

SARKOZY TO SET NEW COURSE FOR FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

Newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy is expected to introduce new dynamism and a new course for French foreign policy. At the European level, France seeks to strengthen the EU's ability to act, in an effort that may also include more supranational elements. In his relationship with the US, Sarkozy is in favor of renouncing traditional Gaullism and establishing a new Franco-American partnership. The transition in Paris creates an opportunity to intensify European and transatlantic cooperation and to revitalize the West.



*President Sarkozy and US Foreign Minister Rice after a meeting in Paris on 25 June 2007
Philippe Wojazer/Reuters*

The victory of Nicolas Sarkozy at the presidential election in May 2007 has brought France to a turning point in a number of ways. While the political career of his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was still rooted in the era of General de Gaulle, Sarkozy, born in 1955, is the first president of France's post-war generation. He represents a new political style. Images of the jogging head of state aim to portray him as a dynamic politician who is shirt-sleeved in the best sense of the word and is more reminiscent of US politicians than of previous French presidents. In terms of political issues, Sarkozy has announced far-reaching domestic reforms. Thanks to the

victory of his ruling UMP party at the parliamentary elections in mid-June 2007, he commands a solid majority in the National Assembly that should enable him to rapidly tackle his program for a modernization of French society.

The future course of French foreign and security policy was only parenthetically touched upon in the election campaign. However, there can be no doubt that Sarkozy's efforts in this area will also be aimed at increasing France's capacity to act. Readjustments are to be expected in French policy vis-à-vis Europe and the US. In other key areas of French

foreign policy, too, a change of course is on the cards.

The legacy of Chirac

Sarkozy has inherited a difficult legacy. During Chirac's presidency, France lost influence in global politics. On the one hand, this was due to the Iraq war, which not only placed a heavy strain on the relationship between Paris and Washington, but also undermined France's role as a leader of the EU. Chirac's statement that the "infantile" and "reckless" candidate states who supported the US invasion of Iraq had "missed a great opportunity to shut up" still resonates; on the other hand, the rejection of the EU constitutional treaty by the French public in a referendum ordered by Chirac himself in May 2005 damaged the president's standing and cast the EU into a profound crisis.

In the realm of security policy, Chirac did set down some important markers. These included the Military Program Law for 1997–2005, enacted in 1996, which – among other things – facilitated the accelerated modernization of the armed forces and heralded the transition to a professional army, as well as the elaboration of a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which was initiated in 1998 on the occasion of a British-French summit in Saint-Malo. Nevertheless, the overall balance of the Chirac era is a meager one: in the past years, French

foreign policy has been characterized more by rhetorical flourishes than by real creative force.

Europe's ability to act

Sarkozy has decided to strengthen the EU's capability for action as his top foreign policy priority. In this respect, the president is confronted with three key challenges. First of all, the constitutional crisis must be rapidly overcome, and the decision-making processes within the enlarged EU must be simplified. In this respect, Sarkozy has exhibited a strong commitment from the very start. In the weeks leading up to the seminal EU summit in Brussels from 21–23 June 2007, Sarkozy cooperated closely with Germany and the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, in advocating a simplified treaty that would salvage the institutional core elements of the draft constitution. He affirmed that France, too, was prepared to take a chance on more supranationality and argued that the principle of "one commissioner per member state" should be abolished. His proposal for a smaller EU Commission was in agreement with his own philosophy of government, as he himself has visibly reduced the number of French government members.

