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A New Way to Engage? French Policy in Africa from Sarkozy to Hollande

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SUMMARY POINTS

- France wields a level of influence in sub-Saharan Africa that it cannot command anywhere else in the world. In crisis situations, it is still seen as a key source of diplomatic, military or even financial pressure on or support for the countries in the region.
- Africa accounts for 3 per cent of France's exports and remains an important supplier of oil and metals – uranium from Niger is particularly strategic for energy security as about one-quarter of France's electricity production depends on it.
- The value of French merchandise exports and imports to Africa has significantly increased since 1960 but France's market share there has consistently declined: from 7.73 per cent of exports and 9.08 of imports in 1960 to 2.82 per cent and 2.05 per cent respectively in 2011. There are some bright spots, however: sub-Saharan Africa is an important market for French logistics, service, telecoms and infrastructure companies.
- President François Hollande's early Africa strategy has amounted to rather more than the military intervention in Mali. He has attempted to refashion France's wider political approach towards the continent and make a distinct break from the message and policy priorities of the Sarkozy era.
- President Nicolas Sarkozy was self-confident and direct, but Hollande has shown a subtler ear for the tone of African diplomacy and how this can be used to productive effect. The trouble taken by Hollande to seek African opinion before going ahead with military intervention contrasted with past practice.
- French authorities have tried to establish dialogues on Africa with emerging powers – especially China – as well as aid and commercial partnerships with African countries. This policy had some success under Sarkozy and continues under Hollande.
- Hollande sent a strong message of general principle in 2012 that countries with democratic governance will benefit from stronger support. However, in practice he has adopted a much more flexible and nuanced approach in dealings with individual regimes.

INTRODUCTION

By the time François Hollande was sworn in as president of France on 15 May 2012 he may well have suspected that, one year into his term, French troops would be on the ground in Mali. Like his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, he believed France should provide logistical and intelligence support if West African countries sent troops to tackle the jihadist groups that had taken over the Malian north. But that France's own contingent would be almost 4,000 strong and committed to an aggressive combat role was probably not the most likely scenario envisaged by either man.

The dramatic scale of the military intervention in the Sahel is a measure of Africa's surge up the scale of priorities for French policy-makers and an indication of the complex challenges the continent still presents for France. Both Hollande and Sarkozy forged their personal reputations in the domestic political arena. Neither entered office amid expectations he would become a foreign policy president. But both have found that even as France seeks to 'normalize' relationships with the sub-Saharan world, Africa remains a continent that it cannot push to the margins of political and economic diplomatic action.

The traditional web of political and business connections commonly summed up in the term *françafrique* is certainly one factor in this – and a continuing target of critical sub-Saharan comment and uncomfortable French media coverage. But deeper basic realities also explain why even the most domestically oriented occupant of the Elysée Palace has to give substantial time to African issues. There are serious reasons why France's relations with sub-Saharan countries, and particularly the francophone states with which it has strong cultural and political ties, will never be as normal as its dealings with some other parts of the world.

Africa is a near neighbour. How it copes with challenges such as climate change, population growth, instability or extremist violence has a direct impact on France as well as on other European Union states across a host of issues, such as migration, trade, security and development assistance. The closeness of human, cultural and economic relationships reinforces that impact.

In this respect the continent is not unique. Much the same can be said of the Middle East too. But what marks out Africa is that in much of the continent France can still wield a level of influence that it cannot command anywhere else in the world. In crisis situations, Paris is still seen as a key source of diplomatic, military and financial pressure on or support for the countries in the region.

This is not a dominant great-power role, but it is a position of relevance. French policy matters in Africa in a way that elsewhere outside Europe it does not. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa reacted to the election of Sarkozy as the new president of France in 2007 by noting that 'given its historical links with the African continent, France will always be a valued interlocutor and partner in our efforts to build peace and stability, strengthen democratic governance and foster social and economic development.'¹

History matters, but Africa is important to France for contemporary political and economic reasons:

- It accounts for 3 per cent of France's exports and also remains an important supplier of oil and metals – uranium from Niger is particularly strategic for energy security as about one-quarter of France's electricity production depends on it. French companies are particularly strong in sectors such as logistics, port and rail operations, telecoms, shipping, banking and air transport; they also have significant interests in tropical commodities and agriculture.
- At least 240,000 French nationals are registered as living in Africa.
- French engagements with African states have played an important role in sustaining its image as a major power. African countries can be a valuable source of supportive votes at the UN and they have been key allies for France and fellow EU members in international negotiations on certain global issues, notably climate change.

¹ 'President Thabo Mbeki Congratulates French President Elect', 7 May 2007, www.dfa.gov.za/docs/2007/fran0507.htm.

French military engagement

France's engagement in Africa is deep. It intervened militarily in the continent 19 times between 1962 and 1995. But gradually, budgetary concerns and a changed strategic climate have encouraged France to adopt a new multilateral approach. Structural changes to the armed forces, including sharp reductions in the size of the military and base closures between 1997 and 2002 meant France could no longer maintain the dominance that it had in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, according to the French Ministry of Defence, in February 2013, of 10,025 military personnel deployed overseas, 4,610 were in West Africa, 2,180 in central Africa and 270 were involved in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.²

A gradual shift has been under way in French policy on Africa since the early 1990s, long before the election of Sarkozy. This was spurred on by the end of the Cold War, an emerging new generation of French politicians and a series of *débâcles* such as France's role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and French efforts to support Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko until the very end. Highly publicized scandals such as that involving French oil company Elf and guns for Angola – in which high-ranking French politicians were involved in money-laundering – undermined the domestic public tolerance of continued sub-Saharan engagement.

Under President Jacques Chirac, the French army developed a new strategic approach from 1995. To prevent being sucked into civil and ethnic strife, it accepted the delegation of peacekeeping operations in Africa to organizations such as the African Union and the UN. With the joint-exercise Reinforcement of Peacekeeping capacities (RECAMP) programme, the French army helped train African troops for UN peacekeeping operations. Recent policy has been to support UN mandates with French troops, as in Côte d'Ivoire since 2003.

However, the 1990s reforms of French Africa policy have begun to peter out. The failure of French mediation in Côte d'Ivoire highlighted the political and economic cost of this loss of reformist momentum. France risked becoming embroiled in an internal conflict and it was forced to relinquish its mediation role to UN and African initiatives.

Sarkozy: plus ça change?

A key theme of Nicolas Sarkozy's election campaign in 2007 was of 'rupture' with past politics. He signalled that after colonialism and 40 years of strong influence over post-independence Africa, policy would no longer be determined by *françafrique's* opaque and informal connections, which had for decades provided unique networking possibilities for influencing policy and trade deals.

In reality, however, Sarkozy sent out mixed messages to Africa. An important reform of bilateral relationships was outlined in a speech in Cape Town in 2008. But by this stage the image of his policy towards Africa had already been strongly shaped by the impact of visits to the continent in July 2007. These had signalled continuity rather than change. All his destinations were veteran francophone allies: Algeria and Tunisia on 10–12 July; Senegal and Gabon on 26–27 July. Sarkozy's keynote address in Dakar dwelt almost entirely on history, culture and moral philosophy. The speech failed to outline any vision for French engagement with sub-Saharan Africa, in contrast to his Maghreb visits that had a clearer vision promoting some sort of Mediterranean Union, which he had highlighted in his inaugural speech in May 2007.

In his Cape Town speech of 2008, Sarkozy made four proposals to change his country's Africa policy: dialogue with African states to adapt old cooperation accords, re-creating bilateral relations on the principle of transparency, using the French military presence in Africa to help Africans build their own collective security system, and making Europe 'a major African partner in the matter of peace and security'.³

² Ministère de la Défense, 'Carte des Opérations Extérieures', http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/rubriques_complementaires/carte-des-operations-exterieures

³ Douglas Yates, 'France, The EU, and Africa', in Adekeye Adebajo and Kaye Whiteman (eds), *The EU and Africa: From Eurafrique to Afro-Europa*, (London: Hurst, 2012), p. 328.

Sarkozy did not have particular experience of Africa upon becoming president (unlike his predecessor, Chirac). His main vision prior to election was to introduce a selective immigration system, tailored to the needs of the French market. Because of immigration North Africa featured much in his thinking and he seems to have tried to balance old and new approaches towards Africa. Under Sarkozy policy focused initially on how to reduce informal immigration of Africans into Europe; it was an agenda driven largely by political pressures at home, where the president sought to win back the support of voters tempted by the xenophobic agenda of the hard-right Front National.

However, Sarkozy did also work through the UN, EU and regional organizations to pursue French objectives. This allowed France to maintain an important voice on the future of Africa's security architecture, even as it reduced its physical military presence on the ground. France also widened its economic focus away from traditional francophone partners, to reach out to the largest sub-Saharan economies, South Africa and Nigeria.

