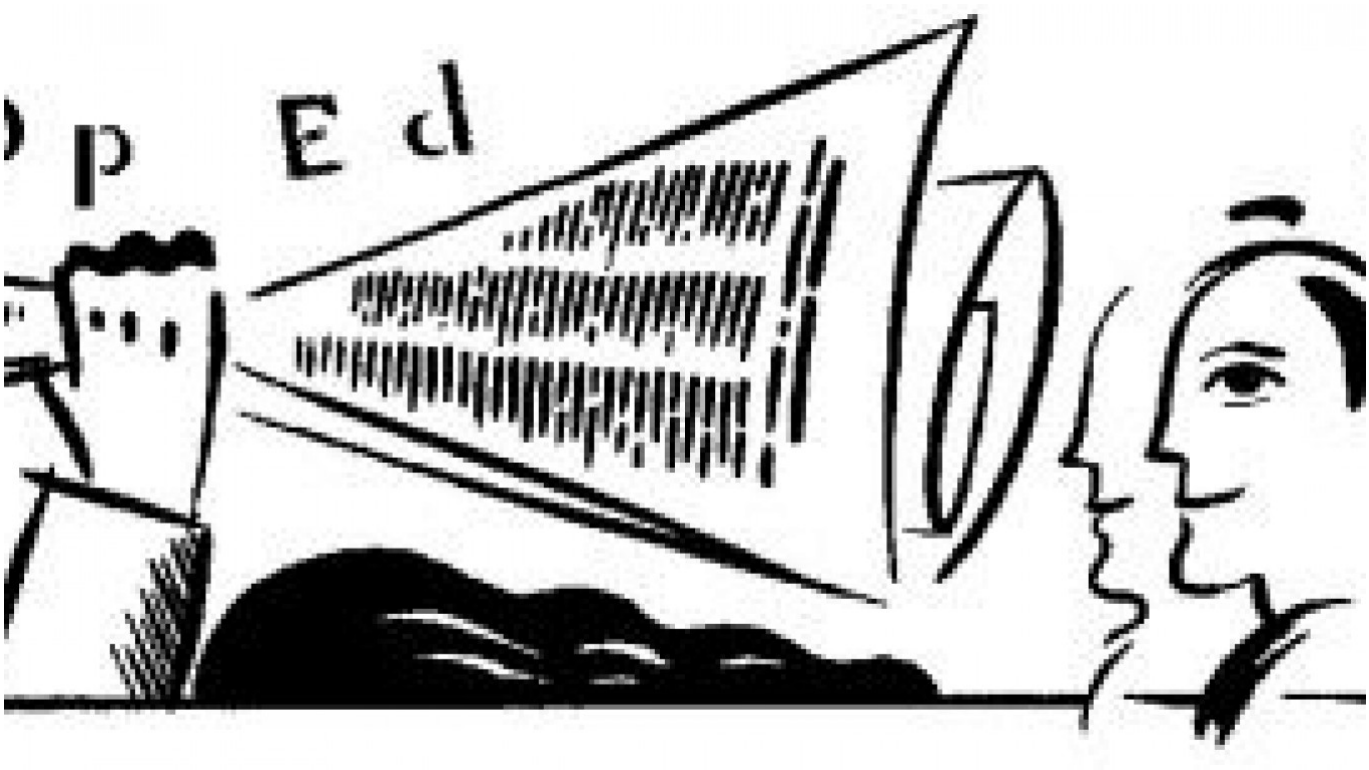
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France Tries to Take the Lead in Mali as U.S. Follows

By Zaki Laidi

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France's military intervention in Mali is proceeding apace, with the recent fall of Timbuktu representing a significant milestone in the effort to rout the Islamist rebels who took control of the north of the country. More broadly, the intervention's apparent success underscores three key points.

First, it confirms that France retains the ability to act as Europe's prime mover. France has a large and rapidly deployable military force, as it demonstrated in Libya in 2011. Furthermore, this military capability is tied to a worldview rather than just to the defense of economic interests.

