

Introduction

What will France's African policy be under Nicolas Sarkozy?

Amandine Gnanguenon, Research Fellow, Irsem¹

The latest avatar of French interventionism in the Ivorian civil war has once again made the issue of France's African policy front-page news, reviving old demons, first and foremost that of "Françafrique"². Beyond the question of defining France's African policy, now more relevant than ever, this situation highlights the difficulties France has to free itself from the weight of its own history. It is also worth noting here that two contrasting analyses can be made of the same reality, depending on each actor's perceptions. Hence the question that many commentators are still asking: is France disengaging from Africa or maintaining the *status quo*³? Since the 1960s, this simplistic view has been limiting the analysis of France's African policy to a dual approach punctuated by *rupture* or *continuity*⁴. To borrow a phrase from Eric Fottorino, "the Franco-African couple never stops breaking up"⁵. And that reality is all the more difficult to understand because, since the independence of its former colonies, France has moved towards a "transitional period with signs of change interfering with conservative positions"⁶, and the transition is apparently not over.

¹ Research Fellow, African Issues, at the French Military Academy Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM)

² It is worth recalling here that the expression was coined by Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1957 and had a positive connotation. It becomes pejorative in the 1980s and now refers to the darker side of Franco-African relations since the independence of the former French colonies, that of the French informal networks that supported dictatorships in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa in the name of French interests.

³ P. MARCHESIN, La politique africaine de la France en transition, *Politique africaine*, October 1998, n° 71, p. 91-106. Châtaigner J.-M., Principes et réalités de la politique africaine de la France, *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 4, n°220, 2006, p. 247-261. Banégas R., Roland Marchal, Julien Mémon, La fin du pacte colonial ? La politique africaine de la France sous J. Chirac et après, Introduction au dossier « France-Afrique. Sortir du pacte colonial, *Politique africaine*, n° 105, 2007, p.7-26.

⁴ J.F. MEDART, « La conférence franco-africaine de Paris : le changement dans la continuité », *Politique africaine*, n° 5, February 1982, p.28-34. Patrick Quantin, La vision gaullienne de l'Afrique, *Politique Africaine*, n°5, 1982, p. 8-18. Châtaigner J.-M., Principes et réalités de la politique africaine de la France, *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 4, n°220, 2006, p. 247-261. Thiam A., La politique africaine de Nicolas Sarkozy : rupture ou continuité ? *Politique étrangère*, 2008, n° 4, p. 873-884. H. de Charrette, Nicolas Sarkozy et la politique étrangère de la France : entre changement et continuité, *La revue internationale et stratégique*, n° 70, summer 2008, p.6-12.

⁵ E. Fottorino, *Le Monde*, July 22, 1997.

⁶ Marchesin, *op. cit.*, p.101

This theme was chosen based on a general assessment already made in 2007⁷ that is not peculiar to the period *Dynamiques Internationales* is focusing on (2007-2011). Within academia, the public debate about French policy in Africa, its direction and its failure, is almost nonexistent⁸. The limited interest in France's African policy as an object of analysis for the sociology of international relations participates in this lack of critical thinking. Deciphering France's policy in Africa thus remains a major challenge for the social sciences. This volume intends to contribute to the reflection on a French policy in transition, always criticized for its lack of clarity and its apparent lack of vision in the short and medium term. Based on this observation, this issue will adopt a nuanced approach to understand what is really "new" in France's African policy under Nicolas Sarkozy. The goal is not only to criticize, but also to propose an analysis of France's African policy since 2007, without overshadowing its links with the past. The question is whether the French President has today the freedom of action necessary to implement a policy that was intended to break with the past⁹.

Different ways to interpret France's African policy

If one uses, for the sake of convenience, the dichotomy rupture/continuity, Nicolas Sarkozy's African policy can be understood in three different ways: through his speeches, through his actions and by interpreting his speeches and actions. On that last point, France's policy towards Africa seems all the more confusing, and thus open to criticism, in view of the fact that its deeds are sometimes at odds, if not in total opposition, with its words. It is these tangled levels of understanding that make the analysis of France's African policy all the more difficult.

Speeches, first symbols of rupture

During his presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy said he would "build a new relationship, sanitized, uncomplicated, balanced, freed from the wrecks of the past and of the obsolescence

⁷ Banégas, Marchal, Mémon, *op. cit.*

⁸ There are a few exceptions, most notably in the journal *Politique africaine* : La France en Afrique, *Politique africaine*, n°5, March 1982 ; Mitterrand et l'Afrique, *Politique africaine*, n°58, June 1995 ; France-Afrique : sortir du Pacte colonial, *Politique africaine*, n°105, March 2007 ; See also the publications of Jean-François Bayart (<http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/cerifr/cherlist/bayart.php>,) see also the site of Médiapart, Quelle politique africaine pour la France ? <http://www.mediapart.fr/club/blog/jean-francois-bayart/251010/quelle-politique-africaine-pour-la-france>, accessed on April 15, 2011.

