

Sarkozy's European Policy and France's EU Presidency

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Abstract: In a historical perspective and as an important political actor on the European continent, France has played a decisive role in shaping European developments since World War II. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it has effectively pursued European unity in its foreign policy. However, the relative reduction of France's influence on European policies in post-cold war era ushered some reviews in its European approaches and the Sarkozy's European policy is a representation of such revisions.

The present article examines the French European policies, particularly in its recent EU presidency term.

Introduction

As a key political power on the European continent, France has played a decisive role in shaping European policy since World War II. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, having nuclear deterrence, it played an effective role in European unity and

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integration. However, the end of cold war ushered extensive and profound changes in European equations, gradually reducing France's influence on European and international policies. Although the French aimed to reclaim their past global status due to their weight and rank in the European Union (EU), they faced numerous crises in domestic and European policies in early 21st century. This led to the marginalization and relative decline of France in the realm of European policies.

Under the strategy of "Return to Europe", Nicolas Sarkozy, the neo-Gaullist president, endeavored to overcome his country's European policy stalemate in the post-cold war transitional period. First part of the article analyzes the French position in the European Union. In view of France's EU presidency in the second half of 2008, an assessment of the features and outcomes of President Sarkozy's European policy is presented in the second part.

France's Status in European Union

As one of the most important political, economic and cultural European players, France has had a significant role and status in the EU for a long time. The country was among the founders of Europe community in the 1950s and wielded the continent's integration process as a leverage to secure its own interests and promote French foreign policy agenda. The history of European unity indicates that establishment of the "European Economic Community (EEC)" was a French-driven initiative. Tied its internal developments after World War II to the fate of EU, France played a determinant role in the long-standing European plans such as common agriculture policy, single European act, European monetary union and the Treaty of Maastricht.

Such a policy helped France increase its extensive influence on European entities. Turning the French city of Strasburg into the legislative capital of Europe, elevating the position of French language as one of the working languages and adopting the French model for EU's

administrative system were among evidences of France's influence. It is worth noting that two of the EU Commissioners and six of the European Parliament presidents have been French nationals. (Safran, 1998:348-350)

Meanwhile, France has not always been a constructive factor behind European convergence. At times, it has even placed obstacles in the way of realizing European unity. Some of these political moves include the 'No' vote to the idea of having a common European defense community in 1954, the empty seat policy in 1964, the policy of confronting Germany in the 2000 meeting of Nice, as well as the 'No' vote to the European Constitution in 2005. (Monnet, 2000: 151)

However, France's national interests have always guided European relations and politics, and facilitated the French historical status and traditional role in the EU. In other words, France has always had an ambivalent outlook toward the EU. On the one hand, it promoted transnational convergence as the means of its power assertion internationally, and on the other, tried to retain the interstate mechanisms in order to shape the EU within the framework of French perceptions and its own national exigencies. Therefore, France's European policies have more or less been fluctuating between de Gaulle's strategy of "Europe based on National Government" (Europe des Etats) and Jean Monet's "Multinational Europe". (Godt, 1989: 226-227)

However, the end of cold war opened a new chapter in the contemporary history of France, and played a distinguished role in shaping its political, economic and cultural developments. "Identity Crisis" seems to be a proper term to explain the nature of challenges and tensions facing the French policy of recent years. This crisis, which surfaced in French domestic, European and international policies, ended the country's age of exception (*L'Exception Francaise*). (Elgie, 2000:205)

The unsettled balance of power in Europe at the expense of Paris subsequent to the German reunification posed a huge challenge to France's European policy. France took a range of measures to prevent the

decline of its European standing. These ranged from its initial objection to German unification and efforts to contain Germany's emerging power within the framework of EU integration, including the signing of Maastricht Treaty and forming the Eurozone. (Guyomarch et al., 2001: 164-165; Maclean, 1998: 90)

Nevertheless, these measures failed to give the desired results due to the transformation of strategic environment in Europe. Besides, following the geographical expansion of EU, France had to deal with a new group of countries that pursued different objectives and agenda. The economic and cultural influence of Germany in Eastern and Central Europe which boosted the status of Berlin in European equations gave rise to new obstacles and challenges for Paris. Moreover, the redistribution of the weight and role of countries that signed the Treaty of Nice further indicated that the geographical extension of Europe does not necessarily equal the extension of the sphere of France's national interests. (Vinocur, December 2000).

