

France Falls Again

Пише: Doug Bandow
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When Napoleon Bonaparte spoke, countries listened. When today's Napoleon-wannabe speaks, people snicker

There are few things more pitiful than a fading star trying to hold onto past glory. It's a common phenomenon among athletes and entertainers. Empires frequently do the same. They strut, posture, and whine long after people stop paying attention to them.

The U.S. likely will eventually do the same. Uncle Sam is effectively bankrupt. Rising powers increasingly will deter the American government from intervening against them. Countries around the world, friend and foe alike, will be less inclined to take orders from Washington. Still, the U.S. remains the most powerful state. It will be able to preen as the world's number one for some time.

France has no such luck. It hasn't been a Great Power since World War I. That fratricidal conflict drained the land of Napoleon. The cost in lives, money, and morale left the victorious member of the Entente defeated in everything except the final battle. No surprise, France was ill-prepared for World War II and quickly defeated by Hitler's Germany.

Nevertheless, British and American leaders maintained the fiction that France was an important member of the winning coalition. As an act of charity they awarded France a UN Security Council seat.



France lost its colonial empire after spilling much blood in a vain attempt to retain Vietnam and

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Algeria. Acquiring a nuclear force de frappe won the country a few status points, but the U.S. dominated post-war Europe. French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed British entry into the common market, but in general France's diplomacy failed to impress. Paris could affect events in Francophone Africa, but those countries did not much matter internationally.

France maintains a potent but limited military. It is impressive by European standards, but that isn't much of a standard. Today, like most of its financially beleaguered neighbors, Paris plans on shrinking its military budget. When forced to choose between welfare and warfare states, there aren't many Frenchmen—nor many Europeans—who will choose the latter.

However, President Nicolas Sarkozy is in political trouble. Which means he is ready for military adventure.

The time when the fabled man on horseback could seize power in France seems over. It took the French five tries, but they appear to finally have a republic worth keeping. Still, gunpowder politics might offer a democratic boost. In the U.S. war often has provided presidents with an effective election prop.

So now the hyperactive French president is marching about in platform shoes, bombing one nation and threatening many others. It is behavior fit for an old Jerry Lewis comedy.

President Sarkozy initially practiced the sort of realpolitik for which his nation was famous. As democracy protests raged in Tunisia his government offered its assistance *to the dictator*. Only when that geopolitical bet turned bad did Paris remember its revolutionary roots.

The French president was then reborn as a scourge of autocracy. Earlier he joined with his European colleagues in welcoming Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi back into polite society after the latter atoned for his terrorist and nuclear forays. Now President Sarkozy has guillotined the ghost of King Louis XVI and initiated war against Qaddafi. The stated grounds were fraudulent—Libya's civil war was no worse than many others around the globe—but provided a convenient opportunity for Nicolas Sarkozy to climb atop the world stage.

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Civilians must be protected, said the United Nations resolution. But that wasn't enough for Nicolas Napoleon Sarkozy. Never mind international law. Qaddafi must go. The rebels must win. President Sarkozy recreated the old entente cordiale along with British Prime Minister David Cameron. Only one thing was missing: the old entente's military force. France and Britain were no longer the Great Powers of old. So they needed to borrow airplanes from someone else. Which meant convincing Washington to join in their adventure.

The good news was President Obama said yes. The bad news was President Obama was serious about turning responsibility over to NATO. Which meant Messrs. Sarkozy and Cameron quickly found their countries at war essentially alone. While the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg pronounced in favor of the necessity of war, it had no airplanes to contribute. Germany abstained in the Security Council vote. Poland and Turkey opposed getting NATO involved. Italy and Spain preferred to mount air patrols against the now nonexistent Libyan air force. Only a handful of small nations contributed toward air-to-ground operations, leaving most of the burden on France and Britain.

Alas, they didn't have enough planes. France and Britain each provided about twenty strike aircraft. Four other NATO countries each offered six. But the allies didn't have enough weapons even for this sparse air armada. The governments found themselves running out of precision, laser-guided bombs.

The prospect of an embarrassing stalemate loomed. Muammar Qaddafi obviously hadn't gotten the memo. He was supposed to "just go," allowing President Sarkozy to march through the Arc de Triomphe to mass applause. However, victory was giving way to embarrassment.

French diplomats responded by begging their allies for help. They couldn't understand why the Obama administration left them to fight the war they had said they were so desperate to fight.

The unfairness of it all! Paris and London are bearing "the brunt of the burden," whined French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet. Why, their allies promised to help! French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe declared: "NATO absolutely wanted to lead this operation." With perfect understatement military analyst Jean-Dominique Merchet observed: "It's the French and the British doing this, it's clear that NATO is not very keen, nor the Americans."

