



## A Post-Gaullist, Pro-American France?

By Reuel Marc Gerecht and Gary J. Schmitt

*Since the suburban riots last August, the perception that France is in decline has become de rigueur in French, European, and American circles. Economically, culturally, educationally, militarily, diplomatically, and even gastronomically, France seems to have significantly diminished. But French foreign policy—which has become noticeably less anti-American since the Iraq war and tougher toward Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons—suggests that France may already be recovering from its déclinisme. A more pro-American France—a surreal idea for many foreign-affairs practitioners in Washington—may not be that far off.*

Although the French have always loved to complain about their problems—the verb *rouspéter*, to whine, is synonymous with *être*, to be—what is happening now is more than the just the usual sourness that comes from being subservient to an overly centralized, administrative-law state. From the McDonald’s-hating, antiglobalist, anticapitalist extreme French Left to the McDonald’s-hating, antiglobalist, anticapitalist extreme French Right, no one really dissents from the view that France’s always-fragile glory has fractured. *The Economist* recently dedicated a fourteen-page special report to the country’s systemic maladies and their possible solutions (essentially, bring on Margaret Thatcher).

It is hard to disagree. The good that can be said about the Fifth Republic, with its vast executive powers and the elite educational system behind it—chiefly the *haut fonctionnaire* finishing school, the *École Nationale d’Administration* (ENA)—is in the past. Although French society has become much healthier than it was when François Mitterrand and his Socialist Party first captured the presidency in 1981—and the triumph of the socialists, for all their early economic

insanity, breathed much-needed fresh air into the country’s culture and politics—France’s political culture seems increasingly sclerotic. With unrelenting monotony, the same faces keep returning to the voters.

The right-wing presidential aspirant Nicolas Sarkozy, who is hardly new to the Parisian political landscape, just may be an exception because his sometimes-right, sometimes-left populism never fails to remind the French and foreigners that he is not an *énarch* (a graduate of ENA). It is difficult to tell whether Sarkozy’s warmer attitude toward America reflects something unalterably profound since it is not easy to identify his core beliefs. In this regard he is similar to President Jacques Chirac, who came into office with some sincere pro-American sentiments not at all in the Gaullist tradition. Chirac’s affection for his youthful travels and work in the United States seems, or at least seemed, quite real. He visited Chicago in the winter of 1996, in part to try to convince expatriate French entrepreneurs to consider investing in France (in itself, a shockingly non-Gaullist mission). His informality, joviality, and the warm colloquial English he spoke during his visit now appear to belong to a completely different person than the Chirac who so tenaciously fought the United States in the run-up to the Iraq

---

Reuel Marc Gerecht (rgerecht@aei.org) and Gary J. Schmitt (gschmitt@aei.org) are resident scholars at AEI.

war, or the Chirac who tried in recent years to lord it over the eastern Europeans and his own countrymen.

Sarkozy's pro-American attitude seems cut from a different cloth. When he was in Washington in September 2006, Sarkozy embraced the United States rhetorically in a way unimaginable to a convinced Gaullist or even a French socialist who has a soft spot for America's open, ethnic-loving society. "I'm not a coward," Sarkozy said. "I'm proud of this friendship, and I proclaim it gladly."<sup>1</sup> In the preface to his soon-to-be published book *Testimony*, Sarkozy affirms that "I stand by this friendship, I'm proud of it, and I have no intention of apologizing for feeling an affinity with the greatest democracy in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Sarkozy's comments on many sensitive issues put him on the cutting edge of the Parisian political elite—he is easily the boldest in his pro-American remarks—and historically in a class by himself. As the *Washington Post* reported, Sarkozy "described the government in Tehran as an 'outlaw nation' and said the prospect of it obtaining nuclear weapons would be a 'terrifying' development that would 'open the way for a murderous arms race in the region.' Hinting at military action, he added that 'diplomacy must be our main weapon, but we must leave all options open.'"

On Israel, Sarkozy avoids the harsh language of most of the French political and intellectual elite, who usually suggest that Israel is, at best, an annoyance for the West, that Palestinian terrorism has its roots in Israeli misbehavior and territorial greed, and that Jews in general (but Israeli and American Jews in particular) are, to borrow from De Gaulle, "an elite people, sure of itself and dominating."

Sarkozy's take on Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda is also a bit different from elite Parisian opinion that often gives the impression that America provoked the events of September 11 through its misguided actions—chiefly its excessive support for Israel. Sarkozy very flatly stated, "We have the same adversaries. Bin Laden targeted New York, but he might just as well have targeted Paris."<sup>3</sup> It is too early to suggest that Sarkozy's view represents a decisive change in Parisian thought about the United States and the threats that Washington sees as preeminent. There have been many false starts in bettering Franco-American relations. The safe bet is that France will not cast off its reflexive anti-Americanism and *tiers-mondisme*

in its approach to the Middle East. Dominique de Villepin, France's much-disliked Napoleon-obsessed prime minister who zealously traveled the world to build an alliance against the United States and its allies before March 2003, still seems intellectually anxious whenever

---

The safe bet is that France will not cast off its reflexive anti-Americanism and *tiers-mondisme* in its approach to the Middle East.

