

France in Africa: from paternalism to pragmatism

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»» When President Sarkozy arrived at the Elysée in 2007, he vowed to change France's relationship with its former colonies and put an end to *Françafrique*. The president has sometimes lapsed into paternalistic language, and there are vestiges of the past in the powerful networks and francophone cultural attachment. But France is slowly adopting more pragmatic policies in Africa. The changing nature of France-Africa relations is key in light of the Africa-European Union Summit in November 2010.

Many factors indicate that Africa now matters less for France, and that the relationship is changing. French small businesses and long-term expatriates are leaving, the diplomatic service has slashed positions and development aid has decreased dramatically. Presidents and chief executives no longer refer to each other as 'friends'. High-level visits are at a historic low. Old-style long dinners have given way to functional telephone conversations.

According to some observers, France simply does not have the means to retain an imperial-style political and cultural presence in Africa. They see Africa being pushed off the French policy radar. But this is not quite what is happening. France has accepted – albeit reluctantly – to give up on *grandeur*. However, it now seeks instead to maintain its position as an important middle-size power through more hard-headed strategies. President Sarkozy's more pragmatic and streamlined policy is contributing to this trend. Africa is still important in French policy, but in ways more tailored to specific interests.

Françafrique – the name traditionally given to France's sphere of privileged influence across Africa – is today a space defined more by conventional national interest calculations on both sides than by the emotive connections of decades past. Relations have readjusted in line with France's own dimin-

HIGHLIGHTS

- France's African policies have become more pragmatic, reflecting the country's diminished means for *grandeur*
- Two main vestiges of the past are the shadowy networks for business and political deals and an outmoded Francophonie cultural policy
- France strategically promotes a handful of big companies, and has downscaled military bases and bilateral defence agreements
- France could channel its Africa policies more systematically through the European Union, improving credibility and outreach. But the European Union and its member states have yet to influence French policy so that it contributes to more European positions in Africa

2

»»»»» ished capacities to project influence as a great power. Today's diplomatic exchanges, such as last May's France-Africa summit, are attended by Anglophone giants Nigeria and South Africa and include forums for business representatives – a distinctive slant away from the Elysée's once robust paternalism vis-à-vis the former French colonies.

VESTIGES OF THE PAST

Remnants of the old *Françafrique* certainly remain in the networks of middlemen that make business and political deals, and in the somewhat outdated and ineffective promotion of francophone culture. These are vestiges of paternalism, though they are definitely losing ground.

The murky networks and the logic of parallel-track diplomacy still exist. There have only been minor personnel changes on the French side. Individuals elevated under President Sarkozy – alongside many of the old guard veterans – hold the keys to business deals and can pull the strings to influence regime-change, or the choice of political and military leaders. They are top businessmen, high-ranking civil servants from the ministries of foreign affairs and defence, parliamentarians and a number of middlemen whose role as 'advisors' between the continents is as opaque as it is powerful. Generations of African elites have learned to navigate this political-economic maze of counsellors, deals and favours. They have themselves used the system to consolidate their powers, including through co-opting close family members and friends. These back-door agreements, powerful mediations and cronyism maintain undemocratic economic predation in resource-rich Africa and are proving hard to dismantle.

President Sarkozy has charged his aides with keeping an eye on what actually are strategic French economic interests. His right hand, chief of staff and confidante Claude Guéant, and Robert Bourgi, a lawyer with no official designation, screen the Africa-related files and can move items up the agenda. The head of the 'Africa Cell' at the Elysée and the minister of cooperation are responsible for managing the issues. These two

extremely politicised offices at the heart of the French government are intimately tied to France's Africa diplomacy, and manage the military and business connections to the continent within a trusted, inner circle of functionaries. Some African partners have complained that access to the French president is now limited. Thus the *Françafrique* interest group now resorts to more lobbying through the Assembly, business networks like CIAN (*Conseil des Investisseurs in Afrique Noire*), and even the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF).

Moreover, France stubbornly insists on its proactive defence of francophone culture worldwide. It now spends a record 750 million Euros annually on its cultural activities. The French language is still considered a preserve of national culture, as if it only belonged to other francophone countries by extension. As such, France's cultural policy retains a strong dose of paternalism.

One of the main forums for France's cultural influence in Africa is the OIF, founded in Niger in 1970. France is the OIF's main financial contributor, with 40 per cent of the total budget and the entirety of funding for university and research initiatives. The OIF is an example of how the boundaries between cultural and geopolitical policies have become blurred, in effect damaging the OIF's coherence. For example, its membership has been inflated to 70 states – from 31 truly francophone countries – to guarantee greater political relevance for France.

