

France: Sarkozy calls for European military build up

Antoine Lerougetel
3 September 2007

Speaking to the Paris diplomatic corps on August 26, French President Nicolas Sarkozy asserted the need for a strong France in a strong Europe capable of dealing with the United States on equal terms.

“Europe must progressively affirm itself as a first-rank player for peace and security, in co-operation with the United Nations, the Atlantic alliance and the African Union.”

Sarkozy referred explicitly to the struggle between the major powers for the re-division of the world’s resources, particularly energy, warning, “The world has become multi-polar but this multi-polarity, which could open the way to a new concert of the great powers, is, rather, drifting towards the clash of power politics.”

His speech offered several measures to challenge the military, economic and political hegemony of the US.

Sarkozy called for the expansion of the G8 group of the world’s richest nations to a G13, including China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. Similarly he proposed that the United Nations Security Council’s permanent members be expanded from the present five (the US, Russia, China, France and Britain) to include Germany, Japan, India, Brazil and “a fair representation from Africa.”

However, his main answer to “the risks of an antagonistic multi-polar world” was a new balance of power through the militarization of Europe: “Without Europe taking on its role as a power, the world would be deprived of a necessary pole of equilibrium,” he insisted.

This required a powerful European Union military presence in the world, with France taking a leading role: “I hope that in the next months, we will advance together towards a reinforcement of Europe as a military power, and France will take very strong initiatives”.

He also called for the strengthening of NATO, the US-led military alliance of which France and most EU countries are members, but made it clear that he was envisioning a partnership of equals: “Both go together: an independent *Europe de la defense* and an Atlantic organisation in which we will play a full part.”

While in full alliance with the United States to ensure that the world remains safe for imperialist exploitation, he strongly asserted the need for France and the EU to be able to vie for their own share of the spoils. He has pledged to increase France’s involvement in the occupation of Afghanistan with a contingent of 150 military trainers and stressed that “the EU has carried out some fifteen operations on our continent, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia.”

Sarkozy called for the development of the European armament and security capability. “France and Germany have laid the foundations: the Franco-German Brigade and then the European Corps,” he said. Pointing out that British and French military spending represented two thirds of the total of the other 25 EU countries combined, he urged

that “our other partners should participate in this common effort”.

The following day, addressing a commission set up to prepare a defence white paper, Sarkozy said he had set the nation’s defence effort at around two percent of the nation’s wealth: “This goal should make it possible for France to acquire the capacities it needs to remain, with the United Kingdom, among the leading European nations.”

Sarkozy’s favourable references to the UK are a marked departure in French foreign policy, which has long viewed Britain as a proxy of the US and oriented itself on the basis of the Franco-German alliance. It is an indication of the importance Sarkozy attaches to military might to back up French and European economic interests.

France and Britain are the only EU countries possessing nuclear weapons, an unspoken factor of Sarkozy’s speech. French imperialism intends to maintain this advantage over its fellow EU members and rivals in order to claim leadership rights.

But on the economic front also, Sarkozy wants Europe to carry out the measures necessary to press forward its interests on the world arena. An essential corollary of French and European imperialism’s drive to be “a first-rank player” is the intensification of the exploitation of the working class and the ability to maintain order at home. For this reason he is enacting a vast and ongoing legislative programme to enhance the repressive power of the police and the judiciary and diminish labour rights, while carrying through major cuts in the social services.

In his speech he insisted that France’s message “will only be heard in the world if it is borne by an ambitious and confident people, a society reconciled with itself and a successful economy.”

Sarkozy congratulated himself on getting the Modified Treaty, a revamped version of the ill-fated free-market European Constitution, adopted by the European Council. The rejection of the European Constitution in the French and Dutch referendums in 2005 was a dramatic setback for the forging of the EU as a single market-driven, business-friendly region where social rights are dismantled. He sees the Modified Treaty as means of consolidating the 27-member EU.

Sarkozy’s turn to militarism, particularly his call for Europe to play a larger role in Iraq, has been portrayed as reconciliation with the US. It is certainly the case that he recognises that a defeat for the US in Iraq would be dangerous for all the imperialist powers. Nevertheless, France has its own interests in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, which Sarkozy intends to uphold and which still bring him into conflict with Washington.

He reiterated that the US-led invasion of Iraq had led to a “tragedy”, stating that France was and remains “hostile to that war”. Criticizing the US decision to invade without UN approval, he asserted, “The

United States did not manage to resist the temptation to have recourse to the unilateral use of force, and on the issue of the protection of the environment, does not demonstrate that capacity for leadership which it claims elsewhere.”