This was also depicted in French domestic politics in issues such as the crisis in social and economic models as well as the French welfare state system pitted against neoliberal globalization, the failed experience of social convergence and widespread protests and unrests among Muslim minorities of Arab and African origin in suburban areas, public protests in 2005, and the emergence of populist and nationalist movements that were violent, xenophobic and racist. These developments highlighted France's identity crisis in its domestic and European policies. (Brizzi, 2005; Zakaria, 2005)

The 'No' vote to the European Constitution aggravated the crisis in France's European policy and was considered as political isolation in its most important foreign policy arena. After the US war of 2003 on Iraq, France tried to come up with new ideas such as multi-polarism and multilateralism to turn EU into a new political and economic pole and a balancing power in international politics. However, the so-called new Europe (eastern and central EU member-states) refused to follow suit

and thwarted the France's positions, creating an all-out crisis for Paris which undermined the French perception of Europe and sidelined it in European developments. (Kramer, 2006: 126-34)

France's detachment from European equations during these years also affected the EU, caused a management gap for the union with unclear goals or directions. Unlike its previous role, France became an obstacle to EU plans. "Culture of cooperation" as the *raison d'être* of EU became irrelevant and the consequence was emergence of a kind of nationalism in European and foreign policies of member-states. The defiance of France toward EU rules and regulations as well as disregard of EU sanctions exacerbated distrust and tension in the union. Revival of individualist, nationalist and protectionist policies were some characteristics of France's European approach in this period of time, derived from a negative perception toward Europe's role in meeting France's national interests.

As things turned out, crumbling France's maneuvering power and its influence over European equations compared with the previous periods led to a mutual estrangement. Decline of France's influence on European equations in recent years also forced it to distance itself from traditional European moves. Consequently, in the eyes of France the EU was no longer a restricted, predictable, goal-oriented and like-minded group of nations that it was during the early decades of its formation. It was also no longer a group that could uphold French inclinations and perceptions, or cared for its national interests. (Vedrine, 2000: 102-103)

These developments led to wide-ranging disputes and debates among the French rightist and leftist political parties and offered new options to its political elites. The presidential election in May 2007 was considered as a new chapter in this respect. It created a suitable atmosphere to redefine the country's European policy and rebuild its new role and status in the EU.

Sarkozy's European Policy

"Return to Europe" and revival of France's European leadership are among the most important characteristics of Sarkozy's European policy which topped the agenda of the French neo-Gaullists after the presidential elections in May 2007 to overcome France's isolation and detachment from European equations in the early years of the 21st century. Meanwhile, Sarkozy's European strategy is also inspired by different and at times contradictory factors, as it represents the diverse views dominating the public opinion and political parties—from Europeanist to Europhobic parties. (Charillon, 2007; De Montbrial, 2007)

During the presidential campaign, Sarkozy called EU the "Trojan Horse of Globalization" and criticized the EU's role in exacerbating France's economic problems. His critical views, along with distrust toward European policies and organizations such as the European Central Bank, irked the Europeans.

This critical attitude was largely influenced by domestic politics. It also demonstrated the fact that the new government pursued the policy of protectionism in economy, industry and agriculture, and challenged the criteria set by supra-national European organizations, particularly the European Central Bank and the European Commission. (Cassen, 2007)

Nevertheless, in his first European moves, Sarkozy joined hands with Germans to resolve the crisis related to EU Constitution. He endeavored to mark the Lisbon Treaty as a point of departure for the return of France to the EU. He supported the idea of preserving important features of this particular law, including the reduction of the scope of consensus decision-making and institutionalizing the simple majority voting procedure, particularly in sensitive issues such as the immigration policy—the main concerns of rightist groups in France. The Sarkozy's support of a moderate and simpler narrative of EU Constitution smoothed its legislation process and approval in the parliament and helped Paris refrain from arranging a referendum and facing the Europhobic public opinion in the country.

