

# Munich Security Conference could present new hope for Libya

*Despite the challenges, holding the line against Libya succumbing to the control of ideologues remains an important strategic goal for everyone*

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The task of engineering a new start for Libya has been an important discussion point this weekend at the Munich Security Conference, the premier European forum for international security.

Delegates agree that Libya is at an “incredibly sensitive” moment. Niels Annen, a German foreign minister who has led the Berlin mediation process on Libya, has been at pains to point out the Libyan conflict’s African context.

Europeans view the conflict most acutely in terms of the tens of thousands of African migrants that use Libya as a platform for entry across the Mediterranean. The conflict has provided these migrants an open gateway to prosperity in Europe despite the risk to life, both from crossing Libya itself and when people-smugglers put them on flimsy boats.

Global diplomats have been engaged in a high-stakes effort to negotiate and sustain a ceasefire.

Only when this takes hold can there be the outlines of a new settlement in Libya. Once achieved, a Libyan peace might provide wider effects across the Sahara, into West Africa and as far away as Sudan and Eritrea. However, we are a long way from that point.

Last week, the UN Security Council marked a rare moment of progress when it passed a resolution in support of a lasting ceasefire and the Berlin process. The officials at the session expressed their hopes for meetings of a joint military commission composed of uniformed Libyan officers, who



Tripoli government forces clash with forces led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, south of the capital Tripoli in Libya last year.

are convening daily in Geneva.

Even with a breakthrough at that level, a ceasefire would need further support from willing partners. Indeed, following the passage of the UN resolution, offers from outside to set up a monitoring mission are on the table.

Since the demise of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya’s former dictator,

there have been multiple diplomatic initiatives dealing with the country.

Most were built on foundations that took little account of conditions on the ground, and failed accordingly. At the end of four decades of one-man rule, there

was no state infrastructure for Libyans to inherit. To say the offi-

cial structures had been hollowed out is an understatement.

The consequences endure to this day. The Government of National Accord has a writ that does not stretch beyond the gates of a Tripoli naval base.

It has taken up too much of the focus of the UN envoy’s efforts, obscuring the essential truth that

# In Syria, Russia faces multiple d

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The position of Russia with respect to its partners in Syria – Iran and Turkey – is looking increasingly uncomfortable.

Iran, Moscow’s ally in the fight, is resentful of its failure to strongly oppose US sanctions against Tehran. Furthermore, there is growing anger in the ranks of the Russian military establishment following Turkey’s recent actions against the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria, which risk opening yet another front for Moscow in the ongoing Syrian war and highlight the burden of an alliance with Damascus.

The core challenge Russia faces is to redefine a new vision and strategy for Syria beyond mere tactical steps. For one thing, further escalation of violence could destroy any chance of crafting a political and constitutional settlement that would relieve Russian forces as Moscow entrenches its presence in Syria further.

Another source of concern is the multiple, often contradictory roles of the US in the country. President Donald Trump may reactivate his personal involvement in Syria policy in the spring which would have implications for Moscow’s policies in the Middle East.

The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who fears the prospect of Washington making deals and decisions without consulting Ankara, is proceeding with confidence and determi-



A Turkish military mobile rocket launcher fires from a position in the countryside of the Syrian province of Idlib towards Syrian government forces’ positions.

nation to alter the facts on the ground, not only in Syria but in Libya, too.

Russia has called on Turkey to refrain from further “provocations”, and Ankara has indeed since toned down its rhetoric. Both countries’ militaries would still prefer to avoid direct clashes between their forces in Syria,

including incidents that might lead to the downing of Russian warplanes. The consequences of such an event would be dire.

In the eyes of the Russians, Turkey must honour its prior agreements with them, and Mr Erdogan’s own bellicosity must end. The problem is that Moscow’s options are limited at this

point. Ending communication with Turkey in Syria and disengaging from the Al Assad regime are both non-starters. But failure to contain the situation could preclude the political settlement that Russia needs in order to stabilise Syria.

For his part, Mr Erdogan wants to compel Moscow to reduce the

commitments made to Mr Al Assad, particularly with respect to Idlib on the Turkish border, where the Russian military is supporting its Syrian counterpart in a major offensive. Mr Erdogan is not seeking to topple the Al Assad regime, nor is he demanding Russia abandon its alliance with Damascus altogether.

*Risking separate confrontations with Turkey, the US and Iran, the core challenge is to redefine a new strategy for Syria*