



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Dimitrakopoulos, Dionyssi G. and Menon, A. and Passas, A.G. (2009) France and the EU under Sarkozy: between European ambitions and national objectives? *Modern & Contemporary France* 17 (4), pp. 451-465. ISSN 0963-9489.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/2136/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

France and the EU under Sarkozy: between European ambitions and national objectives?

Journal Article

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/2136>

Version: Accepted (Refereed)

Citation:

Dimitrakopoulos, D.; Menon, A.; Passas, A. (2009)
France and the EU under Sarkozy: between European ambitions and national objectives?
Modern & Contemporary France 17(4), pp.454-465

© 2009 Taylor & Francis

[Publisher Version](#)

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

[Deposit Guide](#)

Contact: lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk

**France and the EU under Sarkozy:
between European ambitions and national objectives?**

Dionyssis G. Dimitrakopoulos, Anand Menon, Argyris G. Passas *

The early phase of Sarkozy's presidency proved highly proactive, particularly during the French Presidency of the EU. However, little of practical import resulted. Moreover, there is much that connects Sarkozy's policies to those of his predecessors. Constrained both at home and abroad, he was sometimes unable to carry through his preferred policies. In addition, Sarkozy has done nothing to resolve a long-standing tension of French EU policy between enormous ambitions for the Union and reluctance to empower its institutions. Intergovernmental co-operation has been the theme linking all of Sarkozy's initiatives. The jury is, of necessity, still out on the long-term impact Sarkozy will have. Early indications are that, whilst there has been no shortage of initiatives, it is open to question whether these either diverge much from those of his predecessors, or have much impact on the workings and effectiveness of the European Union itself.

Je suis un européen convaincu (...) [m]ais je n'ai pas dit oui à la construction européenne tout au long de ces années pour avoir l'Europe que nous avons aujourd'hui (...) Nous avons fait l'Europe pour agir, par pour subir. Nous avons

* Correspondance to: Dionyssis G. Dimitrakopoulos, School of Politics & Sociology, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1E 7HX, UK, D.Dimitrakopoulos@bbk.ac.uk, Anand Menon Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, a.menon@bham.ac.uk, Argyris G. Passas, Department of Law, Panteion University of Social & Political Sciences, 136 Sygrou Ave. 176 71 Athens, Greece, apassas@panteion.gr

fait l'Europe pour exprimer une volonté commune, pas pour organiser notre renoncement collectif.

(Sarkozy, 2007f: 9-10)

Introduction

This account of European policy making in France covers the Sarkozy presidency from its start in May 2007 to December 2008, and must begin with a series of disclaimers. First, it only covers approximately eighteen months, hence there are limits to the scope of the conclusions one can draw. Second, for six months France held the Presidency of the EU Council – hardly a representative period in terms of assessing the policies of any state towards the European Union, though one that requires broad coverage (hence the range of policies covered by this article). Third, these six months were themselves a period in which France, like other member states, rather than setting an agenda, had to react to a series of profoundly unsettling crises: first in Georgia, then in the world's financial markets. Nevertheless, certain tentative conclusions can be drawn about President Sarkozy's approach towards the European Union, the main one being that the traditional tension between European ambitions and national objectives has not disappeared (see Menon, 2000). In that context, it appears that the EU is more intergovernmental after than before the French Presidency of 2008, due in part to President Sarkozy's activism (Quatremer 17 December 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/12/lunion-aprs-sar.html>).

The Sarkozy camp made some strident claims about the failings of French EU policy under Chirac. The new President argued that, when he took office, 'France was on Europe's "substitutes' bench"' (Sarkozy 2008). This declining influence was attributed to

policy failures, and in particular the fact that France ‘was still playing the European game in a way that perhaps had its merits 20 years ago, but was out of sync with the realities of today’s Europe’ (Sarkozy 2008).

In response, Sarkozy emphasized the need to challenge two traditional aspects of policy. First, the relative disdain in which Paris had held the EU institutions. ‘How,’ asked the new inhabitant of the Élysée Palace, ‘can we act in Europe if our objective is to oppose the Commission or to oppose the European Parliament? We would be doomed to fail’ (Sarkozy, 2007a). Second, France needed to work more closely with its partners; under the new regime, ‘in Europe France is determined to be a team player!’ (Sarkozy, 2008). Bernard Kouchner mirrored this rhetoric, informing the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs committee at the start of the French Presidency (15 July 2008) that France had the ‘ambition to be modest’ (Euractiv.com, 16 July 2008).

Sarkozy was also quick to break with past practice in terms of key personnel decisions. The appointment of Bernard Kouchner and Jean-Pierre Jouyet¹, two socialists, as Minister of Foreign and European² Affairs and junior minister for European Affairs respectively, simultaneously spoke to three constituencies. France’s European partners were reassured by the presence of two known ‘Europhiles’ at the helm of French diplomacy. The already fragile cohesion of the *Parti Socialiste* was dealt a further blow. Further, the decision could be presented to the French public as a signal of bi-partisanship and a *national* conception of foreign and European policy.

