

French President Sarkozy backs Washington's hard line against Iran

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy's bellicose calls for action against Iran's nuclear power installations have been greeted with surprise and satisfaction by the American media. Sarkozy's support for Washington's hard line against Iran is part of a broader effort by French imperialism to extend its global military and geopolitical reach. This includes interventions in Kazakhstan and Djibouti.

The *Washington Post* on October 1 reported: "At last week's UN General Assembly meeting in New York, [Sarkozy] ratcheted up his language, saying the extended hand had been ignored and, in what seemed to be a challenge to Obama, questioning whether it was worthwhile to keep waiting for a return gesture." The *Post* quoted Sarkozy saying pointedly, "Meanwhile, the centrifuges keep on turning."

The *Wall Street Journal*, in a September 29 commentary entitled "French Atomic Pique," wrote, "We thought we'd never see the day when the president of France shows more resolve than America's commander in chief for confronting one of the gravest challenges to global security. But here we are."

Germany and France are, respectively, the first and fourth most active investors in Iran. Sarkozy, in a break with the Gaullist nationalist tradition of a certain independence from the US, has come to the conclusion that the interests of French capitalism in Iran and globally can best be defended by closer collaboration with the US. This means active involvement in American-led neo-colonial wars aimed at securing the resources of the region for exploitation. Last year's decision to reintegrate France into the command structure of NATO, reversing De Gaulle's withdrawal in 1966, is part of Sarkozy's shift from traditional Gaullism.

The French president's foreign policy is driven by the intensification of geostrategic competition among the great powers for the world's energy resources, with Europe and the US increasingly challenged by China. The world economic crisis is accelerating this process. The prime object of this scramble are the vast deposits of gas, oil and other strategic resources in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea basin.

In July 2008, a white paper outlining France's military plans for the next 15 years projected "a priority geographical axis from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, the Arab Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean." The paper continued, "This axis corresponds to the areas where the risks related to the strategic interests of France and Europe are the highest."

Sarkozy has justified his tough stance on Iran by suggesting that if Israel saw too little resolve from the US, it might act on its own and carry out an air strike against Iranian nuclear power installations—an

action with untold consequences. For the moment, the threat of an embargo, particularly on refined petrol, is being raised in an attempt to force the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to abandon Iran's nuclear power programme.

The question of Iran's possible development of a nuclear weapons capability is being exaggerated as a pretext for US imperialism's drive to create a regime in Iran amenable to the exploitation of its oil and gas reserves by American corporations, as is now the case in occupied Iraq.

Sarkozy's anti-Iranian rhetoric is of a piece with his Islamophobic campaign to ban the wearing of the burka. Both are designed to shift French public opinion and build support for France's growing militarism. An opinion poll published last spring showed 68 percent of French people opposed to sending troops to Afghanistan, and only 15 percent in favour.

At the same time, the failure of the US to create a stable Iraq, which is still a military quagmire holding down some 120,000 American troops and increasing difficulties in suppressing the Afghan resistance have weakened the Obama administration and American imperialism's credibility. France, like other rivals of the US, means to take advantage of this.

Sarkozy's visit to Kazakhstan

On October 6, Sarkozy visited Kazakhstan. *Le Monde* on that day wrote, "France's interest in Kazakhstan is above all geostrategical. France wants it to be her special ally in Central Asia, like Brazil in Latin America, Egypt in Africa and India in Asia. Fully involved in the war in Afghanistan, France also wants to guarantee the supply and passage of the 3,000 French soldiers deployed in that country. Paris signed an agreement to this effect."

The geostrategical interests to which *Le Monde* alluded largely involve finance, defence, military hardware and securing energy supplies. Sarkozy was accompanied by representatives of French big business. The two countries are reported to have signed 24 deals worth over \$6 billion.

As *Le Monde* pointed out: "Paris also wants to be able to bypass Russia in order to secure supplies of hydrocarbons. Total and GDF Suez formalised their participation in the exploitation of the Khvalinskoye gas field. They acquired a 25 percent stake (€1 billion) in the future Khvalinskoye offshore gas and oil field project in the Caspian Sea, to be jointly developed by the Russian oil company

Lukoil and the Kazakh state firm KazMunaiGas. Production will begin in 2016. The field is expected to produce up to three trillion cubic feet of gas per year.

“A consortium led by the French firm Spie-Capag signed a memorandum of agreement worth \$1.2 billion in contracts to build a pipeline (Yeskene-Kurik) linking Kazakhstan’s Kashagan oil field to the Caspian port of Aktau.”

