

The evolution of Sarkozy's foreign policy

Written by Charles Cogan

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CHARLES COGAN, FEB 15 2011

As he approaches four years at the helm of France and of France's foreign policy, three things come to mind with respect to an evaluation of Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign policy. Firstly, his ambition remains unchecked: to place himself, and his government, at the center, or more appropriately, near the center, of the world stage. In support of this ambition, he has doggedly striven to achieve French commercial advantage, in China, in Russia, and elsewhere. Secondly, he remains unceasingly on the top of his dossier, something that his rivals for the presidency in 2012 will have to look at quite soberly. Thirdly, he has calmed down somewhat, not only in his gesticulations and verbal excesses, but also in terms of what he expects to get out of foreign leaders, in particular Angela Merkel of Germany. M. Sarkozy and Mme. Merkel seem to have overcome their high personal incompatibility over the years of their meeting and working together, with Sarkozy having learned to defer to the increasingly stronger economic position that Germany has enjoyed over the course of the Great Recession, and with Mme. Merkel seemingly having come to a better appreciation of the historic political role of France in the European Union and the categorical necessity for the two countries to work closely together.

The presidencies of world bodies have a special meaning and a special attraction for M. Sarkozy, with his flair for showmanship and his self-referential nature. In the summer of 2008, he seized the occasion of becoming the rotating president of the European Union to make a name for himself in mediating the conflict between Russia and Georgia. It is conceded by many that no other EU president would have, or could have, done the same. He hopped on a plane to Moscow and came to terms with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. No matter that he in a way botched the agreement, nor that the Russians did not pay full heed to it, as they went ahead and annexed Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the point was that his action stopped the fighting.

After the Georgian conflict, Sarkozy, again as president of the EU, was confronted with the financial crisis that began in September 2008. He seized the occasion by helping persuade George W. Bush to convene an enlarged summit of 20 nations representing 85% of the world's economy. Previously, the Group of 20 had consisted only of finance ministers. There is some dispute as to the origins of the idea to enlarge the G-8 summit to the G-20, with Washington claiming its patrimony and Sarkozy claiming his. In any event, this innovation arose during a visit of Sarkozy to Washington, and the French President was not reticent about claiming credit for himself. In returning from his interview with Mr. Bush, during which they agreed on the idea, Sarkozy announced that this initiative marked a new stage in the development of multilateral governance.

Unquestionably, M. Sarkozy's stint as président of the EU during the last six months of 2008 was a clear success for him. At the beginning of 2011, he was given a new chance to shine internationally, as he became the rotating president of the G-8 and the G-20 for the rest of the year.

There is a curious ambivalence in French attitudes toward M. Sarkozy. On the one hand, he seems to be heartily disliked, and this is somewhat puzzling to outside observers. Is it because most people in France do not think he acts with Presidential manners and hauteur? On the other hand, he is conceded by many, with a tinge of respect, to be a formidable candidate for the Presidency again in 2012. And this, despite what the polls say. At this point, among the prospective candidates, Dominique Strauss-Kahn seems to be the only one to have both the intellectual equipment and the stature to defeat Sarkozy. But first of all, M. Strauss-Kahn must decide whether he wants to run.

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Relations with the U.S.

Although Barack Obama – “Mr. Cool,” if ever there was one – has tempered Nicolas Sarkozy’s ardor for a warm personal friendship, notably in declining the French President’s invitation to dinner in Paris in June 2009, in favor of spending time in the City of Light with his family – the French-American “reset” has held...likely due in part to the influence of Jean-David Levitte, the genial and deft former Ambassador to Washington and now the diplomatic adviser to M. Sarkozy. That Levitte was formerly very close to Jacques Chirac, Sarkozy’s longtime *bête noire*, only testifies to Sarkozy’s ability to reach out for talent beyond his own fold. Another example of this flair of Sarkozy was his reaching out to Bernard Kouchner as Foreign Minister. Though M. Kouchner, as a Socialist, was an important symbol and accomplished important things, particularly in France’s opening to Syria and its attempts to stabilize Lebanon, the experiment wore thin as it was clear that Sarkozy’s presidential advisers were pushing him aside, and he resigned in the fall of 2010.