¹ Jouyet is a technocrat with experience in the private sector who also held senior posts in the central French administration (including the directorship of then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin’s *cabinet*) and Brussels (where he was director of Jacques Delors’ *cabinet*). He gave up his post in December 2008 to take charge of the *Autorité des marchés financiers*.

² The addition of the term ‘European’ to the formal title of the *Quai d’Orsay* can be seen as a symbol of the new French leadership’s policy priorities.

One broad if preliminary finding is that Sarkozy's statements - both as Presidential candidate and since his electoral victory - do not seem to reflect a clearly defined reformist vision of the future of European integration. This contrasts sharply with his explicit critique of aspects of European integration under his predecessors. Indeed, his decision to support Jose Manuel Durao Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker for the posts of Commission President and Chairman of the European Council respectively (Quatremer, 5 May 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/05/lelyse-vote-jun.html>), implies a politician who, despite his forceful arrival on the European stage, quickly felt the need to nourish alliances with existing office holders rather than promote reshuffles at the European level³. The decision to support Barroso was motivated by the fact that, with him at its helm, the Commission will remain docile, limited to the role of the guardian of the treaties and lacking in ambition (Quatremer, 12 December 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/12/barroso-napprci.html>). In other words, President's Sarkozy's decision is, despite his rhetoric, consistent with past French policy. Although in the run-up to the European elections of 2009 Sarkozy's support for Barroso appeared to have cooled, it is incompatible with the French President's declared wish to promote (i) *'l'Europe qui protège'* and (ii) the regulation of financial markets, a major policy aim resulting from the financial and economic crisis of 2008.

Institutional Reform and Enlargement

³ If support for Juncker could be interpreted as a desire to strengthen the position the states of 'old Europe' at the helm of major policy areas like the Euro, Sarkozy's support for the current Commission President was - on the surface - more surprising in the light of the latter's support for the war in Iraq and his role in the handling of the Bolkestein directive. A cynical interpretation would be that it revealed the French President's desire to ensure that the Commission remains subservient to particularly the larger member states. Speculative - delete

For a politician with President Sarkozy's right-wing credentials, his analysis of the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty was remarkably in tune with that of many sections of the Left in France and beyond. He attributed this rejection not to the nature of the treaty itself but to (i) the inability of elites to ensure that their citizens shared their vision of the *finalité de l'Europe*, and (ii) the tendency to de-politicize this project so as to substitute rules for political decisions and priorities technocratic fixes over political choices (Sarkozy, 2007b: 6).⁴

Sarkozy's approach to both treaty reform and enlargement reflect his campaign pledges as well as his repeated statements regarding the need to politicise European integration. Having supported the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty, he took a leading role, alongside the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in the negotiations that led to the adoption in October 2007 of the Treaty of Lisbon. Having received a clear and fresh mandate, he was involved in the intensive bilateral meetings that gradually fostered convergence between national capitals, including Warsaw (Dinan, 2008). The meeting of the European Council under the German Presidency in June 2007 thus paved the way for the adoption of a simplified treaty that focused on institutional reform in line with Sarkozy's campaign pledge (Sarkozy, 2007d). Once this had been achieved, the ratification of the new treaty by the French parliament was swift and consistent with another of his core campaign pledges⁵.

Another key aspect of the new President's EU policy has been his firm opposition to

⁴ This latter claim was in keeping with his criticism of the *énarques* at the domestic level.

⁵ While Sarkozy had supported the idea of a reform treaty focusing on institutional reform, his main rival, Ségolène Royal was in favour of a more substantial reform of the treaty followed by a referendum (Henderson and Sitter, 2008, p. 190). Moreover, it is important to note that this ratification has been facilitated by the abstention of most socialist MPs.

Turkey's accession and his caution vis-à-vis further enlargement more broadly. Speaking at the meeting of the European Council in June 2008 (following the negative referendum result in Ireland), he pointed out that without the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon the EU 'will not be able to expand'. Linking treaty reform to enlargement has been an enduring aspect of French (indeed, Franco-German) policy. Thus, Sarkozy declared that '[y]ou can't say no to reforms and yes to enlargement.' (BBC News, 20 June 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7464879.stm>). The enlargement *dossier* has come to represent a major bone of contention between the new French President and the British government. Moreover, while caution vis-à-vis further enlargement and hostility towards Turkey's accession reflect mainstream French public opinion, they mark a clear break with French policy under Jacques Chirac.