⁹ On this point, see the declaration of Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior and of spatial planning, on democracy in Benin and the establishment of new relations between France and Africa, Cotonou, May 19, 2006: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/063001811.html>, accessed on April 15, 2011.

that persists on both sides of the Mediterranean”¹⁰. For him, it was time to “turn the page on complacency, secrecy and ambiguity for good [and] to go beyond a simple personal relationship”¹¹. Once he became President, this rupture was clearly confirmed in official speeches. On July 26, 2007, at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Nicolas Sarkozy gave a speech that was supposed to outline France’s approach towards Africa. This speech raised the roof and a great hue and cry among many French and African intellectuals. Among these reactions, one can mention the book edited by Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *L’Afrique de Sarkozy : un déni d’histoire* (Sarkozy’s Africa: history denied) (Paris, Karthala, 2008) reviewed here by Francis Arsène Fogue Kuate. The second speech of the French President, in front of the South African Parliament in Cape Town, on February 28, 2008, promised a new rupture. He announced the revision and publication of the Franco-African defense agreements¹² and pledged the support of the French forces stationed in Africa to the collective security system of the African Union. He also insisted on the role of Europe as a “major partner of Africa in the field of peace and security”¹³. While trying, in this speech, to break away from the past, Nicolas Sarkozy invented nothing new.

“If you compare the speeches of Giscard and Mitterrand on Africa, continuity once again prevails. Some tired words, like solidarity, are given a new life. But the words were, under the previous presidencies, so ahead of their times that the only solution left was almost to stay quiet. Here, the sense of déjà vu is tempered by the change in tone as the language used is more in tune with the actual sensitivity of the speakers. A “new style” is put forward; it is more convincing because it seems sincere and it seems to reflect a real change in attitude”¹⁴. Beyond these speeches, it is interesting to uncover how much of “Sarkozy’s style” and of his so-called rupture remains symbolic¹⁵.

The implementation of the reforms proposed by the Head of State shows a certain degree of inconsistency. The African cell at the Elysée was indeed eliminated. However, as Yves Gounin reminds us, France’s African policy is still under the responsibility of Claude Guéant, Secretary General of the Office of the President of the Republic. The neglect of the French diplomacy

¹⁰ Speech of Cotonou, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² The following States signed defense agreements with France: Gabon (1960), Central African Republic (1960), Côte d’Ivoire (1961), Togo (1963), Cameroon (1974), Senegal (1974), Djibouti (1977), and the Comoros (1978).

¹³ Speech of the President of the Republic to the South African Parliament, Cape Town, Thursday, February 28, 2008: http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/PARLEMENT_AS.pdf, accessed on April 15, 2011.

¹⁴ Médart, *op. cit.*, p.33

¹⁵ Let’s note here that France let the opportunity to enact a definitive rupture slip by in the way it managed the Tunisian and Libyan crises.

machinery eventually elicited mixed reactions from former ministers and diplomats¹⁶. Within a polycentric administrative system where several structures are dealing with African issues (Ministries of foreign affairs, of finance and economy, of defense and the Elysée), the symbolic nature of these actions is highlighted by the fact that entrenched bureaucratic red tape still prevails. Symbol of a change that had a limited effect, Jean-Marie Bockel, who took over the position of Minister of cooperation in March 2008, was forced to resign two months later after having announced that he wanted to “sign the death certificate of Françafrique”. Finally, as another sign of contradiction between words and deeds, Rama Yade who became Junior Minister in charge of human rights within the Ministry of foreign affairs has only very limited freedom of action. Nicolas Sarkozy waves the banner of change but, ultimately, ends up justifying an order already well established.

Compliance with this order is justified by the fact that “France’s African policy has long been seen as an essential, but also singular and specific, dimension of France’s foreign policy”¹⁷. We could even ask ourselves whether this specificity did not help Nicolas Sarkozy highlight that a rupture was indeed possible. Indeed, could the President have pronounced the same Dakar speech in Asia or Latin America? With this specificity in mind, is it possible for Nicolas Sarkozy to “normalize” France’s African policy, in other words to make it similar to the rest of France’s foreign policy? For now, many specificities remain unchanged, such as the organization of annual meetings between French and African Heads of State¹⁸. “Considered by its defenders, Presidents Hamani Diori of Niger and Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, as a sort of “French Commonwealth”, the first of these conclaves has been held in Niamey in 1973, with the participation of six Heads of State and Government”¹⁹. With the example of Cameroon in mind, Larissa Kojoue Kamga wonders whether the distant relationship between Nicolas Sarkozy and older Heads of State like Paul Biya are indicative of a desire to depersonalize the relationship between these two countries. Yves Gounin also returns to the issue of the celebration of 50 years of independence and raises the possibility of a new confrontation between Ancients and Moderns, a tension that, according to him, structures France’s African policy. The offer by

¹⁶ See the critics formulated in the newspaper *Le Monde* of July 7, 2010 by Hubert Védrine and Alain Juppé and the interview of Jean-Christophe Rufin, former Ambassador to Senegal.