The Lisbon Treaty, which was signed on December 13, 2007, by 27 heads of EU member-states, is the most important treaty after the treaties of Rome (1957), Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2000), as it

strengthened EU's legal foundations. After member-states ratified it on January 1, 2009, the Lisbon Treaty went into effect and lent a different legal status to EU in the international system. This development had a symbolic importance in the revival of EU, as it managed to survive the political crisis, and took a step forward in ending the political and fundamental deadlock in the way of European convergence.

Other European policies pursued by Sarkozy include the idea of setting up the Union for the Mediterranean¹, efforts to rebuild relations with "New Europe", a relative detachment from Germany, rebuilding relations with the Anglophone (English-speaking) world, redefining European identity and cultural borders, as well as opposing Turkey's bid for EU membership.

France's rotating EU presidency is considered as a turning point, as it helped paving the way for restoring its European image and status, as well as its return to Europe. In other words, it redirected the EU toward a path that would serve France's national and European interests.

Sarkozy and France's EU Presidency

The French came up with ambitious and purposeful plans for their rotating presidency over the EU from July 1 to December 31, 2008. In addition to preparing the ground for implementing the Lisbon Treaty in administrative and political domains, the most important issues pursued during their EU presidency were to set up the Union for the Mediterranean, and formulate common defense, immigration, energy and environmental policies. Reforming the common agriculture and European foreign policies were also among their priorities. (Liberti, 2008; Jouyet, 2008: 96-99)

After a quick review of France's objectives during its EU presidency, developments and issues related to the EU as well as Sarkozy's stance toward them will be examined.

It should be noted that the priorities set by France during its EU presidency were overshadowed by a number of crises. The negative vote of Ireland to the new version of EU Constitution within the framework of Lisbon Treaty proved to be a great hindrance. France's EU presidency also coincided with important political and economic events such as the Georgian crisis and the global financial turmoil.

Organizing more than 10 international conferences during the French EU presidency was a significant move, which began with a conference on the Union for the Mediterranean. It was followed by emergency meetings on the Georgian conflict and financial markets, as well as the eurozone summit. France also took a number of firm steps for having a common EU foreign policy by organizing around 550 European events and arranging 8 meetings with EU international partners. (Ferenczi, 2008)

Mediterranean Convergence

The Union for the Mediterranean or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership which is considered a tool for boosting the maneuverability and status of France in the EU has been inspired by France's strategic considerations in cultural, social and economic fields. It was one of the most important ideas brought up by Sarkozy. The Mediterranean region has traditionally been in the sphere of French influence. The region has also been the main origin of immigrants whose socio-political unrests in 2005 in the suburban areas of major French cities were crushed by then Interior Minister Sarkozy.

During his first visits to the non-EU members Algeria and Tunisia, Sarkozy emphasized the importance of relations with Mediterranean littoral states as a top priority in the new strategy of Paris for improving his country's status in the region. Support for exporting nuclear technology to Morocco, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia has been in

line with the policy of boosting France's economic relations with the oil-rich countries of North Africa.

The North African region has been the main sphere of France's expansionist policies since the 19th century. In fact, Paris still nurtures the urge to regain its colonial hold over this part of the world. The Mediterranean convergence also used to be a focal point of Europeans. Coming up with a framework that could help bolster ties between countries on the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea under the Barcelona Process or Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 indicates this attention which, because of regional circumstances and intra-European/international rivalries, failed to materialize.

The Union for the Mediterranean links North Africa with the Middle East and helps France achieve its political goals such as containing the Islamism, restricting immigration, normalizing Israel's presence in the region, ensuring energy security and imposing Europe's economic and cultural domination over the region. By managing the process of regional convergence in the Mediterranean region, France intends to prepare the ground for playing role in the Middle East crisis. (Bennhold, 2007)

The idea is also considered a means for competing with the Eastern and Central European blocs, which traditionally form the economic and cultural backyard of Germany. Sarkozy's proposal in this respect, which was made without discussing it with other European partners, received mixed reactions, from Spain's enthusiasm to Turkey's opposition.