Prior to his election, Nicolas Sarkozy gave the impression that he opposed the continuation of accession talks (*Le Monde*, editorial, 28 August 2008). After becoming President, however, he allowed talks to proceed whilst maintaining his opposition to full membership – a position he confirmed in the run-up to the 2009 European elections, preferring instead a 'common economic and security area' that in addition to Turkey would also include Russia (Sarkozy, 2009). This tactic allowed him to (i) maintain a campaign pledge without alienating key partners (notably the German Christian Democrats who share his opposition to Turkey's membership), (ii) limit negotiations to those chapters that do not imply full membership and (iii) press for the creation of a 'reflection group' to discuss the issue of '*quelle Europe en 2020-2030 et pour quelles missions?*' in order to keep the issue of the Union's frontiers and *finalité* on the agenda (Sarkozy 2007a). However, Sarkozy was constrained by his partners' insistence that the 'reflection group' be debarred from considering institutional issues (European Council 2008).

Enlargement, particularly the issue of Turkish membership, is so salient in French domestic politics that Jacques Chirac had felt the need to constrain his successors through a constitutional clause that requires a referendum prior to further expansion. This provision - introduced by a politically weak President - was primarily aimed at reassuring the French public that enlargement would not proceed without popular consent. Sarkozy was amongst many in the French political elite who wanted to abolish this clause; he was provided with an opportunity to do so by the Balladur Committee that he had tasked with putting forward proposals for constitutional reform (Quatremer, 27 July 2007, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2007/07/la-fin-du-rfren.html>). The Committee recommended allowing the President to choose between parliamentary ratification and referenda (Comité de réflexion et de proposition sur la modernisation et le rééquilibrage des institutions de la Ve République 2007). Yet the President found his room for manoeuvre limited. Although the proposal enjoyed wide support from across the political spectrum (Quatremer, 15 April 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/04/le-dput-ps-pier.html>), scores of parliamentarians from Sarkozy's own party, the UMP, revolted over the issue. As a result the constitutional requirement for a referendum has been retained in the event that accession is not approved by a 3/5 of a congress bringing together both houses of parliament (itself convened by majorities of 3/5 of each of these chambers) (Quatremer, 27 July 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/07/la-turquie-nvit.html>).

Internal Policies

Whilst Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign stressed neoliberal domestic policy reforms

(economic liberalisation, flexible labour markets and tax reductions for the well-off),⁶ his rhetoric about the role of the EU subsequent to his election has focused on the need for a ‘Europe that protects’ its citizens, exemplified by his eventually successful insistence on removing the reference to free and undistorted competition from the list of the EU’s objectives. Speaking to a domestic audience, he acknowledged that this change was symbolic and political rather than legal, but insisted that it marked a break with the past and offered an opportunity to debate what many within France perceive as the neo-liberal bias of the Union more generally. These debates, he claimed, are necessary so as to ensure that competition ceases being a ‘religion’ and the quest for perfect competition stops being *‘l’unique horizon des politiques européennes’* (Sarkozy, 2007b)

The crisis in financial markets of autumn 2008 offered Sarkozy the opportunity to launch a raft of proposals for economic reform at the European level and to return to the theme of a *gouvernement économique*. Even prior to the crisis he was one of many leading French politicians who accused the ECB of using overly restrictive monetary policies. In July 2007, President Sarkozy broke with protocol and joined Christine Lagarde – his Minister of Finance - at a meeting of the Euro-group (the meeting of Finance Ministers of the member states that have adopted the Euro). Echoing Georges Clemenceau’s famous dictum⁷, he declared that issues relating to growth and employment are so important that heads of State and Government should deal with them directly. However, in so doing he revealed a potential contradiction between his support for a *gouvernement économique* (for example, through the institutionalization of meetings of Heads of State and Government of the members of the Euro-zone whose aim would be to better co-ordinate economic policy in the Euro-zone and provide a political counter-balance to the ‘technocratic’

⁶ See Henderson and Sitter (2008) and Hoang-Ngoc in this special edition.

⁷ ‘La guerre c’est une chose trop grave pour la confier à des militaires.’

ECB) and his government's decision to postpone honouring France's commitment under the Stability and Growth Pact to return the budget to equilibrium by 2010. Nevertheless, his argument that the EU could not simply refuse to deploy the tools of monetary policy to promote growth and employment (*Le Monde*, 10 July 2007; Pisani-Ferry, 2007) resonated with large sections of public opinion in France and beyond⁸. More importantly, Sarkozy's proposal, whilst vague on the question of competence, reflected an enduring theme in French EU policy, namely the combination of pro-European rhetoric with support for purely intergovernmental arrangements.

Another manifestation of Sarkozy's desire to create a Europe that protects its citizens was his idea for the creation of a European sovereign wealth fund that could protect European companies (or, at least those that are of major importance and operate in strategic economic sectors) from foreign (i.e. non-European) take-overs. Whilst the proposal provoked negative reaction in Germany (*Economist*, 23 October 2008) the German government has expressed some sympathy with the idea of targeted protection for some industrial sectors from take-overs by Russian or Chinese firms (*Le Monde*, 10 July 2007).

