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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF NICOLAS SARKOZY:

NOT PRINCIPLED, OPPORTUNISTIC AND AMATEURISH

MARCEL H. VAN HERPEN

*Director
The Cicero Foundation*

Abstract

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has entered the second half of his 5 year Presidency. It seems to be a good moment, therefore, to make a first assessment of his foreign policy. What did he promise and what did he achieve? The author makes up the balance in five foreign policy areas: Transatlantic relations, Russia, the EU, the Union for the Mediterranean, and the rest of the world. The picture is rather bleak and disappointing. Sarkozy tried in vain to warm up with a cool Obama, his – initially critical – Russia policy has given way to a too close embrace with the Putin-Medvedev tandem, not only ignoring human rights, but also the geopolitical interest of France and the EU. A French EU policy is quasi non-existent, the Union for the Mediterranean is a superfluous *doublure*, while the results in the rest of the world (China, Africa, Iran, Afghanistan) are rather mixed.

Introduction

On May 16, 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy became President of France. After almost three years it seems time for an assessment of his foreign policy, because he is – with Angela Merkel – one of the main individuals who inspired and instigated the

implementation of European policies. Four months before he was inaugurated, on January 14, 2007, Sarkozy promised in a speech to his UMP adherents: "I want to be the President of a France of human rights. I don't believe in 'realpolitik' that makes one to give up one's values (...) I don't want to be the accomplice of any dictatorship in the world." Sarkozy started his Presidency in Obama style and his choice as a Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, the founder of *Médecins sans frontières* (Doctors without Borders), seemed to fit very well into this announced idealistic approach. Three years later, however, despite some successes, the overall picture is rather bleak: French foreign policy is not principled, it is opportunistic and - what even may be worse - it is often amateurish.

In order to analyze French foreign policy, we will consider the five following main domains:

1. French Transatlantic policy
2. French 'Ostpolitik'
3. French EU policy
4. French Mediterranean policy
5. French policies in the rest of the world

Transatlantic Relations: Warming Up with a Cool Obama

One of the first foreign policy deeds of Sarkozy was the decision to reintegrate France into the military organization of NATO. This was, for the leader of the Gaullist party, a courageous decision. It was De Gaulle who had left the military integrated structure of NATO in 1966 and since that time the special position of France had become a foreign policy mantra – not only of the right, but equally of socialists, such as President François Mitterrand and former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine. It was a good start for Sarkozy's presidency. The decision was rational and made good sense. France is, along with Britain, the most important European NATO member and it is against the French national interest not to have its full say at the table inside an expanding alliance which is taking on many new tasks. Sarkozy had reckoned that his initiative would be met with approval, if not enthusiasm in Washington. He might

even – secretly - have hoped that a Washington-Paris “axis” could be established, giving France the place of the preferred European partner in the old Lafayette tradition. In fact, such a scenario would not have been impossible if former president George W. Bush had still been in place. The two men got on very well together and Bush had a great interest in European affairs.

This is, however, quite different with Obama. Obama, who grew up on the Pacific island of Hawaii, is not especially interested in Europe. And – what is even more important - the personal chemistry between the two men does not seem to work. According to publications in the French press, this is not only a question of incompatible characters. Obama’s anger seems to have been aroused by remarks made by Sarkozy on April 15, 2009, during a dinner in the Elysée palace with 27 deputies. On that occasion Sarkozy apparently would have made the following assessment of Obama: “Weak, inexperienced, badly counseled, had never to manage a ministry, with nothing to say on global warming.” Although the Elysée immediately made an official *démenti*, the damage was done. In June 2009, after the celebration of the 65th anniversary of the allied landings in Normandy, Obama was invited by Sarkozy. Yet Obama preferred to visit Paris *en famille* and declined the invitation. Obama even proposed to meet there Sarkozy’s *ennemi intime*, Jacques Chirac, but Chirac wisely avoided this trap. The fact that Sarkozy characterized his American counterpart as ‘weak and inexperienced’ during a dinner with 27 deputies, knowing that his words would not remain ‘off the record’, was rather a sign of his *own* inexperience. The result of this is that probably for the rest of his presidency his relation with the American president will remain strained. His – right - decision to reintegrate France into the military organization of NATO will not change this, nor his verbally expressed willingness to share the burden with the US in Afghanistan (of which the implementation falls far behind US expectations: for internal electoral reasons Paris may only send eighty extra soldiers instead of the fifteen hundred Washington asked for, which is only *five* percent...) (Le Monde February 7-8, 2010).

