Only a *Folie de Grandeur*? Understanding French policy in Africa

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In France’s Fifth Republic, foreign affairs constitute the paramount concern in all policymaking and the *horizon réservé* (reserved domain) of the president. In other words, French foreign policymaking is concentrated in the hands of just one man, the president. The French president acts like a modern Louis XIV whose famous phrase ‘I am the state’ he can use in his own way: ‘I am the foreign affairs.’

Such a monopoly of foreign policymaking was facilitated by a combination of three factors. The first is the very nature of the French political system. The 1958 constitution, which was introduced at the height of Algeria’s traumatic War of Independence, established a hyper-presidential system granting the French president near-absolute prerogatives. From 1958 up to 2008, six successive presidents - de Gaulle (1958–1969), Pompidou (1969–

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The second determinant is the near-paralysis of the other actors of foreign policy upon which an impressive collection of constitutional and customary limitations is imposed. With a tamed and expendable prime minister overtaken by domestic affairs, a national assembly uninformed and powerless to exercise critical control, a foreign minister usually serving at the pleasure of the president and relegated to a miserably subordinate role – including and more than ever the incumbent Bernard Kouchner the self-styled ‘Good Samaritan’ and die-hard advocate of humanitarian intervention, and an informal circle of super-discreet advisers such as Jean-Christophe Mitterrand who was his father’s African affairs adviser, the president is relatively free to make foreign policy decisions unchecked. This presidential command of foreign policy issues is further enhanced by the all-too-apparent apathy and laxity of the French public, and the lack of aggressiveness on the part of the media. The third and final factor is the omnipotence of inter-cabinet channels, veritable power networks which encourage highly personalised practices. The cabinets and different staffs of the president, the prime minister, the foreign minister and other ministries work closely together feeding the president with first-hand information and recommendations, providing him with unofficial channels, transmitting his personal instructions and enabling him to conduct his own negotiations.

In this fifty-year period, France changed, the world changed and the position of France in the world changed. More specifically, France found its position drastically weakened, in fact becoming one medium-size power among many others. Such a dramatic depreciation of France’s place dans le monde (position in the world), accelerated by the unmatched supremacy of the United States, was simply becoming unbearable for the egocentric and over-proud French nation impériale (imperial nation) endowed in earlier times with colonies in virtually all continents. Thus, French policymakers, whether from the rightist or leftist political ideologies, had to diligently bring about a foreign policy worthy of France’s passé glorieux (glorious past), grandeur (a rather distorted self-image of greatness) and even mission civilisatrice (a special mission inspired by the supposed universality of the French language and that of the French-championed principles of liberté, égalité and fraternité). In other words, they had to come up with the necessary means for the recognition of French exception and independence, for the retention of its rich historical baggage and its supposedly deserved first-rate global position, in less polite words for the mitigation of its all-too-apparent decline. From de Gaulle to the excessively media-savvy Sarkozy, over exactly fifty years, these means were few but similar: the making and maintenance of a nuclear force de frappe (independent nuclear capability) which needs uranium, the establishment of a strong but French-led Europe, and the maintenance of an inherently neo-colonial policy towards Africa which owns uranium, under a blueprint known as the famous but infamous Françafrique and masterminded by Jacques Foccart, who was the influential African affairs advisor of de Gaulle, Pompidou and Chirac.
Despite previous and recent pronouncements that France has neither the capability nor the desire to continue playing the role of Africa’s gendarme, successive French governments have, rather crudely and cynically, contrived and maintained a policy of co-opting and supporting a host of corrupt and unsavory dictators who show willingness to support France’s interests, play by its rules and have little respect for democracy and human rights. The list is rather long and includes notably Côte d’Ivoire’s Houphouët-Boigny – a parliamentarian and minister in France’s Fourth Republic along with Mitterrand, the Central African Republic’s (laughable Emperor) Bokassa, Zaire’s (equally laughable Marshal) Mobutu, Djibouti’s Gouled, Rwanda’s Habyarimana, Madagascar’s Ratsiraka, Chad’s Habré, Cameroon’s Biya, Burkina Faso’s Compaoré, Congo-Brazzaville’s Sassou-Nguesso, Gabon’s M’ba and Bongo – who owns countless pieces of real estate property in Paris - and Togo’s Eyadema Senior as well as Eyadema Junior.

French policymakers first proclaimed that they were providing the sole bulwark against the Soviet threat in Africa. Then, they tirelessly proclaimed that they could not accept the idea of abandoning Africa to the oil-greedy United States – even if the current French government is more favorably inclined towards the latter. In the mid-1990s, for instance, France continuously had a cordial disagreement with the US which French policymakers suspected of masterminding the fall of the pro-French Zairian and Rwandese regimes in order to unravel France’s control of the region’s mineral riches.