In terms of possible European reactions to the financial crisis, Sarkozy's initial proposal for a €300bn fund for Europe-wide bank 'bail outs' was attacked in some quarters (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 October 2008; *Die Zeit* online, 21 October 2008). In the end, both the French and the German governments rejected this form of co-ordinated action because, as the French President himself recognised, it would pose an enormous problem in terms of operation and decision making (Quatremer, 11 October 2008,

⁸ Although the idea that politicians would give instructions to the ECB was dismissed by the Commission President (*Economist*, 23 October 2008), the crisis in the financial markets and its implications for the real economy will doubtless keep the issue on the political agenda.

<http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/10/la-crise-financ.html>).

Nevertheless, the members of the Euro-zone agreed to follow the example set by the British government, involving the recapitalisation of banks and state guarantees for inter-bank lending, while the ECB agreed – after having reduced its headline interest rates – to accept guarantees of lower quality in exchange for the provision of greater liquidity for the financial markets (*Libération*, 13 October 2008). As a result, although the actual implementation of the agreement was left to individual governments, the notion of politically co-ordinated action prevailed to some extent. Moreover, President Sarkozy encouraged the announcement by the European Commission of the ‘major Recovery Plan for growth and jobs’ (European Commission, 2008). Despite the Commission’s rhetoric and the ‘European’ label, this ‘plan’ was little more than an amalgamation of the measures that had already been announced by the governments of the member states coupled with ‘soft loans’ made available by the European Investment Bank (Quatremer, 26 November 2008, <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/11/plan-de-relance.html>). In addition, in the run-up to the 2009 European elections, Sarkozy returned to his preferred criticism of existing EU policies claiming that the European economy cannot be governed ‘*seulement avec des critères comptables*’, adding that ‘*[o]n ne peut pas regarder le montant du déficit sans regarder ce qu’il finance. On ne peut pas se contenter d’une approche comptable sans regarder la politique économique*’ and re-affirming his support for a common economic policy:

‘Dans le monde tel qu’il est, l’Europe ne peut pas se passer d’une politique économique. Il n’est pas raisonnable que des pays dont les économies sont si étroitement liées et qui partagent la même monnaie n’aient pas une politique économique concertée qui ne peut pas se réduire à un objectif d’inflation et au respect des critères du pacte de stabilité.

(Sarkozy, 2009).

Furthermore, President Sarkozy is credited with the successful conclusion of the negotiations on the EU 'climate-energy' package. Although an agreement had been reached in March 2007 to reduce emissions by 20% by 2020 and to increase the production of energy from renewable sources to 20%, the economic crisis raised fears about the viability of the initial agreement. In part, this was because of Italian and German concerns regarding their heavy industries but was also due to economic concerns in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, an agreement was reached because '[s]kilful French prodding forced the pace on concrete plans to parcel out the costs of slashing European greenhouse-gas emissions.' (Charlemagne 2008).

Foreign and Security Policies

Security policy did not figure prominently in the election campaign⁹. In his relatively few pronouncements, Sarkozy revealed a lack of enthusiasm for French participation in the NATO mission in Afghanistan. He supported Chirac's decision of December 2006 to withdraw 200 French special forces, and later intimated that he doubted the utility of maintaining French deployment in Afghanistan (Bowen, 2007). In keeping with his predecessor's policies, Sarkozy gave priority to the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (Sarkozy, 2007c). Particular emphasis was placed on enhancing military capabilities, involving ideas such as the development of shared military assets (such as a European pool of A400M transport aircraft), industrial consolidation and more effective burden sharing between member states (a prominent

⁹ Indeed, Sarkozy's potentially most controversial remarks related not to substance but to process, as he questioned the traditional Presidential *domaine réservé* incorporating defence, arguing in favour of greater parliamentary involvement in the definition of defence policy (Sarkozy, 2007e) - promises on which he arguably has yet to deliver (Major and Mölling, 2007).

theme both in opposition and in power was dissatisfaction with a situation in which ‘only three or four member states’ spend enough on defence) (Sarkozy, 2007c). He hinted that France would need to ‘adapt its discourse’ in terms of acknowledging the complementarity between ESDP and NATO (Sarkozy 2007e). At the same time, he maintained a degree of continuity with traditional French policy in declaring that NATO should not ‘evolve – as the United States seems to want – into a global organization carrying out military, humanitarian and international policing missions. NATO should not become a competitor organization to the UN’ (Sarkozy, 2007c; 2007e). In keeping with the tenor of his presidential campaign, Sarkozy portrayed himself as an innovator, stressing that ‘consensus, continuity, the permanence of certain principles, cannot be presupposed...it is not enough to express the same concepts, reasoning or certainties’ (Sarkozy, 2007c).

