

A Breath of Fresh Air

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PARIS—The Chirac era in French politics is over, and gone with it are long-held assumptions about French foreign policy. Today, the stagnation that typified foreign policy under Jacques Chirac is being challenged by a dynamic new Prime Minister with decidedly different ideas about France's place in the world.

Already, it is clear that Nicolas Sarkozy is not the darling of the French media. Some commentators have dubbed him too pro-American, too Atlanticist, and too much of an iconoclast on foreign affairs. But, it is equally evident that these skeptics are in a minority. If they were not, French voters would not have signaled their support for Sarkozy so strongly at the presidential polls back in May.

Those elections provided an important glimpse into an electorate in flux. Loudly and unequivocally, French voters backed a candidate who was openly Atlanticist and pro-Israel over his more conservative (in foreign policy terms) rival. Moreover, they did so in spite of the prevailing public discourse in Paris—one that vilifies France's Western allies and Israel. In the process, they roundly rejected the advances of the country's communists, Greens, and Trotskyites in favor of a more progressive foreign policy.

Thus, Nicolas Sarkozy's inaugural five-year term begins with a clear mandate for change. But just what can the world expect from the new inhabitant of the Élysée?

When it comes to foreign affairs, moving the French ship of state is a daunting proposition. Since 1960 and the advent of "Gaullism," French foreign policy has been typified by continuity rather than change. This was particularly true with respect to France's attitudes toward the United States, the Middle East and the Arab world. But Sarkozy clearly aims to change all of that, as demonstrated by his selection of pro-American diplomat Bernard Kouchner over the more unilateralist Hubert Védrine as Foreign Minister. Sarkozy's choice is not simply one of style, even though Kouchner will undoubtedly bring a more conciliatory stance with him to the Quai d'Orsay. Rather, it speaks volumes about the philosophical and diplomatic choices of the emerging Sarkozy government. When it comes to foreign affairs, they portend a reorientation of France's approach to relations with Washington, to its interaction in the Middle East, and to its stance on human rights.

Atlanticism—More than four years after the invasion of Iraq, the intransigent stance adopted by Chirac in the run-up to that conflict continues to color ties with the U.S. and Great Britain. Sarkozy, however, is taking a different tack. He has openly expressed his intention to mend fences with Washington, and already appears to be taking the first steps toward doing so.



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Middle East—Sarkozy also can be expected to chart a considerably different course in the Middle East than his predecessor. He likely will seek a more robust sort of dialogue with the state of Israel, perpetuating and accelerating the strengthening of diplomatic bonds that has taken place over the past several years. At the same time, however, France's established policy of support for a Palestinian state, its backing for greater Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and its endorsement of the pro-Western government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in Lebanon suggest that it can carry out a successful, multi-dimensional regional policy—something which the Sarkozy government is likely to do as well. As for Iran and Syria, France's new president appears inclined to adopt a firmer stance than his predecessor. With regard to the Iranian nuclear program in particular, he already has criticized the diplomatic efforts of the EU "troika" and called for more decisive measures.

Human rights—Last but not least, the new French president is likely to take a more assertive stance on the issue of human rights. Unlike his predecessor, who took a passive approach to Africa, the Caucasus and Sudan. Sarkozy is likely to be a more assertive champion of democratic values abroad, and on his watch, the Quai d'Orsay likely will adopt a more activist, and engaged, posture in these and other regions.

Structural changes are visible as well. As the recent establishment of the French national security council indicates, the new head of state intends to have greater autonomy and authority on pressing international issues. At the same time, his selection of a seasoned senior diplomat, former French Ambassador to the United States Jean-David Levitte, to serve as the head of this new body has ensured that the country's foreign policy course, though principled, will also be pragmatic.

The changes under way in France therefore offer a breath of fresh air—one which may make it possible to forget that all too often, when it comes to support for our allies abroad and addressing international wrongs, France has been conspicuously absent.