The *Financial Times* wrote on October 6, “The region is expected to play an important role in counterbalancing OPEC’s dominance of world oil markets in the coming two decades. Kashagan, one of the world’s biggest oil fields, is due onstream in 2012 and will eventually produce more than 1.5 million barrels of oil.”

The French nuclear firm Areva signed a contract with Kazakhstan, which has large reserves of uranium and sends 10 percent of its production to France. Other commercial accords were also signed, including deals involving aerospace, transport and military equipment for the Kazak armed forces.

Kazakhstan does not border Afghanistan, but shares frontiers with two other Central Asian countries—Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—which do. All these countries are major allies in the US-NATO war against Afghanistan and provide routes for the US to ship supplies to troops there.

“We need Kazakhstan to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan and in Iran, and to establish new relations with our friends in Russia in the fight against extremism,” Sarkozy said after signing a transit agreement with Kazakhstan.

According to an October 6 dispatch by the Associated Press, “These agreements provide NATO with an important alternative to Pakistan, where supply convoys heading by road to Afghanistan have been hit by insurgent attacks.”

China’s presence in the region demonstrates that country’s potential for pursuing its own interests at the expense of its European and American rivals. The *Financial Times* on October 1 pointed out, “China has been increasing investment in Central Asia in recent years, particularly in Kazakhstan, with which it shares a common border. Kazakhstan has striven to balance its geo-political interests between rival powers Russia, China the US and the EU, but the economic crisis has forced it further into the arms of China.”

The newspaper added, “China lent Kazakhstan \$10 billion this April to lock-in future oil supplies and pay for China National Petroleum Corp. to acquire an equity stake in Mangistaumunaigas, an independent Kazakh oil producer. CNPC is also expanding an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to its north-western frontier and building a new pan-Central Asian pipeline to bring gas to China.”

The *Financial Times* quoted a geopolitical analyst as saying, “Given the scale of Chinese investment in that country, it would now appear virtually impossible for Kazakhstan to make a foreign policy decision that ran counter to Beijing’s wishes.”

France trains Somali troops in Djibouti

Pierre Lellouche, the French minister of state for European affairs, conducted a three-day visit, October 9 to 11, to Djibouti. The trip underscored France’s expanding military presence in the region and the drive by the European Union to establish itself as a world military power capable of vying with the US. A former French colony

strategically situated on the Gulf of Aden, and the site of France’s largest overseas military base, Djibouti occupies the southern extremity of the Middle Eastern oil and gas region.

France is also heavily involved in Operation Atlanta, the EU naval operation to combat piracy in the seas off Somalia. An official statement from *Diplomatie française* on Lellouche’s visit to Djibouti states, “His trip, which coincides with a visit to Djibouti by the ambassadors of the EU’s Political and Security Committee (PSC), will also provide an opportunity to rally our European partners around the need to extend Operation Atlanta as part of an EU contribution to strengthening security in the region. This will come about first of all through the consolidation of the State of Somalia. The French initiative to train Somali security forces, under which 150 Somali soldiers have already been trained in Djibouti, falls within this framework. We are also acting to strengthen naval action by training and equipping the coastguards of countries in the region.”

France is at present training 500 Somali men in the Djibouti desert to act as a presidential guard to prop up the shaky transitional Somali government of sheik Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, which is involved in a civil war with Islamic militias. The US is supplying the trainee soldiers through Amisom (the African Mission in Somalia) with weapons and is paying their wages, \$150 US dollars a month. France’s aim is to expand the guard to some 3,000 soldiers.

At a funding conference in Brussels in April, 144.8 million euro were promised to stabilise the country, much of it earmarked for the military. Sarkozy declared at a gathering of ambassadors August 26 that “France will not allow Al Qaida to set up a sanctuary at our gate, in Africa.”

Lellouche invited the EU ambassadors to Camp Mariam, the French base in Djibouti, and asked them to make a contribution to training military personnel and interpreters. He also urged their participation in an independent military force with a global reach for European imperialism: “For the first time, the Europeans can take the decision by themselves to intervene in a distant region where their interests are involved.”

The lack of opposition anywhere in Europe from organisations such as Germany’s Left Party and the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France is underlined by *Le Monde*’s comment that France’s intervention in Somalia “has not been the subject of the slightest public debate.”

Those who claimed in 2003 in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq that “Old Europe,” mainly France and Germany, would represent a restraining influence on US militarism, have been proven wrong. In 2003 they thought that by opposing the US decision to go it alone and insisting on official UN backing for the invasion they could best serve their own imperialist interests. But as the adage goes, the imperialists have no permanent allies, but only permanent interests.



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