

Sarkozy's foreign policy: where do European interests and values stand?¹

Dr. José Ignacio Torreblanca
Head of the Madrid Office and Senior Researcher
The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

Introduction

"France is returning to Europe at a hurried pace, carelessly [...] the French president needs a brilliant and aggressive foreign policy to satisfy the French and pull them out of depression". Thus Lluís Bassets, *El País'* opinion editor, summarised in a few words the feelings that many people in Spain, and the rest of Europe, harbour towards French President Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign policy.

France's long-awaited, albeit abrupt, return to the European and international scene is two-sided: on the one hand, it is positively beneficial, and should not only be welcomed by all European partners, but also harnessed to the maximum in order to promote the European project; on the other, it is quite problematic, and will undoubtedly raise (in fact, it already has) considerable tensions that should not be ignored. These stress points originate primarily in the lack of attention to European interests (and, in tandem, to member states' interests), but also emanate from that marginal place where principles and values relating to democracy and human rights seem to have been relegated.

France's return is a fact, but there are two questions whose answers remain unclear:

- First, which France is returning?
- Second, how will Europe react? That is, what kind of synergy or friction can be expected, and how should it be faced?

This article aims at an initial approach to these questions - if not to provide answers, at the very least to sketch an outline for debate about these issues.

¹ A version of this text was presented at the Franco-Spanish summit, organised by the CIDOB Foundation and celebrated in Paris on 9-10 January 2008. I would like to thank all participants for their comments and criticisms. A comment version will also be published in *Política Exterior*, 122, March-April 2008.

Which France?

Sarkozy's innovative and openly heterodox foreign policy is attracting singular attention in neighbouring countries. Amongst a multitude of texts, speeches, declarations and analyses that this mandate has generated, there is one essential item: President Sarkozy's speech before the conference of French ambassadors on 27 August 2007.² Here, there are a few key elements that must be discussed.

First, it clearly demonstrates the transformative (or almost revolutionary) character of Sarkozy's foreign policy. As Pierre Hassner points out, we are seeing a systematic effort to completely rethink the bases of the last fifty years of French foreign policy – probably an attempt to once and for all reinterpret and adapt Gaullism to the twenty-first century (Gaullism as understood beyond ideological nuances, as an ambitious outlook on France's role and presence in the world). In this view, Giscard, as well as Mitterrand or Chirac would have practised the same foreign policy, in which France acted as a world leader “by default” – certainly influential, but mostly passive (or defensive) in its stances; obsessed with balancing the role of the United States in Europe and throughout the world, and more eager to criticise and counterpoise the US than to act out of its own initiative. In contrast, it can be very clearly deduced from Sarkozy's speech that the France he imagines does not aspire to passively manage De Gaulle's legacy; rather, she wishes to actively formulate an international order that is filled with enormous challenges, which requires a new discourse on security and, most significantly, transatlantic relations and the role of Europe in the world.³

Second, and complementing the above, the foreign policy put forward by Sarkozy is not divorceable from a very clear vision of personal leadership. As he pointed out in the 27 August speech, “the mark of a statesman is to change the course of events, not simply to describe or explain them”. Are we before a European Kennedy? Someone who, like JFK, wants to push the boundaries of the possible, perhaps even of the imaginable in the next generation (as can be inferred from his speech at Tangiers, on 23 October)?⁴ Naturally, this leadership element has two sides: on the one hand, it can be a great facilitator of initiatives and decision-making. However, it might also distort the normal channels of foreign policy formulation in a democratic country, which consist of the search for and negotiation of a balance amongst different views, institutions, sectors of society, priorities, actors, etc. In the last instance, a foreign policy that is completely reliant on personal leadership, and renounces the construction of an ample political and social bases, will most likely be unsustainable, since it will be subject to the vicissitudes that leadership may suffer.