Many Arab countries were unhappy to see the Zionist regime join the Union. Non-Mediterranean European states, particularly Germany, concerned of the eclipsing effects on former EU policies such as the Barcelona Process and the European neighborhood policy, criticized Paris for its negligence toward other Europeans, exacerbating rivalry and disunity in Europe, and directing EU budget toward ambitious French plans. Some of the EU members also tried to undercut the significance

and credibility of Sarkozy's plan by introducing it as a continuation of the Barcelona Process. (Soler I Lecha, 2008: 107-110)

For the same reason, during a March 3, 2008, in a meeting with the then German Chancellor in Hanover, Sarkozy was forced to adjust his plan and follow his idea within the framework of Barcelona Process. Finally, on July 13, 2008, Sarkozy managed to gather 43 heads of the Mediterranean Union to bolster cooperation among littoral states on both sides of the shores. The Paris conference issued a joint statement on the political will of all parties to change the Mediterranean into a region for peace, democracy and cooperation. The statement also stressed the importance of objectives set in the Barcelona Process for bolstering multilateral cooperation to tackle common challenges related to economic and social developments, food security, environment, sustainable development, energy, immigration, terrorism, extremism and dialogue among cultures.

After the Paris conference, the meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean foreign ministers convened in Marseilles on November 3-4, 2008. At the end of the meeting, they approved the declaration for the establishment of a secretariat in Barcelona and selection of a secretary. The participants also decided to set up a permanent committee for the Union in Brussels. In the face of little results coming out of the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean likewise faces numerous obstacles and challenges.

The newly established body is disorganized and lacks resources. It is yet to have a credible structure or a promising future. The regional states are unhappy with the traditional double-standard policies of the EU, especially with regard to Palestine, which has hurt the political credibility of the Union. Likewise, France's colonial heritage in the region has left negative impacts on the historical memory of countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. This has made them look at French efforts with distrust and skepticism.

In general, it seems that Europe's geopolitical balance is shifting. Contrary to the Cold War era, political power in the EU is titling from France toward Germany. The geographical expansion of Europe after the Cold War has also been mostly directed toward countries that are under Germany's geopolitical influence. This explains why Paris came up with the idea of the Union for the Mediterranean to influence the geopolitical balance and boost its status on the European and international stage. Sarkozy's Mediterranean moves have helped France increase its weight in regional equations. For instance, in 2009, France and Egypt will share the presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean.

Ireland's 'No' to Lisbon Treaty

The people of Ireland rejected the Lisbon Treaty in a referendum on June 12, 2008, at a time when France held the EU presidency. This deepened the EU crisis and became an obstacle to France's European programs. This, to an extent, overshadowed France's top European priorities such as energy security, climate change, immigration, defense and reforms in the European agricultural policy.

It gave rise to a new priority for France during its EU presidency. France made extensive efforts to overcome yet another crisis related to the EU Constitution. It also made efforts during the December 11-12, 2008, meeting to find a solution to Irish concerns through compromise. The main parts of the settlement included the obligation to enforce the treaty by the end of 2009, commitment to maintain a balance in the number of EU commissioners, attention to Irish views regarding taxation and the policy of impartiality as well as other issues after the implementation of Lisbon Treaty. To this end, a number of incentives were granted to the Irish government which helped draft a roadmap to implement the Lisbon Treaty thereupon Ireland will take preliminary measures for holding another referendum in the autumn of 2009.

Energy Security and Climate Change

Reaching understanding over reduction of environmental pollutants and tackling climate change were also undertaken by France. In January 2008, the EU Commission approved the proposal of "Climate Action and Renewable Energy Package" to reduce 20 percent of environmental pollutants by 2020.

