy regarding the installation of Prime Minister Fajez al-Serraj and members from the presidential council of the GNA, as many felt they had been chosen by the UN rather than by the Libyan people (Pusztai, 2017). Those two factors led to the LPA not being widely accepted within Libya, as it does not have the support of local institutions. This left Libya split between the east and west, between the LNA and the GNA, with foreign actors such as Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and France supporting Haftar in the east, and Turkey and Qatar backing the GNA in the capital, reinforcing the divide (Weise, 2020). This has fuelled continued fighting between rival factions. Thus, stabilising Libya quickly became a vital security matter for the EU as the country became the departure point for irregular migration to Europe, while the widespread availability of weapons and growing risk of extremist groups added to European concerns. These factors pushed the EU to launch a series of missions and initiatives aimed at managing the crisis.

1.2 *EU Missions*

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has launched numerous missions aimed at managing the crisis through border management and security reforms. Namely, EUBAM Libya was launched in 2013, later complemented by EUNAVFOR MED Sophia. While the former aimed at supporting border management and security reforms, the latter focused on isrupting smuggling networks at sea (Bures & Cusumano, 2025; EEAS, n.d.; EUNAVFOR Med, n.d.-b). Later, Operation Irini shifted to enforcing the United Nations arms embargo and contributing to disrupting the smuggling and trafficking of people through intelligence gathering (EUNAVFOR Med, n.d.-a; Rațiu, 2023). These operations were complemented by funding from the European Trust Fund for Africa (Loschi & Russo, 2020). Additionally, SEAHORSE, a regional initiative, was also put in place to allow Libya to enter a system for sharing information and coordinating maritime surveillance and border control to combat irregular migration and migrant smuggling by sea (Lösing, 2017). Together, these efforts reflect the way the EU has tried to securitise and manage the Libyan crisis.

1.3 *Securitisation theory*

Securitisation theory offers a useful lens to understand how the EU approaches this crisis management. Indeed, this theory developed within the Copenhagen school of thought and provides a way of understanding how issues become framed as security issues. Rather than treating threats as objectives, it

highlights how certain issues are framed as extreme and urgent security threats (Eroukhmanoff, 2020). Therefore, it justifies the use of extraordinary measures by convincing the public that a threat is imminent. In the case of Libya, after the 2011 intervention, migration was securitised as an existential threat to Europe. According to Loschi & Russo (2020), migration as a security challenge to European security has significantly shaped the design of EU interventions in its neighbourhoods. Applying this framework here helps show how securitisation exposes weaknesses in the EU's ability to manage crises.

2. Libya as a test case of crisis management

In Libya, securitisation significantly shaped the EU's crisis management, resulting in three main weaknesses: the securitised rhetoric within CSDP missions, the gap between objectives and implementation, and persistent divisions in the Union.

2.1 *The rhetoric of Securitization in the EU*

The CSDP missions implemented in Libya aimed at stabilising the country; however, these objectives were changed as securitisation pressures made the EU shift focus on its own priorities. The CSDP mission of EUBAM Libya, launched in May 2013, had the goal of supporting Libyan authorities to improve the security of Libya's border and develop a concept for integrated border management (Loschi & Russo, 2020; Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). At the same time, EUBAM Libya's mandate also included preparing the ground for a future CSDP mission that would include broader security reform, with the goal of tackling migration and smuggling networks (Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). Due to security concerns, EUBAM was moved to Tunis in 2014 and even suspended between February 2015 and early 2016. EU officials recognised that the original plan of building integrated border management did not fit Libya's conflict dynamics and argued instead for focusing on containing spillovers, especially at sea (Loschi & Russo, 2020). Thus, in 2015, EUNAVFOR Med Sophia was launched to disrupt the human trafficking networks and gathering intelligence, with the mandate later adapting to include EU patrols to target oil smuggling that financed militias and undermined the recognised government (Loschi & Russo, 2020; Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). The clearest shift in objectives was towards securitisation rather than integration, especially since EU member states were pressuring the EU to prioritise migration control (Loschi & Russo, 2020; Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). As a result, border and migration management became an entry point for the EU's broader security agenda. However, Libya was politically divided, and the EU never made it clear which authority was supposed to take charge (Loschi & Russo, 2020). This lack of clarity contributed to implementation gaps, as the EU's stated goals did not match what could be achieved on the ground.

