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France and the Darfur Crisis

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The crisis in the Darfur province of Sudan, which has already claimed over 70,000 lives and forced 1.5-2 million people from their homes, has placed France in the familiar position of resisting American activism in the United Nations. The United States has repeatedly tried to rally the Security Council into action, urging sanctions against the Khartoum government and deliberately using the term "genocide," which requires action under international law. France, on the other hand, appears to be protecting Sudan or, at the very least, stalling. In July 2004, Paris opposed U.S. efforts to impose sanctions on Sudan, forcing the passage of a much weaker Security Council resolution that threatened Khartoum only with eventual "measures" to be taken if it did not crack down on the militias blamed for the violence in Darfur. In September, France brushed aside the genocide charge made by Colin Powell before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Grave" human rights abuses had certainly taken place, French officials acknowledged, but whether or not they constituted a genocide, they argued, was a question that had to be determined after careful consideration by an international committee. France has consistently cautioned the international community against acting rashly and insisted on slow and careful mediation as the correct response to the crisis in Darfur. American critics of France and human rights activists alike are infuriated.

What is France up to? Cynics wonder if behind French policy is a desire to protect its oil interests, pursue a colonial "great game," or simply frustrate the United States. There is certainly something to these theories: The Franco-Belgian oil group Total owns the largest oil concession in Sudan (although it has yet to developed it), the United States is engaged in an unprecedented escalation of its military and political presence in the region, and France does have an interest in checking American power. But there is little evidence to suggest that these factors are decisive.

Instead, France's Darfur policy only makes sense when considered in the context of France's general Africa policy and its global approach to international relations. Indeed, French policy toward Darfur is not primarily about Darfur or even about Sudan. What France is doing is pursuing a *Cartesian* approach: applying a general rule to a specific case rather than responding to particular circumstances. It derives its rule from a well-defined vision of its role in the world and the best means to advance its interests. These include shoring up its prestige and influence in Africa, certainly, as well as securing energy assets and countering American dominance, however the hallmark of France's policy is its strategy of achieving its objectives through a commitment to formal multilaterialism, specifically international and regional institutions that enable it to influence events to a degree that it cannot achieve acting alone. By insisting on

negotiations, France is refusing to cede to the tension humanitarian crises create between the need to act and its commitment to formal multilateralism. That commitment, though stretched during the Kosovo crisis, appears to have gained strength in recent years, perhaps a reaction to America's response to 9/11. Africa is to be a showcase for French foreign policy; Darfur is just one of many tests of that policy.

Darfur in Context

To date, France has responded to the Darfur crisis by providing considerable material and logistical support to the humanitarian relief effort while promoting negotiations sponsored by both Chad's president, Idriss Déby, and the African Union. The most important steps have been the cease-fire talks held in April in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, and more recent negotiations in Abuja, Nigeria. Although French rhetoric has become more defensive in step with the escalation of America's aggressive language, the substance of France's message has remained the same: "Pressure" is better than sanctions, for only through a negotiated settlement can a long-term political solution be reached. According to Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, a settlement cannot be reached "without Sudan or against it" but only "with it."[1]

A clue to the connection between France's Darfur policy and its overall approach to Africa can be found in a opinion piece published in the *International Herald Tribune* by Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who links France's handling of Darfur with its role in Africa and its commitment to using its power there to help its African "partners."[2] Partners and partnership have been the buzzwords of French policy makers at least since the Francophonie summit in Beirut, Lebanon, in October 2002, however the idea of partnership attained its full weight when Chirac declared it to be the "heart" of the February, 2003 Africa-France summit in Paris and made it the focus of his historic visit to Algeria the following March.[3]

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[1] "Déplacement en République du Tchad: Point de presse conjoint du Ministre des Affaires etrangères, M. Michel barnier, et du président de la République du Tchad, M. Idriss Déby - propos de m. Barnier," http://www.france.diplomatie.fr/actu/bulletin.asp?liste=20040729.html#Chapitre1; See also "Déclarations et questions du point du press à propos de la situation humanitaire au Darfour," http://www.doc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/BASIS/epic/www/doc/DDW?M=1&K=922517505&W=DATE+%3D+%2714.09.2004%27+ORDER+BY+DATE/Descend; "Crise du Darfour: 'le médecin, le soldat et le diplomate," *Figaro*, August 12, 2004, also available at http://www.france.diplomatie.fr/actu/article.asp?ART=43776.

[2] Michèle Alliot-Marie, "When Darfur is safer, seek a political solution," *International Herald Tribune*, September 1, 2004 (http://www.iht.com/articles/536812.html).