France and Putin's Russia – A Too Close Embrace?

When Sarkozy became president the expectations were high as concerns his position on his 'Ostpolitik'. After the unholy triumvirate of Schröder, Putin, and Chirac, Sarkozy seemed to promise a more principled stance vis-à-vis Russia. Here, however, the U-turn came rather soon. The war in Georgia, celebrated as Sarkozy's 'great moment', in effect initiated this U-turn. As acting EU President, he actively interfered in the resolution of the conflict and negotiated "six principles" with Medvedev. Sarkozy's intentions were certainly sincere, but the elaboration of the cease-fire which gave the Russian troops the right "to implement additional security measures" and thereby the right to stay in mainland Georgia, was amateurish, and even naïve. The same was true for not insisting upon the territorial integrity of Georgia to be included in the text. Later, when Russia did not fully implement these flawed six principles, and violated international law by unilaterally recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, there were no firm French protests. The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* made other embarrassing details public. During the negotiations in Moscow Putin was said to have told Sarkozy that he wanted 'to hang Shaakasvili by the balls'. Sarkozy apparently did not protest to this vulgar remark that could be interpreted as a call to murder a democratically elected head of state of a country that just a few months before on the NATO Bucharest summit had been considered, at least in principle, able to join NATO.

The French U-turn, however, was consequently then already in the making. Putin had used Sarkozy's visit to Moscow to propose interesting contracts for French firms. This led to a meeting of French Prime Minister François Fillon and Putin on September 19, 2008 in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. At that moment, the Russian troops still were in Georgia and Russia had not fulfilled the 'six principles'. Fillon's visit, which was considered by the Georgian government as a stab in the back, and which was criticized by Poland, Britain, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states, passed almost unnoticed in the French media.

Since the war in Georgia, French-Russian relations have actually flourished. The most recent example is the intended sale of a *Mistral* helicopter carrier to Russia. This ship which is the pride of the French Navy, can carry 16 heavy or 35 light helicopters, 4 landing craft, 900 soldiers and up to 70 military vehicles, including 40 tanks. According to Russian Navy Commander Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy, "in the conflict in August last year a ship like that would have allowed the Black Sea Fleet to accomplish its mission in 40 minutes, not 26 hours, which is how long it took us." France is considering selling four *Mistrals* to Russia (which will be partly built in Russia), a deal worth €2 billion and the largest Russian procurement buy to date. It would be the first sale of this kind by a NATO country to Russia. The proposed sale has caused great concern among Russia's neighboring states. The Georgian Foreign Minister, Grigol Vashadze, in an address to an audience at the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) on November 27, 2009, in Paris, stated that he was "tremendously worried" about the purchase. "The only destination for this kind of ship is the Black Sea."

On December 18, 2009, six US senators, including former presidential candidate John McCain, wrote a letter to the French ambassador in Washington with a copy to Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in which they expressed their concern with the proposed sale. They drew attention to the fact that Russia had suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty; did not honor its 1999 commitments to withdraw from Georgian and Moldovan territory; and is not in compliance with the Russian-Georgian cease-fire agreement negotiated by the French government. "We fear," they wrote, that "this sale sends Russia the message that France acquiesces to its increasingly bellicose and lawless behavior." The French ambassador answered in a letter of December 21, 2009, writing, "that Russian authorities, at the highest level, have clearly rejected the irresponsible statement that you mention (..)" This sounded almost like a joke: the ambassador was referring to the 'irresponsible statement' ... of Admiral Vysotskiy. And he added, "We have been keen to consult our partners, notably Georgia, before any move (...)." 'To consult' seems for the French government to mean nothing more than 'to inform' and does obviously not include

the need to listen to the other side, thus taking the concerns of the Georgian government seriously.

Apparently nothing can stop Sarkozy's honeymoon with the Russian leadership. On September 15, 2009, his Prime Minister François Fillon, who is his main envoy to Moscow, was even in Yaroslavl to attend a conference of the Valdai Group, a high-level Putin fan club. The year 2010 will be a celebration of the growing French-Russian *entente*. A 'Year of Russia' in France and a 'Year of France' in Russia are being organized with many cultural events, including ballets, theatre performances, an exposition in the Louvre, and official visits of Medvedev and Putin to Paris. The French government, that has definitively chosen for a *mercantilist* foreign policy instead of a real foreign policy, is not willing to let this party be spoiled by difficult questions about human rights and democracy in Russia.

