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## France's foreign policy: from one president to another?

Some analysts pretend that France's approach of foreign policy could be explained by a tension between an "occidental" pole and a "gaullist-mitterrandist" pole. That interpretative framework is used to disqualify Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign policy because the French president has referred to the "Western family" and he is shown as a "neo-conservative". This is not convincing. On the one hand, it is obvious that France is a European and Western nation in the historical, cultural and geopolitical fields. These are facts, and ideology or post-modern subjectivism will not change the main lines. Concerning neo-conservatism on the other hand, that imputation is now used to name any will of self-assertion and it is only controversial. Lastly, De Gaulle and even Mitterrand were referring themselves to the West in their rhetoric and international action. The exaltation of "gaullo-mitterrandism" is primarily a disguise and an attempt of legitimization for a self-referential discourse.

In foreign policy, Nicolas Sarkozy's change means the end of "cognitive dissonances". Now, the official geopolitical discourses and representations are more in phase with France's true international stakes and commitments. The decisions that have been made such as the full participation to the NATO command structure and some others are also the outcome of previous choices and deep logics. More generally, Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign policy is led in a most difficult background. There is a shift of the World balance and the geopolitical tempo is quickening. The financial collapse in 2008, the current Eurozone crisis, the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 and the military intervention in Libya underlined, in some measure, Nicolas Sarkozy's *maestria* and his ability to meet a challenge. However, it is true that the numerous invocations of "pragmatism" and some self-contradictory options may give a feeling of opportunism.

Nevertheless, the global picture of this policy is coherent and consistent. The main idea is to set France at the intersection of the EU and NATO, at the core of the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical system, in order to enhance its power and influence in European matters, to reinforce its levers in Europe's geographical neighborhood and to renew France's World power status. In the European circle, the challenge is to combine an economical and monetary axis with Berlin and a diplomatic and strategic axis with London. The purpose is to give more substance to the EU and to maintain military capa-

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### Abstract

In 2007, at the time of the previous presidential election, the revitalization of France's foreign policy was one of the issues tackled by the political debates, even though it was marginally. In 2012, things are different, the nostalgia for greatness and the "souci du monde" are submerged by domestic issues. Nonetheless, Politics cannot be ignored. The diplomatic and strategic stakes are not as visible and obvious as those domestic issues but they are most important. Therefore, we shall study the share of continuity and discontinuity in France's foreign policy in the prospect of a possible political change at the head of the State.

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(\*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

bilities for interventions overseas, beyond the “old parapets”. This framework is completed with a real activism in the Mediterranean circle. The Union for Mediterranean (UfM) has been planned and the war in Libya has showed a French determined strategic posture in that area.

### **Positive critic and hypercriticism**

A more important investment in the Atlantic circle allows enhancing France’s weight among the Western trio made up of the United-States, the United Kingdom and France. The French purpose is to strengthen the American commitment in Europe’s defence, a necessary pillar for the engagement policy with Russia, and face together big strategic challenges beyond the Mediterranean circle. Let us think of the Afghan theater, the Iranian nuclear threat, the creeping civil war in Syria and, very soon perhaps, the chaotic logic that spreads in Sahel and Sahara. Besides, Paris is seeking to maintain its rank and power through “strategic partnerships” with key-countries and emerging powers. In a French perspective, China is rather a question of geoeconomics. But one has to pay attention to the relationship with India and Brazil as well as the enhanced French presence in the Arabian-Persian Gulf.

Although the big picture is consistent, a more detailed analysis displays internal contradictions and fragilities. In fact, the UfM has been blocked from necessity before being overwhelmed by uprisings and seditions in various Arab countries. Regarding Sarkozy’s Russian policy, the Washington-Moscow “reset” has been a pretext to pursue narrow national interests even if it meant compromising the French global investment in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the most serious Eurozone crisis is leading France to a very difficult balancing exercise between Germany and its growing weight in Europe, and the United-Kingdom, a most important ally to keep on existing as a World power. However, it must be said that it is always easy to oppose the “discourse of the method” to the real world. This latter is much bigger than the reviewers’ and rival’s plans and evaluations.

