

French President Sarkozy goes to Washington: A vassal pays homage

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy spent two days, November 6-7, in meetings with President Bush and the French expatriate community in Washington, DC. On November 7 he gave a speech to a joint session of the US Congress and held a press conference with Bush.

Sarkozy's trip was almost universally hailed in the French and US media as reestablishing friendly ties between the two countries and repairing the damage done to Franco-American relations in 2003 by then-French President Jacques Chirac's opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. Journalists noted that "freedom fries" now appeared as "French fries" on congressional menus. Despite much superficial friendliness, however, there were no substantive new agreements on foreign policy.

Sarkozy's speech to Congress exuded an air of utter unreality. Servilely declaring that "America is today the strongest," he claimed that "America's greatness is having succeeded in transforming its dream, the American Dream, into a hope for all men."

In fact, from within a Capitol building ringed by riot police and troops, Sarkozy was addressing one of the world's most polarized societies.

As Sarkozy attempts to peddle the "American dream" in France to justify junking the welfare state, the notion that the US masses can enjoy a home, a secure livelihood and modest amenities under capitalism has collapsed. The dream has turned into a nightmare of home foreclosures, plant closures and blighted working class communities on the one side, and billionaire hedge fund speculators on the other. The fact that New Orleans was left to rot after being largely destroyed in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina—an entirely foreseeable storm—shows how bankrupt American capitalism really is.

Sarkozy unblushingly presented the US as a land of

democracy and freedom, even though its president arrived in power through a stolen election in 2000 and has dragged the country into unpopular neocolonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that are responsible for the deaths of over one million people and the displacement of millions more.

The true face America shows the world is increasingly that of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay.

Sarkozy reaffirmed his support for the US campaign of political provocation and military threats against Iran, saying, "The Iranian people, representatives of a great civilization, deserves better than the sanctions and growing isolation to which its rulers are condemning it." He conveniently ignored the fact that the sanctions on Iran are being imposed, not by Tehran, but by Washington and Paris. He repeated that "the perspective of Iran with a nuclear weapon is unacceptable for France."

Despite the belligerence of his statements, Sarkozy is walking a tightrope between closer alignment with Washington—fearing that a total collapse of the Middle Eastern political order would jeopardize French interests and access to oil—and the interests of sections of the French bourgeoisie with close economic links to Iran. Total, the main French oil company, has huge oil and gas investments in Iran, and several French corporations—notably carmaker Renault—have set up production facilities there. Though French firms are apparently obeying instructions from French authorities to halt further investment in Iran, they have not ceased operations there.

On the other hand, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, the former human rights advocate and leader of Médecins sans Frontières, has indicated that the French military is planning strikes against Iran.

Ruling circles in Washington and Paris are

considering various possibilities for Franco-American military collaboration. France has already proposed intelligence-sharing between European Union (EU) authorities and NATO.

The most significant suggestion is that France might rejoin NATO's integrated military command, which France left in 1966 under President of Charles de Gaulle. The sticking point in the last such discussions, in 1996 under presidents Bill Clinton and Jacques Chirac, were French demands for control of NATO's Southern Command in Naples, Italy.

This would provide guarantees of continued French political influence in regions where it has substantial economic interests, notably in the Maghreb. Putting a French officer in nominal control of the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean proved too controversial in Washington, however.

In a September 21 interview with the *New York Times*, Sarkozy laid down the preconditions for France's return to NATO. He insisted that European defense capabilities and spending would have to be increased, and that a French return to NATO "could take place only insofar as room would be made for French representatives on the governing bodies, at the highest level."

On November 7, as Sarkozy visited Washington, *Wall Street Journal* editorialist and Council on Foreign Relations member Frederick Kempe wrote an article for *Bloomberg News* calling for the Bush administration to put a French officer in charge of NATO's Southern Command. He called such a move crucial to achieving "one of the most important strategic accomplishments of the Bush presidency—a revolution in French foreign policy that transforms the trans-Atlantic relationship into something more robust and useful."

Kempe wrote that "in a complex world of declining relative US and European weight," France "will become second-rate global power if doesn't find a way to work with her natural ally," the United States.

In the usual demeaning language of the US foreign policy establishment, Kempe was articulating the central dilemma of the French and, indeed, European bourgeoisie. Faced with the growing debacle of US imperialism in the Middle East, it understands that it is too weak to militarily enforce the Middle East's political and financial status quo unaided.

Fearing potential political convulsions and social

upheavals—the collapse of the Saudi ruling family, war in Iran, etc.—its response is to draw closer to Washington in an attempt to bolster the united strength of Western imperialism in the region.

Such an alliance, however, is inherently unstable due to the powerful economic and strategic rivalries between its members. Sarkozy's most notable comments in his speech to the US Congress were his criticisms of the weak US dollar, which has made European and especially French exports, priced in euros, increasingly expensive and thus uncompetitive in world markets.

He said: "The dollar must not remain only other peoples' problem. If we are not careful, monetary disorder risks growing into economic war, of which we would all be the victims."

Continuing tensions between France and the US were underscored by the absence of any new foreign policy initiatives. Sarkozy did not commit to any further deployment of French troops to US-occupied Afghanistan, nor to moving them into the south of the country, where the bloodiest fighting is concentrated. Nor did Sarkozy agree to US requests that Turkey be admitted into the EU.



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