Renewed international engagement: impact on French policy

One of the most significant developments of Africa's international politics in the 2000s was the increased engagement of 'emerging powers'. This started with China. Building on the country's need for natural resources and new markets, Sino-African relations have grown exponentially over the last decade and, according to the Chinese state media, trade between Africa and China totalled \$200 billion in 2012.⁴ China is now Africa's largest trading partner and other emerging powers such as India, Brazil and Turkey have scaled up their diplomatic and economic presence in the continent.⁵ Seeking energy security, business opportunities and a seat on the UN Security Council, India has significantly increased its engagements in Africa.⁶ Under President Lula's leadership, Brazil and its private sector moved beyond lusophone Africa, while Turkey, carried by its economic dynamism and its moderate form of Islam, has made significant economic inroads and expanded its diplomatic network on the continent.⁷

This arrival of new or returning players has been a striking development for Western powers solidly established in Africa. France, the United States and the United Kingdom have traditionally been rivals in Africa, pursuing their national objectives. However, because they share some values as well as interests in a collective security framework, they have been able to follow some common rules and goals, such as a concern for stability or aid conditionality.

After decades of post-colonial French-speaking Africa being seen in France its almost exclusive sphere of influence, there has been a growing recognition of the impact of emerging powers there and in sub-Saharan Africa more generally. In 2006 a report by the Foreign Affairs and Defence Commission of the French Senate noted that since 2000 there had been renewed international engagement in Africa, particularly by the United States, China and India, and that France's role needed to change. Paradoxically, however, the influence of middle-ranking powers has been enhanced by the patchy nature of US political engagement south of the Sahara and China's decision to limit its rapidly deepening engagement to the economic sphere.

This paper first examines the evolution of French policy under President Hollande, comparing it with policy under President Sarkozy. It then considers how France is responding to the growing engagement of emerging powers in Africa. It examines how this presents multiple challenges, although French attention focuses mainly on China and largely overlooks other emerging powers. The paper also seeks to understand how France reacts to the shifting trends in the foreign policies of African states.

4 'Chinese president starts state visit to Tanzania', Xinhua, 25 March 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/25/c_124496973.htm.

5 Christina Stolte, *Brazil in Africa: Just Another BRICS Country Seeking Resources?*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, November 2012.

6 Fantu Cheru and Cyril Obi (eds), *The Rise of China and India in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

7 For instance, Ankara organized a 'Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit' on 18–21 August 2008. See also Alpaslan Özerdem, 'How Turkey is emerging as a development partner in Africa', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2013.

FROM SARKOZY TO HOLLANDE: AN EVOLVING APPROACH TO AFRICA

The need for urgency

The reality of the limits on France's capacity to exert serious influence on the international scene was openly acknowledged by Nicolas Sarkozy on the day of his election to the presidency in 2007, when he indicated that Europe, the Middle East and Africa would be the diplomatic arenas commanding his predominant focus during his term of office.

Approaching the presidency five years later, François Hollande also knew the Africa would be a significant policy area, even though he had kept his election campaign relentlessly focused on basic domestic concerns. He had given considerable private thought to African issues in preparation for the presidency. He commissioned progressive thinkers to provide him with policy briefing notes on Africa and development issues. Moreover, the final stages of the election campaign coincided with the jihadist militant takeover of northern Mali, the military putsch in the capital, Bamako, on 22 March 2012 and the country's subsequent descent into political paralysis. It was clear that Africa would have to be a key priority.

But Hollande's focus on African issues was motivated not only by the need to prepare for power but also by domestic political factors. Interest in Africa is sometimes painted as a preoccupation of the French right and of business circles. But there is also a substantial 'Africa constituency' on the French left and among progressive-minded swing voters: some estimates suggest that as many as 150,000–200,000 French people work in NGOs or are active in associations and civic groups of various kinds with Africa connections, while five million or more donate to humanitarian appeals. Moreover, there are several million French citizens of sub-Saharan or Maghrebi descent.

There was a curious complementarity of political interest between the highly contrasting election campaigns of Sarkozy and Hollande. Through a tough stance on immigration and national identity, Sarkozy sought to win back right-wing voters who had defected to the Front National; meanwhile, Hollande knew that by sticking to a progressive liberal position on these issues, he would maximize his chances of uniting centre-left voters behind his candidacy, and retaining the votes of those tempted by the more radical language of the Front de Gauche candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

After taking office as president on 15 May 2012, Hollande rapidly came to view the Mali crisis and the wider threat that it posed to West African and international security as his biggest foreign policy challenge outside Europe. Aside from the eurozone's difficulties, the Mali crisis has dominated the president's international agenda ever since. During the early months of 2013, with French troops heavily engaged on the ground, it is reported by French officials to have commanded an hour or more of his time almost every day.

In terms of media coverage and public perception, the Sahelian security crisis and the decision to intervene so directly and on such a large scale in Mali have been the commanding features of Hollande's policy towards Africa – indeed almost the only themes that have been noticed in the general public arena in France itself. But in reality, his early Africa strategy has amounted to rather more than Mali. He has attempted to refashion France's wider political approach towards the continent and make a distinct break from the message and policy priorities of the Sarkozy era. And this has been noticed south of the Sahara. It has certainly influenced the African reception for the current French military intervention.

The inheritance

In defeating Sarkozy, Hollande was ousting a president who had set out with the intention of marking a decisive break with the vested interests and personalized elite connections that had characterized the heyday of *françafrique*. And even Sarkozy had not been the first to attempt an overhaul of the often claustrophobic alliances between selected African regimes, some senior French government and political figures and certain business interests.

Such *réseaux* (networks) had periodically led French governments to turn a blind eye to the failings of favoured sub-Saharan friends, fostered questionable financial relationships and, allegedly, political funding. Sporadically exposed in the Paris media, these networks had tarnished the credibility of traditional ties with Africa in the eyes of a jaundiced French public, while many younger-generation Africans have become deeply mistrustful of the motives behind French involvement in their continent.

As far back as 1981 Jean-Pierre Cot, President François Mitterrand's first minister of cooperation, floated reformist ideas only to get sacked for his pains – a fate that was also to befall Jean-Marie Bockel, Sarkozy's first cooperation minister, after he had declared the end of *françafrique*.

In the 1990s there was one serious, sustained and partially successful effort to introduce greater transparency and focus on development and good governance to France's dealings with sub-Saharan countries – and deepen coordination with European Union partners. Launched by the conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé after 1995, this was continued by his socialist successor Lionel Jospin, under whom the management of Africa policy was gradually transferred from the presidency and the politically compliant cooperation ministry to the ministries of foreign affairs and finance. The Jospin government and its UK Labour counterpart were the main architects of the 1998 European Union Common Position on human rights and democracy in Africa,⁸ which became the basis of the democratic governance conditions in the Cotonou treaty of 2000 between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific states.⁹ But this momentum faded during the later years of Chirac's presidency.

Sarkozy came to power in 2007 with the intention of reasserting the gradual *banalisation* ('normalization') of policy towards Africa and the management of relations with the continent. As interior minister in May 2006, preparing the public ground for his election campaign the following year, he had chosen to visit two African democracies – Benin and Mali. In Cotonou, Benin, he made a speech calling for partnership and the end of *françafrique*. But as was to prove the case once Sarkozy became president, the impact of such new thinking was clouded by the consequences of his preoccupation with immigration control. In both Cotonou and Bamako he was met by demonstrators protesting against a parliamentary bill he had introduced to tighten restrictions on the migration of unskilled workers to France.

After Sarkozy's election, early hints at a reformist tone were undermined by the impact of a disastrously misjudged agenda-setting speech in Dakar, Senegal, on 26 July 2007.¹⁰ He stated that colonialism had been wrong but then alienated African commentators when he tactlessly declared that 'the African has not sufficiently made his mark on history'. In forming his government earlier the president had attempted to defuse the domestic political challenge of the xenophobic Front National by establishing a separate ministry to regulate immigration. In African eyes the language of the Dakar speech, coming just a few weeks later, reinforced perceptions that he saw the continent largely in negative terms.

Despite some early gestures towards West Africa's democratic leaders, Sarkozy never really overcame the negative impression left by these early missteps. He soon lapsed into prioritizing relations with traditional partners with a questionable record on governance and human rights, such as the Bongo regime in Gabon and Chad's President Idriss Déby. Reportedly after pressure from Gabon, the would-be modernizing junior cooperation minister Bockel was soon replaced by Alain Joyandet, whose declared priority was the promotion of French business rather than reform.

Speaking in Cape Town in 2008, Sarkozy did establish a new doctrine for a reduced security footprint south of the Sahara, renegotiating defence agreements that had previously allowed

8 '98/350/CFSP: Common Position of 25 May 1998 defined by the Council on the basis of Article J.2 of the Treaty on European Union, concerning human rights, democratic principles, the rule of law and good governance in Africa', *Official Journal* L 158, 2 June 1998 P. 0001–0002.

9 'Second revision of the Cotonou Agreement – Agreed Consolidated Text, 11 March 2010', 19 March 2010, http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/second_revision_cotonou_agreement_20100311.pdf.

10 'Discours de Monsieur Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République française, Université de Dakar, Sénégal', 26 July 2007.

African regimes to call on French military support.¹¹ However, he showed little interest in development issues.

A feature of the Sarkozy presidency was the concentration of foreign policy leadership in the Elysée Palace – particularly pronounced with regard to Africa. This produced positive results: Sarkozy's direct personal engagement was key in re-establishing a reasonable French working relationship with Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, after the earlier breakdown in ties between the two countries. However, the foreign ministry was marginalized. Sarkozy's first foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner – a socialist like Bockel, recruited in an attempt at cross-party inclusiveness – lacked a personal political base in a government dominated by Sarkozy's conservative UMP party.

Moreover, the management of African affairs at the Elysée Palace was shared between professional diplomats such as Bruno Joubert and an informal adviser and Sarkozy envoy, Robert Bourgi. Claude Guéant, secretary general of the presidency and later interior minister, who was much preoccupied by security and immigration concerns, also played an influential role.

During the final months of Sarkozy's presidency, there was a noticeable shift of influence back towards the foreign ministry. After the sudden February 2011 resignation of Kouchner's successor, Michèle Alliot-Marie, over family contacts with recently deposed Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, an embattled Sarkozy appointed a widely respected former prime minister, Alain Juppé, as foreign minister. In a position of political strength, Juppé began to reassert the ministry's standing. Meanwhile, Joyandet had already been replaced by the more development-focused Henri de Raincourt.

Hollande: Mali imposes urgent demands

Elected after a campaign based overwhelmingly on domestic issues, François Hollande nevertheless found himself confronted with the need to give serious attention on Africa from the moment he took office on 15 May 2012 because of the crisis in Mali. He rapidly concluded that this posed a fundamental threat to French national interests, both because it might enhance the capacity of Islamist terrorists to stage attacks in France and because the disintegration of Mali's territorial integrity and constitutional government imperilled the stability of West Africa.

From an early stage Hollande took a conscious decision to prioritize the Mali crisis and to associate himself very publicly with the way it was handled – for example, by receiving members of the Malian community in France at the Elysée Palace. This started to broaden the base of the new president's political agenda, otherwise dominated by domestic and eurozone affairs. And internationally it maintained continuity with the stance taken by the Sarkozy administration, which had already aligned France firmly in support of the demand by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for the restoration of constitutional rule in Mali and its initial proposal to send a military force to tackle the jihadists in the north of the country.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 2012, the French government lobbied ceaselessly for the United Nations Security Council to support the ECOWAS plan to deploy 3,000 West African troops to Mali, with French logistical and intelligence support. The United States argued that ECOWAS' practical preparations were far too sketchy and, despite an early signal of support in principle, the Security Council withheld a green light for the plan until late December 2012.¹² France's sustained diplomatic action was critical in finally winning over the sceptics, strongly backed by the United Kingdom, France also persuaded its EU partners to promise to send several hundred military personnel to train the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and start rebuilding the country's fractured and ill-disciplined army.

This was the context in which Hollande decided in early January 2013 to agree to an urgent request from Mali's interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, to deploy French combat troops to halt a

¹¹ 'Allocution de Monsieur le Président de la République devant le Parlement sud-africain, le Cap, Afrique du Sud', 28 February 2008.

¹² UN Security Council, Resolution 2085, 20 December 2012.

new southward push by the jihadist forces that started on 10 January. This urgent initial intervention, Opération Serval, rapidly evolved into a full-scale campaign to end the nine-month militant occupation of the Malian north.

Fresh talk of a fresh start

While preparations for the ECOWAS intervention in Mali dominated the Africa agenda for French diplomacy in Europe and the UN, the Hollande administration was also engaged in a quite distinct effort to reframe France's engagement south of the Sahara in wider terms. Clearly less urgent than the response to the Mali crisis, this is nevertheless an essential political complement to it – and one whose implementation could, if sustained, mark a significant reset in the nature of the Franco-African relationship. In some respects it is less a change in the content of policy than a cultural and institutional shift in the way in which the French government manages its dealings with Africa and in the tone of its interaction with sub-Saharan counterparts. There are thus both external and domestic dimensions to this fresh approach.

The public message

Externally the crucial signal came with Hollande's first presidential trip to sub-Saharan Africa, when he visited Dakar in October 2012 before travelling on to the summit of the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The choice of the Senegalese capital as the venue for Hollande to set out his agenda for France's policy towards Africa was clearly meant to strike a direct contrast with the offence widely caused by Sarkozy's famously tactless comments in his own Dakar speech five years before. An added bonus was the chance to signal Hollande's support for Macky Sall, who had been elected as president of Senegal in a peaceful and impressively transparent democratic contest just seven months earlier.

Hollande used the speech to stress that while French policy towards sub-Saharan Africa would always be shaped by its own attachment to the principles of democracy and human rights, relationships with African countries would be founded on the principle of mutual respect for their identity and independence.¹³ Africa was a partner he said. Unsurprisingly, this message met with a generally warm response. It cleverly reassured African governments defensive of their sovereignty and resentful of outside interference, while reformers could still be comforted by the progressive tone and recognition of Africa in positive terms.

The Kinshasa summit posed an altogether more awkward test, and opinions are divided over how well it was negotiated. The record of DRC President Joseph Kabila on democracy and human rights had been badly tarnished by the December 2011 election and there was speculation that, to keep his distance from the Kabila regime, Hollande might choose to stay away. But ultimately the importance of the summit as a multilateral event convinced him he should attend.¹⁴

Hollande was noticeably standoffish in his encounters with Kabila, however. In so doing, he signalled French disapproval of the flaws of the Congolese regime. This placated domestic critics on the left, who said he should have boycotted the summit, although some Africa specialists said the gesture was poorly judged in a continent where courtesy and respect matter. They argued that Hollande should have shown more polite warmth towards Kabila in public, while expressing his critical views strongly in a private meeting. Either way, the episode does not seem to have left as deep an impression as the Dakar speech with its stress on partnership and respect – a message that has been paralleled by a clear change in institutional arrangements and functioning in Paris.

¹³ 'Discours de M. le Président de la République devant l'Assemblée nationale de la République du Sénégal, Dakar', 12 October 2012.

¹⁴ 'Discours du Président de la République à l'occasion du Sommet des chefs d'Etat et de gouvernement de la Francophonie, Kinshasa', 13 October 2012.

Tone and structure

Under Hollande the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs has recovered a major role in shaping France's approach to African relationships, rather than simply implementing a policy set in the Elysée Palace. This has to some extent re-empowered the professional diplomats dealing with Africa, and the trend has been reinforced by the president's choice of foreign minister – former premier Laurent Fabius, a heavyweight in the ruling Socialist party. The ministry is no longer marginalized.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that the foreign ministry leads the forging of Africa policy. It is important to remember that France's constitution vests leadership of foreign affairs and defence in the president rather than the prime minister and government that enjoy a parliamentary majority. The new tone set through the Dakar speech and the visit to Kinshasa was essentially shaped in the Elysée Palace, and Hollande himself directly consulted a range of outside opinions before making the trip.

Moreover, Hollande has led the handling of the Mali crisis, advised by a tight circle of close colleagues, notably the chief of his personal military staff, General Benoît Puga – a veteran of Africa interventions who was originally appointed by Sarkozy in 2010 and thus occupied this key post in early 2011, when French forces in Côte d'Ivoire were deployed to muscular effect under United Nations authority to help enforce the removal from power of Laurent Gbagbo, after the latter's refusal to recognize his defeat in the November 2010 presidential election. A key public face for French action in Mali has been the defence minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, one of Hollande's closest political confidants, who has been comfortable fronting for the president's assertive military stance in the crisis.

The real institutional change has been less in a shift in the balance of policy control than in a deliberate step towards a more formalized management of relations with Africa. Like his predecessors, Hollande has maintained an Africa advisory unit at the Elysée Palace (traditionally known as the *cellule africaine* ('African cell')). But this is now headed by Hélène Le Gal, a diplomat whose career expertise has been largely concentrated more in the anglophone east and south of the continent than its francophone west.

In addition, the operation of both the unit and the Africa department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has become more formalized. Officials handle most of the workload, but it is Hollande and his ministers who engage in direct dialogue with their African counterparts, whereas previous French presidents often dispatched trusted advisers or envoys to convey messages on an informal, personalized basis. Officials have been instructed to respect formalities and use formal official channels so that African government leaders feel they are treated with the same respect for their rank that would apply to French dealings with governments elsewhere in the world. Moreover, traditional players in the old *françafrique* networks have been denied access to the Elysée Palace.

A deliberate effort has also been made to seek the views of African governments over the handling of difficult issues. In January 2013 intelligence revealed that jihadist forces were poised for a major breakthrough into southern Mali at the strategic Mopti-Sévaré gateway. Once the French government had concluded that only the immediate intervention of its own forces could prevent this, and while it waited for the necessary formal invitation from Mali, Hollande and his ministers personally sought the opinion of a series of presidents in West Africa and other influential leaders on the continent, including South Africa's Jacob Zuma and Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Sarkozy was self-confident and direct in style. But Hollande has shown a subtler ear for the tone of African diplomacy and how this can be used to productive effect. The trouble taken to seek African opinion before going ahead with intervention contrasted with past practice. French officials say that African governments have expressed warm appreciation for Hollande's readiness to consult them. And this has certainly helped to sustain African support for the intervention and helped to catalyse African government action to reinforce the shared effort to stabilize Mali through the deployment of AFISMA.

Hollande's administration has decided to work in close partnership with the African Union (AU) and the continent's main regional blocs. After taking office, he chose to receive Benin's President Thomas Boni Yayi before any other African leader – partly because Benin is a democracy but also

because, in terms of protocol, Yayi commanded precedence as incumbent chair of the African Union. Hollande also made a point of receiving the new president of the AU Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, soon after her election. The French president is also methodical, takes time to reflect and appreciates the value of seeking a range of advisory views before setting policy lines: a range of Africa specialists and socialist-leaning foreign policy thinkers were asked to prepare briefing notes during the run-up to the 2012 election campaign.

Policy challenges

Three major areas where the Hollande administration has begun to develop an Africa strategy are assessed below. What should not be under-estimated, however, is the extent to which the Mali intervention may reshape the cultural and political context for French engagement in Africa, in both military and wider political terms.

While past French interventions in Africa have sometimes been welcomed by particular regimes or conflict parties that they have supported, or by communities that have benefited from their protection, they have also increasingly become the subject of controversy, bitter criticism and generalized resentment on the continent. They have often been viewed as neo-colonialist interference in national affairs. Even the intervention in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011 – launched at the request of the UN secretary general to help enforce respect for the result of an election – continues to be heavily criticized by supporters of Laurent Gbagbo, the man who was forced out of power as a result. A number of governments outside West Africa, such as those of South Africa and Angola, were particularly uncomfortable about the French action.

By contrast, the intervention in Mali has commanded almost universal welcome on the continent. Among African leaders, President Mohammed Morsy of Egypt has been practically alone in criticizing it. The diplomatic manner in which Hollande prepared the ground partly explains the broad support for France's action; but the main driver was a broad sub-Saharan welcome for the dispatch of French troops to 'rescue' a sub-Saharan country and its people from what was generally perceived as an alien force that was intolerant of indigenous culture and threatening the sovereign survival of an African state.

Whether such an assessment of the threat was accurate is a separate question. But there is no doubt that French intervention has changed opinion and altered African perceptions of the role that France could play. However, French policy-makers are aware that the positive mood may not continue indefinitely; much will depend on the tactfulness and sensitivity with which Paris pursues its wider agenda.

Governance

One of the most delicate challenges facing a French president in dealings with Africa is the question of governance, democracy and human rights. The previous socialist government, under Prime Minister Jospin (1997–2002), joined with then Labour government in the United Kingdom to draft the 1998 European Union Common Position on Africa, which became the foundation of the governance conditionality codified in the 2000 Cotonou Accord that is the framework for relations between the EU and its member states and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Article 96 of the Cotonou Accord formally links European cooperation and development assistance to the extent to which ACP countries respect principles of democracy, good governance and human rights. In practice, the EU institutions apply the Article 96 principles in a relatively structured way – which can periodically lead to the suspension of non-humanitarian aid, for example – while leaving individual member states wide latitude in how they apply the principles in their bilateral dealings.

However, there is always a risk that France, and to a lesser extent other Western powers, will find themselves accused of arrogantly imposing outside standards on sovereign African states. For France this risk was enhanced in the wake of Sarkozy's Dakar speech. There was also a risk of

being accused of hypocrisy because key allies or economic partners with questionable governance records such as Chad and Congo (Brazzaville) were treated gently.

Moreover, by the time Hollande was elected president in 2012, the application of governance conditionality was being questioned in sections of the donor community. There was concern that regimes and elites which abuse power are little affected by aid cuts, while ordinary people who are powerless to change the political situation pay the price. Madagascar has exemplified these concerns: the suspension of most French and other international aid – as well as US trade privileges – after the 2009 putsch contributed to a worsening of poverty and child malnutrition.

Especially given the French socialist party's track record in developing European governance conditionality, there had been some expectation that Hollande would reassert the priority of human rights and democracy as criteria for cooperation with African countries. But in fact he has opted for an approach that seeks to achieve results over the long term through persuasion and implicit incentives but refrains from 'giving lessons'. His government repeatedly stresses its respect for the sovereignty and independence of African states, arguing that Africans must make their own choices – a point made strongly in Hollande's Dakar speech. Senior official sources insist that France does not want to interfere in internal affairs. However, an implicit incentive remains: Paris reminds African partners of the value that it places on certain principles and values. And states or governments that exemplify these – such as the democratically elected Sall administration in Senegal – are clearly seen to benefit through the allocation of larger aid flows and strong public political support. Official sources also argue that it makes sense to be pragmatic in applying the Article 96 conditionality. Having seen the impact on Madagascar of a rigorous application of the rules, France opted not to formally suspend aid to Mali, despite the 2012 coup. It believed that cutting off all support would simply have risked deepening an already serious crisis.

Security

This has been the most noticed area of policy action so far, because of the scale and high media profile of the intervention in Mali, with 4,000 troops along with combat aircraft and armoured vehicles deployed from a standing start over just a few weeks.

Sarkozy had already renegotiated bilateral defence accords with African states to definitely end France's post-colonial role as a security provider to friendly governments. He had also launched a plan to slim down the French military presence in the continent. This envisaged maintaining two major permanent bases in Djibouti and Gabon. The former plays a key role in protecting shipping on the key Europe-to-Asia route from piracy and terrorism, and French forces have already been joined there by US troops, with Japan also interested in establishing a presence. The base in Libreville, Gabon, is viewed as crucial for regional security operations in Central Africa, such as European peacekeeping or enforcement operations in the DRC, Chad and the Central African Republic. But in practice it was assumed that French bases would also be maintained in Ndjamena, the capital of Chad – where a runway can accommodate a wide range of aircraft and the government allows extensive French training exercises – and in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, where around 300 troops would remain to underpin security in a country that remains vulnerable to tensions after the 2010–11 crises.

Hollande has retained some strands of the Sarkozy plan. But the crisis in Mali and concern about the wider security of the Sahel have reinforced the priority given to Africa. The government's White Paper on defence policy, published on 29 April 2013, explicitly recognizes 'a particular role for Africa' in national defence and security strategy.¹⁵ The Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea and the Maghreb (as well as the eastern Mediterranean) are defined as regions of priority concern for cooperation with partners. Indeed, the rationale that the document sets out for this could be taken as a succinct presentation of the Hollande administration's wider case for engagement with Africa. It cites geographical proximity, the depth of the human links with African countries and the importance of economic and energy ties with countries south of the Mediterranean.

¹⁵ *Livre blanc sur la Défense et la Sécurité nationale 2013*, Ministry of Defence; *Dossier thématique Livre blanc sur la Défense et la Sécurité nationale 2013*, Ministry of Defence.

The White Paper stresses both Africa's future economic potential and the challenges it currently faces in meeting threats to its security. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, chairman of the government's advisory group of independent academic and diplomatic experts for the paper, commented that France was likely to find itself conducting more operations of the kind seen in Mali. It stresses that France will give priority to helping Africa develop its own security architecture and crisis-reaction capacity, but argues that France should continue to maintain a military and security engagement south of the Sahara. At least four African bases will be maintained. The paper also argues that African security is a key interest for the European Union as a whole – an implicit plea for fellow EU states to share the burden of supporting the development of sub-Saharan security structures (as they are doing in Mali with the European Union Training Mission (EUTM)).

Recent events have certainly demonstrated the value of the West African bases: Dakar has proved an important rear supply hub, while the capacity to rapidly deploy armoured vehicles from Abidjan proved a critical asset during the early phases of the Mali intervention. Ndjamena has been an important base for air operations over Mali. Furthermore, Foreign Minister Fabius has recently confirmed that a 1,000-strong garrison will be kept in Mali itself for the foreseeable future to safeguard the progress made in driving jihadist fighters out of most settled areas of the country.

Elsewhere, France still maintains a small garrison in Bangui in the Central African Republic, which remains a highly unstable country. Its prime role is to protect the substantial French expatriate community and it stays out of domestic politics. France pointedly refused to deploy its troops in support of President François Bozizé when the Seleka rebel movement attacked Bangui in March and ousted him from power. (He fled into exile in Cameroon.) But it has since hinted that it might be prepared to play a more active role in partnership with a regional force, if legitimate transitional political structures are put in place in the country.

France strongly supports African ambitions to develop a stand-by force structure, for which AFISMA has become a *de facto* test model. Policy-makers recognize that the plans for increased African capacity have to be reconciled with the reality that in some circumstances a French or other outside military presence continues to be required. The decision to maintain a limited permanent French force in Mali alongside a large African one will provide an opportunity to explore how such an approach can work in practice.

Meanwhile, the intervention in Mali – Opération Serval – has had an impact on French domestic perceptions of military action in Africa. It has given a significant lift to France's confidence in its capacity to stage a high-risk emergency intervention of this kind in the continent, especially because of the competence with which it was carried out and the broad welcome for it among Africans, both governing elites and the public at large. French and international officials and analysts seem agreed that only France could have mounted such an operation so speedily in the Sahara/Sahel region; many argue that even the United States would not have been able to do this. The operation has also enjoyed broad support among the French public – even as the popularity of the Hollande administration has plunged to a record low.

