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Sarkozy's Victory and the Future of U.S.–French Relations

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When Nicolas Sarkozy takes over the French presidency on May 16, it will be with a mandate to govern. Sarkozy won the presidency this weekend in a 53 to 47 percent vote, with a turnout of 85 percent. His promise to reform the failing French economy and reassert France's position on the world stage resonated with the electorate. The French people seemingly understand that their country faces a stark choice on its future and opted for an openly pro-American reformer.

Washington immediately welcomed the Sarkozy victory, with President Bush offering his personal congratulations to the victor, and Sarkozy has gone out of his way to embrace a strengthening of diplomatic relations. But with Sarkozy's determination to reassert France's place at the heart of Europe and the French political establishment's opposition to a stronger Franco–American relationship, there is great uncertainty about what Sarkozy's win means for U.S. strategic interests.

Sarkozy and U.S. Foreign Policy. With the Chirac presidency drawing to a close, the younger and more popular Nicolas Sarkozy has achieved his lifelong dream of reaching the Élysée Palace. Sarkozy's tenures in many elected and appointed political offices hint at his manifesto for the presidency, and his victory looks to be a win for U.S. strategic interests.

Over the past year, Sarkozy has taken it upon himself to conduct a personal 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

demonstrates just how far Sarkozy went to distance himself from the ancien régime.¹

Sarkozy's 2006 visit to Washington, timed to mark the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, was particularly successful and may well foreshadow his intentions for the bilateral relationship. Being personally greeted by President Bush was unusual in that Sarkozy was not a sitting or former head of state, but in retrospect the meeting showed significant foresight on Washington's part. Sarkozy's rhetoric and style during his trip may have marked a turning point for the deeply damaged Franco–American relationship. Sarkozy's speech at the French Embassy during this visit 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.²

It is an open secret that Sarkozy was critical of Chirac's vocal opposition to the Iraq War in 2003,

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an issue that dogs Franco–American relations to this day. In a 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.”³ While the British- and American-led coalition in Iraq should not expect to be joined by French troops anytime soon, it should expect an end to the verbal backlash from Paris.

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 he spoke up for Israel’s right “to defend herself.”⁴ While urging that Israel should “maintain level-headedness and restraint,” he refused to join the European Union chorus calling for a total ceasefire.⁵ 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 prevalent anti-Americanism in France have great significance for the war on terrorism.⁶ 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.⁷ In 2006, 76 percent of the French people believed that the war in Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein have made the world a more dangerous place.⁸ For his part, Sarkozy has publicly acknowledged that Paris could just as easily have 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 to the heart of Europe. His warm relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the expected accession of British Chancellor Gordon Brown to the premiership signal the rise of a relatively pro-American trio of European leaders.

Sarkozy’s electoral victory is a favorable change of leadership for the United States. With huge foreign policy questions such as Iran and Darfur taking center stage, America will undoubtedly benefit from a more cooperative approach from the Élysée Palace. France’s role, however, will depend on how far Sarkozy has room to maneuver once in office. While the White House should certainly relish the prospect of another potential ally in Europe, the political realities of elected office often contrast sharply with a leader’s intentions. Sarkozy will have to overcome not just the deeply seated French political establishment, but also a citizenry still nervous about radical reform and France’s place in the world.

Sarkozy and the European Union. Despite Sarkozy’s warmth toward Washington, his presidential victory speech made clear that his term will continue France’s strong support of further European integration. Sarkozy is keen to demonstrate his European credentials and breathe life back 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.”⁹ While the constitution will officially become a treaty to avoid potentially embarrassing

1. 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.
2. Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy, September 12, 2006, at www.ambafrance-us.org/news/statmnts/2006/sarkozy_US_091806.asp.
3. “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.
4. David Twersky, “France’s Next President?” *The New York Sun*, August 8, 2006, p. 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. 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.
7. Andrew Kohut et al., “A Year After Iraq War,” The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 16, 2004, p.19.
8. Kohut et al., “No Global Warming Alarm in the U.S.”
9. Jed Babbin, “Gilligan’s Ghost,” *The American Spectator Online*, April 25, 2005, at www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=8070.

referendums in Britain and France, the text will be essentially unchanged, creating an EU foreign minister and furthering the supra-nationalization of member states' power. Indications are that Sarkozy will move quickly to assert himself as a powerful European player.

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 to the United States, with its own foreign minister, powers of taxation, and legal personality. In alliance with Chancellor Merkel, Sarkozy will 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. While Nicolas Sarkozy is in a position to advance a bold new agenda for France, he has a very tough job ahead of him. France's role as a world leader has suffered not only from years of

neglect, but also from a failure to work with the United States in addressing common threats and challenges. Sarkozy's rejection of the crude anti-Americanism that has dominated U.S.–French relations since the Iraq War is brave and refreshing and has already won him friends in Washington. However, the United States should not expect an immediate sea change in French foreign policy. Sarkozy faces opposition from the French political establishment that will resist fundamental changes in Paris's approach toward Washington and hard-line domestic reform. Sarkozy is also a believer in the trusted Franco–German axis pushing for more, not less, centralization of political power in Europe. It remains to be seen whether he has the drive, determination, and leadership to equally transform the U.S.–French relationship into a partnership serving both nations' interests.

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