More recently, French policymakers have started proclaiming, to whoever is willing to listen, that they provide the best possible alternative to China, which is steadily making inroads deep inside Africa, including in uranium-rich Niger where Chinese companies have been awarded mining rights. They also assert that they unconditionally defend the idea of democratising, under the so-called La Baule doctrine, the fragile African political systems, which are perpetually weakened by internal contradictions and ethnic divisions and which France created itself. The French policymakers, however, hold that this democratisation can only be done at the African political systems’ own rhythms mainly because of French apprehensions that fairly elected and independent-minded African leaders may be less loyal to France and less amenable to its manipulation, and may even look for other protectors. What’s more, French policymakers declare they are replacing Françafrique by Eurafrique, which implies a Europeanisation of France’s undertakings in Africa, a subtle attempt to salvage a semblance of legitimacy, secure international blessing for a new peacemaking vocation and proceed towards cost-sharing. And, more importantly, they state publicly that they will be soon reducing troop levels and closing bases – France currently maintains bases only in Djibouti, Senegal and oil-rich Gabon, reexamining existing bilateral defence treaties the full contents of which were never published, and even refraining from its frequent, unilateral, inconsiderate and discrediting military intervention in Africa.

One very recent example suffices to refute the authenticity and solidity of this pledge to review France’s interventionist policy that should have been changed after the
1994 Rwanda debacle for which it bears direct responsibility by arming and training the military forces of the genocidal government: troubled Chad where French troops have been used the most extensively since its nominal independence in 1960 in order to accommodate whoever is in power – strongmen by the name of Malloum, Goukouni, Habré or Déby who were all at daggers drawn in the legendary French Mousquetaires (Musqueteers), rather than facilitating an orderly transition. France has consistently supported its long-time ally, Chad’s current President Déby, even as internal opposition to him greatly intensified. Both Chirac and Sarkozy gave the green light for French troops to assist the Chadian military with intelligence and logistics, and thus practically helping it to fight off ever-escalating rebel threats in 2006 and 2008. Why would France do that? Because it is mainly interested in ensuring the stability of oil-rich Chad from which exports began in 2003 after a pipeline through Cameroon was completed with a capacity of 225 000 precious barrels per day.

Thus, France’s latest altruistic endeavours are only destined to cover up, prolong and maximise France’s interests in Africa which it shamelessly considers as its chasse gardée. It wishes to preserve the illicit financing of the major political parties and also of related networks known as réseaux which progressively came to be dominated by French individual politicians, their business associates, well-connected lobbyists, senior civil servants, and military and intelligence officers. One of the most established réseaux was the one controlled by former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua who, with undisguised impunity, used his African contacts for his own right-wing party’s illicit fundraising. France also aims at satisfying its infinite need for Africa’s uranium in order to operate its commercial nuclear power plants and provide material for its military nuclear weapons programme. For instance, it was an open secret that, since the early 1970s, the French company Areva has been exclusively exploiting uranium in Niger, the world’s third largest producer of this crucial raw material. In addition, France yearns for securing the unhindered and privileged access to Africa’s existing and newly found oilfields for companies such as TotalElfFina which has been repeatedly used by the French intelligence services to both finance and accomplish numerous covert operations contentedly called barbouzerie.

France, a major arms supplier to most of its former colonies, also wants to sell military hardware to all interested African states, the way in which the European aerospace company EADS, partly owned by the French government, recently concluded a deal to furnish anti-tank missiles to Libya, yesterday’s pariah state. It needs to ensure that former colonies such as Madagascar, Comoros, Benin, Senegal, Niger, Mali, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Central African Republic and Gabon remain a market for French manufactured goods, from consumer products to infrastructure components. France intends to ensure the longetivity of the zone Franc, a zone connecting it especially with its former colonies of Central and West Africa. Furthermore, France would like to ensure that it remains in these former colonies the
leading foreign investor and trading partner, as in Côte d’Ivoire where French fuel distributing, cosmetics, telecommunications, dairy and soft-drink supplier companies control more than half of that country’s economy. It wishes to protect the revenue and preferential treatment of thousands of its nationals who live and work in Africa, and, at the same time, keep African migration to France as low as possible by deliberately reducing the delivery of entry visas and making use of forced expulsion – a hallmark of Sarkozy’s tenure as Interior Minister – in order to nurture domestic support in the face of unrelenting economic difficulty and creeping xenophobia.

Jacques Foccart is dead and buried, no doubt about it, eleven years ago in 1997. But his Françafrique did not follow him to the grave, and, in fact, having survived him, seems destined to disgracefully continue tormenting Africa for years to come. Thus, if truth be told, Africans should not be fooled. France totally lacks concern for the fate and aspirations of Africans, and it acts only in view of its above-mentioned lasting and deep-rooted political, strategic and economic interests the permanence and exigencies of which, more than sheer force of circumstances, account for the continuity in France’s policy towards Africa in a fifty-year period. They should take Sarkozy’s deceptive and insensitive talk of a rupture (departure) in France’s Africa policy only as the same wine in a different bottle, in fact just as a pathetic façade for a hasty and self-interested redecoration of neo-colonialism. In the words of a former French diplomat with long experience of African affairs articulated during an informal tête-à-tête with the author of this commentary: how foolishly could any French president implement a genuine policy that would get France’s relations incestueuses (incestuous relations) with Africa on a sounder footing, and, by default, risk loosing a chasse gardée which was built by the sweat of de Gaulle and Foccart, and which still is both a psychological source of grandeur and a time-tested prize with immeasurable political, military, financial and economic benefits?