The perceived success of Opération Serval has practical political implications. It has bolstered general public acceptance of and support among the political class for a continued French engagement in Africa. The normal French military presence in Africa costs €400–450 million a year. Government planning estimates put the cost of a long-term sustained operation in Mali at €300–400 million¹⁶. There may be some scope for savings through the removal of budget overlaps, but it still seems likely that maintaining a 1,000-strong force in Mali will substantially add to the cost of the overall military presence in Africa. The positive performance and initial results of Serval – and the positive manner in which it is perceived, in Africa and in France – should help to sustain political and public support for the longer engagement in Mali, and the extra financial cost this entails.

There must be doubt about whether broad French public support for Opération Serval would endure if there was a major military setback or a sharp rise in French casualties. However, French military leaders say they have learnt from France's military involvement in Afghanistan that it is

¹⁶ Interview, official military planning sources, Paris, February 2013.

possible to rebuild a country, but that this does take a long time. The Afghan experience may have influenced the recent decision to maintain a permanent military force in Mali. The effort can be worthwhile, but success depends on a willingness to sustain it for the long haul.

Development and economic partnership

France used to be one of the major bilateral aid donors, but its budget has been under pressure for a number of years. Initially the squeeze on new spending was disguised by the high volume of debt write-offs under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, which are included in OECD figures for development assistance. But the Sarkozy administration did not give high political priority to development, and once the HIPC process began to wind down, the overall aid total fell markedly. France's aid expenditure fell by 4.1 per cent in 2011, to €9,348 million (\$12,997 million), according to the OECD's Development Assistance Committee¹⁷. Some 65 per cent of the total was provided as bilateral aid (rather than through multilateral organizations such as the World Bank or the EU institutions). Of this, sub-Saharan African countries took the largest slice – \$3,888 million.

French aid is channelled through a wide range of government departments and agencies and a large programme of 'decentralized cooperation' operated by local and regional authorities all over France, liaising directly with counterparts in Africa and elsewhere.

Sources in the Hollande administration point out that France has opted to channel particularly large volumes of aid through the European Development Fund and that it is also the second biggest contributor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. However, they concede that budgets will remain tight and there is no prospect that France will in the near future increase its aid spending to the UN target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income. In 2011, French aid was equivalent to 0.46 per cent, down from 0.5 per cent the previous year. Africa will get more in the near future, but this will be funded by trimming budgets for some other recipients.

Although overall spending has been limited, Hollande did send out one powerful political signal when he formed his government: the cooperation portfolio – once a full ministry in its own right but latterly a department headed by a delegate minister under the authority of the ministry of foreign affairs – was renamed 'development'. Moreover, under the coalition arrangement between Hollande's Socialists and the Europe Ecologie-The Greens, the portfolio was allocated to Pascal Canfin, a Green member of the European Parliament with a background in dealing with financial-sector issues, notably the financial transactions tax. Canfin has been exploring ways in which, despite the squeeze on international aid outlays, more money can be channelled to developing countries, for example through support for more effective tax collection.

The Hollande administration takes a cautious approach to general budget aid; only a few countries receive such support from France – generally in the form of highly concessional loans, on terms similar to World Bank IDA credits. Recipients in 2013 include Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire (€300 million), Senegal (€140 million), Niger (€50 million) and Mauritania. The government sees France's tradition of funding long-term infrastructure as a strength, but concedes that performance has been weaker when it comes to urgent support for countries emerging from crisis.

During the election campaign Hollande promised a serious debate about the shape of development policy to provide a context for a new strategy. The debate has been taking place through the *Assises du développement et de la solidarité internationale*, a four-month cycle of consultation and debate organized by the development department. This brought together some 600 participants from a wide range of government, NGO, political, business and academic and research backgrounds.

The *Assises* concluded on 1 March and in his closing speech Hollande posed the fundamental dilemma: 'Can France maintain a development policy, in spite of the economic difficulties that it is

¹⁷ OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD-DAC), 'Donor Profile: France', <http://www.oecd.org/dac/france.htm>.

going through?’¹⁸ His answer was in the affirmative and he set out three objectives: to support economic development, security and the survival of the planet. Strikingly, he was explicit in stating that aid for economic development would be tied to ‘political criteria – the requirement for democracy’. He described democracy as a prerequisite for development rather than its goal. This would appear to be in contradiction with his Dakar speech focus on respecting African countries’ independence and right to take their own decisions. However, it remains to be seen how this approach will be translated in practice. Hollande may envisage sending out a strong message of general principle – that countries with democratic governance will benefit from stronger support – while in fact adopting a much more flexible and nuanced approach in dealings with individual cases.

The government points out that France’s 2013 budget did not make any further cut in development spending, and that 10 per cent of proceeds from the new financial transactions tax have been specifically earmarked for development in Africa. It has also promised that once the economy is growing again, France will relaunch the upward trend in spending to move towards its ‘international objectives’ – a semi-promise to resume progress towards meeting the aid target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income.

In contrast to donors such as the United Kingdom, France does not have a powerful independent development ministry, and this has sometimes weakened the country’s ability to make its voice heard in international development circles. The complexity of the institutional structure has also hampered the voice of development within the wider political and policy-making scene. But the Hollande administration has now promised three measures that may help to remedy this institutional weakness. They are:

- the first major framework law on development policy and international solidarity in more than 50 years;
- the creation of a *Conseil national du développement et de la solidarité internationale* (National Council for Development and International Solidarity), to act as a permanent forum for consultation with a wide range of non-governmental actors represented in the recent *Assises*; and
- the revival of the *Comité interministériel de la coopération internationale et du développement* (CICID -- inter-ministerial committee for development and international cooperation), which not met for four years. This will meet in summer 2013, chaired by the prime minister; it will presumably coordinate policy.

There are also plans to double the proportion of aid that is channeled through NGOs. This should enhance the ability to support grassroots programmes.

However, critics expressed concern that Hollande’s new approach has failed to tackle three flaws identified in a 2012 report by the state Court of Auditors (*Cours des Comptes*): a failure to set geographical priorities for development policy, the fact that responsibility for development is shared between several ministries and the extensive use loans rather than grant aid.

The next section examines the response of the Sarkozy administration to the growing African engagement of China and other emerging powers. At this stage, and with an agenda necessarily focused in large part on security and political challenges in the Sahel, it remains uncertain how far Hollande will choose to readjust the responses that France had begun to develop in the face of the expanding role of China and other emerging powers. However, his government has explicitly stated that it sees Africa as a continent of future economic opportunity. This is distinct from its significance as a strategic source of raw materials such as oil, gas and uranium. Given this declared belief in Africa’s economic potential, it seems likely that over the longer term the Hollande administration will seek ways to sustain French economic engagement south of the Sahara.

¹⁸ ‘Intervention de M. le Président de la République à la séance de clôture des Assises du développement et de la solidarité internationale’, 1 March 2013, Paris.

RESPONDING TO CHINA AND OTHER EMERGING POWERS IN AFRICA

All of Africa's traditional Western partners find themselves confronted with the challenge presented by the new African engagement of China and other emerging powers. However, France has had to adjust simultaneously to the growing political and economic significance of mainly anglophone countries, compared with the lesser economic weight of most of its traditional francophone partners.

Since the 1990s, French diplomatic engagement has also tried to move beyond its *pré carré* (turf) of former colonies to reach out to emerging African powers, whose strategic and economic potential is attractive to French diplomats and business alike. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has identified four priority countries in Africa, none of them francophone: South Africa, Nigeria, Angola and Ethiopia. French aid has followed the same 'going out' pattern: whereas it was originally focused on former French colonies, it has been expanded to non-francophone Africa since the designation in 1998 of a *Zone de solidarité prioritaire* on which aid should be focused, including South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia and Kenya. France has developed a political dialogue with South Africa on Africa, building on the relationship between presidents Sarkozy and Zuma, and it has also collaborated closely with Nigeria during the Côte d'Ivoire post-election crisis. This has not been paralleled by a comparable shift in development assistance, however: in 2009 some 76 per cent of commitments by the *Agence Française de Développement* in sub-Saharan Africa were allocated to 14, mostly low-income francophone states.¹⁹

New challenges for France

French policy-makers have not developed a specific set of policies in response to the increasing presence of emerging powers in Africa, but there is a broad official discourse that is overwhelmingly positive about this phenomenon and sees the renewed interest of emerging powers in Africa as a very encouraging development for the continent and for France. Africa needs massive foreign direct investment, especially in infrastructure, to which emerging countries are expected to make a major contribution. This is significant in a context in which Western countries traditionally involved in Africa, such as France, no longer have the capability or the will to carry the burden alone. Africa's economic growth, propelled by emerging countries' FDI and demand for natural resources, is expected to benefit French economic interests as well.²⁰

Yet behind the positive official discourse one can distinguish a number of concerns. The growing interest of emerging powers in Africa affects French activities in many different ways and triggers different reactions and positions from distinct sets of actors. Significantly, most French attention has focused on China while other emerging powers such as Brazil or India have taken a secondary role. This reflects the role of business interests in the formulation of French policy: it was when French companies, especially in oil and infrastructure, started to feel the heat of Chinese competition in the mid-2000s that French diplomats took note of the shift in dynamics under way.²¹ The narrow focus on China is shifting, however, prompted by the formation of the BRICS axis, which further diversifies Africa's options for international engagement beyond traditional partners. In some ways France could be well suited to live with the new challenges presented by the increased role of China and other emerging powers because – save for the uranium sector – mining is not a major area of strength for French business. France is much less exposed than Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom or the United States to the impact of competition from Chinese mining investors in Africa.