[3] "Allocution de Monsieur Jacques Chirac President de la République lors de la séance d'ouverture de la xxiième conference des chefs d'état d'Afrique et de France, Paris, Jeudi 20 fevrier 2003," http://www.elysee.fr/cgi-bin/auracom/aurweb/search/file?aur_file=discours/2003/03FRAF01.html; See also Michael R. Shurkin, "Chirac in Algeria," *US-France Analysis Series*, August 2003, http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/fp/cusf/analysis/shurkin.pdf; Claude Wauthier, "Grandes Manoeuvres françafricaines," *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2003, pp. 12-13.

The idea of partnership represents the conjunction of France's Africa policy with its overall foreign policy objectives. At its most basic, Africa-specific level, partnership suggests a return to the Gaullist idea of cultivating privileged relations with France's former colonies while signaling a distancing from the flip-side of the Gaullist coin, "Françafrique." This term conveys both France's preservation of its lucrative dominance over its former colonies and the massive graft and corruption that resulted from it, not to mention the use of French military power to prop of brutal regimes for the sake of maintaining the profitable system.[4] "Partnership," Chirac told the Africa-France summit, meant real equality, "reciprocal enrichment," shared responsibility, and French cooperation with African efforts at political and economic development. "The time of impunity is over," he declared.[5] At another level, Chirac has used the word to emphasize France's relationship with the Muslim world, claiming that France's principal foreign policy preoccupation is avoiding the "clash of civilizations" by promoting a dialogue grounded in respect.[6] On a third and final level, Chirac identified partnership with a renunciation of unilateralist action (an implicit critique of the U.S.) and the embrace of multilateralism. "The time is past," Chirac declared in Algeria, "when a country can intervene at will, on its own." "Today a country can intervene, but under the responsibility of a regional, continental, or international organization."[7]

In the age of partnership, the France's favored regional interlocutors are not particular nations and client states but rather international organizations: the African Union (AU) and the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), as well as regional institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). France's favorite policy initiative is the Reinforcement of African Peace-Keeping Capacities (RECAMP) program, which brings together a growing number of African nations (as well as European countries and the U.S.) to workshop peace keeping operations and conduct training. The most recent RECAMP prospectus, dated April 2004, declares that "France, faithful to its historical relationship with Africa, is working to develop a partnership between equals, more open to the whole of the continent, supported by the United Nations and the European Union."[8]

RECAMP hints at the two major impulsions behind French multilateralism, self-image and pragmatism. France possesses an exalted sense of self as a providential nation, with a mission and an identity framed by the Revolution and French Republican ideology. This is a self-image

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[4] On the Elf scandals, see Claude Wauthier's discussion of "les turpitudes du groupe Elf," in "Grandes manoeuvres," *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2003.

[5] "Allocution de Monsieur Jacques Chirac..."

[6] "Interview accordée par M. Jacques Chirac à la télévision algérienne," March 1, 2003, available at http://www.elysee.fr.

[7] "Conférence de presse de Monsieur Jacques Chirac…Alger, lundi 3 mars 2003," http://www.elysee.fr/cgi-bin/auracom/aurweb/search/file?aur_file=discours/2003/03ALGE06.html.

[8] http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/actual/evenements/afrique/recamp.pdf. The March, 2001 document can be found at http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/actualites/recamp.htm. This document is dated March, 2001.

that makes its relations with the United States, that other providential nation with an exalted sense of self, prickly, while making it difficult for the French to accept their relative weakness. As Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier put it in their study of Franco-American relations, "universalism is not an easy thing to share."[9] Chirac and many others in the French foreign-policy establishment have been translating France's venerable *mission civilisatrice* into the contemporary language of multilateralism and even multiculturalism. Theirs is a sincere vision of France and the role it can play to advance human society, one that is grounded in more than two centuries of French thought: France the emancipator, France the champion of reason and universal humanity. At the same time, French leaders understand that as a middle-weight power, their best hope for strengthening their influence in the world and restraining American hegemony is by sacrificing a portion of French autonomy and subordinating the nation to a regime of international justice embodied by international organizations, above all the UN and the EU.[10]

Returning to RECAMP, the French approach seems clear: France has found a way to maintain its powerful military presence in Africa and pursue its interests there by reflagging its forces, placing them under the banner of multilateralist institutions and thereby lending them a legitimacy that, France argues, cannot be enjoyed by nations acting unilaterally. RECAMP also lifts France above the fray, allowing it to be everyone's friend, while validating France's indispensability[11] RECAMP gives France a role in Africa that it would like to enjoy elsewhere.

