Syria and the “real” French policy

To achieve its Middle East ambitions, Paris has apparently decided to take full advantage of its chairmanship of the UN Security Council. On July 30, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said that as soon as his country takes the presidency in the UN Security Council on August 1, it intends to call for an emergency ministerial Security Council meeting on the ongoing armed conflict in Syria in order to “try to stop the massacres and prepare a political transition.”

It seems that pride of the French was seriously wounded after an active but largely disastrous July.

Earlier this month the Friends of Syria held a meeting in Paris that essentially ended with a declaration of admittedly impractical slogans calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s resignation, the withdrawal of government troops from the cities, the release of political prisoners, and access by representatives of humanitarian organizations to people in need of assistance.

And at month’s end, France’s efforts with its Western allies to push through a new resolution on Syria based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which would green-light the use of sanctions and enforcement operations, as usual ran up against the strong positions of Moscow and Beijing, which exercised their vetoes and thus blocked the draft resolution.

Paris, therefore, understands very well that its presidency of the UN Security Council in August could give France both “a moment of glory” if it goes all out on Syria and achieves a breakthrough in the long-running campaign to overthrow the Assad regime and the beginning of the end of its “Napoleonic plans” to win a key spot under the Middle East and the African sun should another Syrian initiative fail.

And the French have quite a lot to lose in the region. Especially after the ambitious regional plans it has been constantly talking about in recent years.

France’s continuing “Napoleonic” ambitions

It should be noted that France’s previous president, Nicolas Sarkozy, repeatedly declared his determination to move to a qualitatively new relationship with the countries of the EU’s Southern Partnership by making use of both personal ties and his favorite but as yet nonfunctioning foreign policy “toy” — the Union for the Mediterranean.

In fact, we have witnessed Paris’ active application of Realpolitik in the region. It is important to note that the French have paid special attention to the leading non-Francophone countries of the Greater Middle East — South Sudan and Libya (given their potential and actual hydrocarbon reserves for producing oil in Africa, respectively).

So far, everything is going according to plan with Juba. The French company Total has now become a key oil operator in South Sudan and has already announced its intention of tripling oil production there in the near future,
as well as rushing construction of an alternative North Sudan pipeline through Kenya to the Indian Ocean.

It appears that Total succeeded in gaining a foothold in Libya early on. After getting rid of the obstinate Colonel Gadhafi, who had hindered French ambitions in the region (remember the 0.5 billion euro fine that the Libyan government imposed on the “French Gazprom,” the loss of many Libyan tenders for joint production of hydrocarbons, the failed Franco-Libyan deal to buy French Rafale fighters and other weapons for 4.5 billion euros, Tripoli’s obstacles to the shipment of uranium for French nuclear power plants, and, of course, Gadhafi’s “special opinion” about the Union for the Mediterranean), it seemed as though everything was going according to plan for Paris here also.

However, the French began having more and more problems with Libya early this year. Obviously, the leaders of Libyan tribes in the particularly oil-rich Cyrenaica, as well as the Turkish and Qatari “allies” behind them, were seriously irritated both by Paris’s ambitions and by the Transitional National Council’s behind-the-scenes games with it.

The deaths of two French private security firm executives in Libya confirmed that. It is also not surprising that the issue of the so-called “French debt” came up again in the spring. It was first mentioned last March by the most talkative of Gadhafi’s son’s — Seif al-Islam.

Apparently, the new resident of the Palais de l’Elysee, Francois Hollande, has decided to keep up with his predecessor. Moreover, it has become a “matter of honor” for the new administration to outdo Sarkozy’s team by putting the squeeze on Syria and avoiding a repetition of the mistakes made in Libya.

Especially since, apart from personal ambitions, there are very good reasons for it that have to do with hydrocarbons.

**Ambitions and hydrocarbons**

I addressed the economic rationale for spinning up the Syrian conflict in in a previous New Eastern Outlook article: particularly the fact that the West is using Qatar’s gas ambitions to weaken Gazprom’s position in Europe, and therefore that of Russia, as well.

Little remains to be done: overthrow the Assad regime, which is in the orbit of Russia and Iran, and install a puppet government in Damascus that will give the nod to a pipeline through Syrian territory from Qatar to Turkey and thence to Europe.

Turkey, however, is not essential. To put it mildly, France’s relations with that country are less than ideal. A pipeline could be laid directly to Syria’s Mediterranean coast, where an LNG terminal would be built for unimpeded transshipment of liquefied natural gas to Europe.

Even without the Qatari gas, however, the French have reasons for replacing the government in Damascus with one it can control as soon as possible.

A few days ago, it was reported that Total had signed a contract to develop oil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The report stressed that one of Europe’s largest oil and gas corporations has acquired a stake in the potentially hydrocarbon-rich Safen and Harir fields.

It is significant that for the sake of Kurdistan energy resources, Total went directly against the Iraqi government, which sees such contracts as moves towards separatism by the Iraqi Kurds.

However, the game is worth it for the country with “Napoleonic” ambitions in the region. After all, Iranian Kurdistan has the world’s sixth largest reserves of oil, which could be easily transported through Syria to Europe if the government in Damascus is replaced, thereby improving Paris’s standing within the European Union.

By the way, here are two examples specifically for those “westernized romantics” who take the propaganda in both the Western and French media at face value.

In 2008, France gave military-technical support to Chad’s ruling regime, which was essentially under the same kind of rebel threat as Syria, and in 2009 Paris supported the transfer of power in Gabon to Ali Bongo, son of deceased President Omar Bongo, a longtime “friend” and ally of France. The “elections” in Gabon were, to put it mildly, not up to democratic standards, but Total’s interests were more important than “liberal democratic values.”
Now, Paris’ chief goal is to avoid repeating the mistakes made in Libya and again being relegated to the back seat in benefiting from the “Syrian pie” after Herculean efforts to overthrow the “criminal regime” of Bashar al-Assad.

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