Moreover, French companies present in Africa in sectors such as telecoms, shipping, port operations, railways and air transport stand to benefit from the growth in investment by emerging powers south of the Sahara – because this generates more business for the services that they provide.

¹⁹ See AFD website, <http://www.afd.fr/home/pays/afrique>.

²⁰ Interviews, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and French Development Agency, September and October 2011.

²¹ Interviews, French diplomats, September 2011.

France and Africa in the United Nations: a contested leadership

French diplomats acknowledge that the interest in Africa by emerging powers is creating new dynamics in international arenas. This was particularly true during the period when all the BRICS countries were members of the UN Security Council in 2011–12.

Traditionally, France and the United Kingdom take the lead on debating African issues in the Security Council and drafting most of the resolutions. But this leadership is in question, with emerging powers increasingly weighing in on the discussions. French diplomats have had to learn how to better engage with these counterparts. China and Russia have proved to be sensitive on issues such as human rights, democracy and military intervention, and enjoy the added advantage of having a veto: when their red lines are crossed, they do not hesitate to veto resolutions (for instance, the UK-sponsored resolution on Zimbabwe in 2008). This constrains France, the United Kingdom and the United States, especially in the wording of the resolutions.²²

However, there is ground for cooperation: France and China share a common concern for stability in Africa, and China has at times partnered with France in this regard. The most striking example has been in Sudan where, thanks to its privileged relations with the regime of Omar al-Bashir, China was instrumental in persuading it to accept the deployment of the UN mission in Darfur. China still acts as a bridge between Sudan and the international community. France discovered that in this instance its position on Sudan is closer to China's than to its usual partner, the United States, which is more critical.

The rise of the BRICS

The formation of a BRICS axis in the UN Security Council, which may systematically oppose the views of France, the United Kingdom and the United States (the P3), especially on African issues, has become a major preoccupation for French diplomats.

The 2011 crises in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya were revealing: Security Council debates on these two issues demonstrated a very clear stand-off between the BRICS and the P3 over state sovereignty, the use of force and the responsibility to protect. French diplomats feared that the BRICS might be turning into a politicized and institutionalized group able to speak with one voice. The entry of South Africa in particular into the BRICS group is a significant move, because it signals a new political dimension to the alliance and its desire to reach out to Africa.

This group has not been able to formulate official common positions so far. On Libya and Côte d'Ivoire, none of the BRICS eventually opposed the Western-sponsored Security Council resolutions that opened the way to military intervention, and South Africa even voted in favour. This has exposed the BRICS' lack of coherence and their internal differences. However, the group offers a broad alternative vision of the global order and the principles that should guide it. It also has a convenient common ideological record of anti-Western imperialism that helps to gloss over its internal differences and consolidate a common front against established powers.²³

France has publicly backed enlargement of the Security Council on the basis that it should reflect the shifts in the global balance of power. But privately, some French diplomats worry that allocating permanent seats to Brazil, South Africa and India would not be in France's interests.²⁴

French influence on the wane in Africa?

French diplomats are concerned that the growing presence of emerging powers in Africa endangers France's privileged political and economic relations with its former African colonies. Since independence, it has constantly been able to count on their support in any international

²² Interview, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, September 2011.

²³ Interviews, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, September and October 2011.

²⁴ Ibid.

discussion. Traditionally, between 15 and 20 African countries vote with France in major UN debates, but French diplomats are worried that this support might be eroding, partly as a result of the increasing involvement of new powers.

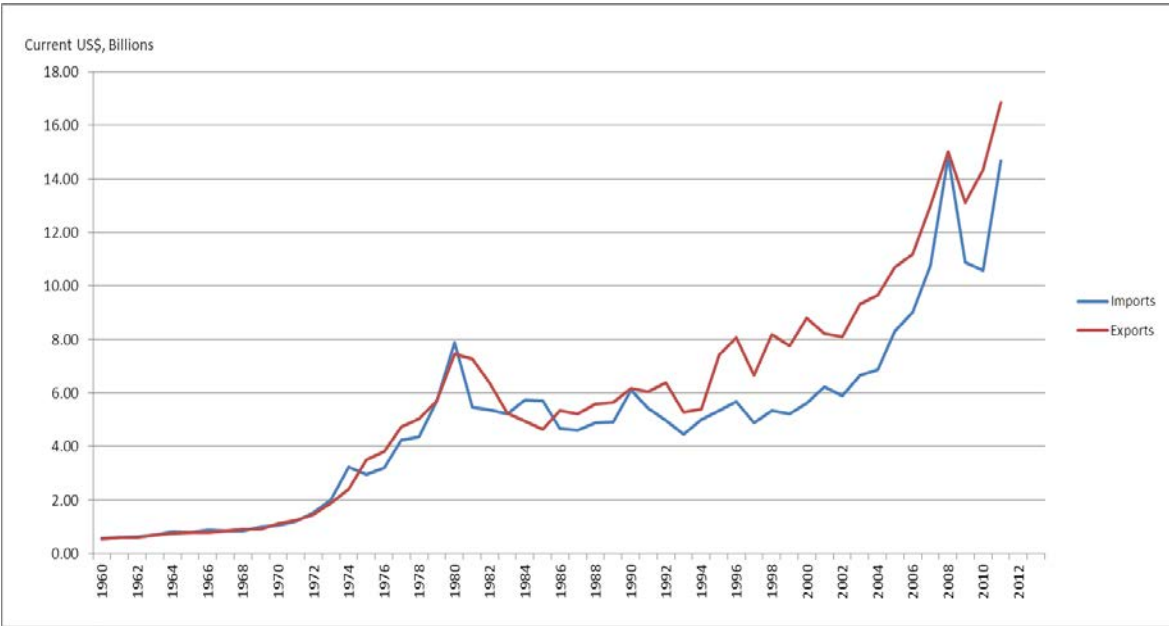
Recent international discussions have confirmed this trend. On Côte d'Ivoire, France struggled to get Benin on board. On Libya, countries such as Niger, Burkina-Faso and Mauritania dragged their feet before officially recognizing its National Transitional Council, in spite of heavy French pressure. It is difficult to assess precisely to what extent emerging-power engagements in the continent played a role in these new dynamics. As mentioned earlier, France's relations with its former African colonies have loosened in any case over the past two decades. But the fact that African countries now have other interlocutors may further undermine French diplomatic efforts by providing them with more room for manoeuvre and allowing them to avoid direct exchanges with France. The French intervention in Mali, however, attracted widespread support and may have helped France project the view that it is still a major African partner.

French economic interests

Economics and trade are the most apparent aspect of the enhanced presence of emerging powers in Africa, and this has had an impact on French economic interests. The effect of this new and unexpected competition varies, depending on the sector and the scale. In construction, telecoms and vehicles, French businesses have suffered badly; civil construction activities are under great pressure because of lower-priced Chinese competition. Although the total value of exports and imports of French merchandise to Africa has increased significantly since 1960 (see Figure 1), France's percentage has consistently declined (see Figure 2). However, there are some bright spots in goods trade, such as champagne sales (see Figure 3). In 2012 Nigeria ranked 22nd in the world for champagne imports, and in terms of France's total champagne exports, Africa's percentage rose to 1.36 per cent from 0.93 per cent in 2005.²⁵ Moreover, export/import figures do not capture the strength of French companies' position in sectors such as the trade in global tropical crops – based to a significant extent on African exports of crops such as cocoa and coffee – or logistics; they remain a major force in shipping, rail and port operations in West and West Central Africa.

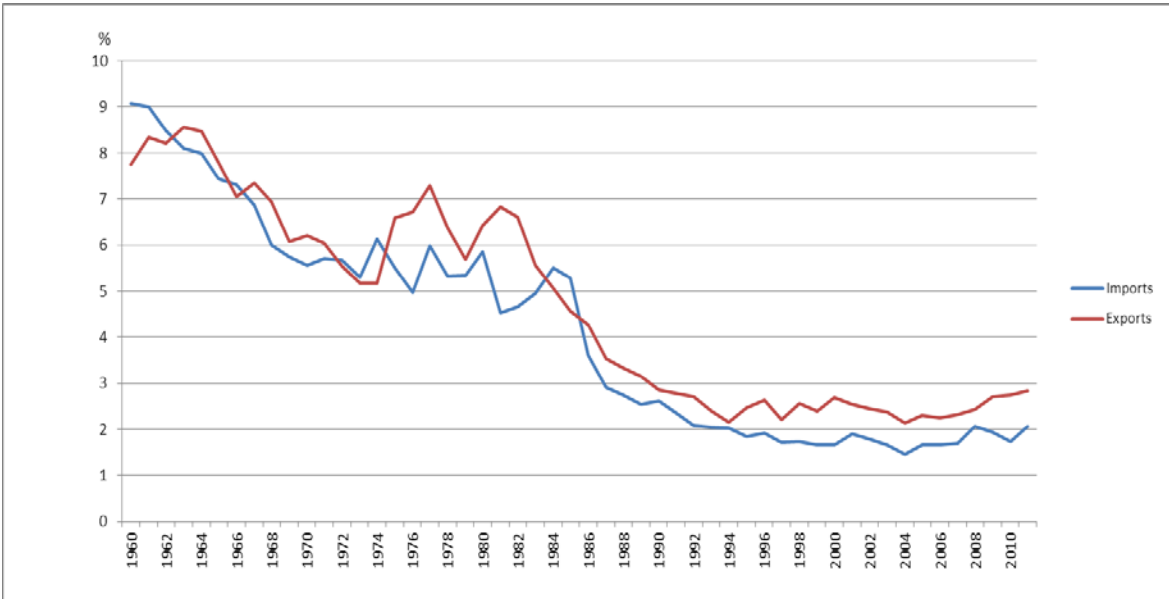
²⁵ Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne, *Les Expéditions de Vins de Champagne en 2008* and *Les Expéditions de Vins de Champagne en 2012*, <http://www.champagne.fr/fr/economie/expeditions-de-vins-de-champagne>.