Third, it is important to underline the significant correlation between domestic and foreign policy. The “Sarkozy phenomenon” goes beyond the mere political spin that it is sometimes given, as it engenders a solid relationship between national and foreign affairs. This is an extremely important point, since the world that we live in (especially within the European ambit) is no longer about managing the complex interrelationship of domestic and foreign policy; rather, it

² Sarkozy, Nicolas., French president, speech given at the French Ambassadors' conference, Elysee Palace, Paris, 27 August 2007. http://elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/2007/aout/allocation_a_l_occasion_de_la_conference_des_ambassadeurs.79272.html

³ Of the three challenges mentioned by Sarkozy in his speech (first, to avoid confrontation between Islam and the West; second, the integration of big emerging powers – China, India and Brazil – into the multilateral order, and their relationship in and with the established rules of the game; and third, climate change, new pandemics and energetic security), it is fair to object to the somewhat simplistic formulation of the first (which evokes Huntington's clash of civilisations). Sarkozy's formulation seems to forget that Al-Qaeda's jihadist terrorism is directed not only at the West, but also at Islamic societies, their processes of political, economic and social modernisation, and especially at their governments.

⁴ Sarkozy, Nicolas., French president, speech at Tangiers, 23 October 2007. http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/maroc_410/france-maroc_1185/visites_5538/discours-m.-nicolas-sarkozy-president-republique-tanger-23-octobre-2007_55551.html

must be concerned with fully comprehending the fact that distinctions between national and foreign affairs have ceased to exist, and that, therefore, everything we do in the domestic sphere will have consequences internationally and vice-versa.

Great European leaders (with a mention to Tony Blair and Felipe Gonzalez) have been so judged in the measure that their activities in foreign policy were a consequence of their analyses of the domestic needs of their countries. That is, in understanding foreign policy not simply as another means to national ends, but as a transformative instrument of society that requires a coherent international transformation as well. Thus, much like Felipe Gonzalez was described by some of his 1980s admirers (or critics, perhaps?) as a “Thatcherist of the left” in virtue of his taste for orthodox liberal economics and for rethinking some of the traditional elements of left-wing foreign policy; and akin to Blair, who ten years later would promote a similar change in the culture of the British left wing (which went from being statist to liberal in both domestic and foreign policy), there is no room for doubt that Sarkozy’s posture is deliberately transformative in its ideological identity, and bears close relation to national policy (which aims at a fundamental reform of the state) as well as foreign policy (whose objective is to lay the foundation for a new global leadership). In a similar fashion to Gonzalez and Blair, Sarkozy seems to believe that only if things in France are working will she be effective in the world; all the while recognising that for France to work a foreign policy to that end is necessary. In sum, the issue is one of building a virtuous relationship between internal and external reform.

These three elements relate to the classical debate about the possibilities and limitations of political will vis-à-vis historical, institutional and organisational constraints that every leader must face at same point. In this sense, Arnold Wolfers’ classical distinction between “possession goals” and “milieu goals” when evaluating member states’ foreign policies is quite pertinent: “possession goals” are objectives that a state seeks to fulfil in a given context, usually at the expense of others (for example, concerning the distribution of power and influence in European institutions, a country will prefer a higher voting quota, a larger or smaller number of members of the European parliament, etc). Nevertheless, on occasion, states will direct their efforts more towards the creation of an institutional environment favourable to their generic interests than at the satisfaction of specific interests.⁵

It can therefore be said that leadership consists not only of the will to change things (a necessary precondition, yet insufficient of its own), but also of the ability to distinguish between instances in which problems can be solved within the existing structures and procedures, and those that are unsolvable lest structures and procedures be changed. This distinction is fundamental in relation to the European Union, given that it can either be regarded as a medium at the service of national interests (thus merely a “transmission belt”), or, in a more sophisticated view, as the environment that would make possible the satisfaction of national interests, requiring a more integrational, consensual and long-term approach. After the Second World War, the US built a multilateral order congruent with its principles and interests, wherefrom it benefited greatly (paradoxically more than when it has unilaterally tried to render this multilateral order at its service, a task in which it has failed miserably). Therefore, in order to be truly transformative, Sarkozy’s leadership will have to build new institutions, not only alter the position of France within existing ones. And that is where Europe comes in, because France will not be able to do it on her own.

⁵ One can distinguish goals pertaining, respectively, to national possessions and to the shape of the environment in which the nation operates. I call the former “possession goals”, the latter “milieu goals.” In directing its foreign policy toward the attainment of its possession goals, a nation is aiming at the enhancement or the preservation of one or more of the things to which it attaches value [...]. Here a nation finds itself competing with others for a share in values of limited supply; it is demanding that its share be left intact or be increased [...]. Milieu goals are of a different character. Nations pursuing them are out not to defend or increase possessions they hold to the exclusion of others, but aim instead at shaping conditions beyond their national boundaries (Wolfers, Arnold., *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962, Chapter Five, “The Goals of Foreign Policy”, pp. 67- 80).