2.2 *Securitisation and the Implementation Gap*

With securitisation playing an important part in the EU's rhetoric within its CSDP missions, the EU and its member states have focused increasingly on protecting European interests and not those of the local population (Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). The implementation of the missions on the ground did not match Libyan realities, revealing a gap between Brussels and the locals. Additionally, the EU demonstrated a lack of a bottom-up perspective, which can be attributed to limited input from local actors and a lack of

understanding of the situation on the ground (Richmond et al., 2021; Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). The EU's focus on short-term objectives overlooks the complexities of Libya's security sector and the realities on the ground (Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). As the EU tends to frame crises mainly through its own lens rather than through local experiences, it centralises its own assumptions in the way it responds (Richmond et al., 2021, p. 50). Within specific missions that the EU conducts, relations between EU missions and local counterparts are weak (Loschi & Russo, 2020). Indeed, integrated border management policies, including EUBAM Libya, tend to be perceived as disengaged from local actors (Loschi & Russo, 2020). For most Libyans, border migration is not a priority, however, the EU treats it as a benchmark of success, making it more important for Brussels (Akamo et al., 2023).Additionally, the EU never made it clear which local authority was supposed to take charge. As Libya was politically divided and the EU only worked with the GNA, the Union did not take into consideration other key actors, worsening the problem on the ground. Following the unrest in 2014 and the mission's relocation to Tunis, there were limited tools to engage with the local population, making the missions' efforts stuck at the bureaucratic level (Loschi & Russo, 2020). Although EUNAVFOR Med gained more acceptance among Libyans once its mandate expanded to cover EU patrols at sea, its impact remained limited. The absence of authorization to operate inside Libyan water, combined with the lack of training, highlighted the limited understanding of local institutions (Rieker & Gjerde, 2021). Therefore, the decision-making process did not reflect the expectations of the Libyan population and were not connected to local actors, creating a sense of discontent (Loschi & Russo, 2020). The recent expulsion of EU delegates from Benghazi in July 2025 shows how the Union still struggles to transform its stated objectives (coordinate migration management) into credible influence on the ground, leading to local actors like Haftar being able to turn EU initiatives into political traps.

2.3 *Securitization and Divisions in the Union*

While these missions were meant to show a coordinated European response, in practice, the EU has been divided in how to deal with Libya. Different political interests between member states is one of the factors leading to crisis responses being shaped by competing agendas rather than by a unified strategy (Loschi & Russo, 2020). This has made the Union struggle to respond in a united way, exposing institutional weaknesses. The clearest example is the rivalry between France and Italy, whose different priorities do not align with the EU's objectives. Behind this rivalry lie economic, geopolitical, and security interests, particularly in relation to oil reserves and migration flows (Rydén, 2024). On one hand, Italy prioritised bilateral agreements with the GNA to manage migration flows and protect economic interests, especially regarding its energy investments through ENI's involvement, which influences the mission's operational priorities (Akamo et al., 2023; Rydén, 2024). Since most migrants depart from western Libya toward the Italian coast, which gives Italy a strong interest in migration measures and explains why it tends to back whoever controls that region (Akamo et al., 2023). Therefore, Italy backed the GNA in Tripoli, also working with localgroups to curb migration flows (Akamo et al., 2023). Italy's migration deals revealed its priorities of containing migration, even if it was at the cost of Libya's internal fragmentation, as the country was making deals with certain officials and not others, strengthening only certain groups (Akamo et al., 2023).

On the other hand, France has been backing General Haftar and the LNA, exacerbating EU divisions as the group is crucial in combating regional terrorism, one of France's main priorities (Rydén, 2024). France is believed to have provided Haftar with intelligence support and supply of anti-tank missiles, which came to light after the death of three undercover French soldiers in a helicopter incident in 2016 (Akamo et al., 2023; Taylor, 2019). Additionally, France's energy interests also complicate its approach to its interests as they depend on Libyan energy exports for domestic demand. France presented itself as a mediator between the eastern and western parts of the country, but its backing of Haftar damaged its credibility and weakened trust in Europe's role (Akamo et al., 2023). As a result of both countries' positions, EU policy in Libya was fragmented and contradictory, with different interests undermining EUBAM's coherence and making coordination of a long-term strategy difficult (Bures & Cusumano, 2025; Ekiz, 2018). These divisions reflected different securitisation priorities, worsening Libya's polarisation. The French-Italian divide meant each focused on its own policies, making mediation harder and prolonging the conflict, further undermining the EU's credibility as a foreign policy actor (Akamo et al., 2023; Rydén, 2024).

