

CURRENT HISTORY

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France Returns to Center Stage

RONALD TIERSKY

From Washington’s point of view, French President Nicolas Sarkozy is the best news to come from Europe in several years. Washington needs a European leader of stature who can change the anti-American sentiment built up during George W. Bush’s two terms. The next US president may be in luck.

There is a lot to say in Sarkozy’s favor. Whereas certain current European leaders are estimable, none has emerged as a genuine leader of the continent. Measured against the likes of Britain’s Gordon Brown, Spain’s José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and even Germany’s well-respected Angela Merkel, Sarkozy is a phenomenon. His arrival on the scene has, in less than a year’s time, reshuffled the cards of European politics and Europe’s international influence.

To project a bit, it is not impossible that the Sarkozy presidency could become as important in reorienting French foreign policy as Margaret Thatcher’s and Tony Blair’s leadership were to British politics—if he can avoid a sequel to Blair’s disaster in Iraq and ultimately enjoys better luck with economic growth than seems likely according to the current dismal outlook.

Sarkozy’s domestic mantra, “Work more to earn more,” was at first ridiculed as hopelessly un-French. Yet widespread popular anxieties about declining standards of living and government benefits, plus grim forecasts concerning the country’s pension system, have made the rehabilitation of a French work ethic no longer unthinkable. The rock of French rejection of *ultraliberal* market economics is softening just a bit.

Among current European leaders, Sarkozy alone possesses Blair’s foreign policy audacity—a

high-powered ambition to increase both his country’s influence and Europe’s overall weight in international strategic calculations. He believes, with good cause, that renewing a close alliance with the United States (without allowing France to become Washington’s new “poodle”) offers more promise than former President Jacques Chirac’s Gallo-nostalgic obsession with establishing distance from Washington.

Chirac’s foreign policies, with the exception of his moment of international glory in opposing the Iraq invasion, seemed a collection of rearguard, tired efforts at lofty leadership. When the 75-year-old Chirac turned over the keys to the Elysée Palace to the 52-year-old Sarkozy last May, the infusion of new energy and dynamism was almost palpable. Chirac tried to appear Gaullist, but whether Sarkozy is “Gaullist” or not is a question that excites almost no one, even within the French foreign policy elite. In retrospect, Chirac’s presidency looks ever more like 12 years of wasted time in foreign policy as well as in domestic affairs.

THE HYPER-PRESIDENT

For sheer political competence, Sarkozy is, like former US President Bill Clinton, the preeminent electoral politician of a new generation. But unlike Clinton at the time he took office, Sarkozy is, at a tender age for presidents, without doubt his country’s most knowledgeable and government-tested leader, having served many years in key positions as interior minister and finance minister. (France dodged a bullet with Sarkozy’s defeat of the inexperienced Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal, in the May 2007 elections.)

Sarkozy seems to have unlimited energy and to pop up everywhere, causing him to be caricatured as the “hyper-president” and “omni-president.” He has taken on long-entrenched interests—notably labor unions, on the issues of labor contracts,

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working hours, and pension reform; as well as masses of university and high school students protesting education reforms across the country with the usual method of shutting down schools by occupying the buildings.

The successes of Sarkozy's first year in office must not be exaggerated. His promise to be "the president of increased purchasing power" has run up against inherited budget deficits and lower-than-forecast economic growth, both magnified by deteriorating international economic conditions. The 70 percent approval rating that he enjoyed in the polls for months has dropped below 50 percent—though this is a fate shared by every president at the end of a honeymoon period.

The president's personal behavior at times has embarrassed and annoyed the public. He is arrogant and aggressive, often disdainful of friends as well as adversaries. He has declared war on traditional French presidential decorum, appearing unexpectedly across the country or hopping around the globe: "I'm on call 24/7; I couldn't care less about time zones," he told journalists in Moscow while he was heading back to France on his way to a quick trip to America.

Government ministers, even his longtime friend Prime Minister François Fillon, seem often to be spectators to Sarkozy's behavior as President-Zorro-to-the-rescue. Unlike any previous president, Sarkozy turns up regularly in grass-roots conflict situations, with overcoat and scarf against the cold, debating angry fisherman on the dock in Normandy (over EU-imposed fishing quotas) or striking railroad workers in a Paris train station (over pension reforms).

