

Sarkozy strives to establish French-British axis

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In a two-day visit to Britain last week, French President Nicolas Sarkozy worked for a closer alliance between the two countries.

Sarkozy, who visited the United Kingdom in his official capacity as head of state, and his new wife Carla Bruni were received by their British hosts with the highest of honours, including a coach ride through London with the Queen and an overnight stay at Windsor Castle. Sarkozy spoke before both houses of the British Parliament and utilised his address to advocate, in his own words, “a new Franco-British brotherhood for the 21st Century.”

The French president lavished praise on his audience, reaching far back into history to build a case for the close affinity between France and England. Sarkozy even sought to use the fact that England and France were often at war in previous periods to argue for a closer alliance. “France and England fought each other for centuries,” he declared, “each asserting her identity by opposing the other, fighting not because they were too different, but because they were too alike.”

Sarkozy then elaborated on the *entente cordial* that France and Great Britain agreed in 1904 to settle their dispute over North African colonies, and specified the division of colonies between the two countries. He also detailed how this agreement laid the basis for their military alliance during the First World War. The *entente cordial*, he said, had now to be developed into an *entente amicable*. Such an alliance, he said, would strengthen the weight of France and Great Britain in the European Union and in the world.

The French president melodramatically attested to British support for France during the Second World War. France “will never forget the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish blood that mixed with French blood in the mud of the trenches,” he declared, and concluded: “As the last century’s wars have shown: like two brothers, the French people and the British people can accomplish together far more than what they can achieve separately.”

Sarkozy spoke of future cooperation between the two countries in military terms. “The United Kingdom and France have a major role to play,” he proclaimed, referring to the current worldwide military engagements of both countries.

“We are both ready to face up to our responsibilities,” he said, “arms in hand, in the service of peace. Nearly 15,000 French soldiers and nearly 15,000 British soldiers are deployed in all the world’s operational theatres. Our two countries have decided to make their ideas heard the world over. In short, our two countries can, if they so wish, perfectly complement each other.”

Sarkozy praised a strengthened alliance, saying it would be a blessing for the entire world. “The world needs two old nations like ours, which long ago gave up dreams of conquest and domination, but have retained from their age-old experience an incomparable knowledge of the world,” he declared. “If the United Kingdom and France together want more justice, the world will be more just. If the United Kingdom and France fight together for peace, the world will be more peaceful.”

Some commentators have interpreted Sarkozy’s appearance in London as a prelude to a fundamental shift in political relations in Europe. They speak of France’s turn away from the German-French axis, which had previously been the motor force behind the European Union, and a new orientation towards Great Britain and indirectly to the United States, aimed at keeping the economically stronger Germany at bay.

Many German commentators, in particular, have cited Sarkozy’s references to the *entente cordial* and the two world wars as evidence that his call for closer ties to London has an anti-German thrust. Rudolph Chimelli wrote in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*: “Notwithstanding their conflict-rich histories, both sides are forging a new European axis of power—without Germany.”

He continued: “It is apparent that a new awareness on both sides of the channel has been revealed, reviving an age-old problem in Europe. Although Germany is too small for hegemony, it is—even without global political ambitions—too big for a prosperous relationship between equals. Sarkozy is making no secret of the fact that the expansion of the EU is leaving France too far on the periphery for his liking, while Germany’s central geographic position remains unchanged.”

Other commentators assessed Sarkozy’s visit more calmly. They referred to his history of high-flying initiatives that end up leading nowhere and are soon forgotten. The *FAZ.net* web site of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said of the “political style” of the “hyperactive” president: “Sarkozy developed 20 ideas in a speech from which he will soon retreat on 18.”

The practical consequences of the initiatives announced by the French president are actually quite modest. Moreover, while the reaction on the British side was not cold, it was relatively restrained.

Nevertheless, Sarkozy’s London visit made clear how tense relations are within Europe and the tremendous problems that the ruling elites in France and Europe confront.

Sarkozy’s state visit took place against the backdrop of the greatest crisis of the international financial system since the 1930s. Both France and Great Britain have been heavily impacted, despite the fact that the full consequences of the crisis have still to be felt. Nevertheless, Sarkozy did not utter a single word about the financial crisis in London.

The aura of unreality that surrounded the French president’s pompous visit at times took bizarre forms. Sarkozy praised the United Kingdom as an economic model which “showed that in the global economy, there was a path to achieve strong growth, full employment and solidarity.” He continued: “This path is one of reforms aimed at restoring the value of effort and encouraging innovation, the spirit of enterprise and a sense of personal responsibility.”

Sarkozy could hardly have been unaware of the fact that the British government had just nationalised the bankrupt mortgage bank Northern Rock and provided guarantees from the public purse for its speculative activities to the tune of £110 billion.

French banks have also been affected by the financial crisis, and the low

value of the US dollar has created difficulties for French industry. France already has a high trade deficit and is falling further behind Germany. Its neighbour across the Rhine, once the most important partner for France in the European Union, is more and more considered a rival in Paris.