Sarkozy appears to have totally adopted Chirac's uncritical pro-Moscow line, putting profits over principles and doing business at the expense of concerns with regard to human rights and democracy. But the question here is not only one of 'realpolitik' versus human rights; it is even more so one of sound geopolitics and long-term European and French self-interest. Russia is playing a dangerous 'Great Game' in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, destabilizing its neighborhood and trying to re-establish itself as the dominant power. In the second half of 2009 one could observe an acceleration of measures and actions that – taken together – are rather disconcerting. These actions began with the combined massive *Zapad* (West) 2009 and *Osen* (Autumn) 2009 maneuvers in August and September 2009 in which up to 30.000 troops participated. (For the maneuvers Khadafi's son was invited, but not Western observers: their presence was prevented by circumventing the OSCE rules by simply cutting the maneuver into two smaller parts). The Zapad maneuver ended in September 2009 in the Kaliningrad oblast with a simulated tactical nuclear attack on Poland – an action which led to protests of the Polish government.

Apart from this, there was a recent change in Russia's nuclear doctrine which allows for the preventive use of tactical nuclear weapons in local wars even against non-

nuclear states, which is a flagrant breach of the Nonproliferation Treaty. Additionally, on August 10, 2009, a law was signed by Medvedev, permitting the use of Russian troops in foreign countries 'to protect citizens of the Russian Federation'. These measures indicate a legal and military preparation for eventual armed interventions in Russia's Near Abroad and express a growing Russian bellicosity which is a direct menace for its neighboring states, not only for Georgia and Ukraine, but equally for Poland and the Baltic states. France's imminent sale of the Mistral to Moscow not only neglects the security interests of Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Georgia, it also enhances Russia's possibilities to conduct offensive landing operations in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, further destabilizing an already unstable region which can have dangerous geopolitical consequences for Europe as a whole.

The European Union: A Lacking Vision

Another foreign policy domain in which Sarkozy's initiatives (or better: lack of initiatives) have been rather disappointing is the strengthening of the European Union. It would be better to strengthen the European Union than strive for a preferential seat at Obama's table, because this is the only way that Europe can become a (more) equal partner of the United States. The *primum movens* of European integration is the French-German tandem. Without the close cooperation between these two countries nothing can happen. The first imperative for the French foreign policy is therefore to establish and maintain a close relationship with Berlin. In the beginning of his presidency Sarkozy did the inverse. Wanting to promote himself as some kind of an informal leader of Europe, he repeatedly offended the Germans by his unilateral initiatives (such as, for example, the Mediterranean Union – see below).

The relationship has improved somewhat recently (but less so by solid actions than by *symbolic* gestures, such as the invitation to Angela Merkel to participate in the celebration of the Armistice of the First World War on the Champs Elysées in November 2009). In fact the French-German tandem has come to a standstill.

Extremely disappointing was the political process around the nomination of a European President and a European High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy - which was welcomed by the European citizens as a real possibility that would give the European process more momentum. Despite the fact that Sarkozy in an earlier phase explicitly backed Tony Blair's candidacy, and despite the fact that Tony Blair was waiting to be called, Sarkozy did not insist and backed in the end two unknown and uncharismatic candidates.

Of course, Sarkozy is not the only one to blame for this disappointing scenario. But petty national interests – in Paris as well as in Berlin – were decisive. An unknown EU President, coming from a small country, will be more easily to manage for France and Germany than a charismatic figure such as Blair. The whole process around this nomination has revealed a deeper underlying reality: that of a deep *malaise* in Europe. A malaise that has three main causes:

- First, a *Europe fatigue* in the European populations after the different enlargements and the endless and protracted ratification processes of, first, the Constitution, and, then, the Lisbon Treaty.
- Second, this trend is strengthened by a *generation shift*. The old generation that founded the European Community and expanded and deepened it into the present EU is leaving the political scene and is being replaced by a younger generation for whom Europe is no longer a unique and invaluable enterprise, meant to end centuries of war in Europe, but a bureaucratic system run by bloodless Brussels Eurocrats who often impose seemingly senseless regulations and needlessly infringe on the national sovereignty of the member states.
- Third, after its unification Germany has progressively become less interested in European integration. Almost a quarter of its population grew up outside the EU. The special relationship of Germany with Russia that has

developed in the last decennium – far from being an example for France to be copied – should be a matter of grave concern for France, because it could mean the beginning of the end of the European project. “Nothing is there for eternity,” answered Gorbachev during his visit to West-Berlin in July 1989, when someone asked him to tear down the Berlin Wall, not knowing that this eternity would end within a few months. The existence of the European Union, equally, is not self-evident, nor is it made for eternity. The first cracks in the Euro system that recently appeared in Athens are a sign on the wall. France should become conscious of the fact that Germany has gradually been distancing itself from the European project and that, therefore, France itself has become – again – the main guarantor of the European project.

This diagnosis should have the four following consequences for the French EU policy:

- First, France should strengthen the *communitarian* character of the EU, because this is the cement that keeps the EU together.
- Second, France should take on the role that was traditionally played by Germany, but that Germany has progressively neglected in the last decade: which is to act as *the defender of the interests of the smaller EU countries*.
- Third, this means that France has to change its present EU policy that has been overly inspired by its own short-term national interests. France should return to the tradition of Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors by proposing projects that are in the interest of the EU as a whole, instead of being the staunch defender of its national champions. France should – once again – become the *intellectual powerhouse of Europe* and formulate ideas that are capable of mobilizing the enthusiasm of young Europeans.

- Fourth, this would mean that France also recognizes the *geopolitical importance* of the European project, a project in which Turkey has its rightful place. Blocking the entrance of Turkey after it had been granted a green light to start accession negotiations is not only a breach of the adagium *pacta sunt servanda*, it is also a sign of historical shortsightedness and of lacking geopolitical insight in the newly emerging world order in which two of the four leading powers have populations of over 1 billion inhabitants.

Union for the Mediterranean – An Unnecessary Initiative?

In his speech of January 2007 Sarkozy promised to create a *Union de la Méditerranée*. This proposal was meant to make another promise more credible: to keep Turkey out of the EU. The Mediterranean Union had the function to provide the Turks an alternative for full EU membership. This proposal was an unnecessary *doublure*, because the EU had already an equivalent structure in the so called 'Barcelona Process'. Worse was the fact that it was not founded on a strategic long-term vision, but on short-term electoral opportunism. In order to be elected Sarkozy urgently needed the votes of the electorate of the extreme right Front National and this was the way, he thought, to attract them.

The way in which the project was initiated was also an example of clumsiness. Sarkozy first infuriated Malta, which he forgot to include in the list of future members. He then elicited Angela Merkel's anger, when she learnt that he wanted to exclude the non-Mediterranean EU member states from the project. When, finally, the project, re-baptized into *Union for the Mediterranean*, came into being, it was EU-wide and did not give France the expected hegemonic role in the Mediterranean. Additionally, to obtain Turkey's participation, Sarkozy had to promise Turkey that the Union was not meant as an alternative for EU membership.

Since its inauguration in July 2008 the Union has not added much to the already existing Barcelona Process of which it is the new embodiment. Sarkozy's Union even was, literally, a *non-starter* when the whole process stalled after the Gaza War in the

winter of 2008-2009. Additionally, the political dimension of the original Barcelona initiative (aimed to create “a common area of peace and stability” in which Israel and its Arab neighbors could live together) has been watered down to involve down-to-earth economic projects, such as developing solar energy farms in the Sahara. One of the – meager - results up until now has been a demand by the Committee of the Regions – one of the EU’s superfluous talking shops – to ask for still *another* assembly (a so-called “Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly,” abbreviated to ARLEM). This means that the main result of Sarkozy’s initiative seems to have been to promote the inbuilt *maladie* of EU institutions: to generate more institutions of which the necessity is not proven.

An event linked to Sarkozy’s Mediterranean policy was the bizarre and deeply embarrassing visit of Libyan leader Khadafi to Paris in December 2007. Khadafi was welcomed by Sarkozy at the Elysée Palace and stayed five full days in Paris with a delegation of several hundred people. Juicy contracts were signed. France sold a nuclear reactor to Libya and signed contracts for ten billion Euros for other equipment, including a deal for 3.2 billion Euros for the purchase of 21 aircraft. French State Secretary for Human Rights, Rama Yade, who had the courage to criticize the visit (which started – ironically - on the UN designated Human Rights Day), said: “Our country is not a doormat on which a leader – terrorist or otherwise – can wipe off the blood of his country.” Shortly afterwards she was removed from her post and transferred to the unimportant sports portfolio.