¹⁷ Châtaigner, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

¹⁸ For further details, see J.-L. Dagut, *Les sommets franco-africains*, DEA thesis in African studies, CEAN of Bordeaux, 1980, 116 p. P. Hilaire de Prince, *Les sommets franco-africains (1973-1996) : contribution à l'étude de la politique internationale : bilans et principes d'analyse*, doctoral dissertation directed by B. Lacroix, 1999.

¹⁹ Pondi Jean-Emmanuel, « La coopération franco-africaine vue d'Afrique », *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2002, vol. 2, n° 45, p. 128.

France to its former colonies to parade during the Bastille Day celebration on the Champs Elysées has revived the controversy around a France that “supports dictators, while denouncing dictatorships”²⁰. Far from the change announced, President Sarkozy’s policy is fully in line with the processes launched by his predecessors. France’s African policy continues to be influenced by two factors: domestic political issues and the evolution of the international environment.

Main policy directions

President Sarkozy’s main policy directions are a continuation of a French policy based on an obsession with security and stability²¹. Since the independence of its former colonies, French policy, that no longer has the means to achieve its ambitions, has gradually reduced its political, economic (official development assistance), and even military commitments on the continent because of its costs financially and in terms of image. The evolution of RECAMP (Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities) since its creation in 1998 has shown that France wants to multilateralize its African policy. Within the same framework that enabled French forces to support MISAB (Inter-African Mission to Monitor the Implementation of the Bangui Agreements) since February 1997 in the Central African Republic, French forces’ mission is to support regional conflict management by African armies by providing them with equipment, training and exercises. These objectives, whether political or military, have been redefined above all to take advantage of and to adapt to a changing international environment. In his article, Patrick Ferras shows that the presence of a French support base in the United Arab Emirates, as a complement to the French forces in Djibouti, is a sign of the adaptation by the French military to a new strategic configuration, thus protecting France’s vital and strategic interests in this zone.

Other contributions give further details on three aspects of French policy: multilateralization, Europeanization and Africanization. France is a key member of the European Union. However, as mentioned by Jean-Marie Chasles in his article on Chad, certain European officials fear that any reference to France’s “special sphere of influence” (*pré carré*) means that they might “participate in Françafrikan policy *via* EUFOR, or see France confuse its own interests with those of the European Union.” Chasles asks what a “utilitarian vision of multilateralism” could mean in the case of Chad. While France tries to pursue its policy within a multilateral framework, Chasles wonders whether this is not an attempt to use the European and UN frameworks as a political instrument. However, in her article, Hélène Gandois confirms that, seen from New York, France

²⁰ Marchesin, *op. cit.*, p. 94

²¹ J.F. Bayart, *Réflexions sur la politique africaine de la France*, *Politique africaine* 58, 1995, p.43.

has indeed taken a multilateral turn. Acting within a multilateral framework enables France to compensate for its lack of legitimacy. France's policy is embedded within a multilateral framework thanks to its action within the United Nations, the European Union and to its support to Africa regional organizations.

But France's reputation still remains tarnished by its past military interventions and the humiliation many Africans feel because of the country's restrictive immigration policy. "Speaking specifically to the youth, tired of hoping for better days that never come and tempted by emigration", Nicolas Sarkozy justified the tightening of his migration policy²². As Sonia le Gouriellec points out, Africans notice several inconsistencies and misunderstandings within France's domestic policy: a tightening of French immigration policy, a political *status quo* towards the dictatorships and a material disengagement with a reduced number of youth and technical experts sent to Africa and a reduction in official development assistance. Once again, the rupture announced in the speeches and expressed by symbolic acts and the changeable pragmatism of the President muddies the message.

The dilemmas of interpretation: the "Ivorian precedent"

At first sight, the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire highlights that we are indeed facing a legality and legitimacy dilemma. The point here is not to go back on the history of the conflict²³, but to assess whether what is happening in Côte d'Ivoire can set a "precedent". Criticizing France's support to President Mobutu in 1997, the newspaper *Le Monde* already referred to a "triple failure" in Zaire: the failure of an ambition, of a method and of a morality²⁴. This assessment can arguably be applied today to understand how the latest intervention by the French forces *Licorne* under a UN mandate can be differently interpreted. What was France's ambition? To protect French nationals in the country and support UNOCI (United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire). What was its method? A multilateral legal framework, i.e. an intervention under a UN mandate. What was the morality behind its intervention? Was France, because of its common historic legacy with Côte d'Ivoire, the most legitimate actor for this intervention? That's where the shoe pinches for many commentators. The fact that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) were the first ones the international community turned to solve this

²² Anne-Cécile Robert, Un discours controversé, L'Afrique au kärcher, *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2007, p.32.

