Libya in the Great Game

On the road to the new partition of Africa

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Fleeing Libya are not only families who fear for their lives and poor immigrants from other North African countries. There are tens of thousands of "refugees" who are being repatriated by their governments with ships and aircraft: they are mainly engineers and executives of major oil companies. Not only Eni, which realizes about 15 percent of its sales from Libya, but also other European multinationals — in particular: BP, Royal Dutch Shell, Total, BASF, Statoil, Rapsol. Hundreds of Gazprom employees were also forced to leave Libya and over 30 thousand Chinese oil company and construction workers. A symbolic image of how the Libyan economy is interconnected with global economy, dominated by multinationals.

Thanks to its rich reserves of oil and natural gas, Libya has a positive trade balance of $27 billion a year and a medium-high per capita income of $12,000, six times greater than that of Egypt. Despite strong differences in low and high incomes, the average standard of living of the population of Libya (just 6.5 million inhabitants in comparison to the nearly 85 million in Egypt) is therefore higher than that of Egypt and other North African countries. Witness the fact that nearly one million and a half immigrants, mostly from North Africa, work in Libya. Some 85 percent of Libyan energy exports go to Europe: Italy takes first place with 37 percent, followed by Germany, France and China. Italy is also in first place in imports to Libya, followed by China, Turkey and Germany.

This framework is now blown into the air as a result of what can be characterized not as a revolt of the impoverished masses, such as the rebellions in Egypt and Tunisia, but as a real civil war, due to a split in the ruling group. Whoever made the first move has exploited the discontent against Gadhafi's clan, especially prevalent among the populations of Cyrenaica and young people in the cities, in a moment when entire North Africa has taken the road of rebellion. Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, however, the Libyan uprising was preplanned and organized.

The reactions in the international arena are also symbolic. Beijing has said it is extremely concerned about developments in Libya and called for "a quick return to stability and normality." The reason is clear: the Sino-Libyan trade has undergone strong growth (around 30 percent in 2010 alone), but now China can see that the whole structure of economic relations with Libya, from which it imports increasing quantities of oil, has been put in play. Moscow is in a similar position.

Diametrically opposite is the signal from Washington: President Barack Obama, who when confronted with the Egyptian crisis minimized the repression unleashed by Mubarak and called for a "orderly and peaceful transition," has condemned in no uncertain terms the

Libyan government and announced that the U.S. is preparing "the full range of options that we have available to respond to this crisis,including "actions that we can undertake on our own and those that we can coordinate with our allies through multilateral institutions." The message is clear: there is the possibility of a U.S./NATO military intervention in Libya, formally to stop the bloodshed. The real reasons are also clear: if Gadhafi is overthrown, the U.S. would be able to topple the entire framework of economic relations with Libya, opening the way to U.S.-based multinationals, so far almost entirely excluded from exploitation of energy reserves in Libya. The United States could thus control the tap for energy sources upon which Europe largely depends and which also supplies China.

These are the events in the great game of the division of African resources, for which a growing confrontation, especially between China and the United States, is taking place. The rising Asian power – with a presence in Africa of about 5 million managers, technicians and workers – building industries and infrastructure, in exchange for oil and other raw materials. The United States, which can not compete on this level, can use its leverage over the armed forces of the major African countries, who they train through the Africa Command (AFRICOM), their main instrument for penetration of the continent. NATO is now also entering in the game, as it is about to conclude a partnership military treaty with the African Union, which includes 53 countries.

The headquarters of the African Union-NATO partnership is already under construction in Addis Ababa: a modern structure, funded with 27 million Euros from Germany, baptized, "Building peace and security."

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Translated from the Italian by John Catalinotto

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