Côte d'Ivoire was the first test of Chirac's Africa policy, and he met it by making a show of his even-handedness, publicly scolding President Laurent Gbagbo and finally intervening militarily not at Gbagbo's behest but ECOWAS's. Up to the present he has insisted on his neutrality, and he has succeeded to the extent that both sides resent the French military presence. And of course, promoting a political settlement that includes the northern rebels has been French policy throughout. Darfur presents the second test; thus far Chirac has stuck to the script.

In this light, the Franco-American rivalry is important but only in an indirect manner: The U.S. influences French foreign policy as a foil against which France defines itself and as a dominant power that French policy makers are looking to restrain as much as possible. As for as the specific case of Darfur, however, America is irrelevant. The best available proof is the fact of French cooperation with the American military's Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), launched in 2002. The PSI is intended to coordinate and improve the anti-terror, intelligence, and border security operations of the nations (all former French colonies) of the Sahel: Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, and Tunisia.[12] What it has done is brought the American

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[9] Brenner and Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences: U.S.-French Relations in the New Era*, p. 23.

[10] Brenner and Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences*, pp. 18-29.

[11] Philippe Leymaire, "L'éternel retour des militaires français en Afrique," *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2003, p. 25.

[12] http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/14987.htm; See also http://www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECPA/index.htm?http://www.eucom.mil/directorates/ecpa/Exercises/Pan_Sahel/PanSahel04.htm&2

military, in the form of special forces, to what has always been considered French turf, mostly to train local troops but also to conduct operations.[13] According to a source in the U.S. military's European Command, which includes all of Africa except the Horn in its area of operations, the French aren't thrilled about PSI, and they watch the comings and goings of American top-brass with great apprehension, yet they are fully collaborating with American efforts. For example, French assets worked with Americans who helped African soldiers chase members of the Algerian terrorist group, the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) from Mali all the way to Chad, where they were killed in March by troops from Niger and Chad.[14] They also worked with Americans to monitor the possible threat posed to the recent Paris-Dakar race on its Mali leg. An understanding appears to have emerged: the U.S. acknowledges that it needs French help and that it cannot hope to rival France's intelligence capabilities in the region, while France acknowledges that the United States is not going away.

French involvement in PSI also suggests the proper way to view the role of oil interests in determining French policy: the issue for the nations involved in oil production in Africa is not so much grabbing a bigger piece of the oil pie but trying to protect the pie. It is in France's interest to help the U.S. bring greater security to the energy-rich Sahel.

Philosophies of Crises

The disagreement over Darfur can best be explained in terms of essential philosophical differences about how to handle crises and how to prevent future ones. France is far more reluctant than the United States to abandon formal multilateralism in the face of a crisis because it clearly has far more invested in it. France has staked a great deal on its Kantian vision of an international society regulated by a legal regime maintained by international organizations; it comes to this vision both because of its ideological proclivities, stemming from its self-identity, and because of a rational calculation about how best to preserve its influence in a world dominated by a single power with whom it cannot hope to compete on its own, the United States. In contrast, the United States is less adverse to conflict and tends to regard multilateralism more as a tool than as a necessity, a "safe method for lightening American burdens."

What is so striking about French policy is its Cartesian nature, France's insistence on elaborating a theoretical, universal approach and then applying it to the particular. Chirac himself described his outlook as such in his 1998 annual presidential address, in which he described his desire for rational and coherent strategies and his distaste for improvisation:

> This is the occasion for me to depict an international reality that is complex, sometimes irrational, in a Cartesian analysis. The need to affirm a global vision for the long term, instead of only dealing pragmatically with each issue as it arises, distinguishes our country, I believe. To analyze what one sees and to say what one wants is a necessary exercise for a great nation. The French

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[13] Brian Whitmore, *The Boston Globe*, April 11, 2004. See also http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2004/n03082004_200403085.html

[14] Giles Tremlett, "US Sends Special Forces into North Africa," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2004.

> need to know where they are going. And I have the feeling that in proposing its vision for the twenty-first century our country will find itself receiving wide assent in the world.[15]

Ironically, the Darfur crisis reveals that France's investment in multilateralism and its relative disdain for pragmatism and improvisation limits its own ability to respond quickly to crises, making American leadership all the more vital. That said, one cannot help but wonder about the deficiencies of America's approach, which can be a marvel of pragmatism and improvisation but does little about the long-term.

[15] Cited in Brenner and Parmentier, p. 30-31.