Sarkozy's fondness for expensive accoutrements is regularly mocked rather than admired. With his signature Rolex watch and aviator-style Ray-Ban sunglasses, he is called "President Bling-Bling" (the hip-hop term for gaudy jewelry and an ostentatious lifestyle). His vacations, in which he uses the yacht and private plane belonging to his wealthy friend Vincent Bolloré, are criticized as crass cronyism with capitalists; ditto his friendship with business and media magnates such as Arnaud Lagardère.

Above all, Sarkozy's flamboyant romance with—and recent marriage to—an Italian-French heiress, the former high fashion model and pop singer Carla Bruni, has irritated rather than charmed. His similarly beautiful and trendy second wife, Cécilia, had only a few months earlier terminated a long-running marital soap opera by leaving him (it was as if Josephine had dumped Napoleon). Sarkozy

and Bruni's first public outing as besotted lovers was, bizarrely, a turn at Euro-Disneyland outside Paris, followed by an escape to Luxor and Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt (where they were put up at the villa of the Emir of Abu Dhabi) and a quick weekend in Petra (where they were hosted by Jordan's King Abdullah). The couple's natural desire to share a bedroom before they were married became a small diplomatic *cause célèbre*.

Such in-your-face behavior by a president embarrasses not only the French but France's European partners as well, who have to wonder whether Sarkozy's hyperactive, not to say hypomanic, behavior might raise questions about his reliability. Before news of their wedding broke, one French commentator was provoked to suggest that "The sooner Nicolas marries Carla, the better."

DOMESTIC CHALLENGES

Sarkozy's capacity to shake things up is affected by the current economic downturn. Although France's high unemployment has declined significantly over the past two years, from 10 percent to 8 percent, the Chirac government left a legacy of deficits and slow growth. France's economy, along with the other core-country European economies, has been struggling for years. The US economic meltdown, including the effects of the subprime mortgage debacle, deepens Europe's economic troubles.

As a result, French economic growth, and thus tax receipts, will be lower than projected. A government forecast of 2.5 percent growth this year was revised down to 2 percent—which was still optimistic—even before the Société Générale disaster, in which a trader at the bank was accused of losing \$7.2 billion. Declines in financial markets combined with continued high interest rates will dampen business investment, thus slowing job creation.

This is especially bad timing for a reformer with Sarkozy's ambitions (though, of course, any president would be in the same situation). His reform strategy has been to attack on all fronts. His aim is to upend a corporatist, interlocked, and mutually reinforcing web of entrenched interests and benefits (*droits acquis*) in order to foster a sense of inevitability about reforms that previous governments failed to carry through in the face of strikes and street protests.

Sarkozy is already achieving some success. A government that finally stood firm against simultaneous, disruptive labor union strikes and university protests in the fall of 2007 won over a highly inconvenienced (and financially penalized) pub-

lic to the view that small numbers of intransigent workers, for example train engineers, have no right to paralyze the entire French public transport system. A new law, broadly supported by the public, mandates minimum transport service even during strikes. In historical terms, the ideological prestige of strikes and the instinctive solidarity of French opinion with striking workers are slowly collapsing, and the opaque functioning of labor unions as a cartel of the employed against the unemployed is being clarified.

Sarkozy's tactic has been to give compensatory advantages in exchange for agreement on basic reforms. Union rank and file are accepting a law establishing a private-sector Danish-style "flexicurity" system, including compromises on job protection clauses, in exchange for expanded guarantees of government support in job retraining, pension portability, and other benefits. Union leaders have also accepted the principle of phasing out special pension deals awarded decades ago to people in particularly arduous, health-threatening job categories (railroad workers got such a deal at a time when the job included shoveling coal into engine boilers).

Even France's law mandating a 35-hour workweek is heading for the dustbin of history. Opt-outs at the enterprise level are being expanded, even if the 35-hour week remains the national legal limit. In an economy heading toward recession and further erosion of standards of living, Sarkozy's mantra of "Work more to earn more" appears increasingly attractive—some are even trading in vacation days for cash. France's leisure-oriented culture, and its sometimes *Bonjour paresse!* (Hello laziness!) mentality on the job, may be on the way out.

THE MULTICULTURAL REPUBLIC

Sarkozy's reputation as a xenophobic hard-liner on immigration and France's Muslim minority is an exaggeration. His campaign rhetoric did play to voters' worries about urban violence and illegal immigration. A deliberate strategy, risky but plausible, it had the positive effect of winning so many voters away from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front that Le Pen's party is becoming, like the French Communist party before it, a rump political force. (The National Front is in the process of selling its party headquarters for financial reasons.)

