

From Moscow to Berlin, a peace conference for Libya

After the substantial failure of the preliminary talks in Moscow between the Tripoli premier Fayez al-Sarraj and his Cyrenaic opponent Khalifa Haftar, the international community's spotlights are on this Sunday's Berlin conference. Libya has not existed since 2011: the central state disappeared with the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the outbreak of the subsequent civil war, while nowadays the territory six times the size of Italy with a tenth of its population is disputed among hundreds of militias, more or less tied to foreign sponsors such as Russia, Turkey, France and the Gulf powers. Italy does not participate in the conflict, but risks becoming its first illustrious victim. Proof of this is the frenetic diplomatic activity that has been staged until recently – after the guilty and prolonged wait-and-see policy of the last few years and the apparent disregard for the long-range implications of the disastrous Western intervention nine years ago. And while fighting are spreading throughout Libyan territory, in Rome the government mulls about being involved into a possible UN peace mission. To recover influence after having married the cause of the weakest actor (prime minister al-Sarraj) and having done little or nothing to support him on the field, as well as to try to mitigate the tragic legacy of the conflict that has turned Libya into a space of permanent threats. But this week's news is another. General Haftar has indeed agreed to attend Sunday's conference and to suspend his offensive against Tripoli, after refusing to sign the ceasefire agreement negotiated in Moscow a week ago. The apparently conciliatory move

of the man depicted frequently as the strongmen of Cyrenaica is largely a consequence of Turkey's deployment of its weapons systems and troops in the city that was the capital of the former North African country. Which prove that international forums such as Berlin's are attended by great and medium powers in the first place to consolidate at the negotiating table the gains achieved on the battlefield. This is essentially the spirit with which the most influential actors in North Africa (namely Turkey, Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates) approach the upcoming crucial peace conference. With all due respect to Athens, directly involved into the crisis by the Ankara-Tripoli agreement on the maritime division of the continental platforms and logically furious for having been excluded by the Germans at Turkish request. Or the complains of the Tripoli government over the fact that its main foreign sponsor – al-Thani's Qatar – was kept out by order of Abu Dhabi. And although the absence from Berlin of President Trump confirms Washington's strategic lack of interest for Libyan affairs, the fact that Haftar landed directly in Amman, Jordan, for talks with American and EAU emissaries immediately after leaving Moscow is the unequivocal sign that the United States remains an actor capable of profoundly influencing regional dynamics. The chaos in Libya plays indeed into the hands of those who – such as the US – work to prevent the emergence of a competing power into a strategic region such as the Mediterranean. Too bad that Europeans and Italians have been caught completely off guard.