During the summit negotiations, Sarkozy's active support for Council President Merkel and his own compromise suggestions were decisive in bringing about agreement in the wrangling with Poland over a new voting mechanism. The benchmark values agreed in Brussels for a EU reform treaty, to be negotiated in the second half of 2007, were in full agreement with his views: More continuity through the new institution of a president of the European Council, to be elected for two-and-a-half years; more coherence and visibility through the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, who in addition to the Commission's external relations will also be responsible for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (second pillar); more legitimacy through a strengthening of the EU Parliament; and more efficiency through an increasing number of votes based on the principle of the double majority (55 per cent of states and 65 per cent of the EU population) and the reduction of the number of commissioners to two-thirds of the number of

French armed forces

Personnel strength (professional army since 2003)

- █ Active: 254,895 (Army: 133,500; Navy: 43,995; Air: 63,600; Central Staff: 5,200; Service de Santé: 8,600), Paramilitary 104,275
- █ Civilian: 44,465 (Army: 28,500; Navy: 10,265; Air: 5,700)
- █ Reserve: 21,650 (Army 11,350; Navy 6,000; Air 4,300), Paramilitary 40,000
- █ Target strength for 2008: 446,653

Budget

- █ Ranked third in terms of global defense expenditures
 - █ 2006: US\$53.1 billion (US: US\$528.7bn; UK: US\$59.2bn; Germany: US\$37bn)

Sources: *IISS Military Balance 2007*; *SIPRI Yearbook 2007*

member states. If this treaty is signed, as envisaged, by all member states by 2009, the EU would be able to demonstrate its ability to reform itself and would considerably reduce the danger of institutional paralysis in future rounds of enlargement.

Sarkozy's position also coincides with that of Angela Merkel regarding the second main challenge of European policy, namely the EU accession of Turkey. Both are opposed to an EU membership for Ankara and instead argue in favor of a "privileged partnership". Sarkozy would like to integrate this partnership into a new "Union of Mediterranean Countries" where Turkey would be assigned the role of a major pillar. This Mediterranean Union would be encouraged to model itself on the integration dynamics of the EC in the 1950s and strive for deeper sectoral cooperation between its members for example in matters related to the environment, trade, and immigration. This project of Sarkozy's aims, on the one hand, to provide an alternative avenue for integrating Turkey, but also to establish improved and institutionalized contacts between France and the North African countries. However, it has so far not been specified how the "Union of Mediterranean Countries" would be brought into line with the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process).

Third, Europe's future actionability also depends on whether France under Sarkozy will agree to a readjustment of the integrative equilibrium within the EU that takes into account the enlargement of the Union while adding further states – in particular, Britain – to the traditional

twin Franco-German leadership. In this respect, the development of bilateral relations between France and Britain is of particular importance. While the rupture between Chirac and Tony Blair over Iraq remained insurmountable for the duration of their terms of office, the near-simultaneous handover of power in Paris and London creates an opportunity for a new beginning. In the meantime, Sarkozy can even conceive of a scenario where Blair is elected to head the planned office of an EU president. On the other hand, in the absence of a consensus between the European great powers, the EU will find it difficult to define its global political interests and to defend them collectively.

Improved relations with Washington

Chances for the establishment of a more coherent and efficient EU foreign policy are good, not least because of the prospect of a far-reaching change of course in French policy towards the US. While Chirac followed the traditional Gaullist line in promoting differentiation from the US in the interest of a multipolar order, Sarkozy is moving towards Washington – irrespective of a critical stance towards the US among the French public. Sarkozy had already displayed more sympathy for Washington's stance than the majority of French decision-makers in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq. He continues to strike a noticeably more conciliatory tone today. Although he now calls for "friendship, not vassalage" – not least due to the pressure of public opinion – he has been praising the dynamism of the US model of society for years. On the night of the election, he highlighted the traditional

solidarity between France and the US and emphasized that Paris would always stand by Washington's side in time of need.

Sarkozy's nomination policies for his cabinet also hint at a change of course towards cooperation with the US and a departure from traditional Gaullism. The new French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, is considered a transatlanticist. He was one of only a few French politicians to argue publicly in favor of the US attack on Iraq. The founder of "Doctors Without Borders" and former UN administrator in Kosovo is basically in favor of an interventionist policy, albeit for humanitarian reasons and not, as is the case in Washington, due to security policy or geopolitical considerations. The increasing interest of the government in Paris in maintaining good relations with the US is also reflected in the nomination of Jean-David Levitte as Sarkozy's foreign policy advisor and "sherpa". Levitte has skillfully worked at smoothing the waves of the transatlantic storm during the past few years in his capacity as French ambassador to Washington.