Figure 1: French merchandise imports and exports from/to sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–2011

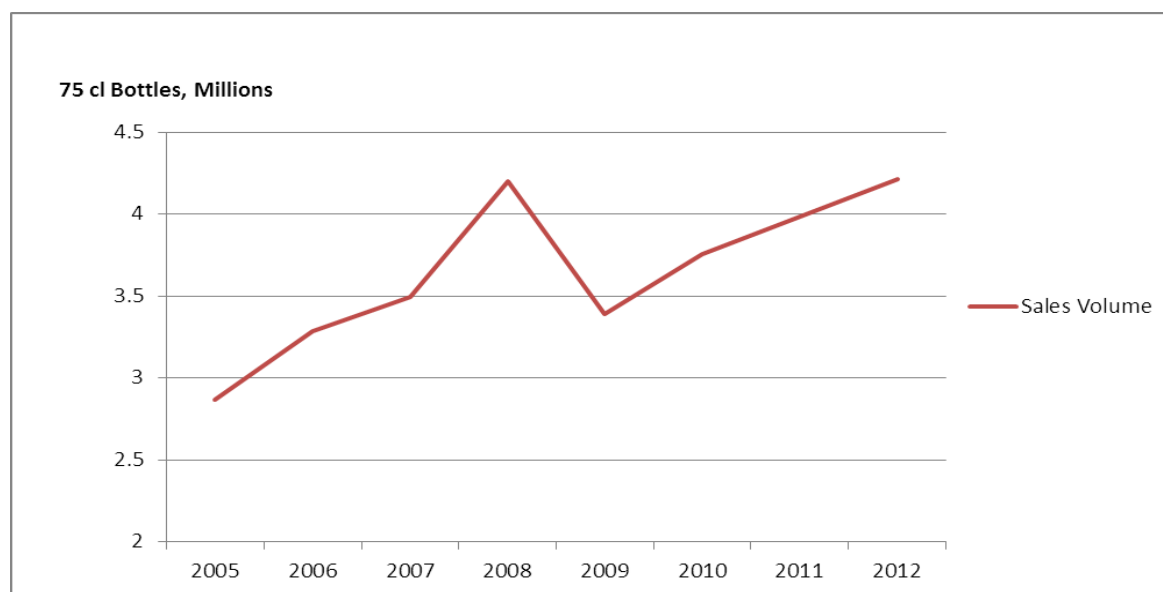


Source: World Bank

Figure 2: French merchandise imports and exports from/to developing economies in sub-Saharan Africa as a percentage of total French merchandise imports/exports



Source: World Bank

Figure 3: Champagne sales to Africa

Source: Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne²⁶

The French private sector has started to organize itself in response to this heightened competition. The construction syndicate *Fédération Nationale des Travaux Publics*, business organizations such as the *Conseil Français des Investisseurs en Afrique Noire* (CIAN) and the dominant Medef International have lobbied the government, the European Commission and the World Bank to win what they call ‘the battle of norms’²⁷ – getting a more level playing field when competing for infrastructure projects funded by international donors.

Major French firms are also emphasizing their commitment to international social and environmental standards in an effort to distinguish themselves from the competition. The centrepiece of this strategy was the adoption at the Africa-France Summit in 2011 of a Charter of the Entrepreneur in Africa. Medef International encouraged this charter and the 80 French companies that attended the summit pledged to scale up their social and environmental responsibilities in Africa.²⁸ The objective of this discourse on social and environmental norms is less to convince Chinese companies to adopt them than to raise awareness among African elites and international donors that French business represents quality.

Although there is competition, there are also opportunities for partnership. For example, in specific fields where French technology is advanced, Chinese and French firms could work on joint projects, with Chinese companies providing the hardware (infrastructure) and the French providing the software (advanced technology).²⁹

In a couple of sectors where French companies have strong expertise, partnerships have been established with Chinese companies to get access to major public contracts, as Chinese parastatals and large private firms are reliable partners, rarely short of money and hungry for French technology. For instance, on 25 April 2013, in the presence of President Hollande and President Xi Jinping in Beijing, Luc Oursel, the president and chief executive officer of the uranium and nuclear energy group AREVA, signed a series of key agreements with the Chinese companies CNNC and CGNPC for the development of the Franco-Chinese strategic civil nuclear partnership. This may open the way to cooperation in Africa too. Recent developments in the oil sector are also

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview, CIAN, September 2011.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview, Ubifrance, September 2011.

very significant. In September 2011, the Ugandan government approved a joint-venture project involving France's Total, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Ireland's Tullow Oil for the exploitation of three oil blocks in the Lake Albert rift basin. This is the first project of this type between Total and a Chinese company. Total brings high-tech expertise in offshore drilling (most of the oil is located under Lake Albert). CNOOC brings its capacity to raise large amounts of money very quickly and its networks of Chinese sub-contractors, which are expected to be useful for the envisaged construction of oil refineries.³⁰

Most French companies that have been able to take advantage of opportunities offered by Chinese interests in Africa are big globalized ones with considerable finances and expertise. For the most part they already have a solid knowledge of Chinese economic operators and practices because they already work in China (Lafarge, Alcatel etc). Chinese competition has been more damaging for France's small and medium-sized companies, which are used to operating in small captive markets in francophone Africa and unaccustomed to competition.

A paradox for French development aid?

China's growing engagement in Africa exposes the French aid sector to major challenges. When the French Development Agency (AFD) finances infrastructure projects in Africa, it has to accept that Chinese construction companies are competitive in price and likely to obtain the tender. About 7 per cent of AFD funding in Africa benefits Chinese companies,³¹ which have won major AFD-financed infrastructure tenders in Cameroon, Kenya and Tanzania.³²

The AFD has shifted the focus of its financing away from the large infrastructure projects for which Chinese companies are well placed, in favour of sectors where French expertise is still competitive, such as water/sanitation, new energies and innovative agricultural projects. This shift was not the result of an official decision, but the result of incremental adaptation on the ground. However, a study commissioned by the AFD in 2010 to examine the effects of the untying of aid found that it had generally had positive consequences for the French private sector. It did open the door to Chinese companies, especially in construction sector, but French companies continued to win a dominant share of the business (about 25 per cent) and had benefited from the untying of aid by other donors too.

The AFD also enhanced the social and environmental criteria for tenders that it financed, hoping that this greater focus on sustainable development would also conveniently make it harder for Chinese companies to win contracts through cheap pricing. However, the move has largely failed: Chinese construction firms have mostly adapted to the new standards while maintaining cheaper prices.

The fact that China itself is increasingly becoming an aid donor in Africa presents France with a number of challenges. The AFD has had to accept that the Chinese capacity to disburse large amounts of aid quickly and free of governance conditionality makes France less attractive and competitive in the eyes of African elites.³³ The French authorities, like most of their Western counterparts, are worried about the negative effects of Chinese aid on African countries. Western donors, through the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have enacted a normative and regulatory framework to ensure that development aid is harmonized, follows certain rules and should be beneficial to the recipients on the long term. This framework includes issues of governance and democratic conditionality, social and environmental norms and a Debt Sustainability Framework.

But China is not a member of the OECD and operates outside this normative framework. There is a lack of transparency regarding Chinese aid: most of the deals take place at state-to-state level, and it is difficult for Western diplomats, the World Bank and the IMF to obtain any information about

30 Interview, Benjamin Augé, Associate Researcher at IFRI and specialist in oil politics, September 2011.

31 These figures were provided by an AFD staff member.

32 Interviews, AFD, September and October 2011.

33 Ibid.

them since China does not take part in local coordination meetings between donors. Consequently, there is a suspicion that some of these deals do not comply with the standards of traditional donors. French concern relates mainly to the financial sustainability of these aid deals for fragile African states. In 2005, the IMF and the World Bank introduced the Debt Sustainability Framework, the aim of which is to provide donors with guidelines to ensure that aid projects (especially loans) are compatible with the IMF–World Bank HIPC initiative and do not endanger recipients' financial sustainability. International institutions and traditional donors fear that Chinese aid might jeopardize all these efforts by luring poor African countries into unmanageable deals.