---

he hears criticism of France for being insufficiently anti-American. He has been quick to reprimand Sarkozy for both his presidential pretensions in discussing French foreign policy on American soil and for his pro-American views.<sup>4</sup> Chirac and Villepin have at least once referred to the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a responsible, regional power.<sup>5</sup>

And while Chirac's Middle Eastern applause has faded, he certainly enjoyed his increased stature in the Arab world in

2003 and 2004. The whole superstructure of French–Middle Eastern social, cultural, and intellectual relations has been premised on the understanding that France would be reliably "pro-Arab" in international forums—at least more so than any other Western European country. Beyond its serious scholarly objectives, the Institut du Monde Arabe, France's beautiful, Moorish glass-and-steel tribute to Arab and Muslim culture built under François Mitterrand in the heart of the Latin Quarter, is the reification of the idea of France's supposedly special and privileged political relationship with Arab lands.<sup>6</sup>

## A New French Foreign Policy?

France may well already be on the cusp of a major, positive transformation, at least in foreign affairs. Although it has been little remarked in both the American and British presses, France under Jacques Chirac has apparently broken with French practice in its diplomacy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Understood in a French context, Paris's Iran policy within the European Union's (EU) efforts to halt the growth of Tehran's nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs has verged on the revolutionary, threatening to downgrade, if not discard, anti-Americanism, *tiers-mondisme*, and commercial self-interest as France's guiding lights in the Middle East. If the French continue their hard-line policy toward clerical Iran—and again, it is important to note that France's approach within the context of the EU-3 negotiations merits the description "hard-line"—it

could quite conceivably convulse the way France conducts its foreign policy everywhere. France's "pro-American" Iran policy is a potentially landmark turn.

According to French and German diplomats, the French have been tougher—at times considerably tougher—in their stance on Iran's nuclear-weapons program than either the Germans or the British. The Germans, even under Chancellor Angela Merkel—who, unlike her predecessor, believes sincerely in robust transatlantic ties—are the softest partner in the EU-3. Unlike the French and the British, senior German officials regularly hint in private that they really would not mind if the clerical regime developed a "monitored" enrichment capacity inside Iran. Even with the British, whom the Americans expected to be the most concerned over the clerical nuclear threat, one often gets the impression from Foreign Office officials who handle Iran's atomic dossier that Great Britain's stance, too, is not ironclad on the question of domestic enrichment. So far, the French have brusquely—at least in the German view—dismissed local enrichment as an irretrievable caveat in to Tehran that would guarantee the mullahs an atomic weapon. Paris's position is surprising given that French diplomats and scholars who deal with the Middle East usually had, at least before the American invasion of Iraq, a somewhat *laissez-passer* attitude toward the clerics' quest for the bomb. Paris had no illusions about the clerical regime's intentions: French intelligence about the Islamic Republic's nuclear program has for nearly twenty years been decent, often more detailed than the information obtained by American intelligence. This has made Paris more pessimistic than the British, Germans, or even the Americans about the likely delivery date of a nuclear weapon.

The French government, according to French officials involved with Iranian negotiations, conducted an internal evaluation of the possible effects of non-petroleum-related European sanctions against the clerical regime and concluded, unexpectedly, that Europe, if it chose to, could do considerable damage to Iran's economy. The evaluation concluded that sanctions, if they were to have any effect on the mullahs, should commence massively rather than be deployed in a piecemeal fashion. French theory is almost always better than

French practice, but the seriousness with which Paris has approached Iran on this issue is real and unexpected by many in France and in the United States. Note, for example, that Ségolène Royal—the socialist candidate for the presidency and a woman not known for many foreign-policy positions, let alone hard-line ones—suggested in a recent presidential debate that the Islamic Republic could not be trusted even with a civilian nuclear program.<sup>7</sup> This goes beyond the stated position of Paris, London, and Berlin in the EU-3 negotiations. And even *Le Monde* took to chastising Chirac and

---

According to French and German diplomats, the French have been tougher—at times considerably tougher—in their stance on Iran's nuclear-weapons program than either the Germans or the British.

