

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1692
November 6, 2007

The Bush–Sarkozy White House Summit: A U.S.–French Entente Cordiale

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy's arrival this week in Washington signals a sea change in the relationship between Washington and Paris. What would have been unthinkable a year ago—a two-day summit between the leaders of France and the United States—is now a political reality that promises to change the complex and troubled landscape of U.S.–European relations. Not only will Sarkozy meet with President Bush at the White House and Mount Vernon, but also he will address the U.S. Congress, a great honor and rare privilege, especially for the president of a formerly hostile power.

A Stunning Rapprochement. In the space of just a few months, Sarkozy has performed one of the most stunning foreign policy reversals of recent years. Alongside his straight-talking foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, the new French president has become a key U.S. ally in efforts to halt the rise of a nuclear-armed Iran, delivering a barn-storming speech, in September at the U.N. General Assembly, condemning the stance of Iranian tyrant Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Most of the old tensions over the war in Iraq have largely dissipated, replaced by a newfound willingness to work together on an array of issues, from the Iranian nuclear crisis to genocide in Darfur. There is even talk in Paris of France rejoining the unified command structure of NATO in the next couple of years, a radical reversal in French thinking.

Nicolas Sarkozy bravely extended the hand of friendship to his U.S. counterpart and by doing so has emerged as Europe's leading figure on the world

stage, eclipsing both of his nearest rivals, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In some ways, Sarkozy is filling the shoes vacated by Tony Blair as the most vocal international supporter of American-led international efforts. In contrast, Gordon Brown's signals toward Washington since coming to power have been far from warm and have given the impression that the prime minister is going out of his way to distance himself from the White House. Merkel too has been wary of being seen as too close to President Bush but will be traveling to meet with him for two days in Crawford later this week for what are likely to be difficult discussions over Iran.

France's extraordinary about-face in its approach to the United States is a welcome development that has significantly strengthened Washington's hand in confronting Tehran. President Bush and President Sarkozy should jointly issue a stern warning to the Mullahs of Iran that they must either halt enrichment of uranium and cease development of a nuclear weapons program or face the consequences. The two leaders must also appeal to European allies, especially Germany, to support a hard-hitting sanctions regime outside of the United Nations targeted at Iran's economic, military, and

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1692.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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political infrastructure, including an end to export guarantees and a complete investment freeze by European Union countries.

The Pitfalls of a U.S.–French Alliance. The dramatic shift in French strategic thinking since Sarkozy came to power significantly improves the prospects for a more constructive transatlantic relationship over the next few years. The new French president should be given great credit for bravely challenging decades of deep-seated French anti-Americanism, which has frequently poisoned relations between Paris and Washington, reaching its peak during the presidency of Jacques Chirac. Sarkozy's bold tack showed him to be a powerful world player and a leader with whom Washington can do business.

Nonetheless, the White House, National Security Council, State Department, and Pentagon must recognize the pitfalls of attaching too great an importance to the concept of a long-term U.S.–French alliance. In many ways, Sarkozy is a unique figure in modern French history, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, an outsider who is willing to challenge the status quo. Arrayed against him is a powerful coalition of vested interests, from the communist-dominated trade unions to the entrenched elites who rule the civil service. His pragmatic pro-American approach may not outlast his administration or even always win out while he remains in power.

There is also scant evidence that the great French public shares Sarkozy's enthusiasm for *les Américains*, and France remains a highly regulated socialist society, whose best and brightest typically end up fleeing the country, mainly to Britain. Humiliatingly, France is the only Western European society that actually produces large numbers of economic refugees rather than attracts them from abroad.

The French foreign ministry, Quai d'Orsay, with its deeply entrenched suspicion of Anglo-Saxon culture and global power, will always be a powerful force ensuring that the Elysée Palace does not stray too far from the traditional norms of French policy, which include the centrality of the Franco-German axis and a pro-Arabist policy in the Middle East. In the coming decades, French foreign policy will also become increasingly influenced by the country's

demographics: The descendants of the more than 6 million Muslims that today comprise 10 percent of France's population could make it even more difficult for France to support future potential wars against Islamic state sponsors of terror.

France's relationship with the European Union will also be a major complicating factor for the U.S.–French alliance. France's ruling elites remain wedded to a vision of Europe that embraces the evolution of a European superstate and are among the strongest supporters of a unified European Union foreign policy and defense policy that, if enacted, will pose a direct challenge to American leadership on the world stage. France's military chiefs are deeply committed to the building of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), a direct threat to the future of NATO.

In essence, French foreign policy remains a web of contradictions: a pledge of a new era for U.S.–French relations, but support for the rise of a European superpower; a tough line on Iran's nuclear ambitions, but a willingness to include Iranian-backed terrorist groups like Hezbollah in negotiations over Lebanon; talk of a new commitment to the NATO alliance, but with a determination to build a rival European defense structure.

Protecting the Anglo–American Special Relationship. The strengthening and defense of the traditional Anglo–American Special Relationship must remain central to U.S. strategic thinking despite the temptation of Paris's wooing. Great Britain has proven time and again that it is America's most reliable and dependable ally, despite occasional periods of tension. At all levels, from intelligence sharing to economic investment, the United States and the United Kingdom are and will remain intricately entwined for the foreseeable future.

The U.S.–British alliance is a strikingly successful partnership of two world powers built on the solid foundations of a common heritage, culture, and vision. The two nations have fought alongside each other in seven major wars in the past 90 years, from the First World War to the second Gulf War. It is an alliance forged on the battlefield in a spirit of common sacrifice, involving a huge expenditure of blood and treasure in defense of the free world.

Already over 250 British soldiers have laid down their lives alongside their U.S. allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In short, both the United States and Great Britain are great warrior nations, while France certainly is not.

In military terms, the French would struggle to compete with British combat experience and force projection. While battle-hardened British forces have been waging major campaigns against insurgents in Iraq and against the Taliban in Helmand Province, French troops have seen military action only in minor colonial conflicts in Africa in recent years. In Afghanistan, the French have barely fired a shot in anger. It is one thing to talk tough when it comes to standing up to tyrants and terrorists, but it is another thing altogether to commit tens of thousands of troops to fight in a major war. Nations are

ultimately judged in history not by what their leaders say but by their deeds and actions.

There is, however, no room for complacency in London, and Downing Street should not encourage the strategists in Foggy Bottom to think that France, Germany, and a common European Union foreign policy are a viable long-term alternative to the Special Relationship. An “entente cordiale” with Paris is pragmatic and sensible, but any attempt by Washington to ultimately replace the Anglo–American alliance with a new partnership with France would be both naïve and short-sighted, as well as a highly risky proposition.

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