He called for a political solution and “a clear timetable for the withdrawal of troops... Only then will the international community, starting with the countries of the region, be able to act most usefully. France, for its part will be ready to do so. This is the message which Bernard Kouchner [Foreign Minister] has just taken to Baghdad, a message of solidarity and availability.”

Sarkozy has also renewed relations with Syria, broken off by the former president Jacques Chirac, putting him at odds with the White House but giving France the opportunity to act as a broker in the region.

His position as both an ally and a rival of the US, depending on the circumstances, comes out most clearly on the question of Iran which he described as “the most serious crisis weighing down on the international order”. The country is a major source of gas and oil supplies and field of investment and commerce for France, Europe and other US rivals.

He is in full agreement with the Bush administration on the need to pressure the Iranian regime into the complete abandonment of a nuclear weapons programme, going so far as to warn that a failure to do so might lead to Iran being bombed. Unless Iran halted its nuclear programme, the “alternative would be catastrophic: the Iranian bomb or the bombardment of Iran.”

But Sarkozy also made clear that he wanted a diplomatic solution, promising, “France will spare no effort to convince Iran that it has much to gain from engaging in serious negotiations with the Europeans, the Chinese and the Russians, and of course the Americans.” The placing of America last expresses Sarkozy’s desire for Europe and other powers to act as a counterweight to US dominance.

On Kosovo he again emphasised his desire to defend European interests, appealing to both the “Russians and the Americans to understand that this affair is very difficult and first and foremost a European affair... and that it is within the Union that the long term future of the Balkan region resides.”

Sarkozy’s speech was welcomed by the US as an indication of a thawing of relations with France. *Voice of America* stressed Sarkozy’s opposition to the possession by Iran of nuclear weapons, adding that “the president also reaffirmed the importance of good relations with the United States.”

The *Wall Street Journal* noted, “He also signalled that France means to be something more on the international scene than an anti-American nuisance player. That’s worth applauding...”

The US media calculates that, in the end, France’s ambitions can be contained and his placatory noises towards America and more important than his banging the nationalist drum for domestic consumption. However, the US cannot reconcile itself to any genuine effort to assert French and European interests. Future clashes are inevitable, particularly in Africa and the Middle East where France’s historical presence and interests are being challenged not only by the US but also China.

The priority of American imperialism is to foil any challenge to its economic supremacy by all means, including military. Washington too wants Europe to play a greater role militarily, but only in a subordinate position. For now the US believes it can afford to be somewhat sanguine towards Sarkozy’s grandiose claims for France

and Europe, given its overwhelming military superiority and ability to sow divisions in Europe through its own allies such as the UK and Poland.

Libération noted the objective limitations on Sarkozy’s dreams for France, editorialising that “when one leads a medium-sized country tied by numerous treaties to groupings which are beyond it, diplomatic speeches are not the essential thing... To wish to make a break in all things is doubtless excessively ambitious.”

The response in Germany reflects powerful tensions within the EU and the belief that France is setting out to challenge its own hegemony over Europe. A venomous round up of the German press in *Der Spiegel*, “Rambo in the Elysée”, quotes the business journal *Handelsblatt*: “The more poorly he speaks about certain things, the more seriously he takes himself. The speech that the head of state formulated yesterday was simply a manifold claim for French leadership, both in Europe and across the globe.”

The conservative daily *Die Welt* wrote, “Paris wants to assert itself as a player on the global stage. One can interpret his attempt to extend the European Union toward Africa as an answer to Germany’s increased influence following its reunification and EU expansion.”

The paper dismissed Sarkozy’s support for a German place as a permanent member of the UN Security Council as belonging to “the realm of rhetoric. It will stir the Germans up, but in the end it won’t lead to anything.”

The German political establishment has been angered by what they perceive as excessive French nationalism and several unilateral initiatives taken by Sarkozy’s government without reference to the EU or Berlin: the intervention in Libya to free the Bulgarian nurses combined with the sale of a nuclear power plant to the oil-rich country, and the call for the European Central Bank to act to reduce the value of the euro in order to boost French exports. It is also possible that his rebuke to Russia, accusing it of “using its assets, notably oil and gas, with a certain brutality” was seen as endangering Berlin’s close relations with Moscow. Germany relies on Russia for a third of all its oil and gas imports, while France looks to Africa and the Middle East.

Financial Times Deutschland commented, “Regarding his idea to make the EU a strong player in global security politics, he will soon have to learn this lesson: Several of his EU partners will quickly rebuff the New Guy in Paris and his plan.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact