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**Leon T. Hadar**

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

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## Let France, Israel, the Saudis Deter Iran

According to Washington's latest conventional wisdom, France under President Nicolas Sarkozy has been steadily embracing a tougher approach towards Iran and is sounding now more belligerent than the Obama Administration in demanding that Tehran end its nuclear program. Indeed, Sarkozy seems to have been transformed into the "Scoop" Jackson du jour of neoconservative pundits who just a few years ago were bashing France as "our oldest enemy" and the French as "Cheese-eating surrender monkeys" and who now seem to be doing a lot of French kissing.

Hence, columnist Charles Krauthammer who had expressed "the particular satisfaction of seeing Anglo-Saxon cannonballs puncturing the [French] Tricolor," after watching the naval epic film "Master and Commander" in November 2003, is now contrasting "Obama's fecklessness" on Iran with Sarkozy's manly attitude towards Tehran's ruling clerics.

That Sarkozy has been expressing his growing concerns over Iran's nuclear program with an uncompromising language may have something to do with his prickly personality or it could reflect his reliance on alarming reports provided to him by French intelligence services. Or perhaps as some suggested, the French have been designated to play the role of the "bad cop" against the American "good cop" in the negotiations between members of the E3+3 group and the Iranian representatives in Geneva.

But instead of searching for a secret agenda to explain the French behavior we should take them at their word. It's more likely that Sarkozy's comments reflect real concerns in Paris about the possibility that the Islamic Republic of Iran is getting close to acquiring nuclear military capability. It may be difficult for American pundits who tend to subscribe to a world-view according to which the French and other foreign leaders either assume the role of anti-American bad guys, as former French President Jacques Chirac supposedly did in responding to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, or play the part of the pro-American good guys, the way President Sarkozy is allegedly doing now, to apply the following Realpolitik axiom: Decisions about war and peace are made in Paris or other world capitals almost always based on existing perceptions of national interest.

Chirac, reflecting the view shared by the French political elites was skeptical about U.S. allegations that Iraq had nuclear weapons or that it had posed any direct threat to French security interests (and he was right). Sarkozy believes that unlike the Iraq ruled by the bungling and secular Saddam Hussein, a resurgent Islamic Republic of Iran (thanks to the Bush Administration's policies) with nukes could pose such a threat to French national security.

In fact, Sarkozy's predecessor in office was also very apprehensive about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Without naming Iran, Chirac in an address he made in early 2006 warned that states which threatened his country could face the "ultimate warning" of a nuclear retaliation. The warning was followed by a French decision to modify its nuclear arsenal to increase the strike range and accuracy of its weapons, according to a report published by the French Liberation. Moreover, in an interview with American and French journalists in January 2007, Chirac suggested that if Iran were ever to launch a nuclear weapon against a country like Israel, it would lead to the immediate destruction of Tehran. According to The New York Times, Chirac explained that it would be an act of self-destruction for Iran to use a nuclear weapon against another country. "Where will it drop it, this bomb? On Israel?" Chirac asked. "It would not have gone off 200 meters into the atmosphere before Tehran would be razed to the ground."

The deconstruction of Chirac's remarks suggests that French strategic planners, not unlike many of the leading U.S. foreign policy realists, have concluded that the most effective response to the threat of a nuclear Iran would be a robust containment and deterrence policy. Indeed, while they continue to publicly threaten a possible military strike against Iran's nuclear sites, the Israelis have been preparing for the "day after" - if and when Iran goes nuclear -- by developing a second-strike capability. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said recently that he didn't consider Iran's nuclear program an "existential issue" reflecting the assumption that Israel would be able to deter an Iranian nuclear attack by demonstrating that it could survive a first strike to retaliate effectively against Iran (as Chirac pointed out).

There is no doubt that the acquisition of nuclear weapons could reduce Israel's security margin if and when it tries to respond to potential threats from Iran's regional allies, like Lebanon's Hizbollah. Tehran's nuclear capability could become an element in the strategic calculation, in the same way that the U.S. was constrained in its ability to use conventional military force against Soviet's allies during the Cold War when the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) was in place.

Indeed, the utilization of a version of the same doctrine -- call it mini-MAD -- may explain why the two nuclear military powers of South Asia -- India and Pakistan -- have been able to preserve a stable balance of power in the region and refrained from going to war since they both had gotten the bomb. In fact, the notion that Saudi Arabia and other Arab governments could decide to join the nuclear club shouldn't cause us too many sleepless nights. There is no reason why Washington should not encourage the French, the Saudis, or the Israelis to protect themselves against a potential threat from a nuclear Iran. The French, working together with other members of the European Union (EU) have all the financial and technological resources they need in order to develop an effective deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Iran. At the same time, the Saudis and the other Arab governments and the Israelis should consider the notion that taking steps to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and create the conditions for regional strategic cooperation in dealing with Iran is in their national interest; after all, a nuclear attack on Israel will probably destroy most of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

In a way, by continuing to count on the Americans to protect them against a nuclear Iran, the French, the Saudis and the Israelis are trying to avoid making the very costly decisions involved if they are forced to assume the responsibility for their own security. From that perspective, a U.S. military strike against Iran that would probably retard the Iranian nuclear program by a few years would also allow the French, the Saudis and the Israelis and other governments to postpone making some hard choices about their security as they continue to free ride on U.S. military protection.

U.S. foreign policy makers and analysts who are calling on the U.S. to assume that responsibility by either attacking Iran or by providing a "nuclear umbrella" to Israel and the Saudis hope that such a costly American policy would allow the U.S. to continue maintaining its strategic hegemony in the Middle East. After all, if the Europeans and the Middle Eastern end-up demonstrating that they are able to protect themselves without the need to rely on U.S. leadership aka American military interventions, those who in Washington who benefit from securing that leadership could become the main losers.

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