

# A Gaullist By Any Other Name

**Justin Vaisse**

When discussing the foreign-policy orientation of French leaders, it is always tempting to distinguish between Gaullists and Atlanticists. Depending on which side of the debate – and the ocean – one is on, each label can be used to praise or vilify. The problem, of course, is that reality is much more about shades of grey, and if the neat division makes for great headlines, it does not provide for sound analysis.

Nicolas Sarkozy is a case in point. While he has been described, and has described himself, as an Atlanticist, there's a good case to be made that he is actually a Gaullist. Not only does this ambiguity show the inherent limits of using labels, it also has a direct impact on the future of French policy vis-à-vis the EU, the United States and the world.

## **A case of mistaken identity**

Sarkozy's personal style is definitely not Gaullist. His taste for public-relations stunts and constant media exposure, including his personal life, stands in strong contrast with de Gaulle's discretion and modesty. And while de Gaulle imposed a unified voice on French foreign policy (his own), Sarkozy's reliance on diplomatic backchannels has sometimes brought confusion to the decision-making process.

Many of his beliefs, however, can be described as Gaullist. Like de Gaulle, Sarkozy is a pragmatist at heart. Consistent with the post-de Gaulle consensus, he sees the EU as a 'reincarnation' for France, and envisions 'a

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multipolar world in which the European Union could progressively come to be one of the most active poles'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, he believes that the EU should be not just a peaceful trading bloc, but a power in world affairs. He has spoken of his 'conviction that France has an important – perhaps even irreplaceable – role to play on the international scene'.<sup>2</sup> It is not enough simply to defend the national interest: Sarkozy's goal is that of French independence, influence and *grandeur*. In office less than a year, he has already promoted weapons sales abroad in order to secure not only French economic interests, but also French technological independence. And he is the first president since de Gaulle to have opened a military base outside of France's traditional zone of influence, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

On a host of issues, Sarkozy has by no means moved French foreign policy in a more Atlanticist direction, even if, in some cases, his rhetoric has seemed to. Indeed, there is much continuity between the current president's policies and those of his arch-Gaullist predecessor, Jacques Chirac. On Israel–Palestine, for example, it is impossible to tell the political difference between Chirac and Sarkozy, except that the latter has used more emphatic words to describe French–Israeli ties, which started to improve in 2004–05. (Of course, Bernard Kouchner, the foreign minister, while condemning terrorism, has also said that 'colonisation is not only illegal, it is also, politically, the main obstacle to peace'.<sup>3</sup>) On China, Sarkozy's position on the arms embargo and Taiwan is the same as Chirac's, although the issue has had a low profile. And while Sarkozy's vow to return France to NATO's integrated command has been interpreted as very much an Atlanticist move, neither his precondition of strengthening the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), nor the fact that Chirac took the same initiative in 1995–97 (and failed), should be overlooked. Moreover, France already boasts an extensive presence in NATO structures, from commanding operations to contributing actively to the NATO Response Force, and is absent from only two committees, Defense Planning and Nuclear Planning. 'Reintegrating into NATO' would amount to an important political symbol, but a modest reality.

On Iran, one can detect a slight hardening of the French position, although not by much. Chirac's off-the-record comments about the acceptability of an Iranian nuclear bomb notwithstanding, French policy has

always been to prevent Tehran from getting one, and French investment in Iran decreased in 2004–06. If anything, Sarkozy has simply been more vocal about France’s position, although he did (unsuccessfully) lobby other EU countries to adopt tougher sanctions in autumn 2007. In Afghanistan, Sarkozy has slightly increased France’s commitment, in spite of pre-election signs he was in favour of reducing troops. And he has sent Kouchner to visit Iraq, although this was not accompanied by any concrete steps in terms of cooperation with Washington. Indeed, it would be strange if French officials did not visit Iraq, with which France has long-standing ties.

Then there are the issues on which French positions have actually changed, from Washington’s perspective, in the ‘wrong’ direction. Sarkozy opposes Turkey’s entry into the EU, something Chirac supported. Between June and December 2007, Sarkozy negotiated intensely with Syria over Lebanon; Chirac severed his ties to Bashar al-Assad following the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Kouchner has tried to mediate the Lebanese political deadlock and has included Hizbullah in the talks – a move that prompted the US Congress to send an angry letter to the otherwise popular Sarkozy. Finally, far from being the free-marketeer the press has sometimes made him out to be, Sarkozy has acted to prop up French firms and national industrial champions; he has called for a strong ‘*préférence communautaire*’ (trade preference for EU member states), most notably for agriculture; and he has come out strongly against the dollar and unfair exchange rates, as did de Gaulle. On these and other issues, such as global warming and attitudes towards Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Paris and Washington are far from seeing eye-to-eye, and France is charting its own course.

So why the hype about Sarkozy breaking with French Gaullist tradition and aligning himself with Washington? The first reason is that the French president himself has spoken of it, as part of his posture of ‘rupture’ with the past. Another reason is simply that Sarkozy is not Chirac: in the minds of many observers, Jacques Chirac’s foreign policy has been reduced to his 2003 opposition to the Iraq War, while his wide-ranging 2004–07 rapprochement with America has been underestimated or ignored. Needless to

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say, the media – who love nothing more than strong contrasts – and a Bush administration desperate for friends have played up the issue. Sarkozy has enjoyed a lot of goodwill from the White House – in the form of a free pass on discussions with Syria, for example – because of his overblown rhetoric of friendship.

