



Challenge for France

January 22, 2008

For India, French President Nicolas Sarkozy's visit will be an opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations and forge a meaningful strategic partnership. Of course, provided Sarkozy is interested and means business

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has recently made it to Page 3 of many newspapers and magazines. But besides the much-publicised Carla Bruni affair, which will hopefully not derail the progress in Indo-French relations -- like the Clemenceau issue had sunk President Jacques Chirac's visit in 2006 -- this state visit is an important milestone for two long-time strategic partners.

In May 2007, during the French presidential election, both candidates, Mr Nicolas Sarkozy and Ms Ségolène Royal, had promised 'change'. Ultimately the French voters reposed their faith in Mr Sarkozy who got a five-year mandate to transform the nation of Asterix the Gaul into a modern state.

Change in style was not long to come. On May 16, a few minutes after the presidential oath-taking ceremony, Mr Sarkozy was already on the move. He flew to Berlin to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel the same evening to rekindle the 'construction' of Europe blocked after the

French 'No' to the referendum on the European Constitution two years earlier.

The headlong 'charge' has continued with the new President aware that he has to initiate a thorough transformation of old France's political habits. He has been spending a few hours in the morning in one country, the afternoon in another, dining with friends at a restaurant on the Champs-Élysées at night, and jogging in the Élysée Palace corridors (or the gardens) the next morning.

Some of Mr Sarkozy's initial decisions are thought-provoking, especially when seen from India. Take, for example, his Cabinet of Ministers. He has fixed the total number of Ministries at 15. Can we imagine a Cabinet in Delhi with only 15 Ministers? The remarkably small size of the French Cabinet certainly implies a saving for the exchequer and less governmental intervention.

Another innovation is the Rightist French President deciding to maintain gender parity in the Cabinet -- eight men and seven women - - while selecting socialist Bernard Kouchner for the post of Foreign Minister, who, till Mr Sarkozy was elected President, was his staunch opponent. Interestingly, so too was the President's consort, Ms Carla Bruni.

During his first Presidential Press conference on January 8, Mr Sarkozy presented his latest concept -- "politics of civilisation". He spoke of "bringing man back to the centre of society by 'rehumanising' it".

Easier said than done!

Mr Sarkozy would like to amend the French Constitution "to guarantee the equality of men and women, the respect for diversity and the means to have a true politics of integration". He has also decided to recruit Mr Joseph Stiglitz and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen to redefine growth.

Paradoxically, Mr Sarkozy is trying to integrate many concepts that are associated with the Left: "It is not acceptable that a company which has a lot of profits, does not reward its employees." He said that he was not against doubling or trebling the participation of workers in a company's profits.

The next day, the Left-oriented daily, *La Libération*, called him an "ideological squatter". They pointed out that he had selected Mr Sen, known for his Leftist leanings, to implement Rightist politics. *La Libération* complained about his "Leftist ideas, cynically recycled... but this approach does not surprise anymore, it is the essence of Sarkozyism".

The French President also mentioned his vision of an enlarged G-8 with nations such as India, China, Brazil or South Africa participating fully: "We have a 20th century organisation for the 21st century. It can't work."

He promised to make the French people work more, thereby creating more wealth and consequently solving the problem of chronic unemployment, slow growth (barely two per cent), as well as related deficit problems in the social security Budget. He has set himself to this task.

From our side of the planet, it is not difficult to grasp why France cannot compete with countries like China or India, which work much more for less. Globalisation and delocalisation are here to stay and the West has no choice but to adapt itself to this new paradigm.

Mr Sarkozy's visit to India primarily raises the question of the future of Indo-French relations. On his arrival in Mumbai in 1998, former President Chirac had declared, "In India, France is not at the level where it should be." Ten years later, that statement still holds true. Bilateral relations must take a qualitative turn and it is quite likely to

expand in two directions -- joint-ventures/delocalisation and nuclear energy.

Collaboration in civilian use of nuclear energy may come first. During his visit to India on December 20, 2007, Mr Kouchner let it be known that India and France are working on a civil nuclear agreement though its finalisation will have to wait till talks on India-specific safeguards at the International Atomic Energy Agency conclude.

As for joint ventures in the defence and aviation sectors, Defence Minister AK Antony recently called upon the defence establishment to redouble its efforts towards self-sufficiency. At the same time it was announced that the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme was "quietly buried last month". The DRDO has said that in future weapon systems will be produced in collaboration with foreign partners and at a faster pace. It is here that France can join hands with India.

Though designed in Europe, Scorpene submarines are built in Mazgaon in Mumbai and more interestingly, the Defence Research and Development Laboratory, a missile research laboratory under the DRDO, and the leading European company, MBDA Missile Systems, are planning to jointly design and build a new missile. The \$500-million project is aimed at developing the 35-km Maitri quick-reaction missile. MBDA Missile Systems will develop an active homing head, thrust-vector controls and missiles; DRDL will handle software, command-and-control, and integration.

Before Mitterrand's 1989 visit, *Le Monde's* correspondent had quoted an Indian businessman dealing with France: "You are able to demonstrate true solidarity (with India); sometime strike great commercial 'coups', but between these sudden initiatives, you don't

work, you let the links loosen. This is the quality and the flaw of the French... Friendship or partnership, you have to look after it." Nineteen years later, that assessment remains relevant.