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Regime Change in Paris: How Nicolas Sarkozy Could Reinvigorate U.S.-French Relations

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According to the latest polls, by spring 2007 the president of France could well be Nicolas Sarkozy, the man who *The Washington Post* described as “not your everyday French politician.”¹ For a start, the current French Interior Minister and leader of the UMP conservative party is pro-American. He understands that the war on terrorism is the world’s fight and not one America should have to bear alone. He grasps the nature of the threat facing Continental Europe from Muslim extremism and favors fighting terrorism head-on and without apology. His worldview is not one that ends in the Michelin-starred restaurants of Paris. Further, he is vocally enthusiastic about the Anglo-Saxon economic model and keen to shake up the statist, government-centered French economy with a hefty dose of innovation and entrepreneurialism. So if Nicolas Sarkozy does become president next year, what exactly will it mean for U.S. interests?

Sarkozy and U.S. Foreign Policy

It looks increasingly likely that the ineffective Jacques Chirac will be forced to make way for his younger and more popular colleague to take his party’s presidential nomination in January 2007. Having openly flaunted his ambitions for some time, Mr. Sarkozy has used his many elected and appointed political offices to set out a powerful manifesto for the presidency. And for American strategic interests, it is a good one.

As chief pretender to the throne, Sarkozy has recently taken it upon himself to conduct his own foreign policy while abroad, independent of the

traditional Gaullist line. Chirac’s well-reported fury at Sarkozy’s pro-American rhetoric during a U.S. visit in September 2006 indicates just how far Sarkozy is willing to go to distance himself from what he sees as the *ancien régime*.²

Chirac’s ire has risen following Sarkozy’s successful Washington visit, which was timed to mark the 5th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. During this trip, Sarkozy was as honest about the fractured Franco-American relationship as he was unabashed in his pro-American remedy for the problem. His speech at the French Embassy was breathtaking by French standards:

The crisis our two countries experienced in 2003 was probably the gravest since 1966, when American forces withdrew from French NATO bases.... You Americans were struck in the heart on September 11, 2001, and never understood our opposition to the intervention in Iraq. Some of you, to call a spade a spade, even felt it as a form of betrayal.³

It is an open secret that Sarkozy was critical of Chirac’s vocal opposition to the Iraq War in 2003, an issue that dogs Franco-American relations to

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this day. In his September 2006 interview with *Le Monde*, Sarkozy said that this period marked a “crisis” for Franco-American relations and that “Americans felt that they were abandoned by a nation with which they had felt close historical ties and shared values.”⁴ Chirac, in turn, described Sarkozy’s comments as “irresponsible” and “lamentable.”⁵

Sarkozy’s stance on the Israeli-Lebanon war represented another break with French foreign policy. Sarkozy was not afraid to condemn Hezbollah as the aggressor and spoke up for Israel’s right “to defend herself.”⁶ While urging that Israel should “maintain level headedness and restraint,” he refused to join the European Union (EU) chorus calling for a total ceasefire.⁷ In fact, his policy was remarkably similar to that of the United States and marked Sarkozy as a sensible voice on the Middle East in Europe.

Sarkozy’s efforts to combat disturbingly high levels of anti-Americanism in France have great significance for the overall war on terrorism.⁸ One year after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, more than half of the French people believed that the U.S. motivation for the war on terror was to dominate the world.⁹ Today, 76 percent of the French people believe that the war in Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein has made the world a more dangerous place.¹⁰ For his part, Sarkozy has publicly acknowledged that Paris could just have easily been the target of the 9/11 terrorists and is adamant

that anti-Americanism is not “a French thing.” Sarkozy’s “new” foreign policy is sending a powerful message right to the heart of Europe. His warm relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel quashes any prospect of the sort of anti-American axis between Berlin, Rome, and Paris that left-wing Italian Prime Minister Roman Prodi might have hoped for.

In all, the gulf growing between Chirac and his potential heir favors the United States. Ahead in the polls, Sarkozy may well be the next president of France. His victory would mean the chance for America to work more effectively with a medium-sized foreign power in *ad hoc* coalitions, such as in Afghanistan, and also that the U.S. would have a more genial partner within the EU and the United Nations Security Council. With huge foreign policy questions such as Iran and North Korea taking center stage, America will benefit from a more cooperative approach from the Élysée Palace.

The White House should relish the prospect of a potential ally in Europe who rejects the rabid anti-Americanism that has become an integral part of modern French politics.

Sarkozy and the European Union

Despite Sarkozy’s warmth toward Washington, a Sarkozy administration would probably not shift French policy away from Brussels significantly or shy from supporting further European integration.

1. George Gedda, “Sarkozy Visits U.S. to Show Solidarity,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2006, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/12/AR2006091201434.html.
2. Martin Arnold, “Chirac hits at Sarkozy over pro-US stance,” *The Financial Times*, September 18, 2006, at www.ft.com/cms/s/e59be13c-4737-11db-83df-0000779e2340.html.
3. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, Embassy of France in the United States, September 12, 2006, at www.ambafrance-us.org/news/statmnts/2006/sarkozy_US_091806.asp.
4. “Nicolas Sarkozy: ‘J’aime l’énergie et la fluidité de l’Amérique,’” *Le Monde*, September 09, 2006, at www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3224,36-811330@51-801093,0.html.
5. Arnold, “Chirac hits at Sarkozy over pro-US stance.”
6. David Twersky, “France’s Next President?” *The New York Sun*, August 8, 2006, p. 8.
7. Ibid.
8. See Andrew Kohut et al., “No Global Warming Alarm in the U.S.,” The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 13, 2006.
9. Andrew Kohut et al., “A Year After Iraq War,” The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 16, 2004, p.19.
10. Kohut et al., “No Global Warming Alarm in the U.S.”

Sarkozy is keen to breathe life into the European Constitution, despite the overwhelming “non” from French voters in 2005. In arguing for the European Constitution during the French referendum, Sarkozy said that he was the first 50-year-old in French history not required to go to war for his country and cited “one simple reason: Europe.”¹¹

The draft Constitution threatens to drive a stake through the heart of the transatlantic alliance that has secured peace in Europe since 1945. From top to bottom, the Constitution will establish Europe as a rival political force to the United States, with its own foreign minister, powers of taxation, and legal personality. In alliance with Chancellor Merkel, Sarkozy may seek to resurrect a Franco-German axis in support of “ever-closer union” in Europe, a political development that is in the interests of neither Europe nor the United States.

Conclusion

Nicolas Sarkozy represents the best hope for a French administration that would work more closely with the United States on the world stage. His rejection of the crude anti-Americanism that has dominated U.S.-French relations since the Iraq

War is brave and refreshing and should win Sarkozy friends in Washington. Sarkozy has also demonstrated a tougher stance on the global war on terrorism than any of his leading competitors for the presidency.

However, the United States should not expect an immediate sea change in French foreign policy if Sarkozy comes to power. He will face opposition from powerful vested interests in the French political establishment that will resist fundamental changes in Paris’s approach toward Washington. Sarkozy is also likely to stick to the trusted model of the Franco-German alliance and will push for more, not less, centralization of political power in Europe.

His European policy aside, Nicolas Sarkozy will be a breath of fresh air on the international stage, but whether he has the drive, determination, and leadership ability to fundamentally transform the U.S.-French relationship remains to be seen.

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11. Jed Babbin, “Gilligan’s Ghost,” *The American Spectator Online*, April 25, 2005, at www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=8070.