With regard to illegal immigration, Sarkozy, the former interior minister, is indeed a hard-liner, not only in France but at the level of the European Union (EU), where he wants stricter rules and stricter enforcement of borders. Leaks from inside the government indicate that he has set target quotas for expulsions of illegals.

At the same time, however, Sarkozy has shown genuine solicitude for France's Muslim population. He was instrumental in creating a public advocacy institution—the French Council of the Muslim Faith—to represent Muslim interests in public affairs, similar to the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions that organizes an official Jewish representation in French public life. His 2005 book, *La République, les religions, l'espoir* (The Republic, Religions, and Hope), presents a thoughtful, liberal view of the difficult relations between religious belief and the tenacious secularism of French

political culture. He has for years been one of the few French political leaders advocating affirmative action ("positive

discrimination"), a heresy in relation to the French republican doctrine of category-blind equal treatment of citizens.

Sarkozy's government is also the most multicultural in French history, with an unprecedented number of women and ethnic minorities in high office. Three important and very visible ministers are women of color with recent immigrant family origins: Justice Minister Rachida Dati; Deputy Foreign Minister for Human Rights Rama Yade; and Deputy Minister for Urban Affairs Fadela Amara, one of the founders of the women's organization Neither Whores nor Doormats. Of these ministers, Sarkozy says, "They have less right to fail than any of the others."

A MINI-REVOLUTION IN FOREIGN POLICY

Sarkozy's foreign policy amounts, at least rhetorically, to a mini-revolution. It is based on ambitions for greater French international influence and transatlantic harmony in the face of global terrorist threats and ongoing instability in Muslim countries. As a result, French foreign policy toward the United States has been turned upside down, France's EU diplomacy has shifted into high gear, and France is active again in crises throughout the Greater Middle East.

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“J’aime l’Amérique” (“I love America”): Remarkably, Sarkozy says this to the French as well as to Americans. Against years of anti-Bushism and disdain for American ways, Sarkozy wants not only a closer Franco-American foreign policy alliance but also a rehabilitation of America’s cultural reputation in France.

In some sense, Sarkozy does “love” America, meaning America’s democratic traditions and its historical and military importance for France and Europe. Also, as with so many French young people of the 1950s and 1960s, his youth was saturated in American pop culture. Today, however, Sarkozy sees renewing ties with the United States as a kind of French national interest. And rehabilitating America’s image in France also means rehabilitating France’s reputation in America. Presidential rhetoric can have traction, and Sarkozy’s pro-American references amount to a strategy to de-demonize and de-dramatize America in the French vocabulary.

While tilting toward the United States, France is also once again at the center of European affairs. France will take over the European Council presidency from tiny Slovenia on July 1, but already Paris is formulating the next EU agenda with new ideas and renewed enthusiasm for moving forward. The French are making proposals in the most difficult policy areas: the hornet’s nests of budget reform and Europe’s common agricultural policy; tighter EU-level counterterrorism and immigration policies; integration of defense industries and moving forward with the EU’s common foreign and security policy; and energy security and global warming.

Sarkozy has already had one considerable success in European diplomacy, having tipped the balance in concluding a new “mini-treaty” that will advance EU institutional reform after two years of moroseness that followed the demise of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. The mini-treaty takes up the most important institutional changes that the Constitutional Treaty would have created, including an EU foreign minister (reduced in title to “High Representative”), a European Council presidency with longer tenure and authority, and majority voting extended to many new policy subjects. French ratification is almost certain because Sarkozy will present the mini-treaty not in another referendum but to a “Congress,” a joint House-Senate vote.

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With regard to the EU economy, Sarkozy is continuing the usual French hectoring of the European Central Bank to lower interest rates. Successive French governments have wanted an EU “economic government,” meaning an expanded monetary brief for the European Central Bank to support growth and employment in addition to working against inflationary pressures. Sarkozy goes further, advocating some level of government interventionism in markets and some kinds of protectionism for EU industries given “the globalization and commercialization of the world.”

Sarkozy is also proposing a new “Mediterranean Union,” with Turkey having a central position. Sarkozy’s opposition to full EU membership for Turkey is well known. The Mediterranean Union would have the advantage for him of consolidating Mediterranean country identities as separate from

those of the EU, thus taking EU membership off the table for them and, most importantly, for Turkey.