In addition, in contrast to Germany and Great Britain, France has not yet succeeded in reducing the amount of public spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is a massive impediment to its global competitiveness. Attempts to cut spending on social services have continuously come up against opposition in the working class. Public spending in France is currently more than half of GDP, at 53.5 percent, compared to 46 percent in Germany and 44 percent in Great Britain.

With his offer of an alliance with the British government, Sarkozy is attempting to resolve these problems through a pragmatic and ill-considered mixture of strategic aims and economic and political initiatives. He met with a British prime minister with whom he shares at least one thing in common: unpopularity with the electorate. Both Sarkozy and Gordon Brown have recorded historical lows in opinion polls.

Sarkozy's most important motive for closer cooperation with London is France's intensifying rivalry with Germany. During the Cold War, France was in a position, using the structure of the European Union, to prevent its economically stronger neighbour from achieving political superiority. This was the heyday of the much-heralded German-French partnership. With the reunification of Germany and the eastern expansion of the EU, France's position has changed.

Germany has become bigger and more influential. It has a population of 82 million, compared to 64 million in France. Its GDP of €2.3 trillion is €520 billion more than France's. Thanks to its geographic position and its export-based economy, Germany has profited much more from the eastern enlargement of the EU. Ten percent of German trade is with the new EU members, as compared to 4 percent for France. France is also more dependent on selling its goods to Germany than the other way round. Fifteen percent of French exports travel across the Rhine to Germany, while only around 10 percent of German exports are to France.

Germany also has a stronger position on the world market. Half of Germany's trade is outside the EU, for France the figure is 40 percent. Germany has a trade surplus of €200 billion, France a deficit of €40 billion.

French attempts to curtail Germany's superiority have been resisted by Berlin. Just recently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel thwarted Sarkozy's plan for a Mediterranean Union. This union, under the leadership of France, would have encompassed all countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea and served as a counterweight to German-dominated Eastern Europe. An EU conference at the beginning of March agreed to a heavily watered-down version, which retains little more than the name of the original plan. It replaces the previous "Barcelona Process" and Germany will have just as much influence in the union as France.

Germany also scuppered France's plans to limit the independence of the European Central Bank, which is responsible for the stability of the euro.

Sarkozy's London speech made clear that he envisions a greater role for Great Britain within the EU. He continually came back to this question. For example, Sarkozy referred to Winston Churchill being the first to call for a united Europe. He also declared Europe to be "our common destiny" and called for close cooperation with Great Britain when France assumes the presidency of the EU in the second half of this year.

Sarkozy also called for closer military ties with Great Britain. He wants to revive the agreement made in 1998 by then-French President Jacques Chirac and then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Saint-Malo. This agreement was intended to be the start of an autonomous European defence policy, under British-French leadership. The agreement was never implemented because European governments never provided it with the necessary resources and London repeatedly took the side of the US and the US-dominated NATO.

In his speech to the British Parliament, Sarkozy explicitly referred to the status of France and Britain as nuclear powers and veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council. He said, "Let's discuss together, decide together, and act together. Everything justifies it: our common status as permanent members of the Security Council, our responsibilities as nuclear powers, the influence we each exert in a part of the world, our common membership of the European Union and our passionate commitment to democracy and freedom."

He also emphasised that "France and the United Kingdom account for two thirds of the defence spending of our 25 European partners and double their research efforts."

In order to insinuate France into the close partnership between the UK and US, Sarkozy is even prepared to integrate France once again into the NATO command structures, from which French President Charles de Gaulle withdrew in 1966.

Sarkozy also promised to send an additional 1,000 troops to Afghanistan to boost the current NATO forces. It appears, though, that Sarkozy never discussed this with anyone else in France.

The US and UK have long appealed for additional forces to be sent by other NATO members. According to experts, the fate of NATO depends on its success or otherwise in Afghanistan.

French and British opinions on the role of NATO are still far from unified. Sarkozy views the military alliance as a means, above all, to strengthen the military might of Europe and act as a certain check on the power of the US, which has sought to bypass the command structure of NATO with its own "coalitions of the willing." This latter policy is supported by the UK.

Alongside military ties with the UK, Sarkozy also wants closer cooperation in the development and distribution of nuclear technology. Both countries are basing their current and future energy needs on nuclear reactors and are even promoting them as a means of protecting the environment. Some 20 percent of Great Britain's energy consumption is served by nuclear power plants, some of which are aging and are due to be replaced. In France, the figure is 80 percent.

The construction of new nuclear plants in the UK would bestow French industry with multi-billion-euro contracts and increase its chance of selling nuclear technology around the world. In this area, France could benefit at the expense of Germany, which is handicapped by a law passed by the former Social Democratic Party-Green Party government that prohibits the building of new nuclear plants.

Finally, Sarkozy hopes to get support from British Labour Party Prime Minister Brown for the implementation of social "reforms," which have continually come up against determined resistance in the French population. He praised British economic policies as a model and ensured the assembled parliamentarians: "France will carry out her reforms all the more resolutely and faster because, having put them off for too long, she can no longer wait. You can count on my total determination in this respect."



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