Sarkozy set the tone at the very beginning, and with maximum theatrical effect, when he declared to the American Congress on November 7, 2007, “I want to be your friend.” The American public, always quick to criticize the French, but also always quick to appreciate gestures of French approval, has remained generally favorable toward M. Sarkozy – something unheard of in American attitudes toward French presidents as the terms of these presidents wear on and, in American eyes, wear thin.

Relations with Israel

The other sea-change in Sarkozy’s foreign policy, the relationship with Israel, has also – and also somewhat remarkably – held. That Sarkozy’s own background seems to have little to do with this change (his maternal grandfather was an escapee from the German program at Salonika[i]) may be of some surprise to Americans, but it is in keeping with the idealized French model of single citizenship without regard to one’s background. On the ground in Israel, the relationship between the French Mission and the Israeli public is like day and night to what it was before. And this despite all the difficulties created by the Israelis themselves, from Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009) and the storming of the Turkish relief ship to Gaza, the Mavi Marmara, on May 31, 2009, and the ensuing nine Turkish deaths.

Change in the zeitgeist

Both with respect to relations with the United States and relations with Israel, M. Sarkozy seems to have sensed that the *zeitgeist* had changed in the 40 or so years since the French *pensée unique* on these subjects had become crystallized, chiefly under the lead of Charles de Gaulle. Over the years, the reflexive attitude of opposition to U.S. dominance and opposition to Israel’s disregard of international norms, had left France out of step with its principal European partners, Germany and Britain. With the U.S. having somewhat declined in the world since the time of de Gaulle, Sarkozy seems to have realized, perhaps with the help of his American-savvy advisers, that a softening of French attitudes toward the U.S. would not appreciably diminish his image in those quarters opposed to or reserved toward the U.S. Similarly, a softening of French statements about Israel would not appreciably alter France’s standing in the Arab and Muslim world.

The remarkable calm that greeted France’s return to the integrated command of NATO in April 2009 – despite the trenchant opposition of several French political personalities – reflected this change in the *zeitgeist* as well as the fact that France, in a series of operational steps, notably in the Gulf War, then later in the 1990’s, and finally in Afghanistan after 9/11, had become more inside than outside the integrated command of NATO. What sense did it make, therefore, for France to be taking part operationally with NATO while virtually excluding itself from NATO’s strategic decision-making structures? Upon the return to the integrated command, French officers came back to these structures and notably, France was given one of two strategic commands, the Transformation Command at

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Norfolk, Va., as well as the Regional Command at Lisbon, which is also the base of NATO's Rapid Reaction Force; however, the luster of the Transformation Command has since become somewhat diminished by decision of the Pentagon to abolish the American Joint Forces Command, which was also located at Norfolk.

Saving the EU, Saving the Euro

Sarkozy has been active, and instrumental, in persuading Germany, firstly in the bailouts of Greece and Ireland, followed by the setting up of a rescue fund; and then in the unveiling of a "pact for competitiveness" jointly with Germany, the main features of which would be an end to the indexation of salaries with inflation, the establishment of a common base for corporate taxes, the alignment of pension systems, and legally binding commitments for tough fiscal policies – the latter at the particular insistence of the Germans. Whether these proposals will go through is far from clear. In principle they are to be voted on at the next EU summit in March.

In addition the above initiative toward firmer EU governance, the British-French defense pact of November 2010 and the tripartite British, French, and German statement of January 2011 urging President Mubarak against harming Egyptian civilians, seem to reflect a new trend toward a sharing of responsibilities among the European powers, in the face of economic crises and unrest outside their borders. On Iran, Sarkozy has been, if anything, sharper than his European negotiating partners in his criticism of Tehran's apparent attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. Overall, it seems that Sarkozy's foreign policy has been conducted in a more coherent and less hectic way than his domestic policies, as his foreign counterparts, in what have been largely private settings, may have been able to temper and calibrate some of his more ardent initiatives, notably that of the Mediterranean Union, now diluted by an extended membership, stymied to a large degree by the impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and hobbled further by the fact that Hosni Mubarak was its co-president. France's image before the emerging street movements in the Arab world was not enhanced by revelations of plane trips and hospitalities for two French cabinet members courtesy of the deposed leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, not to speak of the offer of one of them, Michèle Alliot-Marie, to provide France's "savoir-faire" in crowd control to the Tunisian police as demonstrations were underway. But, as the saying goes, "this too shall pass."

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[i] Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Sarkozy declared before the Knesset that he had been largely raised by this maternal grandfather.