Saving 20 percent of energy by 2020, adopting measures for diversification of energy resources and development of cooperation with energy exporters to stabilize the energy market are the most important decisions taken by the EU within the framework of common energy and security. The agreement has also taken into consideration alternative energy resources such as the renewables. France is the second largest nuclear country that supports the promotion of nuclear energy as a source of fuel and energy supply.

Based on the above policy, the EU is making strides to bolster its credibility in international meetings on environment such as the Copenhagen Conference and also lead the drive against climate change worldwide. The objective is to turn EU into an international model for protecting the environment and laying the foundation for Europeans to play a greater part in international environmental discussions.

EU's Immigration Policy

The Europeans signed the EU Immigration and Asylum Policy during the July 7-8, 2008, meeting in Cannes to seal EU's internal cracks by forging a common European immigration policy. The Governance Area on EU Immigration and Asylum Policy aims for more immigration, higher protection and better integration. Rather than securitizing immigration, the EU should be an open and welcoming destination for immigrants.

Importing workers can sustain growth in ageing societies and is better than exporting jobs. Embracing people from all countries and faiths will also enhance Europe's standing in the world, which will ultimately enhance its security and increase its influence. At the same time, it is vital that those who cannot be admitted are adequately protected and those who are admitted are properly integrated. Other objectives pursued by the policy include organizing legal immigration, promoting social integration and fighting illegal immigration (by using tools such as deportation, tighter border security and paying attention to the link between immigration and development).

The policy prepared the ground for coordinated management of immigration throughout the EU. However, immigration policy remains one of the most important challenges for EU. Given the internal challenges, France facilitated the adoption of a common European policy on immigration. The single most important feature was to coordinate the asylum policies and regulations related to the deportation of illegal immigrants. France is also tackling the immigration policy within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean.

European Security Policy

Having a common European security and defense policy has always been a top priority for France. Despite the sensitivity of Europeans regarding defense, the issue was placed on the agenda during France's rotating EU presidency. According to Sarkozy, a European defense union conforms to NATO membership and a rise in defense budget would enhance the credibility of EU's foreign and defense policies. In fact, France is striving to redefine Europe's security strategy and help the EU have a permanent command and planning structure for military operations. This will give a fresh outlook to the union in handling international crises. (David, 2008; Vidal, 2008:18-19)

During this phase, Sarkozy aimed to take the initiative for devising EU's defense and security policies. His priorities included focusing on the strategy for the next decade, boosting capacities of military crisis management, expansion of EU tools and placing the union on the frontline of disarmament and war on terrorism. Some of these proposals were ratified in the December 2008 meeting.

The aim was to pursue a coordinated policy for reaching a common understanding about threats and dangers, upgrading Europe's security strategy based on collective commitment for boosting capacities, giving attention to the strategic and economic needs in rebuilding the industrial and technological foundations of defense, strengthening partnership with NATO and the United Nations, and giving more authority to EU in the face of global threats.

The EU's security strategy was ratified in 2003, with an emphasis on common security interests. The objective of the French action was to upgrade the above strategy in the face of developments in Europe and new global threats (spread of terrorism, organized crimes, etc.). Such a policy has, in fact, distanced itself from the civil nature of EU policy and conforms to militarism based on the policy of power politics.

Sarkozy apparently aims to return France back to the fold of NATO in order to make NATO a European pillar and boost Europe's defense capabilities within the NATO. The French are trying to justify their reintegration into the military wing of NATO by linking their all-out convergence with the idea of European defense. After the Cold War, a kind of distrust emerged between the United States and France. This created a rift between their security interests and views, making Washington skeptical about European independent defense objectives.

However, France is now trying to boost its rank as an inevitable ally of the US in the world and in the regions surrounding the EU. To this end, Sarkozy managed to get the US consensus for having two military command ranks at NATO. He won the US approval for handing over control of the Norfolk Command Center (also known as Allied

Command Transformation, which is responsible for laying out the long-term vision of the Atlantic alliance), and inherit the regional command in Lisbon (in charge of naval operations in the southern Atlantic region). This will facilitate the return of France into the fold of NATO and end its Gaullist foreign policy of independence and exception. (Hall and Blitz, 2009)

The French tried to open up a new chapter in their relations with NATO during the April 3-4, 2009, meeting in Strasburg, which was jointly organized by France and Germany to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, any progress in EU's defense policy will largely depend on the scope of collaboration between France and Britain.