In this sense, the rescue of one of the essential driving forces of European integration from the globophic malaise in which it has been languishing in recent years is both timely and welcome.⁶ However, given that Sarkozy's goal (to use a computing analogy) of "restarting" France occurs in a context where both France's economic and foreign policies are fully Europeanised, he will necessarily need to restart the European Union too. Naturally, this is the point at which friction and tension originate, since neither the problems nor the timing or the solutions raised or proposed by France need be similar to those raised or put forward by Europe and its member states.

The Europe that Sarkozy will find

The Europe that Sarkozy wishes to be an actor in is a "domesticated" one. After fifty years of European integration, the essential characteristics of the Westphalian state (autonomy inside, sovereignty outside) have been replaced by the rule of European law (the *acquis communautaire*), which is based upon its supremacy over national law and the direct effect of the Community's norms. The project's success, sufficiently reflected by the unprecedented growth of the organisation's members (from six to twenty-seven) demonstrates the appeal of the so-called "European transformative power", or simply the "European effect".⁷ Despite the recent questioning of soft power by the Sino-Russian resurgence (both staunch believers in "hard power"), Europe represents its paradigmatic quintessence.

The problem resides in the fact that in a moment when Europe was naturally and imminently inclined to take a great step forward in terms of political unity and fulfil its "manifest destiny" in world affairs, the most important member states hesitated and, ultimately, retreated. Tony Blair did so because his mandate, which started off with the desire to bring the United Kingdom to the heart of Europe, ended in catastrophe with regard to his own leadership (as he became a mere sidekick of the United States), as well as with respect to European divisions. Blair's political legacy is not only a divided Europe, but also an even further debilitation of the European cause in the United Kingdom, reflected by the oscillations between indifference and hostility of Gordon Brown's European policy.

A similar complaint can be lodged against the evolution of German foreign policy. This is because its "normalisation" after reunification has not resulted in a further "Europeanisation" of its foreign policy (despite significant changes in doctrine that made Germany's participation in the Kosovo conflict possible). Much to the contrary, it has led to a clear "renationalisation", sufficiently evidenced by its effort - both sterile and anti-European - to obtain a permanent seat on the Security Council. To complete the picture, the recent years of German foreign policy, at least in matters of energy (Schröder-Putin), have made it evident that the US is still the "indispensable power" despite its failures in Iraq, and that the European Union is losing its collective weight.

The signals emitted by France are not exceedingly different from the aforementioned framework of renationalisation. With actions such as: proposing in September 2006 a mini-treaty instead of the European Constitution; forcing a rediscussion of the Turkish question; imposing the Mediterranean Union; demanding that a committee of wise men ponder the future frontiers of the European Union; and unilaterally starting a process of revision of the European Security Strategy, Sarkozy has obscured, or relegated to the background, the European outlook in his search for common ground between national and European interests.

⁶ The 251/2006 Eurobarometer on attitudes towards globalisation showed that 72 percent of polled French consider it a threat, whereas, much to the contrary, 77% of Danes considered it an opportunity. http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_251_en.pdf

⁷ Leonard, Mark., and Youngs, Richard., "El efecto Europa", *Foreign Policy Edición Español*, October-November 2007.

Such an approach to European interests – bottom-up, speech-fuelled and without a previous search for consensus – seriously undermines Europe’s options, which become reduced to the accommodation of national interests. More precisely, Europe is limited to acting as a transmission belt in the amplification of national interests, if not otherwise avoided and marginalised when it becomes an obstacle. The proposal, development and unfolding of the Committee of Wise Men, which later became the Reflection Group, is a good example of this phenomenon, as are all things related to the birth and development of the Mediterranean Union.

In fairness, the criticism of tending towards renationalisation can also be extended to Spain, formerly the country of “Spain is the problem, Europe is the solution”. At first sight it is decidedly pro-Europe and, supposedly, genetically shielded from any kind of Euroscepticism. However, the voices that advocate a reevaluation of the traditional parameters of European politics are gaining considerable strength, especially because they are no longer derived from Aznar’s sphere (neoconservative and close to the Bush Administration and the Republican Party), as in the years 2000-2001, but from a growing perception that, with respect to key issues of interest to Spain (energy security, immigration, or the safety of our investments in Latin America before thriving populism), Europe seems unwilling to act despite its great capacity to do so. Thus, it is very likely that Spain will eventually reach the same conclusion as its neighbours (through persuasion or imitation) about the unavoidable need to reinforce the (soft or hard) powers of action and projection of states. On the other hand, it is also quite likely that these powers will in turn be used to strengthen European capabilities; nevertheless, this is not certain, and must not be taken as given.

