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**Taking the Long View: the Foreign-Policy Consequences of the French elections
in Historical Context**

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In recent weeks, Americans have spent a surprising amount of time discussing the presidential election in France. Indeed, it may seem somewhat incongruous that François Bayrou is now more familiar to the US public than Nigeria's Umaru Yar'Adua, whose controversial election to the presidency of Africa's most populous country, on the same day as France's first round, went largely unnoticed.

These discussions in the US have resulted in a broad consensus. Its premise is that the backdrop of the French presidential election has been the malaise that grew steadily under the barren and uninspiring Chirac years, and culminated with the traumatic first-round victory of Jean-Marie Le Pen on 21 April 2002, the rejection of the European Constitution in May 2005, and urban riots in November of the same year. On the basis of this assumption, common wisdom proclaims that the three leading candidates in the first round have succeeded because each, in different degrees and through different means, squares the circle of representing change long overdue, while *at the same time* reassuring the French public that the changes they propose will not affect them adversely.

With respect to French-American relations and foreign policy generally, this analysis has led informed US commentators to warn Washington against the notion that a Sarkozy victory, as against Royal's deeply ingrained rejection of all things "anglo-saxon," would herald a more positive era in transatlantic relations, breaking away with Chirac's and Villepin's quixotic posturing.

The argument looks something like this: certainly, Sarkozy during his campaign reached out to Washington, and indeed made much of his face-to-face meeting with President Bush. He went so far as to condemn in explicit terms France's stance during the Iraq crisis in 2002-3. His economic and social platforms are instantly recognizable to US politicians, and some go so far as to see in his foreign policy philosophy a last hurrah of neo-conservatism. Even his personal "grand narrative" as a self-made politician has an American ring to it. All this suggests that Sarkozy's rapport with America might be much less contentious than his predecessors', in terms of atmospherics as well as policy.

However, the same commentators are quick to add that these hopes are most probably misplaced. They point for instance to Sarkozy's rigid rejection of Turkish membership in the European Union, to imply that France, under his leadership, would remain a frequent irritant to major US foreign policy goals. They also argue that France is in no mood to play an active role abroad, as its new president will have to spend much time dealing with its latent identity crisis, tending to profoundly introspective issues such as French self-perception, law and order, and immigration policy. Moreover, they warn that neither Royal nor even Sarkozy will in fact be in a position to effect the changes they promised, as neither will have a sufficient popular mandate to do so.

The conclusion is unmistakable: with or without Sarkozy, France will remain a despondent, conflicted, inward-looking, unreliable, indeed undecipherable ally at least for the next five years, and Washington should keep its hopes at bay.

Although there is much truth in this analysis, the problem is that its historical scope is somewhat short-sighted. The proper backdrop of this election goes beyond Chirac's frustrating and deleterious rule from 1995. In fact, it represents a more significant turning point. What is at stake is the legacy of the entire second half of the twentieth century. Seen in this light, the lessons of the election for French-American relations are somewhat different.

Simply put, Sarkozy and Royal represent a break not only with Chirac, but also *with De Gaulle himself*. The foundations of the French malaise were not laid in 1995, but in 1945 and 1958. What has long been rotten in France's kingdom is the Gaullian vision of France, and the Gaullist foreign policy posture that results from it. France now cannot afford, indeed has not been able to afford for three decades, the Gaullian myth of the "Grande Nation," or the desperate and ultimately futile struggle for the preservation of France's illusory "rank in the world." France's malaise has been so protracted and so difficult to diagnose because it is caused by the pangs of coming to terms with a taboo: the fact that France's history and foreign policy over the past sixty years have been built on a lie, De Gaulle's necessary, but ultimately doomed lie that France had gone unscathed, untarnished and undivided through the Second World War.

This is why Sarkozy and Royal will fit uneasily within the Fifth Republic system, and the political philosophy that its Founding Father created. Sarkozy's presidency, by his own admission, would in fact rather look like a British prime-ministership, while Royal's persona represents a conscious, militant rejection of traditional presidential profiles.

What dies with the Gaullian dream of France that France can no longer afford is, first and foremost, its ambition to punch above its weight in the world. In this sense it is true that France in the next five years will be inward-looking and less engaged internationally. But other consequences are also noteworthy. For instance, De Gaulle's France is put to rest with France's traditional engagement in Africa and with the Arab world. It also takes to the grave a certain vision of Europe, perceived confusingly as a necessary, natural, and beneficent historical process, but also as an "extension of France's body" that would allow Paris one last shot at maintaining its rank in the world, and at bringing about its cherished multipolarity as a counterweight to the US "hyperpower."

Neither Sarkozy nor Royal will see Europe in this light. There, indeed, lies the crucial point, and the main reason for hope that the French election will bring about significant changes for the better in French-American relations. We can now reasonably anticipate the final collapse of a dubious ideology that led France, for instance, to hide behind

recent diplomatic tensions among Turkey, Cyprus and Malta in order to delay or prevent the emergence of a positive relationship between NATO and ESDP – at a time when this relationship is more important than ever, and indeed has turned into the cornerstone of US-European relations outside of the economic sphere.

In the past, yearning desperately to punch above its weight, France too often exhausted itself quickly and fell back on purely negative politics, taking its solace from blocking international efforts that it found it could not lead. Its decision to leave the military structure of NATO in 1966 (which led to a policy reversal forty years later, when it became clear that France could check NATO policy more effectively from the inside) or its policy at the UN in 2002-3 are the more striking examples of this tendency.

This year's election will enable France, at long last, to make its peace with the death of its illusions, and back away from its state of denial. It will hopefully herald an era when France, by coming to terms with its actual place and power in the world, can finally use it more efficiently, more positively, more confidently, *more creatively* than has been the case in the past half-century.

This is the real backdrop of the presidential election. Indeed a case can be made that 85% of French voters went to the poll, and that Americans paid an unprecedented amount of attention to their decision, because all can sense that what is at stake is France's final awakening from a sixty-year old dream.