THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (http://nationalinterest.org)
Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 31, 2011*): http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/sarkozy-gets-better-of-obama-5081

Sarkozy Gets the Better of Obama

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March 30, 2011
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President Barack Obama has insisted that unlike his predecessor who launched a unilateral invasion of Iraq, the U.S. military strikes on Libya are part of a "multilateral" operation.

It's true that the Bush administration failed to win the support of the UN Security Council for the plan to depose Saddam Hussein, while the Obama administration persuaded Russia and China not to veto the Council's resolution approving coercive measures against Muammar Gaddafi. Moreover, at least some members of so-called Old Europe who rejected Bush's military adventure in Mesopotamia have backed the new adventure in Libya—with France among the principal cheerleaders.

In addition, administration officials cite the green light (or at least a yellow light) that the Arab

League has given to the enforcement of the no-fly zone, as evidence that military action against Libya (unlike the attack on Iraq) is supported by the Arab world. By highlighting the supposed multilateral nature of the military campaign in Libya, Obama and his aides have created the impression that Washington is merely playing the role of a short-term friendly enabler in the process.

But there are several problems with this "multilateral" pose. First, multilateral institutions do not operate under the authority of an imaginary "international community." Policies being pursued by a multilateral institution constitute the sum of the policy decisions made by its member states.

When it comes to multilateral military ventures, action requires an agreement among the powerful members of the multilateral body—those nations with the military resources needed to win a war. Those governments have to decide that taking military action accords with their respective national interests. With apologies to the slogan of the National Rifle Association, "multilateral institutions don't go to war; their member governments go to war."

And for most of the post-World War II era, it was America as the hegemonic power that made it possible to bring about the kind of collective military action under which smaller military allies were willing to contribute troops and financial resources. The first Gulf War was the most dramatic demonstration of such U.S.-led multilateral military operations in the post-Cold War era. President George H.W. Bush built an international coalition that included not only the NATO members and Japan, but also several Arab governments, and participants.

Critics have justifiably challenged the assumption that the Gulf War and other U.S.-led military operations helped advance American national interests. But there is little doubt that it was U.S. leadership and the massive U.S. military machine that made the difference in Desert Storm as well as in the military campaigns against Serbia during the wars in the Balkans. For better or worse, multilateralism in all these cases was merely a convenient add-on to U.S. power.

France and other governments refused to support the Iraq war because they recognized that invading Iraq would run contrary to their respective national interests. For strategic, economic, and demographic reasons, they have adopted a different view regarding disorder in Libya

The notion that France, Italy and the other southern European governments (as well as Britain) should take the lead in dealing with the upheaval in Libya makes sense. Considering their strategic interests, instability in Libya—and the rest of the Middle East —should create a powerful incentive for collective action on their part. After all, Libya is in their strategic backyard, occupying the same position that Mexico does vis-à-vis the United States. And these governments have the military and financial resources to protect their interests in Libya. Conversely, Libya should be at or near the bottom of the U.S. global strategic agenda.

President Obama's initial reluctance to get the U.S. military involved in Libya made strategic sense. If he had persisted in that stance, it could have provided incentives for France and Britain to develop and implement a European-led operation in Libya, with the U.S. providing only very limited logistical support.

Instead, under the pressure of the "humanitarian interventionists" in his administration, Obama decided that Washington would take the initial steps—and the initial lead role—in launching military action in Libya, hoping that France and other governments would end-up "taking over" leadership of the operation.

Obama has played directly into the hands of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has succeeded in drawing the United States into a military campaign aimed at protecting French and general European interests. In the emerging French narrative, they are the ones leading the campaign in Libya, while in reality, the French and the other European allies will continue to free-ride on U.S. military exertions.

Even as NATO officially takes over the management of the Libya operation, it is America as the leader of NATO that will continue to shoulder the major military and financial costs—as it has been doing in Afghanistan. There is a clear danger of being sucked into another quagmire —albeit this time with a multilateral face.

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