Once in office, the new president and government not only attempted to put more flesh on these somewhat bare bones, but also to reconstruct the skeleton itself. The latter approach was clearest in the decisions taken with regard to NATO. During a speech to the assembled French Ambassadors in Paris in August 2007, Sarkozy hinted at the possibility that France could resume a ‘full role’ in NATO (Sarkozy, 2007a), a prospect he raised again in the US Congress two months later (Sarkozy, 2007g). In April 2008 at NATO’s Bucharest summit, he announced that France would take a decision by the end of the year about returning to the military structures of NATO, whilst agreeing to the deployment of 700 more troops to Afghanistan. Later in 2008, he spoke in impassioned terms about the need to remain engaged in a mission whose purpose he had called into question as a candidate: ‘you commit yourself long term or it’s not worth committing yourself’ (Sarkozy, 2008).

'Normalisation' of France's position within NATO was made conditional on reciprocal concessions by France's allies. As Sarkozy emphasised in an interview with the *New York Times* (24 September 2008), 'I would make progress on European Defence a condition for moving into the integrated command (...) It is obvious that if we were to envisage such a move, it could only happen in as much as space was made in the leadership, at the highest level, for representatives of France'. Two conditions pertained. First, 'space in leadership' meant that France aspired to a senior command position in AFSOUTH. Again, this was not a major innovation in that Jacques Chirac had offered French re-integration into NATO in return for the Americans agreeing to allow a European to head NATO's southern command in Naples. The *Daily Telegraph* (25 March 2008) reported that Sarkozy too was targeting French command of the Naples base, whilst the Senate Defence Committee suggested that the post of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe be rotated amongst all European states rather than just the UK and Germany (Francois-Ponçet et al., 2008).

On ESDP, in August 2007 Sarkozy spelled out priorities that included the creation of an 'armaments Europe', enhanced interoperability between European forces, and the revision of the 2003 European Security Strategy (Sarkozy, 2007a). As the French Presidency of the Union approached, there was much speculation regarding ambitious French plans: *Le Monde* (13 September 2007) claimed that the President was planning a 'Saint Malo mark two'. A more precise idea of the nature of French ambitions for ESDP was provided in early 2008 when Pierre Lellouche, a UMP parliamentarian and defence policy spokesman, made proposals for the creation of a defence 'G6' that would take the lead in forging ahead in cooperation on defence matters (Lellouche 2008). Under his plans - widely believed to have the support of the Élysée - a grouping of France, UK, Germany, Spain, Italy and Poland would commit themselves to spending 2% GDP on

defence while opening up their arms markets and contributing to a common intervention force of 600,000 troops under a 'unified command'. Lellouche's plans, along with statements by other leading policy makers, underlined the increasing importance France attached to the need to improve European military capabilities as a means of enhancing the effectiveness of ESDP. The 2008 Defence White Paper called for resurrection of 2000 Helsinki goals whereby the EU would deploy up to 60,000 troops within 60 days¹⁰. Never one to lack ambition, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner went further and drew up an impressive list of the operations he foresaw the Union being able to carry out simultaneously (Kouchner, 2008).¹¹ Senior officials enumerated other French proposals, including a General Affairs Council formation composed of Defence Ministers, a high level group to improve relations between NATO and EU, and enhanced interoperability between European military forces to be fostered via a military-type ERASMUS (Security and Defence Agenda, 2008). The various proposals consistently stressed the need to reinforce EU planning capabilities (see EUObserver, 13 November 2007, *The Financial Times*, 16 June 2008).

What are we to make of Sarkozy's record on ESDP? Firstly, he has provided much evidence of 'hyperactivity'. In the lead-up to the French Presidency of the EU, Paris put forward a raft of proposals for enhancement of European defence capabilities. Sarkozy has also proven adept at utilising symbolism, for example his decision in July 2008 to allow representatives of the armed forces of all 27 member states to participate in the

¹⁰ Which was all the more striking because the Helsinki document had in fact been superseded by the *Headline Goal 2010*, adopted at the European Council meeting on 17 June 2004, which focussed on small, rapidly deployable units capable of high-intensity warfare.

¹¹ He demanded that the EU be able, simultaneously, to carry out: two important military stabilization and reconstruction operations, with up to 10,000 men for a period of at least two years; two rapid reaction operations, using battlegroups (around 1,500 troops); an emergency evacuation of European nationals; a surveillance or maritime or air interdiction mission; a civilian-military humanitarian assistance operation lasting up to 20 days; all along with 10 or so civilian missions (police/justice) of variable size, including a larger, longer one

Bastille Day parade. An assessment of practical outcomes, however, necessitates a more nuanced conclusion. The French President has portrayed his approach towards NATO as a 'break with the past' (Sarkozy, 2008). Yet a historical perspective serves to cast doubt on this claim. As two respected observers have pointed out, relations between France and the United States have tended to be cyclical since the time of General de Gaulle, with the early phase of a new presidency witnessing attempts to bring about a *rapprochement* between France and NATO (Bozo and Parmentier, 2007). Moreover, it is far from clear what France's 'return' to NATO might mean in practical terms. France never left the organisation and its levels of participation are already significant - 2000 French troops were deployed in the NATO force in Kosovo, 1500 to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, with the President promising an additional 700 at the Bucharest NATO summit. France is the fifth largest financial contributor to the organisation, providing some 13% of its budget. French officials have participated, since 1995, in meetings of Defence Ministers and the Military Committee, now being absent only from the Defence Planning Committee and Nuclear Planning Group. Hence the practical impact of 'normalisation' might be quite limited. Nevertheless, symbolism matters in politics, particularly at a time when NATO is involved in what promises to be a long conflict in Afghanistan and allied support for the mission is half-hearted at best. Any profession of faith under such circumstances would doubtless be welcomed by France's allies.