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Indeed.

However, President Sarkozy is not the first politician to have foolishly plunged into an unnecessary war with fantastically optimistic assumptions about the outcome. Plan A was for Washington to fight his war. Apparently there was no Plan B.

So Nicholas Clemenceau Sarkozy stood fast. Not one step back would the French forces go. It was Verdun all over again. He proposed rewriting the UN resolution to allow operations formally designed to oust Qaddafi. He promised more aid. “We are indeed going to intensify the attacks,” President Sarkozy told the rebels. “We will help you.”

In went *ten* military advisers. Another *six* fighters were moved to Crete for action in Libya. Just like sending in the Grande Armee of old. No doubt, Qaddafi ran to his bunker in horror.

Although the attention of the Elysee Palace is focused on Libya, Nicolas Bonaparte Sarkozy’s ambitions are not limited to that nation. France intervened in the violent political crisis in the Ivory Coast—nominally in the name of democracy, but Paris long has manipulated its old Francophone African empire, and rarely for humanitarian purposes.

However, shortly after initiating the Libyan adventure, France decided to become an empire for democracy. Foreign Minister Juppe said that the Libyan campaign should serve as a warning to Arab autocrats: “I say sometimes that the job of a dictator is now a high-risk job.” Singling out Saudi Arabia and Syria, he added: “Let’s hope that all this will serve as an example.”

But Sarkoleon, as some now call him, didn’t stop there. His list of potential targets was far longer. At the European Union summit in mid-April, he told the press that the Libyan mission created a precedent for the so-called “responsibility to protect.” He declared: “Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will be from this moment on each time be the same: we will be on the side of peaceful protesters who must not be repressed with violence.” He added: “no democracy can accept that the army shoots live ammunition at protesters. This is the position of France and it does not change no matter what the country concerned.”

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Except, suggested some cynics, for Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, which had received little criticism, let alone threats of intervention.

But then Hungarian Deputy Foreign Minister Zsolt Nemethgot, perhaps channeling (Austro)-Hungarian army chief of staff Franz Conrad von Hoetzendorf, who effectively launched World War I by attacking the terror-stained state of Serbia, got in the spirit earlier this month. He told the European parliament: “We’ve been discussing these three countries, where there are authoritarian regimes which are also playing with fire, and where there is a risk of intervention.” It was an especially important message for Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, he said.

Every country, it seems, is now within range of someone’s aircraft.

Not all of Sarkozy’s European counterparts were as impressed by the French leader’s professed ambitions. That puts him in good company, however. As Jesus observed, “no prophet is accepted in his home town” (Luke 4:24).

But most important, there remains the small question: Whose military?

It won’t be that of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which possesses an army of precisely 900. It won’t be Hungary, which has just 14 combat capable aircraft and a couple dozen helicopters. Arab regimes are not likely to cower when receiving Minister Nemethgot’s ultimatum.

And it won’t be France.

President Sarkozy commands a real military, but its capabilities remain limited—as he has discovered in Libya. For all his bluff and bluster, Sarkoleon can’t even force Muammar Qaddafi to flee into exile. The pitiable French president has been reduced to asking Belgium, the Netherlands, Croatia, and Bulgaria, among other NATO members, for help.

The real Napoleon didn’t have to go around with a tin cup begging for military aid. He had the

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best army on the continent and imposed his will at will. He made allies through conquest and extracted assistance through threats. When Napoleon Bonaparte spoke, countries listened. When today's Napoleon-wannabe speaks, people snicker.

That doesn't mean President Sarkozy's vaulting ambition hasn't already created enormous damage. The West likely will lose irrespective of the outcome. A stalemate will embarrass NATO, create long-term regional instability, and ensure continued hardship for the Libyan people. A rebel victory may turn into a violent power struggle in which liberal elements lose. Years of Western intervention and "nation-building" seem certain to follow.

But President Sarkozy's foolish new imperialism has an ironic silver lining. France's Libyan project has exposed European pretensions to be a new Weltmacht in competition with China and the U.S. The Europeans want to help manage the globe, but they are incapable of removing a petty dictator on their doorstep. And their military capabilities are scheduled to continue shrinking. They can't expect to be taken seriously if they are unwilling to act seriously.

France has a storied military history. Unfortunately, that is not evident in Libya today. If President Nicolas Sarkozy wants to wander the world bombing other nations, he needs to create a military capable of fulfilling that mission. So far, at least, neither the U.S. nor Europe seems prepared to join his foolish geopolitical crusade.

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