

French Foreign Policy under Sarkozy

Written by Arthur Goldhammer

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ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER, JUN 14 2008

The presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy has certainly brought a change in the style of French foreign policy, but has it altered the substance? The answer, I will argue, is a qualified yes, not least because it is characteristic of the new French president to blend style and substance until the two become indistinguishable. Sarkozy, who transformed his party, the UMP, into a vehicle of personal power, may have inherited the Gaullist mantle, but he shares little of the Gaullist ethos of *la grandeur*. On June 27, 1958, the General, shortly after returning to power, described France as “a nation that the world needs if it is to avoid cataclysm.” Sympathetically parsed, this hyperbole might have made a kind of sense as the founding myth of Gaullist foreign policy in a world riven by the bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. But by the time Sarkozy assumed office just under half a century later, on May 16, 2007, it would have seemed aberrant to the point of madness. France was by then just one of a number of midrange powers vying for influence in a global arena reshaped by the military pre-eminence of the United States, the demise of the Soviet Union, the emergence of potent Asian economies, the proliferation of regional conflict, and growing competition over scarce raw materials, especially sources of energy.

Sarkozy's long political apprenticeship shaped his approach to the strategic challenges of an increasingly multipolar world. Having made his way as one of a number of ambitious contenders with no clear advantage over his political rivals, Sarkozy was, earlier in his career, in the same situation in which France finds itself today. He was always careful to play in several games at once, so that when things weren't going well in one arena, he could advance in others. He made shrewd instrumental use of institutions whose potential others failed to see (the city hall of Neuilly, the role of party spokesman, the finance and justice ministries, and the UMP itself, a party created to support a president, Chirac, who became Sarkozy's enemy, but which Sarkozy commandeered and turned to his own advantage). He learned to maximize his influence by attracting the attention of the media. He cultivated relationships with both the powerful and the less powerful, and with those with whom he disagreed as well as those with whom he agreed. Last but not least, he did not hesitate to break off relationships at crucial moments or to mollify potential enemies at the risk of vexing erstwhile friends.

In his first year in office, Sarkozy has employed all of these tactics in advancing his foreign policy agenda. He has launched initiatives on many fronts: with the European Union, to win approval of the Lisbon Treaty; with Libya, to free the Bulgarian nurses held captive there, secure contracts with the government, and enlist Qaddafi in his plan for a Mediterranean Union; with Russia, to discuss the supply of gas to Western Europe; with Africa, to initiate a new relationship with France's former colonies; to China, to negotiate economic issues and the sale of nuclear reactors; with Lebanon, to register French support of the new government; with the United Kingdom, to woo the British with the notion that France under Sarkozy had become more “Anglo-Saxon” in its outlook; with Germany, to smooth differences with Angela Merkel over the European Central Bank and the Mediterranean Union; with NATO, to begin consideration of full French integration into the military command structure; and with the United States, to signal a more flexible French position vis-à-vis American military engagements abroad.

To which of these initiatives is Sarkozy really committed? What priorities has he established? As always with Sarkozy, it is difficult to say. Indeed, inconsistency is the genius of his approach. He gets away with audacities that might be mistaken for blunders or incoherence in a man of firmer principle. If, for example, he were really the outright Atlanticist, not to say pro-American toady, that critics accuse him of being, would he have risked inviting Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to Paris for a Bastille Day gathering of regional leaders to discuss the Union for the

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Mediterranean? The Americans ostensibly oppose talks with the Syrian, who shelters Hezbollah, has ties to Iran, and stands accused of the murder of American-backed leaders in Lebanon. But Israel is talking to Assad, and the United States may well have an interest in opening another channel of communication to him through France. The Union for the Mediterranean provides a convenient cover for such communication while at the same time enhancing France's position as a regional broker. To bolster himself against domestic criticism for the overture to the dictator, Sarkozy was careful to stage a very public show of solidarity with the new Sleimane government in Lebanon. The gamble seems to have paid off in at least one way, moreover, because prominent Socialists Michel Rocard and Jack Lang have denounced critics of the invitation to Assad for thinking like politicians rather than statesmen.