### **Sarko's world**

Rhetoric aside, it is clear that Nicolas Sarkozy has not veered from the post-de Gaulle consensus aptly captured by Hubert Védrine in the slogan: 'Friends, allies, not aligned'. His policies are not informed by desire to please Washington, but rather by his own assessment of the post-Iraq War world. Sarkozy believes the West will find it harder to achieve its goals and control world politics in what he calls 'an era of relative power'.<sup>4</sup> And while he places France squarely 'within its Western family', this is only to reach out to other countries such as Venezuela, Libya or Syria, and more generally to the Arab world – like de Gaulle, Sarkozy sees France as a country that can transcend geopolitical divides. This is why France insists on dialogue with all responsible states, including ones like Venezuela that the West doesn't fully approve of. If the West wants to punish countries like Iran, it is crucial to actually reward countries which make the choice of cooperation, like Libya. In the same vein, Paris wants to practice a 'diplomacy of reconciliation' aimed at restoring ties with former antagonists like Côte d'Ivoire or Rwanda.

The biggest fragility of today's world, in Sarkozy's eyes, is the threat of a clash of civilisations. This reflects Sarkozy's view of religions and cultures as fundamental units of both French society and the international system – a vision which goes against traditional French republicanism. Here, the magic word is 'diversity'. Fully accepting diversity, Sarkozy believes, is the solution for many problems – strife in Lebanon, lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, reconciliation in Rwanda, difficulties of integration in France. Accepting diversity is also a precondition to democracy, and can be used as a surrogate for democratisation. Beyond diversity, Sarkozy wishes to encourage a dialogue of cultures: his 'Union for the Mediterranean' project is a reflection of this. He also believes that international institutions should be

adapted to current realities, advocating, for example, that the G8 be turned into a G13 by including China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. He also advocates inducting Germany, Japan, Brazil, India and ‘a major African country’ as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Sarkozy’s engagement with the world is what could be called his ‘AREVA diplomacy’, after the French nuclear giant. For the French president, promoting civilian nuclear energy in the Arab world – he has already signed exploratory deals with Algeria, Morocco, Libya and the UAE – serves many purposes. It demonstrates that there is no clash of civilisations and no exclusion of Arab countries from the benefits of high technology. It shows all countries, but especially Iran, the concrete benefits of playing by the non-proliferation rules. It helps global warming. And, of course, it is good for AREVA, as well as for Total, which is also a participant in some deals.

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### **The way forward**

Whether Sarkozy’s vision amounts to a coherent foreign policy, however, is another matter. It must be said that his political style has undermined his plans. His hyperactivity, personal diplomacy and high media exposure have contributed to some successes, such as the Lisbon Treaty and the liberation of Bulgarian nurses from a Libyan jail, but his approach has also antagonised European allies and led to a loss of credibility. His messy decision-making process has caused confusion, especially in the case of Lebanon.

Moreover, Sarkozy’s vision does not provide guidance for many thorny diplomatic issues, such as military intervention in Africa, as was seen during the crisis in Chad in February 2008. Most importantly, the active and independent course he has charted for France has rubbed its EU partners, especially Germany, the wrong way. Sarkozy’s vision does not address a fundamental dilemma in French foreign policy: how deeply France should commit itself to the EU. On the one hand, France needs the EU to project power and count as an international player. On the other hand, the more Paris reinforces the EU, the less independent a foreign policy it can pursue.

In this context, Sarkozy’s acquiescence on 3 March 2008 to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s demand that he scale down his ‘Union for the

Mediterranean’ project and fold it into the existing EU Barcelona process was an important step – it signalled that Paris–Berlin cooperation is still a pillar of French foreign policy (the issue had become a major irritant between the two countries) and that France will listen to its partners, paving the way for a more serene French presidency of the EU in July–December 2008. What remains to be seen is whether Sarkozy will manage to strike the right balance between activism – re-energising the ESDP, for example, is one of his stated priorities – and the more patient, consensual and constructive leadership that the exercise of the EU presidency calls for.

Perhaps the best test of Sarkozy’s tenure will come when a new American administration takes office in January 2009. If he is a true Atlanticist, that is when a decisive breakthrough on NATO and other issues can be expected. But it is more likely that speculation about Sarkozy’s Atlanticism will lead to inflated expectations in Washington, and to disappointment when the world discovers that he is indeed a Gaullist – or maybe, more accurately, a Sarkozyst.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, ‘Speech to the Diplomatic Corps on the occasion of the New Year’, Paris, 18 January 2008, [http://www.elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=view&lang=fr&cat\\_id=7&press\\_id=909](http://www.elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=view&lang=fr&cat_id=7&press_id=909).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Bernard Kouchner, Interview with *al-Ayyam*, quoted in ‘Pour Bernard Kouchner, la colonisation israélienne est “le principal obstacle à la paix”’, *Le Monde*, 18 November 2007, available at <http://www.lemonde.fr>.
- <sup>4</sup> Sarkozy, ‘Speech to the Diplomatic Corps’.