3. Lessons for EU crisis management

The weaknesses revealed in the previous section depict more than problems specific to Libya and point to broader tendencies in the EU's crisis management. They show a focus on short-term priorities rather than long-term stabilisation, a risk of getting stuck in political entrapment, and fragmentation within their member states weaken the EU's credibility. An important takeaway is that the EU tends to remain stuck in short-term crisis management logics and struggles to move towards long-term objectives. Within the Union's crisis management framework, the process is meant to move in stages, starting with crisis management, then moving to crisis resolution, and finally crisis transformation (Richmond et al., 2021). However, in practice, the EU often remains stuck in the initial stage, where the priority is to prevent crises from harming nearby regions and the EU itself (Richmond et al., 2021). This securitised effort translates into short-term, limited actions, rather than long-term attempts to address the root causes of the crisis (Richmond et al., 2021). The lack of inclusion of the local population reflects this approach, showing that EU engagement in Libya was shaped more by crisis management logics, which focus on short-term objectives, rather than by genuine efforts to build long-term stability.

Additionally, EU missions can fall into political entrapment. This idea rests on two key features: path dependency and lock-in effects (Plank & Bergmann, 2021). On one hand, path-dependency refers to the initial policy decision and direction. It sets the EU on a specific policy path where small choices and decisions could be irreversible due to the density of institutional politics (Plank & Bergmann, 2021). On the other hand, lock-in effects force actors to proceed on the path by accelerating and solidifying the policy direction that was chosen and making previously plausible alternatives not possible (Plank & Bergmann, 2021). This can be seen in the Libyan case study as EUBAM kept extending year after year, despite being largely inactive on the ground. Indeed, when the mission was launched in 2013, its goal was to help Libya build border management capacity, but the insecurities in the country made that impossible. Instead, the mission continued in Tunis, highlighting the lock-in effects at play (Rydén, 2024). The EU then kept extending its

mandate and rhetoric shifted from stabilisation to securitisation, with the EU focusing on migration control. Over time, once investment has been put into framing Libya as a migration/security problem, it becomes more difficult to shift back to broader goals, highlighting how lock-in effects perpetuate ineffective missions.

Finally, Libya also illustrates how internal divisions among member states, in this case between France and Italy, weaken the EU's credibility in responding to crises. The securitisation of different threats among member states leads to a lack of unified response from the EU. On one side, Italy was securitising and prioritising migration, while on the other, France was prioritising counterterrorism, with both countries prioritising their own energy supplies highlights individual preferences and divergence in objectives. These tensions have had an impact in the European political sphere, with tensions growing between the two countries (Lüdtke, 2023). Overall, such tensions in crisis management lead to an inability on the EU's side to take any unified actions.

Conclusion

The securitisation of the EU's CSDP missions in Libya revealed broader tendencies in the way EU missions respond to crises. While the missions were aimed at stabilising the country and protecting civilians, they ended up being dominated by securitisation logics, particularly around migration (Loschi & Russo, 2020). Member states' focus on border security to avoid migration became the main concern (Ekiz, 2018). Additionally, the lack of inclusion of local actors led to implementation gaps, dynamics that can still be seen in the recent expulsion of the EU delegation from Benghazi after refusing to appear alongside representatives of Haftar's unrecognised administration. This incident exposed the EU's limited ability to work alongside Libya's fragmented landscape. Furthermore, political divisions among member states further weakened the missions. Since the implementation of the missions, France and Italy have shown different priorities and objectives towards Libya, revealing a divide that has undermined the credibility and coherence of the EU's approach.

These weaknesses revealed broader tendencies in EU crisis management when dealing with missions. Indeed, the EU tends to prioritize short term containment rather than focusing on long term stabilization, missions risk getting stuck in political entrapment, and fragmentation within their member states weaken the EU's credibility (Loschi & Russo, 2020; Plank & Bergmann, 2021; Richmond et al., 2021). Without addressing these issues, the EU risks repeating the same patterns elsewhere. Thus, on one hand, member states should be able to coordinate better between each other and with local actors as well. On the other hand, a balance between short-term and long-term objectives should be put in place by engaging with different sides of the conflict.

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