These complex maneuvers belie the portrayal of Sarkozy as a mere showman interested solely in public relations coups, such as the images broadcast round the world of his then wife Cécilia leading the Bulgarian nurses out of the desert. His moves in the many interlocking games of his foreign policy are calculated and complementary. The goal is to accomplish as much as possible with the limited resources available. Losses—and the capitulation to Merkel on the Mediterranean Union must be counted as an early one—can be salvaged for gains in other contests, such as the struggle for influence in the Middle East. The freedom to act independently of the United States, as in the overture to Assad, allows France to assume a role that is complementary to American policy, neither opposed nor aligned.

Is Sarkozy the architect of his foreign policy? To suggest, as I have done, that his style is the fruit of his experience as a rising politician maneuvering among more powerful rivals might seem to indicate that his policy goals are idiosyncratic. In fact, he relies on a number of experienced advisors. Jean-David Levitte, a former ambassador to the United States, is perhaps the most important of these. Jean-Pierre Jouyet, his principal advisor for European Union affairs, is an experienced hand, having served on the staff of Jacques Delors when he was European Commission president and of Lionel Jospin when he was prime minister. And Claude Guéant, the secretary general of the Elysée, is thought to have played a key role in a number of initiatives, including the affair of the Libyan nurses and the response to a rebellion in Chad. Another advisor, speechwriter Henri Guaino, influenced the plan for the Mediterranean Union (now rebaptized the Union for the Mediterranean and scaled down in ambition) and wrote a speech outlining France's new African policy, which did not go down well when the president delivered it in Dakar in July 2007.

So the president is not *un cavalier seul* in foreign policy. He has his team of close advisors. A conspicuous omission from this list is foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, whose presence in the cabinet in a sense confirms my contention that Sarkozy's moves generally have multiple goals. Kouchner's nomination signaled a symbolic commitment to human rights and humanitarian assistance, ideals with which Sarkozy has sporadically aligned himself, as when he criticized the Chinese crackdown in Tibet or the treatment of women by the Taliban. Yet such velleities are indulged only as long as they remain costless and sacrificed to expediency when the costs outweigh the gains: human rights did not figure prominently on the agenda in visits to Peking and Moscow. Kouchner's appointment also served a domestic political purpose: it was a spectacular (but again relatively costless) overture to the Socialist opposition, and it limited a potential critic's room for maneuver. Jouyet also came from the Left, and his nomination slathered salt on one of the deeper wounds in the left flank, dissension over France's integration into Europe.

In French as in most other foreign policies, the importance of human rights recedes wherever economic issues become salient. And here the president's personal stamp is very much in evidence. He is a man who admires wealth and respects entrepreneurial energies. He rarely travels abroad without a retinue of CEOs, and seldom does he return without a contract or two in hand. Securing future energy resources has been a principal axis of his policy from the beginning. Having approved the merger of the French gas company GDF with Suez, he has been keen to secure gas supplies from both Russia and North Africa. He is also committed to the promotion of nuclear power along with the fortunes of the largely state-owned firm Areva, a global leader in the nuclear industry. The deal he brokered with Libya included a promise of Libyan uranium for Areva along with a Libyan commitment to purchase nuclear power plants from the French company.

History, in short, has spared Sarkozy the need to seek an escape from the bipolar logic of the Cold War by way of a mythical resurrection of the previous century's concert of nations, in which France was a major player. Yet he inherits a world that is increasingly multipolar once again, a world in which there are real gains to be made if the right

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cooperative formulas can be found. This is a game that the French president instinctively knows how to play. The world may have to find a way to avoid cataclysm without relying on France, but the Gaullist knack for combining bluff with bravado may prove to be a winning strategy for *la Grande Nation* as it shakes off its last lingering delusions of *grandeur*. Sobriety has its compensations, and Sarkozy seems to have made up his mind to enjoy as well as exploit them.

Arthur Goldhammer chairs the seminar for visiting scholars at Harvard's Center for European Studies and is on the editorial board of the journal *French Politics, Culture and Society*. He has translated more than a hundred works by many of France's most noted authors. In 1996 he was named *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Minister of Culture and in 1997 he was awarded the *Médaille de Vermeil* by the Académie Française. He maintains a blog on French politics at www.artgoldhammer.blogspot.com