

The Drone War Reaches the Mediterranean: Alarm for NATO's Southern Flank

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On **Sunday, November 22, 2026**, the central Mediterranean basin became the scene of an operational escalation set to redefine the region's security balance. The port of **Benghazi** and the waters off Cyrenaica, a stronghold of General Khalifa Haftar's Esercito Nazionale Libico (LNA), were struck by a **dual, coordinated offensive carried out using unmanned surface vehicles (USVs – *Unmanned Surface Vehicles*)**. The action, attributed by international intelligence sources to Ukrainian security services, caused the **capsizing of a modern Russian Navy warship while berthed** and damaged a merchant vessel off the coast, bringing Black Sea asymmetric warfare into the heart of the Mediterranean for the first time.

The dual raid on the port of Benghazi and off Al Sabri

The first attack began at first light, when a swarm of remotely controlled explosive boats headed directly for the naval facilities inside Benghazi port. Although port defenses managed to

intercept and destroy at least four incoming craft, **at least two naval drones breached the defensive perimeter**, slamming violently into the hull of a Russian military vessel.High-resolution satellite imagery released by *Vantor* and analyzed by specialist sources identified the target as the **guided-missile corvette *Merkury*** (Project 20380, *Steregushchiy* class). Commissioned in 2023, more than one hundred meters long and armed with Kalibr cruise missiles and Uran missiles, the vessel – estimated to be worth around £150 million – **capsized and partially sank alongside the pier**, leaving only its bow above water. The ship was in the Libyan port for logistical resupply under naval cooperation agreements between Moscow and the authorities in eastern Libya. Although Benghazi’s parallel administration officially reported ten injured, local sources say there were **casualties among Russian and Libyan military personnel** on board and on the pier.

A few hours later, on the evening of the same Sunday, a second wave of **more than twenty kamikaze boats** saturated the waters off the coastal district of **Al Sabri**.Haftar's air and naval forces engaged the swarm, managing to shoot down most of the vehicles before they reached the shore. However, at least one floating explosive device struck the **Maltese-flagged merchant vessel *Ascalon***, causing an explosion on board and the subsequent rescue of the crew by the Libyan Coast Guard.

The Ukrainian connection and launch sites along Libya's coast

Although neither Kyiv nor Moscow has issued official claims or comments, converging accounts from leading international media outlets and intelligence sources point to the **direction of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)**. This was the **first direct attack on a regular Russian Navy warship in the Mediterranean Sea**, continuing the campaign against vessels in Moscow's so-called "shadow fleet."

Particularly alarming from both an operational and geopolitical standpoint is the origin of the vehicles. Libyan officials reported that the maritime drones did not arrive from outside the basin, but were launched by **cells of Ukrainian specialists operating along the coast of western Libya**, particularly from the **Misurata** area and the coastal stretch between **Tripoli and Zawiya**. This hypothesis is supported by earlier intelligence reports dating back to spring 2026 and has triggered immediate political condemnation from both Osama Hammad's eastern

government, which announced a joint investigation with Russia and denounced a serious violation of national sovereignty, and Tripoli's Government of National Unity, which is determined to reject any accusation of complicity in turning Libyan waters into a battlefield for foreign powers.

Alarm on NATO's Southern Flank and risks for Italy in North Africa

The events in Benghazi mark an extremely critical turning point: **the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has definitively moved beyond the borders of Eastern Europe, turning the Mediterranean Sea into an active operational theater**. The use of swarms of kamikaze naval drones in the central basin is triggering a **dangerous escalation** that directly threatens freedom of navigation, commercial shipping, and the security of subsea energy infrastructure. In this changed scenario, the **Southern Flank of the Atlantic Alliance** assumes central importance.Allied Joint Force Command Naples (**JFC Naples**), the operational command responsible for the southern region, is required to **immediately raise its level of alert and surveillance** by strengthening ISR (*Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance*) capabilities, maritime domain awareness, and coordination with Allied naval forces engaged in Operation *Sea Guardian*. The availability of low-cost, long-range unmanned systems along the North African coast drastically reduces warning times and requires an urgent review of the counter-drone defense posture of Western naval units.

For Italy, the implications are twofold and extremely serious. On the one hand, there is a **direct and immediate threat to military and civilian personnel deployed in Libya**, beginning with members of the **Missione Bilaterale di Assistenza e Supporto (MIASIT)** stationed in Tripoli and Misrata, as well as Italian diplomatic and energy personnel. The alleged use of the Tripolitanian coastal strip as a launch pad to strike Russian assets in Cyrenaica risks **indirectly drawing the Italian contingent into a dangerous proxy confrontation**, exposing it to possible asymmetric retaliation by Moscow or local militias linked to it. On the other hand, the expansion of the conflict to the Libyan coast heightens the **real danger of renewed and profound destabilization across the entire North African region**, an area vital to Italy's strategic, energy, and security interests. Turning Libyan waters into an arena of confrontation between external actors could indeed shatter the already fragile balance between Tripoli and Benghazi, triggering a spiral of regional crises that Italy and the entire Alliance cannot afford to

endure passively. This makes an **immediate strengthening of *Force Protection* measures** and renewed political-diplomatic engagement in the North African theater essential.