²³ For more information on Côte d'Ivoire, see Christian Bouquet's publications, especially C. Bouquet, *Géopolitique de la Côte d'Ivoire : le désespoir de Kourouma*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2008, 274 p. See also T. Hofnung, *La crise en Côte d'Ivoire : dix clés pour comprendre*, Paris : La Découverte, 2005, 140 p.

²⁴ *Le Monde*, 19 mars 1997.

crisis clearly answers that question and shows that ECOWAS and the AU were considered as the most legitimate actors to intervene. But the failure of the African mediation attempts and the fact that ECOWAS did not follow through with its threat to intervene militarily led *de facto* to France's intervention as it already had troops on the ground and had the necessary capabilities to do so.

Beyond the Ivorian example, one of the inconsistencies linked to the desire to "Africanize" conflict management seems to show through. Two approaches stand at loggerheads, one based on an obligation of means, the other on a performance obligation. In other words, since the most legitimate actors, the African States, do not have the necessary capabilities (logistical and financial) to intervene, they cannot act until they acquire those means. Conversely, for the actors that have the necessary capabilities, the issue here is to offset their lack of legitimacy by insisting on the legality of their intervention. Ultimately, the selective use of military means for humanitarian purposes ends up politicizing the legality/legitimacy debate. It is thus not easy for France to reconcile respect for the sovereignty and independence of States and its emphasis on the development of their populations. Beyond the different factors previously outlined, other elements appeared that limit implicitly President Sarkozy's freedom of action.

The Franco-African legacy's challenge to Nicolas Sarkozy

The ties between France and the African continent are defined both by their constancy and by their closeness. Against this background, the key here is to "help France overcome its stunted image as a colonial power and put an end to the endless war of memories in order to come up with a shared narrative."²⁵ Nicolas Sarkozy is *de facto* part of this legacy as he represents the French nation-state, the only entity able, because of its historic continuity, to take responsibility today for what it did in the past. To be sure, "[...] even though the Head of State can indeed heavily influence the direction taken by our country's foreign policy, we should not underestimate the inevitable inertia that weighs on this policy, an inertia that reflects the permanence of our vital interests and our respect for past commitments."²⁶

Speeches tend to obscure a legacy that French political leaders, one after the other, seem to have a hard time coming to terms with. But it is difficult to forget a past that constantly comes back to haunt the present, even casting a doubt on France's intention. History, firmly anchored in

²⁵ J.-L. Bonniol, « L'Afrique » immobile. À propos du discours de Nicolas Sarkozy à Dakar (July 26, 2007), *Bulletin amades*, N°72, 2007: <http://amades.revues.org/index87.html#bodyftn5>, accessed on April 15, 2011.

²⁶ Charrette, *op. cit.*, p.8.

Franco-African collective imagination, keeps fueling, consciously or not, African actors' resentment towards France and influencing the perception that the French have of the African continent. While France's actions are constrained by its past, this common political and symbolic capital still remains an asset that will help reconcile the existing gap between France's African policy and African reality.

The relationship between France and Africa now stands at the crossroads and it is unclear which path it will take as Africa is made up of a multiplicity of actors that want to write their own history and is governed by a generation of leaders who want to manage their own affairs. Power relations have evolved and the pressure of the "weak" on the "strong" that defines unequal diplomatic alliances has never been so effective. Furthermore, other factors, more or less obvious, continue to impede change. France's African policy is based on three pillars (economic/financial, political and military/security) around which several secondary actors congregate (networks, lobbies, consultants, young expatriates, technical experts, NGOs, etc.). These actors represent pressure groups that enjoy mutual benefits based on pandering.

The question we would like to ask at the end of this introduction is the following: How much freedom of action does Nicolas Sarkozy have to implement his foreign policy in Africa? Our answer would be that he has a rather large freedom of action weighed down only by past Franco-African relations. The President's main asset, besides his guarded and oft-repeated reputation as a leader of the "new generation", is his ability to take up the "challenge of seduction"²⁷. He had to "drive the point home that the new policy would not be a cosmetic change with the same aberrations committed to serve the same ambitions"²⁸. From now on, if he still wants to open a new chapter in Franco-African history, he will have to be up to the challenge, especially after the Dakar speech that revealed the contradictions of an approach based on the idea of a fresh start. In the end, this volume intends to ask numerous questions and open up new areas of research in order to understand, beyond Nicolas Sarkozy's mandate, France's African policy.

²⁷ D. BOURMAUD, « La nouvelle politique africaine de la France à l'épreuve », *Esprit*, August-September 2005, p.24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24-25.