

# TURNING THE PAGE

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Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an independent, U.S.-distant approach has driven French foreign policy. Under this “Gaullist line,” France has long aimed to position itself as the middleman in European and international politics.

Today, however, a new wind is now blowing on the Élysée. In his now famous August 27<sup>th</sup> speech, new French President Nicolas Sarkozy affirmed that French foreign policy “will be guided by French values and will above all protect French national interests.” But it has quickly become clear that Sarkozy envisions a more activist approach to a host of international issues—from European Union affairs to Franco-American affairs—than his predecessor.

Administrations, they say, are defined as much by their supporting characters as they are by their lead actor, and the Sarkozy government is no different. President Sarkozy has made clear that he sees a higher international profile for Paris—one involving a key role on most major international issues. It is not coincidental, therefore, that he has appointed as his chief diplomat Bernard Kouchner, a man with a reputation of getting the job done. A former volunteer doctor and founder of Médecins Sans Frontières, Kouchner is a human rights pioneer, and a champion of the policy of humanitarian intervention.

Sarkozy’s selection of Kouchner for the post of Foreign Minister is emblematic of the changes under way in French foreign policy. France has embarked upon a new diplomatic line—one which, as Kouchner himself described to *The*



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*Economist*, “is more than a change of style.” This new French *realpolitik* is not simply a change in diplomatic tone; the substance of French foreign policy is changing. After forty years of officially sanctioned pro-Arabism, anti-American sentiment and the Gaullist desire to act as a balancer between Moscow and Washington, Paris is now focused on strengthening its relationship with the United States.

### **A brand new day**

Such changes are already afoot. Unlike his predecessor, Sarkozy clearly plans to achieve his political objectives while strengthening his country’s partnership with the United States. Since taking office, he has begun taking stronger positions on issues that are key priorities for the United States: Iran, the fight against terrorism, the confrontation between Islam and the West, Russia, and China.

This change in attitude was evident during Sarkozy’s November 2007 trip to Washington. During his address to the U.S. Congress on that occasion, Sarkozy declared that:

...the U.S. are [sic] one of the rare countries in the world with whom we did not fight... Americans came to help us twice and we ourselves helped them a long time ago. We share the same values, we are neighbors from the Atlantic side, and they are the first economic, military and monetary power...

Mr. Sarkozy reassured Congress that such improved relations will lead to much closer cooperation on a host of international issues, including Iran’s nuclear program, the Middle East peace process and Lebanon. And there are certainly reasons for optimism on that score. Despite his domestic environment, which is gen-

erally hostile towards America, there can be little doubt that Sarkozy is pursuing a more conciliatory and strategically compatible foreign policy line on a number of fronts.

### **The Middle East**

Like his predecessor, President Sarkozy has signaled his intention to maintain strong diplomatic and economic ties with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. At the same time, however, he has demonstrated a commitment to improving and strengthening relations with Israel, a country which was clearly maligned and neglected during former President Chirac’s openly pro-Arab tenure. He plans to do so by stepping up France’s role as an “honest broker” in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, supporting the creation of a Palestinian state while simultaneously safeguarding Israel’s security. At the same time, Sarkozy has been careful not to weaken France’s historic standing in the Middle East, as indicated by his January 2008 visit to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha.

In Sarkozy’s view, a *status quo* in the region would only strengthen Hamas and other regional radicals, including Hezbollah. Accordingly, Lebanon and Syria are also major focal points of French foreign policy. France, a long-standing friend of Lebanon, is a strong advocate of its full freedom, independence and sovereignty as envisioned in UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701. And France has been playing an active role in the dialogue among Lebanese political forces during that country’s contentious selection of a new president. Syria’s continued interference in this process through intimidation and the actions of its terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, have led to growing frustration on the part of

senior French officials, resulting in the suspension of diplomatic relations between Damascus and Paris.

Then there is Iran. Breaking with Chirac's conciliatory approach to the Islamic Republic, Sarkozy has adopted an unequivocally strong stance. With the backing of Foreign Minister Kouchner, he has made clear that the emergence of a nuclear Iran is unacceptable to France. And while there have been no further public elaborations of how France intends to tackle the current international impasse over Iran's nuclear ambitions, Paris has traditionally never hesitated to pursue hard-line policies when the country's national security interests were at stake. To be sure, this scenario is complicated by France's commercial interests in Iran, and it remains to be seen how the balance between economics and national security will be struck. Overall, however, it is clear that the French and U.S. positions on Iran are converging; France has become significantly more assertive in its calls for sanctions (while also leaving open the option for negotiations should Iran choose to comply with its international obligations).

As for the crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, France is now unquestionably playing a more constructive role. On Iraq, while it has not changed its overall position critical of the rationale and justification for the war, the French government is now advocating a policy that would help isolate extremist groups, launch a process of national reconciliation and devise a plan for the withdrawal of foreign troops. In Afghanistan, meanwhile, France has committed more than 2,000 ground, naval and air support troops to stability operations in the former Taliban stronghold. And this number is poised to

increase, with additional deployments specifically tasked with training the Afghan army.

### **Russia and Eurasia**

The French government, like most others in the West, is currently following the worsening domestic situation and rising authoritarianism in Russia with significant concern. During his state visit to Russia last October, President Sarkozy made a point of signaling his worries on that score, meeting with representatives of human rights organizations and pro-democracy activists.