All of this leaves open the question of whether Sarkozy's attempt to tie reintegration with concessions elsewhere will succeed. Certainly, the French emphasis on capabilities has served to woo a British Government that shares many of Sarkozy's concerns about the excessive financial burden falling on only a few member states (*European Voice*, 14 February 2008). Equally if not more importantly, the American administration, desperate

for reinforcements in Afghanistan, has publicly supported French efforts to reinforce ESDP (Nuland, 2008), and may well be more willing than was Clinton in 1996 to trade senior commands for a French return.

Yet practical progress has remained limited, partly because of factors beyond Sarkozy's control. The Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty effectively scuppered the plans laid out by Pierre Lellouche by denying Paris the opportunity to make use of its provisions for Permanent Structured cooperation. Meanwhile, the economic crisis has rendered even less probable an increase in European defence spending. Only France and the United Kingdom currently fulfil the 2% criterion proposed by Lellouche, with Germany (1.32%) and Spain (1.18%) lagging well behind. Above and beyond such recent constraints, various French initiatives need to overcome more traditional and longstanding obstacles. Turkish officials have been quick to question plans for a high level group bringing together NATO and EU officials (see the comments by Tomur Bayer of the Turkish Foreign Ministry in Security and Defence Agenda 2008). And the UK, for all its support for enhanced capabilities, has displayed a traditional reticence in the face of French plans to enhance autonomous EU planning capabilities and concern lest France not be setting sights too high in terms of ambitions (see the comments by Air Commodore Bob Tizard in Security and Defence Agenda 2008).

There remain legitimate grounds to question France's ultimate objectives. For all the professions of faith in NATO and in its complementarity with the EU, the rhetoric used in Paris has continued to imply the potential for competition between them. Thus Sarkozy declared during the 2008 Bastille Day celebrations that 'I want Europe to be capable of ensuring its security autonomously' (*International Herald Tribune* 14 July 2008), the clear implication being an eventual role for the Union in territorial defence.

Suspicions remain that proposals to strengthen the EU's planning capacity are indicative of a desire on the part of France to allow the EU to compete with NATO (Chatignoux, 2008).

Contradictions are also discernible within French policy itself, as the traditional tension between European ambitions and national objectives resurfaces (Menon, 2000). Defence Minister Hervé Morin emphasised the French priority of relaunching ESDP via an 'armament Europe'. He even spoke of the possibility of European financing for some aspects of defence, with the implication that if 'we are planning to share our defence preoccupations with our European partners, the European institutions must be involved, especially when it comes to budgetary decisions' (Morin, 2007). The new administration has moved aggressively to promote French arms sales, and to underline that the French arms industry remains a crucial element of the national economy. Morin (2007) stressed that a core objective of the government was to 'preserve our national defence industry' so that France could enjoy 'the necessary degree of autonomy'. Work remains to be done in terms of reconciling potentially contradictory tendencies.

From 'Union pour la Méditerranée' to the 'Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean'

The proposal to establish a 'Union for the Mediterranean' emerged in the 2007 French presidential campaign and was initially seen as a potential alternative to Turkey's membership of the EU, although Sarkozy's also intended the forum to exert some influence over the Middle East Peace Process (*International Herald Tribune*, 10 May 2007). Sarkozy's proposal for a *Union pour la Méditerranée* (UPM) was clumsy, divisive and poorly handled. Although intended to be funded through EU funds (at least in part), it would not have included all EU member states. The initial French proposal entailed the creation

of a structure that would exist and operate alongside the EU's neighbourhood policy and the Barcelona process launched in the mid-1990s, a notion that the German government rejected outright (*Le Monde*, 16 February 2008). Important aspects of the French proposal proved counter-productive. The launch of the initiative, to which European heads of state and government were invited, coincided with the celebration of Bastille Day: this created the impression of an initiative with predominantly French objectives served in European packaging. The public declarations of the French government also caused irritation because they appeared to assume the support of the other member states.

The timeliness of the concept of regional co-operation in this area is evident, given the fact that North Africa is a major transit route for immigrants, a locus of Islamic terrorism and the repository of natural gas reserves. But while the proposal had the support of important regional actors such as Spain and Israel, it quickly created controversy. The Turkish government predictably objected to the initial plan, fearing it was meant to give an alternative to membership of the EU. Some non-Mediterranean member states objected to the non-inclusive nature of the proposals. As noted by Michel Barnier, one of Sarkozy's allies and former Foreign Minister, the French proposal was meant to lay the foundations of a common market that would operate in co-ordination with the EU's single market (*International Herald Tribune*, 10 May 2007).