Nominally, the OIF has also sought to defend democracy and become a political mediator in African crises, notably under the chairmanship of former Senegalese president Abdou Diouf. However, its declarations and agreements in recent years have been ineffective. The OIF's criticisms of coups and use of sanctions in cases of rigged elections or human rights abuses have been irregular. Its foray into mediation and conflict resolution has depended too much on the networks and powerful middlemen of old-time *Françafrique*. Some voices within African countries have been calling for the OIF to return to its original purpose, promoting the arts and humanities within the francophone sphere.

Africa accounts for 20 million new French-speakers since 2007, and is predicted to be home to 85 per cent of all French-speakers in the world by 2050. French is widely used in literacy campaigns and higher education. Of course, English is preferred in many business environments. In Rwanda, French has been relegated to the second official language behind English. *France 24* now broadcasts news in English and Arabic, reaching out to a non-francophone public.

ECONOMIC AND MILITARY PRAGMATISM

French policy has become more pragmatically focused on economics, prioritising support for big companies. France has also reduced its military presence in Africa.

France and Africa are important trade partners: 18 per cent of France's exports go to Africa, while African products amount to 13 per cent of France's imports. Despite the rise of South-South flows and

notably China's investment in Africa, France is still one of the main investors in the continent with 4.4 billion dollars of flows in 2007. Like other Western donors, France has also increased its share in South Africa and other rising non-francophone economies. The most important

indicator of French economic interests is a series of key companies that dominate the sectors of energy and construction. This is a change from the widespread and numerous initiatives that were active shortly after independence.

Some 20 large companies now account for most of France's economic interests. Among them, Total has key interests in Gabon and Congo Brazzaville, and Bolloré is a world leader in infrastructure develop-

ment and transport. These companies have enjoyed preferential access to markets and won key African contracts to prospect for oil and gas and for the construction of harbours. Areva is a booming French company that works on all stages of nuclear energy production, ranging from uranium prospection, mining and refinery to the delivery of civil energy; it influences France's policy in Niger and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Military equipment suppliers to poor Central African countries, telecommunication firms in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, and timber companies in Gabon are all part of the French military-industrial mix spread across Africa. More daring companies have also shown a remarkable ability to penetrate highly lucrative markets beyond traditional *Françafrique*. One example is construction company Bouygues in Nigeria.

An example of the new pragmatism was the France-Africa summit celebrated in Nice in May, which was shorter than usual, and where business guests shared the stage with presidents. Betraying the primarily commercial orientation of the summit, one of its few substantive outcomes has been a new 2.5 billion dollar investment and guarantee fund. High-level visits have also reflected this pragmatic approach. After Jacob Zuma was inaugurated as President of South Africa, the first visit by a member of the French government was that of the secretary of state for foreign trade, who participated in a Franco-South African high-level conference on energy in 2009. President Sarkozy personally makes an effort when necessary, as in Angola in 2008, when he visited President Dos Santos to restore French-Angolan potential for cooperation beyond the issues of judicial prosecution in France ('Angolagate'). On this official visit, the heads of Total and Bolloré played a high profile role, together with representatives from Areva and Thalès – the latter targeting a business agreement on secure communications systems estimated at 150 million Euros.

For their part, African countries have taken steps for rapprochement with France. This includes Guinea, facing a crucial transition, and Rwanda, with whom relations had been suspended for years. Many of

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»»»»» France's former colonies still rely on French investment and industrial cooperation. A notable example is the pegging of the CFA Franc, the currency of 14 Central and West African countries, initially to the French Franc and now to the Euro. But these states can also raise the stakes, especially in the energy sector, which has become more competitive with the entry into African markets of rising economic powers like China, Brazil and South Africa. The African Union might also become a means for the continent to exert its collective leverage, although France may be reticent in the face of such a prospect.

Development aid has also changed, dwindling in overall amounts but increasing the French executive's strategic power in Africa. Like other Western countries, France has been reducing aid in the past few years; from 0.47 per cent of GDP in 2005 and 2006, it fell to 0.39 per cent in 2008. Sub-Saharan Africa is still the region that receives the largest share of France's aid, even if this has gone down from 59 per cent in 2003 to 43 per cent in 2008.

Most importantly, the French government politically steers aid even more assiduously than in the past. Bilateral grants have been cut back, but loans have risen in percentage and volume. France is also replacing its grants with debt forgiveness and with higher levels of budgetary support. Such initiatives have allowed France to select the countries and regimes it compensates more tightly, as compared to project-oriented grants. Nigeria has benefited from debt forgiveness in recent years, and the new 137 million Euro debt rebate to Cameroon is another case in point. French lawmakers' oversight in development cooperation has diminished with declining aid volumes, for the Assembly was powerful vis-à-vis grants and bilateral aid. But now President Sarkozy has centralised control, and the executive is better able to influence the development aid that goes through multilateral institutions.