Rest of the World: Africa, Iran and China

Remains what in shorthand will be called ‘the rest of the world’, which includes Africa, Asia and South America. Although Sarkozy has promised to abandon the former dubious practices of *Françafrique*, which often led to corruption scandals, the relationship of official France with its former colonies is still far from transparent. One example: *Le Monde* recently suggested that a rapprochement between Paris and Rwanda could lead to “a progressive suppression of the [French] legal inquiry into the attack [on the Rwandan President] of 1994,” which should be

continued “in name of the independence of the judiciary.” (*Le Monde* of Jan. 10-11, 2010). The rapprochement is sought by Paris, explained the paper, because without Rwanda it would not have influence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ex-Zaire), “to further its interests in the resources of its rich soil, especially uranium.”

But there also did appear some good news. After the bloody repression in March 2008 of manifestations in Tibet, Rama Yade, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Human Rights, told the press that Sarkozy had threatened to boycott the opening of the Olympics in Beijing, unless China opened a dialogue with the Dalai Lama and freed political prisoners. This political courage, however, did not last twenty-four hours. On that very day Bernard Kouchner declared that there were *no* conditions on France’s position. When, shortly afterwards, Beijing-based tour operators stopped selling France as a tourist destination and some French firms were boycotted, Sarkozy decided to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Since then, the Sino-French business and diplomatic relationship has been warming up. Despite the fact that the Olympic Games, far from softening the Chinese regime, have had the inverse effect: in 2009 the Chinese government clearly intensified its repression of human rights activists and national and religious minorities. As concerns Iran: here France was prepared to take a more principled stance, which was laudable.

Conclusion

What is the conclusion? Although there are some positive points (NATO, Afghanistan, Iran) the overall picture is rather bleak. Sarkozy’s pro-Atlantic turn has until now not yet paid off the dividends that he expected: a special relationship with the inhabitant of the White House will not materialize and a Washington-Paris axis is not in the making. Sarkozy’s ‘Ostpolitik’ vis-à-vis Russia lacks not only a principled stance and a moral spine, but equally a geopolitical understanding of the situation. Not only is it too much inspired by short-term economic interests, but it also risks to alienate the East-European EU member states which were already not well treated by his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, who, during the Iraq crisis, told them “to shut

up.” The EU policy is a shambles. In the first years of his presidency Sarkozy neglected the importance of the Franco-German axis, making the French EU presidency into a one-man show that irritated the Germans. Additionally, he had no insight in the changing internal dynamics of the EU, especially concerning a new German aloofness in European affairs. He did not try enough to bind the Germans, nor did he try to play the role of a defender of the smaller European nations. (a role that Germany used to fulfill). The nomination of a European President and High Commissioner for Foreign Policy was a missed chance to nominate high-profile politicians to these posts. In the rest of the world the picture is more mixed, but even in these rare cases where France took a principled stance, this was not of long duration. We can only hope that Iran may prove to be a litmus test of French resolve. Are there other reasons for hope? Certainly. In June 2009 Sarkozy appointed Pierre Lellouche to Secretary of State for European Affairs. Lellouche, an intellectual who worked with Raymond Aron, is a renowned defence specialist and staunch pro-Atlanticist. He is not only well placed to warm up French-American relations, but he has equally a pro-active EU agenda. In January he announced, together with his German counterpart, Werner Hoyer, ‘ Sixteen Proposals’ to bolster the Franco-German relationship (Le Monde, January 24-25, 2010). These sixteen original proposals have in the meantime been augmented to eighty in the *Agenda 2020* that was presented on February, 4, 2010, at a meeting of the two governments in the Elysée Palace. The Agenda consists of many proposals for pragmatic cooperation on the level of civil society (youth exchanges, joint research programmes, a French-German PhD, a joint office for renewable energy, etc). It is all very sympathetic, positive, and useful. But for a re-launch of the French-German couple one needs more: a common geopolitical vision and the will of both countries to put their weight behind it.

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