The final agreement was hailed as Angela Merkel's triumph, even before it was signed in Paris in July 2008 (*Les Echos*, 14 March 2008). It created a union that brings together 43 states including all 27 member states of the EU, transforming Sarkozy's project associating Mediterranean states under French leadership into a genuine European

project (Laidi, 2008)¹². The Presidency will be held jointly by the state holding the EU presidency and a Southern Mediterranean state. The union's secretariat will be based in Barcelona and it will organise projects that focus on energy, civil protection, infrastructure and the protection of the environment – including some that had already been launched under the Barcelona process, financed by a budget of some 600 million euros (Español and Patrie, 2008). Although it was greeted by President Sarkozy as a 'dream that came true', others did not share his enthusiasm (*Le Figaro*, 14 July 2008). If the negotiations are anything to go by, its operation and development will be far from easy. Israel initially opposed the Arab League's request to participate as a full member and only accepted after securing a post of deputy secretary general, with the remaining four attributed to the Palestinian Authority, Greece, Italy and Malta (*Libération*, 5 November 2008). Given the regional complexities, pessimism about the future of this initiative might be appropriate (Pisani, 2008)¹³. At its launch, it was clear that Sarkozy's initiative became 'European' only at the price of losing most of its distinctly French characteristics. Perhaps this was the best possible outcome for an initiative that, as Jean Quatremer put it, was an '*affaire mal préparée et mal vendue*' (*Liberation*, 15 March 2008: 12).

Conclusion

The early phase of Sarkozy's presidency saw a number of ambitious proposals, yet little of practical import resulted. It remains to be seen what will come of French insistence on the need for economic governance, how effective the 'Union for the Mediterranean' will

¹² This shift in emphasis is symbolised by the change of name: from President Sarkozy's preferred 'Mediterranean Union' to 'Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean', the formal title endorsed by the European Council in March 2008.

¹³ As Senator del Picchia (a member of the UMP) reported to the French Senate's foreign affairs commission in March 2009, the process suffered due to political issues (such as Israel's invasion of Gaza in January 2009) and funding problems (Sénat, 2009).

be, and what will come of proposed reforms to France's position within NATO. Most importantly, with the fate of the Lisbon treaty still hanging in the balance, it is not clear what the future holds for the EU and its institutional system.

Despite the emphasis on reform, there is much that connects Sarkozy's policies to those of his predecessors. His attempt to trade ESDP against a return to NATO is similar to Chirac's in 1996-7. French dissatisfaction with the working of the ECB all but preceded its creation. Nor is it new to see an incoming French President raise expectations at home, amongst European partners and in the United States about a change of direction (and it is worth pointing out how regularly in the past these heightened expectations have been dashed). For all his activism, Sarkozy has found himself constrained and sometimes unable to implement his preferred policies. European partners watered down his idea for a Mediterranean Union. Domestic political forces prevented him from abolishing the requirement for EU enlargement to be approved by referendum in France. Perhaps most strikingly, Sarkozy has done nothing to resolve the long-standing tension in French EU policy between enormous ambitions for the European Union and reluctance to empower its institutions. Intergovernmental co-operation has been the theme linking all Sarkozy's initiatives, with all that this implies in terms of the ability to produce meaningful outcomes. Stronger economic governance is all well and good, but will be limited if states such as France fail to respect the rules. Bearing in mind the disclaimers with which we began, the jury is still out on Sarkozy's long-term impact on French EU policy. Early indications are that, whilst there will be no shortage of initiatives, it is open to question whether these will either diverge much from those of his predecessors or have much impact on the workings and effectiveness of the Union itself.

References

- Bowen, N. (2007) 'France, Europe, and the Mediterranean in a Sarkozy Presidency', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 1-16.
- Bozo, F. and G. Parmentier (2007) 'France and the United States: Waiting for Regime Change', *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 181-197.
- Charlemagne (2008) 'The magnificence of Nicolas Sarkozy', *The Economist*, 18 December.
- Chatignoux, C. (2008) 'L'ambition européenne de Sarkozy à l'épreuve des réalités', *Les Echos*, 10 January.
- Comité de réflexion et de proposition sur la modernisation et le rééquilibrage des institutions de la Ve République (2007) 'Une Ve République plus démocratique', <http://www.comite-constitutionnel.fr/actualites/?mode=details&id=48>.
- Dinan, D. (2008) 'Governance and institutional developments: ending the constitutional impasse', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 46, annual review, pp. 71-90.
- Español, E. and B. Patrie (2008) 'Union pour la Méditerranée, étrange projet', *Libération*, 26 June.
- European Council (2008) 'Presidency conclusions - Brussels European Council, 14 December 2007', Brussels, Council of the European Union.
- Francois-Ponçet, J. et al. (2008) 'Rapport d'information fait au nom de la commission des Affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (1) sur l'évolution de l'OTAN', Senate, Paris.
- Henderson, K. and N. Sitter (2008) 'Political developments in the EU member states', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 46, annual review, pp. 183-213.
- Kouchner, B (2008) 'EU-NATO seminar – Opening speech by M. Bernard Kouchner, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs (excerpts)' Paris, 7 July, available at <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/EU-NATO-seminar-Bernard-Kouchner-s.htm>