Ankara, however, is showing no interest, since its goal is precisely

to join the EU as a full member. And Sarkozy is under pressure to think again about Turkey. Paris announced in January that France is not opposed in principle to further EU enlargement, and Sarkozy has promised to delete from the French constitution Chirac’s amendment requiring that any new proposed EU membership go to referendum (belying Chirac’s public support of Turkey’s aspirations).

The issue of whether Turkey should be an EU member state is profoundly important for formulating both the final structure of European integration and Europe’s role in the global integration of Islamic countries into the modern world. The Turks will not be put off forever, and yet Turkish membership would change the character of the EU. France in any event will play a key role in deciding the outcome, but what Paris will ultimately decide is far from clear.

DEALING WITH RUSSIA

Resurgent Russia is arguably Europe’s biggest security worry, but the problem is not some vague military threat. It is economic. During the cold war the Soviet Union represented a genuine continental security danger. Today Russia poses, at the most, second-order political dangers in the form of neighborhood effects in Eastern European coun-

tries (for example, Poland) that could develop as a result of Russia's authoritarian-nationalist turn under President Vladimir Putin. The first-order challenge is the geoeconomic uncertainty inherent in the fact that Russia is a major supplier of the EU area's energy requirements.

Imports from Russia make up one-third of EU nations' natural gas supplies and 29 percent of their oil supplies. Russia supplies about 25 percent of French natural gas requirements, as compared with 39 percent for Germany, 31 percent for Italy, 43 percent for Poland, and 65 percent for Turkey. France depends much less than other European countries on Russian oil because so much of its electric grid (more than 75 percent) is powered by nuclear energy, and because Norway, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom are also major suppliers.

European energy dependence on decisions made in Moscow was highlighted in early 2006 when Russia bullied Ukraine and Moldova with a sudden interruption of gas exports after the two countries refused to pay large price increases. Supplies to Europe through the pipeline were immediately affected. Putin quickly promised that what had happened was purely a neighborhood problem and that Russia would be a reliable energy supplier to Europe (which is in Russia's interest as well). Nevertheless, Russia's potential for controlling prices and, in the worst scenarios, resorting to some kind of blackmail, was made clear. In contrast with Chirac's reluctance to confront Russia, today Paris, Washington, and Berlin are presenting a united front.

EU energy companies are still investing in Russia. The French company Total, for example, in July 2007 agreed to form a consortium with Russia's gas monopoly Gazprom to develop one of the world's largest natural gas deposits offshore in the Arctic. And the Dutch firm Gasunie recently entered into a partnership with Gazprom on the Nord Stream pipeline to be laid between Russia and Germany.

Even so, diversifying away from Russian supplies is fundamental to Europe's energy security. The EU's major but much-delayed Nabucco pipeline project—which will import natural gas from Iran and Azerbaijan, shipping it through Turkish pipelines to southern and western Europe—is a case in point. The Nabucco project was delivered a blow in January when Russia and Bulgaria concluded a \$15 billion deal on the so-called South Stream project, a gas pipeline that will run under the Black Sea. Russian supplies will pass through

Bulgaria, thereby bypassing Turkey and giving Russia substantial control over Bulgarian and Balkan gas supplies.

Russia is a historic partner of the French, and Sarkozy is attempting a policy of two irons in the fire. He is openly critical of the authoritarian trend in Russia. On Kosovo, France doubtless will support a declaration of independence from Serbia, following the German and American lead. Putin will not be pleased. At the same time, Sarkozy alone among European leaders called Putin to congratulate him on his party's landslide but corrupt victory in the December 2007 parliamentary elections (placing the French president in a group with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). Moscow, however, has no doubts about the general American reorientation of French policy.

Sarkozy's multitrack strategy toward Russia—a combination of comity, commerce, and criticism—is typical of his foreign policy overall, as can be seen in his dealings, for example, with Iran, Syria, and Libya. While admonishing certain governments, France is simultaneously taking the lead in talking to everybody, in contrast to the Bush administration's simple stubbornness. This approach is giving France a special role in foreign policy among the European countries.

OTHER HARD CASES

In relation to Iran, Sarkozy has surprised people with an exceptionally hard line regarding Tehran's nuclear intentions. (Chirac had been quoted off the record to the effect that "one or two Iranian bombs would not be disastrous.") Lining up Paris with Washington, Sarkozy advocates increased sanctions and determination to avoid having to choose between "an Iranian bomb and bombing Iran."