Elections in Britain and Germany are slated for the current year. Given the opposition of the Conservative Party in Britain and the electoral logic governing British premier Gordon Brown's policies, Paris will apparently face a range of challenges in pursuing its objectives.

Concordance with Britain

The three powers of France, Britain and Germany have historically played an effective role in integrating or disintegrating European equations. Although the Franco-German axis has been the single most important European alliance in contemporary history, Paris and Berlin at some point in time have tried to join hands with London to create a balance in their partnership. Having said that, France has always had difficult relations with the English-speaking world, as Paris-London ties have been marked more by rivalry than cooperation on the European political stage. On the other hand, the British have an economic outlook toward the EU and show little interest in political and defense integration.

One of the first signs of moderate change in Sarkozy's European policy is the formation of an informal alliance with Britain while

ignoring Germany in certain European initiatives. Sarkozy's expedient alliance with Brown in handling the financial crisis is a clear sign of such a shift. At the same time, Sarkozy's all-out convergence with the English-speaking world is aimed at using London's influence to undermine those who oppose an independent European defense policy—the trans-Atlantic group in NATO and EU. This is because Britain and France are nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council. (Machane, 2007)

Although the leftist British prime minister has become one of the most important allies of the conservative French president in the EU, the frail standing of Labour Party and the objections of Britain's conservatives to France's ultra-nationalist interests in Europe do not show bright prospects for London-Paris cooperation. Sarkozy's close ties with the English-speaking world also highlight the western alignment of French foreign policy. In a world where the dominant role of the United States is overshadowed by the emerging power of China and India, the resurgence of Russia and while the EU is sidelined in diplomatic and strategic arenas, France aims to redefine its role and approach for consolidating its European and international status.

Tensions in Franco-German Relations

Relations between France and Germany which play a historical role in promoting European integration witnessed political tensions after Sarkozy won the presidential elections. France's nationalist and individualist policies also played a part in putting an unofficial end to the Franco-German axis of alliance and weakened their traditional convergence. Some of the most important signs of these tensions pertained to their differences over European institutions, especially the Central Bank of Europe, Airbus, the role of nuclear energy and the concept of the Union for the Mediterranean.

German officials have reacted harshly to the recent French nuclear policies of, talks on nuclear cooperation with Libya and other Arab nations, and especially the proposal that Germany focus on nuclear power stations for electricity generation. At present, close to 80 percent of France's electricity are generated by nuclear power stations and that explains why it has turned nuclear energy into an important axis for enhancing its economic and industrial position in the world.

The differences of opinions between the two countries during France's EU presidency also came to the surface in other areas, including the methods used in managing the financial crisis. It now appears that the disengagement of France and Germany over the past two decades has to some extent undercut the previous role and importance of Paris-German axis as the point of reference of European policy. (Guerot, 2008:99-101)

Georgian Crisis

The war between Russia and Georgia was the most important political crisis that France faced during its EU presidency. This is because the conflict changed the tone of relationship between the West (Europe and US) and Russia.

The Caucasus crisis was the first-ever military action by Russia outside its borders after the Cold War. In reaction to the crisis, the EU held an emergency session on September 1, 2008, expressing its deep concerns over the "disproportionate Russian reaction". It also condemned "Moscow's unilateral decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia".

During this period, the EU adopted a kind of common policy in threatening to suspend its strategic partnership and compelling Moscow to make peace with Tbilisi. However, the Europeans refused to impose sanctions on Russia or support the demands of "New Europe" countries. Quite the opposite, they continued to cooperate with Moscow under the

framework of EU's neighborhood policy. To this end, as the rotating EU president, Sarkozy mediated in the crisis and played an effective role in enforcing a ceasefire between Russia and Georgia.