- Läidi, Z. (2008) 'Méditerranée: une union pour quoi faire?', http://www.telos-eu.com/fr/article/mediterrance_une_union_pour_quoi_faire.
- Lellouche, P. (2008) 'Huit propositions pour donner à l'union une défense commune', *Le Figaro*, 31 January, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2008/01/31/01005-20080131ARTFIG00515--propositions-pour-donner-a-l-union-une-defense-commune.php>.
- Leparmentier, A. (2008) 'La rupture européenne de Nicolas Sarkozy', *Le Monde*, 1 July.
- Major, C. and C. Mölling (2007) 'Sarkozy's Brave New World: France's Foreign Security and Defence Policy', *ISIS Europe: European Security Review* no. 35.
- Menon, A. (2000). *France, NATO and the Limits of Independence: The Politics of Ambivalence*, Macmillan, London.
- Morin, H. (2007) 'Université de la Défense à Toulouse: Discours de M. Hervé Morin, ministre de la Défense', Toulouse, 11 September, available at http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ministre/prises_de_parole/discours/discours_de_m_herve_morin_ministre_de_la_defense_toulouse_le_11_septembre_2007
- Nuland, V. (2008) 'Ambassador Victoria Nuland, United States Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Speech to Presse Club and AmCham', Paris, 22 February, available at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/February/20080222183349eaifas0.5647394.html>
- Pisani, E. (2008) 'L'erreur méditerranéenne', *Le Monde*, 2 July.
- Pisani-Ferry, J. (2007) 'Que va-t-il faire à l'Eurogroupe?', *Le Monde*, 10 July.
- Sarkozy, N. (2007a) 'Allocution à l'occasion de la conférence des Ambassadeurs', 27 August, http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/2007/aout/allocution_a_l_occasion_de_la_conference_des_ambassadeurs.79272.html.

Sarkozy, N. (2007b) 'Allocution à l'occasion de la grande réunion publique sur le thème de l'Europe', Strasbourg, 2 July,

<http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/root/bank/print/78984.htm>.

Sarkozy, N. (2007c) 'Discours de Nicolas Sarkozy, Conférence de presse sur la politique internationale', Paris, 28 February,

http://www.sarkozy.fr/download/?mode=press&filename=28fevrier_Conferencessurlapolitiqueinterntionale_DiscoursNS.pdf.

Sarkozy, N. (2007d) 'Je veux que l'Europe change', Strasbourg, 21 February,

<http://www.u-m->

[p.org/site/index.php/ump/s_informer/discours/je_veux_que_l_europe_change](http://www.u-m-p.org/site/index.php/ump/s_informer/discours/je_veux_que_l_europe_change)

.

Sarkozy, N. (2007e) 'La politique de défense selon Nicolas Sarkozy: interview', *Défense et Sécurité Internationale*, vol. 24, March, pp. 40-2.

Sarkozy, N. (2007f) 'Mon projet - Ensemble tout devient possible',

http://www.sarkozy.fr/download/?lang=fr&mode=programme&filename=mon_projet.pdf.

Sarkozy, N. (2007g) 'Speech by M. Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the Republic, before the Congress of the United States of America', 7 November, Washington DC,

<http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Discours-du-President-Sarkozy.html>.

Sarkozy, N. (2008) 'Discours, XVIème conférence des ambassadeurs', Palais de l'Elysée, 27 August, Paris, http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/27.08_-

[_XVIeme_Conference_des_Ambassadeurs_Francais.pdf](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/27.08_-XVIeme_Conference_des_Ambassadeurs_Francais.pdf).

Sarkozy, N. (2009) 'Réunion républicaine à Nîmes (Gard) sur le thème de la France et l'Europe', Nîmes 5 May,

http://elysee.fr/documents/index.php?mode=cview&cat_id=7&press_id=2592&lang=fr

Security and Defence Agenda (2008) 'Security and Defence Priorities During France's

EU Presidency', Brussels, Security and Defence Agenda, available at

http://www.securitydefenceagenda.org/Portals/7/Reports/2008/SDA_French

[EU_Presidency_Report.pdf](#)

Sénat (2009) 'Communication de M. Robert del Picchia sur la situation de l'Union pour la

Méditerranée. Réunion de la commission des affaires européennes du mardi 31

mars 2009', <http://www.senat.fr/europe/r31032009.html#toc1>