As concerns Russia's neighbors, French diplomacy is already distancing itself from former President Chirac's era, during which commercial interests and security of energy supply trumped the promotion of democratic reforms and respect for the rule of law. That policy had led to tolerance for Russia's plans to maintain a belt of limited-sovereignty countries on its border. France's new, more principled stance became clear when, similar to other NATO countries, it tacitly accepted the Bush administration's plans for a missile defense deployment in Europe—an effort regarded by Russia as an unacceptable interference in its geopolitical sphere of influence.

### **Asia**

Although France's foreign policy priorities are by and large "Euro-Atlantic," rising powers such as China and India are also receiving significant attention. President Sarkozy's visit to China last November was an indication that, in spite of his lack of familiarity with Asia, he understands the strategic importance of the region.

With China, the challenge will be how to reconcile France's long-

standing commercial and economic interests in the PRC with Beijing's systematic violation of fundamental human rights and the absence of basic democratic institutions there. During his state visit, President Sarkozy was all smiles and diplomatic niceties. But at some point, France—like other democratic countries—will need to draw a line between commercial and national security interests and continuing to support authoritarian regimes by doing business with them.

### ***Human rights and Africa***

Given its long-running relationship with the continent, it is no surprise that Africa remains an essential priority of French foreign policy. As Paris sees it, African development can be achieved through a balance of economic prosperity and security. The current genocide taking place in Darfur—as well as many other crisis areas in the region—represents a major obstacle to such development. In the case of Darfur, France has adopted an assertive diplomatic approach designed to mobilize the United Nations out of its current, stalled position. The recent UN Security Council authorization of the creation of a hybrid UN/African Union security force was a significant achievement for France, and one that Paris hopes will spur other European countries to adopt a more activist role in this and other crises. As the foregoing makes clear, President Sarkozy seems keen to restore a moral dimension to French diplomacy.

### ***Islam and the West***

President Sarkozy's priorities include the promotion of an open-minded and tolerant interpretation of Islam, both within France's Muslim communities and countries in the

Muslim world themselves. As part of this vision, he has introduced the concept of a future "Mediterranean Union," which would bring together the European Union (particularly its southern members) and Middle Eastern and North African countries. The plan would be to establish a union among the members based on four pillars: 1) environment and sustainable development; 2) intercultural dialogue; 3) economic growth and social development; and 4) security of the Mediterranean region (including the fight against terrorism).

For now, this partnership is only theoretical. It is not at all clear how Sarkozy's envisioned Mediterranean Union would work in practice, and how it could work in parallel with existing EU initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy. But Sarkozy seems to believe that such a "union" could play a role in heading off a potential confrontation between Islam and the West.

Reactions from European capitals (as well as Mediterranean countries themselves) have so far been generally skeptical. The reality is that this initiative is seen very much as an alternative to Turkey's membership in the EU and a way of controlling illegal immigration from Northern Africa. After all, President Sarkozy has been quite explicit in his belief that "we must see Europe's relations with Turkey through this Mediterranean Union" and his contention that "if Europe wants to have an identity it must have borders and, therefore, limits."

### ***Europe***

None of the above is to suggest that Sarkozy is not as invested in Europe as his predecessors. France, a founding member of the European

Union, was and remains a staunch supporter of the “European idea.” Paris is invested in maintaining its influence over key European policy decisions and debates, such as those over the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), agriculture and transport. In view of its upcoming six-month term of office as President of the European Union, France is going through a process of internal consultations aimed at developing the vision for Europe’s way forward. Although the adoption of the revised EU Constitutional Treaty last December was largely a success resulting from close Franco-German cooperation, it is very likely that it will contribute to France’s popularity during its Presidency of the European Union later this year.

And France has a clear vision for Europe’s future. On security and defense, President Sarkozy is a vocal advocate of Europe’s military independence, and of the need for Europe to assume responsibility for its own security. Together with immigration, security and defense policies will be among the priorities of the French presidency of the EU later this year. Sarkozy’s stance is very different from that of Jacques Chirac, who viewed European defense as a means of rivaling NATO and countering American power. Sarkozy, by contrast, is keen to prove to the United States that Europe will remain an ally even if it becomes militarily stronger and more independent. This approach is pragmatic; the reality is that it will take Europe a very long time (if ever) to become militarily independent from the United States, and to develop its own “European” foreign and defense policies.

### **Moving forward**

In the few months since his election to the French presidency,

Nicolas Sarkozy has already distinguished himself. Like all of his predecessors, Sarkozy wants France to become stronger at home and gain greater influence abroad. But the presidential rhetoric has changed: in his speeches, Sarkozy does not mention *grandeur* or *gloire*, both staples of the Chirac-era discourse. Instead, he uses “less ambitious” terms such as France’s influence and role.

President Sarkozy is certainly a political risk-taker, and so far his gambles are paying off. As of this writing, just over 100 days since he took office, Sarkozy has managed to persuade the European Union to adopt a “simplified treaty,” given a diplomatic push to peacekeeping efforts in Darfur, floated the idea of a “Mediterranean Union,” helped to free Bulgarian nurses on death row in Libya, and issued a stern warning to Iran. And the French people are taking notice. According to a recent survey by French pollster TNS Sofres, 71 percent of French citizens think Sarkozy’s first 100 days have been positive, and three out of four approve of his view of France’s place in the world.

The message is unmistakable: France is back. Under Sarkozy’s direction, France is moving beyond the Chirac era and beginning to be taken seriously again on the international scene. To be sure, great challenges lie ahead. But, at least for the moment, France’s new head of state appears to be up to the task.





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