Sarkozy is now trying to use his close relations with Russian leaders, which helped secure a ceasefire through mediation, to play a greater role in handling future relations between Europe-US and Russia. Nevertheless, his special relations with Moscow made the pro-Atlantic partners of Washington (Eastern and Central European states) unhappy, concerned and bitter.

France's all-out diplomatic campaign over the Georgian conflict was a bid to revive the EU as an influential political player in resolving international disputes. After its mediation, France tried to enhance its presence in Russia's surrounding regions by organizing the EU-Ukraine meeting on September 9, welcoming normalization of ties with Belarus after its parliamentary elections on September 28, convening the First Assembly of EU and Central Asian States on September 18 in Paris and organizing the meeting of EU with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on December 9, 2008.

Just as importantly, Germany and France, which opposed the hasty NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, placed normalization of ties with Russia on the EU agenda after the Caucasian crisis. Poland and the Baltic states had earlier put their faith in the security guarantees of the US, but later sought a long-term agreement in energy and security domains with the resurgent Russia. After an agreement was reached between Moscow and the EU Troika on September 8, the ground was prepared for resuming negotiations on strategic partnership between the EU and Russia. A meeting between the EU and Russia on November 14, 2008, in Nice paved the way for reevaluation of ties and continuation of talks over a future deal.

Global Financial Crisis

The global financial meltdown has proved to be the single most important economic crisis and the biggest challenge for European politicians since the introduction of euro in 1999 as the common currency of EU member-states. Most responses and measures taken by the EU member-states against the crisis were largely of national and unilateral nature. As the president of EU, France took a range of measures such as holding a G4 summit in London of economic powerhouses Germany, France, Britain and Italy on October 4, 2008, and the G20 Summit of economic and industrial powers in Washington.

However, these efforts of France not only failed in devising a common European policy, but also created differences among European powers over the scope and aspects of the crisis as they opted for nationalistic strategies and policies. In other summits and meetings that followed the Paris summit on the global financial crisis and the role of European bodies in resolving the problem, participants likewise failed to come up with a proper European solution for getting out of the crisis, stabilizing the financial market and supporting banks and investors. These efforts only led to the adoption of marginal measures and offers of general support.

After France failed to formulate a common European approach for handling the financial crisis during its EU presidency, it tried to boost the position and role of the union in international economic fields and financial markets. It organized a meeting of French officials, European organizations and their American counterparts in Washington and called for holding the G8 Summit of industrial nations in the second half of December. It also won the US approval for holding the G20 Summit of leaders of industrial and economic nations on November 15. The motive behind these measures was to revise the governing norms and regulations in international banking and financial institutions.

As things stand, the global financial crisis has not gone away and its handling by the EU has had little result largely because the main players pursued their own national policies and agenda. Of course, the inharmonious positions of Germany, the largest economic powerhouse in Europe and France's traditional partner in handling such matters, posed the biggest obstacle.

The German chancellor is skeptical about Sarkozy's efforts in turning himself into the main addresser of the US. It views Sarkozy's call for the economic governance of Europe as a challenge to the independence of European Central Bank as well as an excuse for state protectionism and interference in the economic field.

Trans-Atlantic Relations

In other words, efforts to restore ties with the US have been the most important sign that indicates Sarkozy has distanced himself from France's Gaullist tradition. During his visit to the US in September 2006, he called for a new era in its trans-Atlantic ties and announced that it is unimaginable for Europe to define its identity as an opponent of the US. The enthusiastic comments made by Sarkozy on US policies made his critics call him "an American politician with a French passport". (Gedda, 2006)

The close and fully harmonious cooperation between Sarkozy and Bush coincided with the French leaning toward the English-speaking axis in the EU as well as the pro-Atlantic countries in Central and Eastern Europe such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Baltic states. In trying to normalize French-American ties during his country's EU presidency, Sarkozy tried to lead the trans-Atlantic currents in Europe and become the main addresser of neoconservatives in Washington. To this end, he made promotion of trans-Atlantic relations a top priority during his country's EU presidency.