---

Villepin for their commentary on Iran playing a "stabilizing" role in the Middle East. *Le Monde*, which is the *New York Times* of France, encouraged the government to move more quickly to the discussion of sanctions against Tehran at the United Nations.<sup>8</sup>

Yet it is precisely because Paris has been steadfast in the EU-3 negotiations under Chirac and Villepin that one can believe that a transformation might be afoot. Although France, like Great Britain and Germany, began the EU-3 approach to Iran to forestall the possibility that President George W. Bush might preemptively attack another member of the axis of evil, the continuation of

this process has created its own dynamic in Europe, especially in France, where negotiations with Iran have become a significant test of Europe's ability to engage in meaningful global diplomacy. Paris is not indifferent to European hopes and pretensions, even if the Quai d'Orsay, France's foreign ministry, has never had any illusions about the likelihood of EU-3 success against the clerical regime. The failure to ratify the EU's constitution—and the French *non* more than the Dutch veto killed this initiative—has also probably helped France become more serious about, if not more effective in, its foreign policy. The Iraq war, which so roiled America's transatlantic ties, also paradoxically made French foreign policy more oriented toward the United States. In private, French officials are quick to say that things got out of hand with Villepin and Chirac. Washington's good relations with Paris on Iran are in part the rebound from this excess; they are also an expression of France trying to find itself—a new center of gravity that has more meaning than Gaullism and its reflex to oppose America's *hyper-puissance*.

## The Sources of Change

An important repercussion of this soul-searching has been the fading of *tiers-mondisme* in the French academe and the Quai, especially when it comes to looking at the Middle East. Third-worldism is now stronger in American universities than it is in France, the birthplace of this romantic, anti-Western creed. Talk to the well-known, first-rate scholars Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy, or France's director of Iranian studies at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique Bernard Hourcade, and to their students, and it will become immediately apparent that the study of the Middle East and Islam in France is actually less politically charged than it is in the United States. There is an experimental bravery in French scholarship today generated in part by the fatigue resulting from years of too much ideological rigidity and conformity.

The turning point probably came in the early 1990s, when France was on the verge of implementing Quebec-style anti-English laws for commerce and culture. The Parisian elite pulled back, clearly seeing this path could only lead to parochialism, irrelevancy, and bigotry. Afterward, it became easier to express affection more openly for the United States. As a sustaining creed, Gaullism died.

In November 1992, the journal *Esprit* published an article by a senior French diplomat writing under the pseudonym of Didier Grange. Entitled "Pour une nouvelle politique étrangère" [For a New Foreign Policy], it caused a minor earthquake in Parisian foreign-policy circles. Essentially, Grange, who is now a very senior official in the foreign ministry, argued that French foreign policy was bankrupt—and had been for years. In every direction—toward Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russia, Africa, Cuba, the Middle East (especially Israel, Iraq, and Iran), and America—the Gaullist Cold War—approach no longer made any sense. Grange underscored the essential need for France to have a much closer alliance with the United States than the rhetoric of Gaullism had publicly allowed. He scathingly deconstructed his country's *politique Arabe*, showing it to be vainglorious, counterproductive for both the French and the Arabs, and at times deeply immoral. He recommended a policy supportive of democracy and capitalism throughout the third world.<sup>9</sup> According to Grange, Paris urgently needed to downgrade its great-power search for glory. France was a

middle-sized European country whose status was more likely to fall than rise. He emphasized something which many Frenchmen have known but few have been willing to confess. French foreign affairs have consistently been conducted in ways degrading to the dignity and decency of the country, to the all-essential honor of a nation without which the successful conduct of foreign policy is impossible. It is worth quoting Grange at length:

The redefinition of our foreign policy arrives by recalling the basic principles on which it must be founded since it cannot be reduced to a simple score card for the world as it is. A foreign policy must defend the values of the nation. It must reflect the democratic character of French society. Without sacrificing realism, a sound foreign policy implies the deliberate renunciation of Realpolitik, which ignores the moral obligations and principles to which a democratic nation adheres. The time is no longer of Talleyrand's because the world that gave it meaning is dead. With clarity and firmness,

French foreign policy should express these moral obligations and principles, the guarantor of the honor and dignity of France. . . . It is undeniable that France has tried too often to play all sides. . . . It plays up at every opportunity the theme of the rights of man while being one of the rare countries to send its minister of foreign affairs to

---

As surreal as this may sound to an American audience, morality is on the rise in French foreign policy.