Therefore, precisely at a moment when Russia and China pose a growing challenge to the European Union, and when Europe is becoming less attractive in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Europeans continue to adopt a foreign policy that – despite considerable improvements in recent years, and the new instruments of the Treaty of Lisbon – is still too similar to the “pre-Euro” Europe (characterised by diffuse interests, fundamentally reactionary policies and fragmented currencies managed by central banks that barely communicated amongst themselves). Is it that difficult to extend the euro analogy to European foreign policy, as a means to better understand the cost of a “non-Europe” in matters of foreign policy?

Considering the existing data and demographic and economic forecasts for Europe in 2040 (that show the complete irrelevance of potentially fragmented European states, in contrast with the possibility of the provision of global public goods that a united Europe should harbour), the blindness of European leaders can cause nothing but impatience. Most certainly, a strong Europe cannot exist without powerful and vigorous states that have dynamic foreign policies. However, this must not culminate in the current situation, where there are no institutions that allow European interests to prevail over national interests when it comes to European foreign policy. In Afghanistan, Darfur, Kosovo, or before Russia, Europeans are no longer able to speak with a single voice (something that, in theory, they should have been doing since 1970), let alone *act* together, which is truly essential.

Therefore, although the bilateral relations of the EU’s member states have been “domesticated”, the European Union’s foreign policy is still an amalgamate mess. On one side, the EU does have “foreign affairs”, since its common policies have external impacts that must be managed. On the other, due to internal market demands the EU is a customs union that requires common trade policies. In sum, it has slowly grown into apparatus and foreign policy institutions (CFSP and ESDP) that have limited ambitions and are presided over by an irreparable intergovernmental character.

As Sarkozy pointed out in his speech of 27 August, “our foreign policy is a reflection of our national identity”. Implicit therein lies a very clear corollary: if Europe has a weak identity, or if states agree on the irrelevance or weakness of that identity, then its foreign policy will also be weak. For this reason, the suppression of symbols in the Constitutional Treaty is a lot more relevant than it seems. Foreign policy, as markedly noted by Sarkozy, is not just any other public policy; rather, it is concerned with question like “who are we?”, “what do we want?” and “who are we willing to achieve it with?”. Nevertheless, these questions and their answers remain diffuse in the European realm.

As such, despite having salvaged the cargo (the framework of the Constitutional Treaty), the European ship has wounded its shared purpose (the so-called *finalité politique*). The lack of resonance between France, Spain and Germany, added to growing British eccentricity, may come to undermine the effectiveness of European policies and, more importantly, hinder the rightful development and implementation of the very powerful foreign policy instruments that reside in the recently signed Treaty of Lisbon.

Conclusion: Europe’s absorption capacity

Once the European ship was rescued from the paralysis caused by the French “no” in May 2005, damage control signalled fatigue points in the four most important engines of European integration.

First of all: the question of *deepening*. The Treaty of Lisbon has meant a significant setback with respect to the Constitutional Treaty, as much in substantive terms (new red lines) as with regard to the feeling of shared purpose (identity disarming). In any case, the Constitutional Treaty fixed the integrational ceiling at twenty-seven members, which implies that in the future there will be more variable geometry, sectoral specialisation and reinforced cooperation. Such flexibility offers a realm of practical possibilities, but it also harbours a very significant risk: that the European Union (like the Mediterranean Union) might become a “union of projects”, rather than a “project of unity”. It would not be less curious if, now that Rumsfeld has left, the EU swapped its motto (“united in diversity”) for the former’s favourite one (“the mission determines the coalition”).

Second: *enlargement policy*. Another consequence of the French referendum and the subsequent crisis regards a negative (and unfounded) retrospective judgement of the effects of the 2004 enlargement. This negative view of enlargement has considerably damaged French influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Sarkozy’s turnaround vis-à-vis Turkey - diametrically opposed to decisions made by Chirac for over a decade - sowed deep tension at the heart of the EU (especially with respect to Spain, which has always been a staunch defender of Turkey’s eligibility, as well as fomenter of the “Alliance of Civilisations”).

