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France's Role in Three Conflicts Displays a More Muscular Policy

By STEVEN ERLANGER

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PARIS — [France](#) on Tuesday found itself engaged in three shooting wars at once for the first time in memory, indicating a new muscularity in using power by the politically embattled French president, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#).

French [peacekeeping](#) troops attacked the presidential palace in [Ivory Coast](#) in support of the [United Nations](#) overnight, while French planes were attacking the troops of the Libyan leader, Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#). French forces are also fighting alongside the United States in the war against the [Taliban](#) in [Afghanistan](#).

“This is entirely new,” said François Heisbourg, a defense expert at the Foundation for Strategic Research here. “The reasons are different, but we are in three shooting wars simultaneously, and that in my memory has never happened before.”

With the loser of the Ivory Coast election, [Laurent Gbagbo](#), negotiating surrender in Abidjan, France's intervention in its former colony may prove to be of short duration. France hopes to be as lucky in the war against Colonel Qaddafi, who seems to be in the initial stages of [trying to negotiate an exit](#).

In both instances, Mr. Sarkozy was the most active supporter of robust military action. But Mr. Sarkozy and his government have emphasized that they are using military force in the name of the United Nations, not out of any colonial impulse, with the aim of saving lives.

He claimed the use of force was justified by recent [United Nations Security Council](#) resolutions demanding the protection of civilians — a quick implementation of an idea, “the right to protect,” that has been floated for a decade.

Now, both Security Council resolutions, 1973 for [Libya](#) (sponsored by France, Britain and Lebanon and passed March 17), and 1975 for the Ivory Coast (sponsored by France and Nigeria and passed March 30), are viewed as precedents for authorizing military responses to humanitarian crises.

China and Russia, which like France are permanent members of the Security Council, have criticized the French interpretation of the resolutions and opposed its use of force in Libya and Ivory Coast.

Some have suggested that Mr. Sarkozy, who is at historical lows in the opinion polls, with a presidential election next year, is acting tough to stir up patriotism. “If Sarkozy could do it, he would declare a war every week,” said Didier Mathus, an opposition Socialist legislator on the foreign affairs committee of Parliament.

Others call that explanation simplistic, saying French voters remain deeply worried about the country’s continuing commitments in Afghanistan, where many think the war has been lost. They say the potential price of inaction in Libya and Ivory Coast may have weighed on Mr. Sarkozy.

Nick Witney of the European Council on Foreign Relations noted that acting quickly might have avoided a deeper shame with political consequences. “You might not reap popularity for taking action, but if we all stood by and watched a bloodbath in Benghazi, you might be slaughtered by public opinion,” he said. “After saying Qaddafi must go, if he’d crushed the opposition it would have been a huge embarrassment for the West.”

Bruno Tertrais, another French defense expert, said that French policy in Ivory Coast was not a big issue for voters — “it’s the usual business in Africa,” he said. “And I don’t think he’s doing Libya for domestic political reasons.”

He said, though, that Mr. Sarkozy might be seeking to compensate for “the failure of French diplomacy on Tunisia,” where the French remained largely supportive of an autocratic regime even as a mass uprising there toppled it.

Mr. Sarkozy’s former foreign minister, [Bernard Kouchner](#), a Socialist, agreed that Mr. Sarkozy seemed inclined to act quickly after remaining relatively passive during the Tunisian and Egyptian protests. Mr. Kouchner helped to promulgate and promote the “right to protect” doctrine both in and out of office.

“Sarkozy originally condemned the right to intervene but then he did it,” said Mr. Kouchner, who was replaced as foreign minister last November. “The war is just, the cause is just, even if the goal is a bit confused.” He said he opposed the infamous [visit of Colonel Qaddafi to Paris](#) in 2007, when the Libyan leader embarrassed his hosts and put up a tent in Paris, then reneged on promises for lucrative contracts.

Mr. Heisbourg, the defense expert, sees in the Sarkozy attack on Libya an element of revenge, while Mr. Kouchner sees mostly irony. “It’s hard to turn 180 degrees, to invite Qaddafi and then later bomb him,” Mr. Kouchner said.

“It’s a bit strange and a bit French, I have to say,” he said, laughing.

Mr. Kouchner also supports Mr. Sarkozy on Ivory Coast. “We are doing the right thing there,” he said, noting that France did not participate in the civil war. “We said we would support U.N. orders and we did that.”

The United Nations secretary general, [Ban Ki-moon](#), asked for French military help on Sunday night to destroy Mr. Gbagbo’s heavy weapons, which he was using against civilians in Abidjan. “We bombed once but it was not a big deal,” Mr. Kouchner said. “We are protecting civilians there, and not just the French.”

French officials said that they were also concerned that a lengthy conflict might reproduce the [intercommunal killings that happened in Duékoué](#), in western Ivory Coast, some of which were laid at the door of the forces of [Alassane Ouattara](#), the internationally acknowledged winner of last year’s presidential election. Abidjan, the commercial capital, is a center of Gbagbo support, and an extended fight for control of that city could lead to high casualties, they said.

Moreover, some 12,000 foreigners and people with dual citizenship live in Abidjan, and France said it wanted to ensure their protection and prevent the taking of hostages. Already on Monday

afternoon, there were reports that at least two French citizens were taken hostage by Gbagbo forces.

Mr. Tertrais saw no real change in the former French colony, where peacekeeping troops have been present under various mandates since the civil war of 2002, when French troops entered to separate both sides in what was probably the last old-style French intervention in Africa. That operation was later put under United Nations auspices.

Mr. Mathus, the Socialist legislator, thinks Mr. Sarkozy is “playing with fire” in Ivory Coast from “a post-colonial reflex” and says that reports of massacres by Mr. Ouattara’s forces are “not a very good omen.”

So far, the Libyan intervention appears to be popular in France, with a strong majority of voters supporting it in recent polls.

If the conflict drags on, however, attitudes could change, especially given the cost of all this military intervention when France is trying to trim its defense spending and reduce its budget deficit. The major defense debate will be about Afghanistan, Mr. Tertrais said. “But it will be much more difficult now to argue for cuts in defense expenditure.”

Mr. Mathus notes that not a word has been said so far about the cost of France’s latest military adventures.