---

Beijing and Tehran. It condemns terrorism yet maintains relations with openly terrorist factions of the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization]. It defends the right of self-determination but was as slow as possible in recognizing Croatia and Slovenia and condemning actions by Serbia. It maintains its impartiality [in the Middle East] but never misses an opportunity to vilify Israel, all the while it rests strangely silent about all the human-rights abuses in Arab lands. . . . [T]he list [of French contradictions] is long, from Algiers to black Africa. . . . The time is long past when our ignominies overseas are no longer known beyond our chancelleries. Today, sooner or later, they become public and turn against the authors of these actions.<sup>10</sup>

It is a good bet that a lot of Frenchmen today, even among the more anti-American elite, have many of the

same concerns that Grange had fourteen years ago. It is also a good guess that many of them had such anxiety when Grange published his seminal work. The shock of Grange's piece at the time was not that he was outrageously novel; it was that he had the temerity, especially as a serving diplomat, to say what so many knew to be true. Grange defied the *pensée unique*—the intuitive ability of Frenchmen to collectively and sheepishly self-censor themselves. Nicolas Sarkozy probably has a great deal of company, on the left and on the right, in suggesting that France's priorities overseas, especially during the twelve-year dominion of Chirac, have been unbalanced. As surreal as this may sound to an American audience, morality is on the rise in French foreign policy. If the dignity and honor of France get redefined along the lines that Grange hoped—and we think Grange is likely to become the most farsighted foreign-affairs analyst of post-Cold War France—then anti-Americanism will cease being central to the identity of France overseas. The Quai d'Orsay will no longer default to doing the opposite of *les américains*. It is ironic, of course, that in the aftershock of the Iraq war so many in Washington are running in the opposite, Realpolitik direction. In a decade's time, if the United States loses *les obligations morales et les principes auxquels adhère une nation démocratique*,<sup>11</sup> Grange's commentary on France might be apposite across the Atlantic.

---

AEI research assistant Rachel Hoff and AEI editorial associate Nicole Passan worked with Mr. Gerecht and Mr. Schmitt to edit and produce this European Outlook.

## Notes

1. Glenn Kessler, "Visiting French Presidential Hopeful Lauds U.S. in Speech," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2006.

2. Nicolas Sarkozy, *Testimony* (New York: Pantheon Books, forthcoming). English translation of the preface (and the book) was kindly provided by Philip Gordon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

3. Glenn Kessler, "Visiting French Presidential Hopeful Lauds U.S. in Speech."

4. "Villepin suggère à Sarkozy de 'bien réfléchir' en matière de politique étrangère" [Villepin Suggests to Sarkozy That He 'Think Carefully' in Matters of Foreign Policy], *Le Monde*, August 10, 2006.

5. Editorial, "Face à l'Iran" [Confronting Iran], *Le Monde*, August 31, 2006. This is incongruent with Chirac's general

private stance. According to French and American officials who have dealt with Chirac on Iran, the president seems to have a particular animus against Shiite Muslims, perhaps owing to the death in 2005 of his friend, former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, at the hands of the Iranian-backed Syrian regime, or because of Tehran's proxy bombing of Paris in 1986 during the Iran-Iraq War. The clerical regime's murder in 1991 of former Iranian prime minister Shapur Bakhtiyar, who was a decorated soldier in the French Army in World War II and who was under the French state's protection when he was assassinated, also may have soured Chirac on Iranians.

6. For a devastating left-wing critique of Chirac's politique Arabe, see Éric Aeschmann and Christophe Boltanski Grasset, *Chirac d'Arabie: Les mirages d'une politique française* [Chirac of Arabia: The Illusions of a French Policy] (Paris: Grasset, 2006).

7. Constance Baudry, "Turquie, Iran: les présidentiables socialistes font entendre leurs différences" [Turkey, Iran: The Socialist Potential Presidential Candidates Make Their Differences Understood], *Le Monde*, November 11, 2006..

8. Editorial, "Face à l'Iran" [Confronting Iran].

9. Didier Grange, "Pour une nouvelle politique étrangère" [For a New Foreign Policy], *Esprit* 11 (November 1992): 35. Grange was way ahead of the Bush administration:

"Le refus de soutenir financièrement ou économiquement les dictatures va de soi mais il faudrait également manifester une solidarité naturelle avec les démocraties: mettre sur un meme pied Israël et la Syrie est indigne . . . le tiers-mondisme est mort d'abord parce que la notion de tiers monde ne correspond aujourd'hui à rien, si tant qu'elle ait jamais eu un sens. La meilleure manière d'aider le 'tiers monde' serait, en tout état de cause, d'y proner la démocratie et l'économie de marché qui vont de pair et qui se sont révélées, à l'usage et malgré leurs défauts, le moins mauvais système." [The refusal to support financially or economically dictatorships goes without saying, but we ought to also show a natural solidarity with democracies. Treating Israel and Syria in the same way is shameful. . . . [T]hird-worldism is dead first because the notion of the third world doesn't correspond to anything real today, if it ever had any meaning at all. The best way to aid the "third world" would be in any case to extol in this region democracy and the market economy, which go together and are clearly, despite their problems, the least bad system possible.]

10. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

11. Translated as: "the moral obligations and principles to which a democratic nation adheres."