In Mali, France is not seeking to lay claim to resources, export democracy or extend a francafrique in which it no longer believes. More prosaically, France seeks to stabilize a country that is subject to violent forces that are not always led by Malians and that are likely to disrupt the whole subregion while also threatening Europe.

Second, the intervention once again highlights the strategic insignificance of the European Union, which is promoting a "comprehensive strategy" for Mali and the whole region to avoid the crucial question: Under what conditions will Europe use force?

The final point concerns the nature of U.S. involvement in the conflict. The United States remains France's most valuable strategic ally in this endeavor, but the terms have changed. Indeed, after a decade of fruitless military interventions, tightening budget constraints led President Barack Obama's administration to sacrifice some ground forces to keep intact the country's substantial air and naval capabilities. One apparent reason for this policy is containment of China.

Obama's recalibration has accentuated the realist turn in U.S. foreign policy, according to which the U.S. is now willing to intervene only when its immediate interests are at stake. In other cases, the United States' allies will have to demonstrate their commitment if they are to receive American backing.

This new approach was applied to Libya, where it was characterized as "leading from behind." But this concept is inapt because it implies that ultimately the U.S. was the leader. Clearly, it was not. Absent the initial push from France and Britain, the United States would most likely have remained passive, which was what the State and Defense departments advised. The State Department even went so far as to warn France and Britain not to vote for United Nations Resolution 1973, which authorized military intervention.

Obama overturned his bureaucrats' position, proposing a strong military intervention, without ground troops, for a very limited period. In the end, the U.S. delivered 75 percent of the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, 75 percent of the air-to-air refueling and 90 percent of the targeting intelligence, an indisputably significant contribution. Yet Libya marked the beginning of a concept, applicable to Mali today, that might be termed "following from above."

In other words, the U.S. is conveying to its allies that it will no longer intervene in low-priority areas unless its allies commit first, much like an investor waiting for the promoter to make a down payment. As in Libya, France had to take the initiative in Mali. And as in Libya, U.S. support was crucial in the four areas where France and other European countries fall short: aerial reconnaissance, targeting, air transportation and air-to-air refueling.

Unlike in Libya, though, in Mali the United States took an unprecedented step in the history of trans-Atlantic relations by considering making France pay to lease troop transport aircraft. Although this proposal was discarded, it reveals both the erosion of U.S. support and the United States' determination to signal its lack of assistance to Europeans who are in harm's way.

Moreover, there are real disagreements in the U.S. bureaucracy when it comes to assessing the threat that al-Qaida in Mali poses for U.S. interests. Following from above thus has operational and symbolic significance. Operationally, it is limited to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and does not involve ground troops. Symbolically, it means backing initial and significant efforts undertaken by others.

For Europe, this situation is worrying on two counts. First, it illustrates the stop-and-go

dynamic undergirding U.S. politics, which can swing, in just five years, from a disturbing expansionism to an equally worrying withdrawal from the world. A jihadist Mali admittedly does not directly threaten the U.S., or at least less so than it does Europe. But does it make sense to stick to such a simple analysis after what occurred on Sept. 11, 2001?

Second, Europe persists in ignoring the need to determine under what conditions it can and should use force, not for peacekeeping but to fight potentially hostile forces. The aversion to war is one of the most serious risks that Europe currently faces.

For the French, the U.S. position will force a re-evaluation of the importance of Africa in France's global strategy, given that the government's 2008 white paper on defense clearly minimized the continent's importance, most likely to justify a reduction in France's ground forces and military budget. Moreover, it will encourage France to broach the subject of military force with its European allies.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been known to criticize France for being less than enthusiastic about European political union. The question is how to build Europe with states that bury their heads in the sand at the mention of the use of force while cynically admitting that France is defending all of Europe in Mali.

France must now insist on addressing the question of the use of force as a precondition to any negotiations on Europe's political integration. By showing Europe that it is following its actions from above, the U.S. will once again force Europeans to awaken from their political torpor and strategic mediocrity. The question remains whether Europeans will be willing to do so.

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