How France responds

The challenge of China and other emerging powers in Africa has triggered a set of reactions in France. The authorities have tried to establish communication channels with emerging powers – mainly China – to discuss Africa in order to exchange views, voice concerns and, it is hoped, gain influence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has set up its own platform for dialogue. Annual meetings are now held between the Directorate for Africa and the Indian Ocean (DAOI) and its Chinese equivalents in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, alternating between Paris and Beijing. A similar dialogue takes place every year with South Africa, but significantly there is no such initiative with other emerging powers because of the costs and time constraints, although France has been trying to build up strategic partnerships with Brazil and India.

The dialogue on aid takes place mainly at the multilateral level within the EU, the G20 and the OECD. The EU has been concerned with China's 'no strings attached' aid policy: it has repeatedly raised the issue as part of the EU–China dialogue, and the European Commission tried to initiate an EU–China–Africa trilateral dialogue in 2008.³⁴ Progress has stalled, however, because, by focusing on norms, the initiative failed to elicit any interest from the Chinese side. France, as president of the G20 in 2011, intended to use the platform to discuss aid with China and India.³⁵ But its engagement with China on aid mainly happens through the OECD's DAC. The DAC has regularly approached Chinese authorities to set up platforms for discussions on aid. Its most striking achievement has been the establishment of a study group with the International Poverty Reduction Centre in China (IPRCC), an organization jointly initiated by the Chinese government and the United Nations Development Programme and based in Beijing. Since 2010, this study group has organized a series of thematic conferences involving OECD, Chinese and African officials. France has also held its own discussions with China on aid. In September 2007, the AFD organized a French–Chinese seminar in Paris on aid in Africa with, on the Chinese side, the Ministry of Commerce, Eximbank and the think-tank CIIS (the China Institute of International Studies).

What France and other traditional donors have tried to achieve through this dialogue is clear: to find some ways to bring China on board and bring it in line with Western aid standards so as to achieve a certain degree of harmonization and (possibly) integration. There have been some signs that China's approach is shifting. Chinese officials now attend international forums on aid in big numbers and participate more than previously.³⁶ The vocabulary of social and environmental norms now permeates Chinese discourse on Africa. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which has left Western donors short of money, China is becoming increasingly assertive in international discussions on aid.³⁷

The French authorities have also tried to collaborate with the Chinese in joint aid projects on the ground. In 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the AFD approached the Chinese with a project on forestry in the Congo basin. France identified forestry as a potential area of cooperation because it is a very technical and depoliticized field (in which it has strong expertise) and because the AFD expected to build on its already existing cooperation in the field with Chinese partners in

34 European Commission, *The EU, Africa and China: Towards Trilateral Dialogue and Cooperation*, 17 October 2008.

35 Interview, Henriette Martinez, MP, October 2011. The French initiated the first G20 Development ministerial meeting on 23 September 2011, aimed at discussing development issues and aid policies.

36 Interviews, AFD, September 2011.

37 Interview, AFD, October 2011.

China itself (Yunnan province).³⁸ The expectation on the French side was that such cooperation on a small project could be a stepping stone to further aid cooperation in Africa and could enable France to expose Chinese and African partners incrementally to international aid practices and norms. However, in spite of the organization of a symposium in June 2010 in Yunnan, this strategy failed. On the Chinese side, there was a lack of political will: the Ministry of Forestry showed interest but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not.

The French agency for export promotion, Ubifrance, has also tried to stimulate business cooperation. In November 2010, it organized a seminar in Beijing, aimed at connecting French and Chinese companies operating in Africa. This attracted interest from Chinese companies: 250 participated in the seminar, looking for networks and opportunities for collaboration in francophone Africa, where the French have expertise and relationships. On the French side, only about 20 companies participated: distance played a major role, but this lack of participation also highlights differences of opinion within the French business sector where some companies, especially in the construction sector, are ambivalent about partnering with the Chinese.

As discussed above, the rise of emerging powers in Africa has not led France to adopt a specific set of policies. However, it would be wrong to say that nothing has changed. French strategic and economic interest in Africa was generally on the wane from the early 1990s. The arrival of new actors has partly changed that, particularly on the economic side. The arrival of Chinese, Brazilian and Turkish companies in Africa has reminded the French business sector that the continent can be a profitable market. The increasing demand in China and India for raw materials has boosted many African economies and has contributed to a new 'Afro-optimism' in France, with the expectation that the continent might become the new frontier market.³⁹ French companies are taking a fresh look at Africa, now increasingly considered a continent of business opportunities.

Under Sarkozy the arrival of new competitors in Africa shaped a view that France must be more assertive in defence of its strategic and economic interests. The Sarkozy administration openly promoted French economic interests in Africa by supporting major French companies at state-to-state level through official visits focused on publicly them when they bid for contracts. In March 2009 Sarkozy visited the DRC and Niger with the CEO of Areva in an attempt to secure key contracts. Two months later, Prime Minister François Fillon paid an official visit to Nigeria, accompanied by Total's CEO, and offered military assistance for the authorities' effort to defeat rebels in the Niger Delta.

The Sarkozy administration also argued that French aid should not only support development but also benefit French national interests. Following the OECD–DAC recommendation of April 2001, French bilateral aid has been officially untied since 2002,⁴⁰ but this policy has been questioned by French business organizations and a number of politicians given that some Chinese and other emerging-country companies took advantage of it to access tenders financed by the AFD. Most of them do not openly profess a return to tied aid (which would be largely impracticable anyway) but they euphemistically argue that aid should ultimately support French economic interests. The then secretary for cooperation, Alain Joyandet, expressed this bluntly in June 2008, when he famously said: 'We want to help the Africans, but we must also get something out of it.'⁴¹ This is a view still expressed in some business circles.

However, the Hollande administration may not share this view – at least not in such simplistic terms. Of course, national interest remains a consideration in shaping development policy, which is true for every donor government. But there is no sign of the Hollande government moving back towards any concentration of aid solely on countries of priority interest to French businesses.

Indeed, the experience of the Mali crisis may reinforce the contrary analysis that aid is both morally right and a long-term broad investment in the stability of regions such as West and Central Africa whose successful development is in France's own enlightened self-interest. By comparison with

38 Interviews, AFD, September and October 2011.

39 See for instance the book co-authored by former AFD Director General Jean-Michel Severino and Olivier Ray, *Le temps de l'Afrique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010).

40 OECD, 'Untying Aid to the Least Developed Countries: the OECD/DAC Recommendation', 25 April 2011.

41 'Alain Joyandet: "On veut aider les Africains, mais il faut que cela nous rapporte"', *Libération*, 24 June 2008.

countries such as Gabon, Mali was not one of France's traditional closest allies in Africa. Yet, largely through the failures of its political and development model, it became the locus of a major crisis that France has viewed as a direct threat to its own security. This experience seems likely to reinforce the arguments of those who believe it makes sense to devote much of the aid budget to helping vulnerable countries with serious needs – because this is not only right, in a moral sense, but is also an intelligent contribution to France's own security and that of Africa as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Africa enables France to still command global authority and influence to an extent not offered anywhere else in the world. As demonstrated by the 2013 Mali crisis, Paris is still seen as a key military player in the continent. Over 7,000 French troops are currently committed to sub-Saharan Africa, and France's White Paper on defence policy – published on 29 April 2013 – explicitly recognizes 'a particular role for Africa' in national defence and security strategy. Under the new strategy France is expected to maintain at least four military bases in Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 3 per cent of France's exports and also remains an important supplier of oil and minerals – uranium from Niger is particularly strategic for its energy security as about one quarter of France's electricity production depends on it, fuelling nuclear generation. The market share of French merchandise exports and imports to Africa has significantly decreased since 1960 but there are bright spots: sub-Saharan Africa is an important market for French logistics, service, telecoms and infrastructure companies. And in 2012 Nigeria ranked 22nd in the world for importing champagne.

During President François Hollande's first year in office, his Africa strategy has amounted to more than the military intervention in Mali. He has sought to develop a wider political approach towards the continent, making a break from the message and policy priorities of the Sarkozy era. President Nicolas Sarkozy was self-confident and direct but Hollande has shown a subtler ear for the tone of African diplomacy and how this can be used to productive effect.

Although Hollande stated in 2012 that countries with democratic governance will benefit from stronger French support in practice he has adopted a much more flexible and nuanced approach in dealing with individual regimes. Given France's domestic economic needs, trade policy is likely to trump a values-based strategy in a number of situations

French authorities have tried to establish dialogues on Africa with emerging powers, especially China – as well as aid and commercial partnerships with African countries. This policy had some success under Sarkozy and continues under Hollande although greater efforts needed to be made to reach out to the likes of Brazil and Turkey.

However, the enduring effectiveness and durability of Hollande's refashioned French strategy has yet to be tested. The policy foundations have been laid, through the key Dakar speech on political relations with Africa and a reinforcement of the institutional framework for development. Intervention in Mali, and the tactful diplomacy that accompanied it, have fostered a refreshing mood of goodwill and mutual respect that may help to dissolve the mistrust that has so often undermined a connection that remains important to both France and Africa. The challenge now will be to sustain this reinvigorated partnership over the long term.

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