In the prospect of a possible political change, it would be difficult to anticipate the shifts in the foreign policy field. Indeed, States are not like ships that would easily change course: the main facts are what they are, the environment is under constraint, the treaties and alliances have to be respected (*Pacta sunt servanda*). François Hollande has been excessively discreet about international issues but some experts close to the Socialist Party allow us to get more information. In fact, this is rather some isolated criticism than a global picture. In the background, it seems that the most important is to project the “antisarkozysm” on the international stage. Every problem would just be a matter of character. With a “common man” at the head of the State, problems should be less difficult that it was initially thought. That mindset could be analyzed like a sort of “Obama syndrome”. In that case, disillusion, setbacks and misfortunes would be inevitable.

### **Hollande’s policy and its uncertainty**

Just a few specific elements can be mentioned about what a socialist president’s foreign policy could be, and they let us skeptical. A firm attitude towards Germany is announced with the risk of jeopardizing the European financial balance even more. In the same time, the “French-German couple” is invoked against Sarkozy’s rapprochement with the United-Kingdom. An “Initiative for growth” would open a new convergence with some European countries in difficulty but it must be said that France would be the only one to make the choice of spending more public money and to see social-democracy as a response. In the Transatlantic field, political understanding, lucidity and courage would lead to withdraw troops from the Afghan theater as soon as possible! Moreover, they say that it would be without any consequences in the relationship with the United-States and the European allies. No damage for France’s word and trust in its policy, they think. All of that would be only old things!

Besides these questions and geographical zones, it is difficult to anticipate what would be the French foreign policy as a whole. Just a very little information about the course of events in the Mediterranean Basin and Arab countries. Would we have to expect “generalizing generalities” over democratization, development and secularization? Nothing strong on the Sahelian-Saharan zone and the Tuareg issue. According to various experts who are opposed to Sarkozy, if we read between the lines, it would have been necessary to support Gadhafi and in the Côte d’Ivoire, not to help Alassane Ouattara against

Laurent Gbagbo. That is supposed to be the right way to maintain an African status quo that does no longer exist! Incidentally, it must be remembered that Laurent Gbagbo belonged to the Socialist International movement. In the world field, France's new mission would be to play the self-proclaimed intermediary in the business between the installed Western powers and the emerging powers. Those last ones would just be looking for symbolic gratifications. More generally, multilateralism is showed as a "betting-system" and the main file would be a question of international representativeness.

Indeed, that global picture is still evasive but it shows a mindset that is not very convincing and encouraging. Domestic issues are priorities and moreover, the French State should be turned into a machine for taking and allocating riches that are no longer created by the economic system. The State loans on financial markets are still supposed to compensate the lack of growth and innovation although those markets are condemned as if they were evil persons fighting against France. All that under the direction of an impotent State disguised in a strategic State. In that way of thinking, the foreign policy is secondary and it must be feared that a low intensity moralism and the invocation of the concept of "dialog" would be the mask of a grand retreat and a sort of approval of the European provincialism. That would also mean less investment in a too much "global" NATO. The unlikely "European defence" would be a pretext for stasis and less military spending again.

### A mental and energy rupture?

If a political change happens, the main lines of France's foreign policy would not be *ipso facto* shattered, even though a "butterfly-effect" and chain reaction should not be ignored. The principle of inertia, an efficient "engine house" (i.e. the diplomatic and military system) and the International frameworks within France is a stakeholder are factors that play for some continuity. Nevertheless, this is the leaders' psychology, their mental maps and decisions that give move to the 'engine house'. Step by step, some punctual inflections could alter the global picture and a weak spirit, showed as a sort of open-mindedness to the otherness, would endanger the foreign policy in its substance.

First and foremost, the rupture that we try to conceive is in the mental and energetic field. In addition, some ideological aspects – i.e. a vague and implicate "penitential narcissism" – have to be taken into account. That rupture would be a sort of consent to decline, a process maybe seen and showed as a fair backlash, when that unbalancing and polycentric world requires resolution and a strong presence abroad. Let us be sure that the laws of tragedy are not mere matters of "representations" and language games. The political sense relies on objectivity and preemption in order to avoid the worst. Whoever he will be, the next Head of State will meet very serious threats and he will have to be up to the situation. They say that the function creates the organ. Alas, this is far from certain.

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