Rapprochement between Paris and Washington should reinvigorate both NATO and relations between the EU and the US. However, renewed friction between the two cannot be excluded altogether when it comes to individual global hotspots. For example, Sarkozy has mentioned the possibility of a middle-term withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan, while the Bush administration in Washington is calling for the international ISAF force to be expanded. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan of a 200-strong special forces contingent by Paris in the winter of 2006, approximately 1,000 French troops remain stationed in and around the capital of Kabul. It is also conceivable that conflict may erupt over expanding NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia, an option that is already being discussed intensely in the US, but is rejected by Paris for the time being.

France in the world

France will continue to assert its claim to be a global actor under Sarkozy, too. For example, the new president has committed himself to the construction of a second aircraft carrier that will join the

nuclear-powered "Charles de Gaulle" and give France the ability to project power. Sarkozy can also be expected to continue the successive raising of defense budgets that was already witnessed under Chirac.

Concerning regional crises, French Middle East policy in particular is expected to undergo certain corrections. Sarkozy takes Israeli security concerns very seriously. His election has been greeted with noticeable satisfaction by Israeli officials. The French president is opposed to Hizbollah, which he believes is a threat to the independence and unity of Lebanon. While Chirac had a personal stake in the Lebanese issue insofar as he was a close personal friend of the family of murdered former prime minister Rafik Hariri, Sarkozy is more distanced in terms of handling the Assad regime in Syria, which opens new prospects for negotiation in this respect as well.

Concerning Iran, Sarkozy has a more critical stance towards the regime in Tehran than his predecessor. He regards Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a threat. Accordingly, he is pressuring Iran to cooperate unconditionally with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Although he fundamentally underlines the importance of multilateral negotiations, Sarkozy does not exclude the idea of sanctions against Iran even outside of the UN framework.

Furthermore, a more critical stance towards Russia and China can also be discerned in the new French government. The politically explosive nature of the Chechen conflict and the importance of human rights are stressed. However, Sarkozy is not looking for open confrontation either. He wants to avoid an escalation of the conflict with Moscow over the future status of Kosovo and has therefore counseled against hasty decisions and in favor of cautious diplomacy.

Africa will continue to be a central region of French foreign policy. However, the new president has announced his intention to coordinate French engagement in Africa even more closely with the African Union, which he believes should be strengthened further. Sarkozy's policy towards Africa, which is to be coordinated by diplomat Bruno Joubert, will pursue a more reticent

and less paternalistic approach. French policy vis-à-vis Africa is to become more transparent. The controversial "cellule africaine" in the Elysee Palace is to cede responsibilities to a new National Security Council.

Strengthening the West

An analysis of the first few weeks of Sarkozy's presidency shows that a new dynamism has been introduced into French foreign policy. Beyond existing budgetary restraints, there is a clear desire to continue work on policy "construction sites" and to adopt new approaches in the process. Besides the reinvigoration of the European integration process, this is seen most clearly in the context of the transatlantic relationship. Sarkozy's France will move towards rapprochement with its Western partners in a number of topical issues.

The transition in Paris offers reason to hope that the West, which has been weakened and unnerved in recent years by internal discord and terrorist attacks by Muslim groups, will be revitalized. The presidential elections in the US in autumn 2008 can be expected to contribute to this process. Initial promising steps towards closer cooperation were seen at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm and the EU summit in Brussels in June 2007. A revitalization of transatlantic and European cooperation is a precondition for coming to terms with global challenges such as climate change or stabilizing regional crisis hotspots such as the Middle East.

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