France's security pragmatism in Africa has meant reduced interference and a diminished yet strategic presence. France strongly believes in *realpolitik* and hard power, but is less and less willing to use military force against Africans to defend French interests. When rebel groups attacked Chadian President

Idriss Déby's palace in N'Djamena in 2008, President Sarkozy allowed a minimum use of violence to defend expatriates at the airport, thus indirectly protecting the regime. But this was less robust or partisan than Jacques Chirac's intervention in Chad or Côte d'Ivoire in previous years.

In military terms *Françafrique* is in decline, with a sober downscaling of bilateral defence agreements with African countries to just eight friendly or strategically vital regimes. These agreements are undergoing strict renegotiation, away from the old 'secret' clauses that *de facto* allowed the French to defend incumbent regimes. Agreements have been reached with Togo, Cameroon, Gabon and Central African Republic, while negotiations are almost closed with Djibouti, Comoros Islands and Senegal. Negotiations with Côte d'Ivoire meanwhile remain shelved. France's military bases on the continent will also shrink to just two, in Djibouti and Gabon. They will keep about 4,000 troops on the ground (down from 6,000), providing launch pads for military deployment when necessary. France still values hard power to secure expatriates and interests, but is working to create an image of a much friendlier *gendarme*.

France is also using Africa as a 'maximiser' of its international relevance and to support its own stands for multilateralism. President Sarkozy has tried to seduce rising powers and the whole continent with his rhetoric of Security Council reform that would lead to adequate representation for Africa. However, France still needs to resolve the contradiction between favouring the many francophone countries that claim non-permanent seats, or strategically supporting Nigeria and South Africa's prospects for permanent seats. Despite Sarkozy's lip service to the traditional allies in the recent OIF summit, the latter option seems to take precedence in his more pragmatic agenda.

FRANCE AND THE EU: NEW AFRICAN HORIZONS

France's position is not yet so pragmatic and streamlined within the European Union's Africa policies. France's reluctance to let go of the past has impeded

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a truly European perspective on African security affairs. It has been willing to use the EU instrumentally when it suits its interests, such as during military interventions in Africa under a convenient EU label of multilateralism and prestige. For the EU, these operations have meant hands-on experience with hard power, which it arguably needs to boost its international profile. For example, EUFOR Congo was deployed in the DRC in 2006 to secure the electoral process. Though France was both the main

contributor and had a French force commander, the headquarters were in Potsdam and the operation commander was German. Likewise, EUFOR Chad/Central African Republic was set up in 2008 with a French commander and headquarters, but 14

EU member states were present and the operation commander was Irish. These have been successful operations, but the EU's inability to develop its own, long-term strategy for the continent still underlines the key role of member states, with France among them, often bound to vestiges of the past. An alternative for the EU has been to support broader multilateral initiatives such as the African Peace and Security Architecture, boosting African ownership in conflict resolution but diminishing the EU's potential for hard-power policy.

France is also reticent to let go of national control over EU development cooperation. The European Development Fund remains the main EU instrument, but it is set up by member states (and not funded from the EC budget) and allows for direct national influence in policies, notably by the government. But French parliamentarians are currently expressing an interest in more EU-centred options for Africa policies, regularly arranging meetings with COREPER staff and closely following developments in the European Parliament. This would only open ways to depoliticise and democratise EU development cooperation.

Increased synergies between France and the EU could contribute to better policies for Africa. They would strengthen new EU routes to dealing with international security and development challenges, with France cementing a more legitimate steering role at the EU diplomatic roundtable. European countries have usually observed *Françafrique* with a mixture of indifference and disdain, but have partly colluded to maintain such a zone of exclusive influence. Overcoming this situation and becoming more active on the continent – as has recently been the case for Spain in West Africa – may in fact hold ample rewards. Regarding the European Union, it still benefits, unlike France, from being widely admired and seen as essentially neutral in popular African perception. But this may fade quickly if EU policies are decidedly anti-migration, and if the approach to African development and conflict resolution does not demonstrate unequivocal results. And the EU and its member states have yet to influence French policy so that it contributes to more European positions in Africa.

France has sought to reshape rather than abandon France-Africa relations. Age-old networks and a rather ineffective cultural policy have stood in the way of new African horizons. But a more strategic economic and security focus is emerging, prioritising big French companies and downscaling military engagement. President Sarkozy's pragmatic approach, as prescribed by the international reality of economic crisis and rising multipolarity, may indeed be an opportunity for France better to annex the EU's prestige and channel its influence through the EU-Africa track, and finally bid farewell to paternalism. France's encouraging reorientation is seemingly following this direction, but the European Union must itself envisage how this could also work the other way around, with France's initiatives and leadership better harnessed to bolster more European positions and interests in Africa.

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