Seen from the outside, it seems hardly constructive to resume dialogue between “Islam and the West” (as Sarkozy proposes) with a “no” to Turkey (as well as its being contradictory to the spirit of the Mediterranean Union). France intends to unilaterally change the terms of the EU-Turkey debate in this matter, since from the beginning of accession negotiations the debate has not been about Turkey’s eligibility or reasons for joining, but about the conditions of accession. Here, once again French unilateralism was vehemently contested by member states and European institutions. Nevertheless, the most worrying symptom was the “Committee of

Wise Men" (later "Reflection Group"), an initiative that was conspicuously imposed on other states in order to force an unsolicited debate about Europe's frontiers.

In third place, doubts still exist over the extent to which the Union's so-called "*economic constitution*" will be censored, since we find ourselves at a point in which the rules of the domestic market, growth and stability pact, and, definitively, the Union's mechanisms of economic governance are too often questioned from a determinedly negative stance towards globalisation, which is regarded much more as a threat than as an opportunity. Therefore, the rough edges around the "European preference" and the free market are far from having been smoothed out, and have caused considerable friction among member states. Germany, in particular, has embarked on a set of very effective reforms, albeit perhaps not so visible, that imply enormous sacrifices which Chancellor Merkel is managing with extraordinary competence both in the political and economic fields.⁸

Finally, the fourth source of friction is *European foreign policy*. In its journey from Toulon to Tangiers, the proposal of the Mediterranean Union has at the very least caused great perplexity with respect to both form (unilateral) and content. Italy and Spain have seen in this issue the opportunity to strengthen the Mediterranean policy of the Union and, consequently, have concentrated their efforts in "Europeanising" the initiative both in process and contents. However, other members, such as Germany, have been much less deferential, strongly criticising the initiative at every stage.⁹

Furthermore, the fact that the initiative to revise the European Security Strategy during the French presidency was launched without previous consultation of member states was not welcome in Germany. Once again, this gave the impression that the revision of the security strategy was a precondition necessary for the fulfilment of a national objective (France's return to NATO's military structure) rather than the result of a shared analysis of European security needs. This is not to say that Sarkozy is wrong in wishing to put an end to the absurdity of the current situation whereby NATO is perceived (and vilified by many) as an American organisation, while twenty-one out of its twenty-six members pertain to the EU. However, the problem remains that his proposal appears to refract from an exclusively national prism.

A similar point can be made about democracy and human rights. It is paradoxical that France, traditionally the bosom of human rights, is undermining the already fragile European policy of promoting democracy and human rights. The explicit support for Putin after elections that were unanimously considered abusive; the refusal to criticise America's obvious double standards on human rights and democracy; and Gadaffi's visit to Paris, along with the military agreement with the United Arab Emirates, all demonstrate that Sarkozy's foreign policy is moving far beyond the point that Bernard Kouchner's presence in his Cabinet would have seemed to indicate.

In sum, it is possible that some of these discrepancies on key issues are the result of a certain *décalage* caused by the frantic rhythm of proposals put forward by Nicolas Sarkozy in the first few months of what seems set to become a hyper-presidency. For this reason, one could argue that such differences will eventually be dissipated, provided that, with time, the Elysian and the Quai d'Orsay synchronise their paces (which, to date, has only happened laboriously and not without tension) and, in turn, bilateral coordination with Spain, Italy, Germany, and other members and European institutions happen *ex ante* as opposed to *ex post*, the latter having been the case with several foreign policy initiatives thus far.

⁸ In this sense, it is obvious that the Vedrine Report proposes a view of European economic governance and regulatory needs that is quite distant from the European norm. Therefore, whether or not one agrees with it, it is clear that transplating it to the European sphere will be difficult.

⁹ See Merkel's s harsh declaration on the subject: "Merkel sure Mediterranean Union will not happen", AFP, 7 December 2007, <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/1197048725.87/>, and "Merkel criticises Sarkozy's Mediterranean Plans", *Euobserver.com*, 6 December 2007.

However, as I have tried to argue here, beyond the problems of coordination (which are relatively easy to solve), the existing friction also reflects deeper tendencies regarding the conceptualisation of problems and solutions. Therefore, while such differences cannot be resolved through coordination, and must therefore be solved through negotiations, their treatment needs further discussion.

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org