Paris wants Tehran to understand that France must now be dealt with as a separate European diplomatic power. Embarrassed by the recent US National Intelligence Estimate that concluded Iran had dismantled its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003, France nevertheless leads Europe's confrontation of Tehran's Shiite leadership and is even emerging as a guarantor of Sunni regimes in the Middle East. On a January trip to Arab countries in the region, Sarkozy announced that France is setting up a military base in the United Arab Emirates—a small one, but facing Iran directly across the Persian Gulf. Two French civilian nuclear plants will be built in the Emirates, making a total of four in Arab states, with the others in Algeria and Libya.

France under Sarkozy is also increasingly confronting Islamist groups. For instance, France's 1,900-strong independent contingent in Afghanistan will increase in size, and Paris is pondering how to help the United States disengage from Iraq without sending combat troops. France's outstanding counterterrorism capabilities in Europe and beyond continue to set a standard.

France, Sarkozy says, could even return to NATO's integrated military command—if a new American president with a different view of Europe's significance were to accept European self-assertion within the alliance.

Regarding the Middle East, Washington remains the key broker of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but France is now more active and influential than it has been in many years. Sarkozy is a "friend of Israel." Indeed, a number of new books indicate a renewal of French interest generally in Israel. France's longstanding *politique Arabe* is less in evidence now, although French commercial interests in Arab countries remain fundamental. Sarkozy's innovation is a new emphasis on Israel's security requirements in any agreement that would create a Palestinian state, including guarantees regarding the anti-Israeli Islamist groups Hamas and Hezbollah.

The new French support for Israel is an important development, but in any case, Europe remains the most important source of aid to the Palestinian Authority. Following the November 2007 Middle East summit in Annapolis, Maryland, France hosted a December donors' meeting of some 60 governments (including Arab governments) at which \$7.4 billion in new aid, much more than expected, was promised for the Palestinians. Meanwhile, although France's historic influence in Lebanon declined long ago, Sarkozy has made France a diplomatic player again by cutting normal contacts with Syria until Damascus gives evidence that it has stopped blocking the election of a consensus president.

A new way of dealing with Libya symbolizes the Sarkozy touch. In January Muammar el-Qaddafi arrived at the Elysée Palace with a fraternal handshake for the French president and his fist in the air for journalists, savoring a moment of diplomatic triumph. Setting up his tent in the courtyard of a luxury Paris hotel, for five days Qaddafi saw the Paris sights, including the Louvre museum and the Versailles palace.

The Parisian welcome for the Libyan leader, despite widespread criticism from human rights

organizations, represented French legitimation of Tripoli's tenuous return to international respectability—reciprocity for Libya's cooperation in counterterrorism efforts; for giving up its nuclear weapons program in 2003; and for finally freeing a group of Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who had spent years in Libyan jails on trumped-up charges of infecting children with the HIV virus.

The game of saving face was played: Sarkozy said he discussed human rights concerns with Qaddafi; the controversial guest insisted the phrase had not been mentioned. On the day Qaddafi visited the Louvre, Sarkozy pointedly met with families of French victims of the 1989 terrorist bombing of a commercial airliner, for which Libya had been held responsible and had paid compensation. There was also a commercial aspect to the hospitality: the deal for a French-built nuclear power plant in Libya, and Libyan options on some French-built fighter aircraft that have not been selling well.

THE OLD DILEMMA

Any ambitious French foreign policy faces the fact that the means do not usually match the ends. Charles de Gaulle himself could not resolve this dilemma and, as the political scientist Stanley Hoffmann famously put it, Gaullism was always "more an attitude than a policy." In this respect, Sarkozy's foreign policy success will require more than just political courage and enterprise. It has to be more than hyperactivity and enthusiasm. As with any world power, an influential French strategic presence requires a strong economy and a military capacity sufficient to oblige France's partners and adversaries to take the country seriously.

This is why a strong alliance with a new American president is vital: because France and Europe geostrategically cannot matter sufficiently by themselves. Whether French public opinion will support an activist strategic policy, and whether Sarkozy can rally the rest of Europe with more success than Blair did, are open questions.

But France is central to Europe both geographically and historically, especially when it works in tandem with Germany. Paris is intrinsically better positioned to lead Europe than London is. The Franco-German "motor" powered European integration for decades, and French presidents, especially de Gaulle and François Mitterrand, sought to play an independent role on the world stage. Sarkozy's calculation is that France and Europe will achieve more by working with Washington than by working against it. He is right. ■