During this period, France defined its foreign policymaking identity by aligning with the United States and endeavored to impact regional and global equations by forging cooperation with Washington. Organizing the summit on the global financial crisis while the US was absent from the international stage was effective in the EU-US alignment. In 2009, at a time when Germany is grappling with domestic issues and elections, and Britain is struggling to manage its recession and economic crisis, France aims to strengthen its leadership over Europe and present itself as an indispensable ally of Washington.

Assessment and Outlook

The EU presidency was the first official test for Sarkozy's European policymaking and marked a new chapter in the union's development. In finding a European answer to the two major challenges posed by the Georgian conflict and the global financial turmoil, he was relatively successful. These two issues brought the EU out of its former passivity and turned it into a crucial political player in handling global crises. Of course, the US presidential election was one of the key factors in facilitating French measures.

In general, there are differences of opinion over how well Sarkozy's diplomacy vis-à-vis Europe worked during this particular period. While his actions helped restore France-EU relations after the French voted against the European Constitution, Sarkozy's policies undercut the traditional ties between Paris and Berlin. Even smaller countries and new EU members were unhappy about his approach in conferences and meetings.

In addition, some of the ideas put forward by Sarkozy conflicted with the European integration policy. The discordant idea of forming the Union of the Mediterranean, tensions between France and Germany, support for curbing the independence of European Central Bank, his constant disputes with EU officials and organizations, criticism of the

liberal policies of Peter Mandelson, Britain's commissioner and EU representative in Doha trade talks, persistence of difficult relations with the European Commission, efforts to extend France's EU presidency beyond the approved deadline and failing to invite the leaders of Czech Republic and Sweden to the Eurozone Summit among many others created frictions between France and its European partners.

The Europeans were also concerned and uncomfortable of replacing the policy of "Europization of France" with the policy of "Frenchization of Europe" or turning the EU into a tool by Paris to push its own bilateral and national agenda. Moreover, Sarkozy used the EU presidency to stage diplomatic moves for showing a new face of France in European and international arenas. He tried to play a dominant role in Europe and across the globe and present himself as a man that could handle international crises. However, his actions and goals were motivated by French domestic political concerns and national interests.

Analysts of European politics are of the opinion that Sarkozy's unilateralism and showmanship have dealt a major blow to the spirit of EU, retracting it from "political convergence" to "political cooperation". In general, Sarkozy used the EU presidency for pursuing French diplomacy in order to present a new image of France in the European and international arenas. He aimed to expand France's influence and political weight in Europe and international relations, but faced obstacles, sensitivities and rivalries of other EU members. Consequently, he was compelled to deal with numerous challenges of maintaining favorable relations with Britain, rebuilding the traditional ties with Germany and forging links with President Obama, following his past neoconservative tilt.

Although the EU signed the Lisbon Treaty to end the political crisis, the Irish negative vote once again created problems. At present, the idea of a Europe based on nation-state which seeks to preserve the national identity of member-states in the EU, has gained favor. The priorities and political options inspired by the "re-nationalization" of EU

policymaking have likewise led to changes and adjustments in the traditional goals of the union. This has led to introversion of member-states, making them defend their national interests more than they used to do in the past.

Another important point is that in addition to being under the influence of American policies, the EU continues to be a manifestation of differences and agreements in the European policies of Paris, Berlin and London. Indeed, the domestic policies of these three countries will have an impact on the direction of their European policymaking. In other words, competition among Germany, France and Britain for balancing their clout and bolstering their weight and role in redistributing power in the EU is on the rise.

In summation, despite the fact that Sarkozy's ambitious and, at times, hasty policies have relatively raised France's status through its strong alliance with the neoconservative US policies and exploiting the crises in Europe and international relations, the European realities indicate that Paris has more than ever distanced itself from its past position in Europe. In other words, the balance of power on the European continent has shifted in favor of France's rivals. Under the new circumstances in Europe, France will have to inevitably clip the extent of Sarkozy's ambitions.

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Notes

¹ The Union for the Mediterranean (French: *Union pour la Méditerranée*), officially known by the full name of Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean and previously known as the "Mediterranean Union" (French: *Union méditerranéenne*), is a community initiated on 13 July 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

