



France

Assessment: Fair

Trend: ↔

Capital: Paris

Type of Government: Republic

Head of State: President Jacques Chirac (since 17 May 1995)

Foreign Minister: Dominique de Villepin

Population: 59,551,227

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 12

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

France has a **fair** record of support for democracy abroad. With a rich democratic tradition, energetic and influential diplomacy, and robust economy, France is well-positioned to support and foster democracy throughout the world. But while the country has done a good deal to advance democratic ideals, it has at times been indifferent or pursued policies that impeded democratic consolidation. Like most other Western powers, France has been willing to criticize the poor democratic performance of foes, but is far more reluctant to apply similar standards to countries with which it enjoys close political and/or economic ties, including in the Middle East and Francophone Africa. A major foreign aid donor, France has shown only modest enthusiasm for devoting substantial resources to democracy-strengthening programs. In sum, promoting democratic institutions and practices internationally has not been a consistent guiding principle of French foreign policy over the past decade.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

France has long seen itself as the birthplace of “liberté, égalité, and fraternité,” with the central government historically playing the role of the protector of democracy. For modern France, the principle of democratic governance has been more than just an abstract idea. It is widely viewed as a concrete concept that can foster peaceful coexistence among its European neighbors and ensure national survival.

Contemporary French foreign policy has its roots in the de Gaulle era. As war raged on the continent, de Gaulle called on Europeans to “join together in a practical and lasting fashion.”¹ De Gaulle is closely associated with advancing French power and prestige, as well as with relinquishing much of France’s colonial empire. Yet, he must also be recognized for quickly grasping the need for a unified, integrated Europe in which to anchor Germany in order to prevent another epoch of rising German nationalism and military power.

In many ways, the foreign policy framework constructed by de Gaulle has been followed by every subsequent president from Pompidou and d’Estaing to Mitterand and Chirac, though the influence of the Foreign Ministry has waxed and waned. France has been in the forefront of the push toward European unity since the 1950s. Relations with Germany have been central to this strategy. Despite some difficulties along the way, Franco-German cooperation has been the cornerstone of an expanding democratic European community² -- with France as the political center and Germany as the economic core.

French foreign policy since 1992 can be characterized as cautious pragmatism grounded in self-interest, often narrowly defined along traditional economic and strategic lines. Enhancing France’s stature and influence within Europe, and within the international arena more broadly, remains a paramount goal. France generally has worked to strengthen the global economic and political influence of the EU and its role in building a common European defense, often viewed as a counterbalance to U.S. hegemony. It continues to view Franco-German cooperation and more recently, the development of a European Security and



development of a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), as the foundation of efforts to enhance European democracy and security.

RESPONSE TO THE OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

France's response to the overthrow of democratically-elected governments has been mixed. The government's reaction to the coup in Haiti, which ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991, was swift and unambiguous. The French government condemned the military coup and called for a quick return to democracy. It also supported the 1993 UN-imposed sanctions against the military regime. Soon after the successful U.S.-led effort to restore democratic rule, France provided financial support and dispatched experts for election monitoring missions.

A military coup in the Cote d'Ivoire in 1999 swept aside the democratic Parti Democratique de la Cote d'Ivoire, and brought to power a military junta headed by former Army Chief of Staff, General Robert Guei. Both President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin condemned the coup and issued strong warnings to the junta, although the two differed on the wisdom of military intervention. Beyond these blunt statements, and the suspension of some minor technical assistance programs, the French government failed to take action. With 500 troops based in the country, many observers thought that France could have done more had it been so inclined. More commonly, the presence of French troops in Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire have often served to bolster authoritarian but friendly regimes in these countries.

France was a vocal critic of the inclusion of the far-right Freedom Party, led by Joerg Haider, in Austria's coalition government. The French government, while not wanting to interfere directly with Austrian politics, was "very worried" by the prospect of Haider in power.³ Chirac, mindful of the emergence of Jean Marie le Pen, the leader of France's own right-wing party, was one of the strongest proponents of imposing sanctions against Austria, which went into effect when the Freedom Party was sworn into government. When France took over the presidency of the EU, Chirac was again very vocal in his desire to maintain sanctions against the Austrian government. Just a few months into the presidency, Chirac lifted sanctions when Austria was given a clean bill of health on its human rights record by an EU-appointed committee.

France was not as vocal after the coup in Pakistan. While it expressed concern over the

situation in Pakistan, and called for a return to constitutional order and civilian rule, it did not formally sanction or rebuke General Musharraf. The EU was considerably more vehement in its insistence that democracy be restored and suspended all political dialogue with Pakistan immediately after the coup.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

France's response to the manipulation of electoral processes has been good in Europe, where it has been a steadfast opponent of electoral misconduct. In Africa, however, successive French governments have often disregarded electoral manipulations.

France joined the rest of the EU and OSCE in speaking out against flawed elections in Belarus and other former Soviet republics. The same was also true in Yugoslavia. Following the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic by Vojislav Kostunica, the candidate of the democratic opposition of Serbia in the 2000 presidential elections, Milosevic attempted to ignore the result and stay in power. As strikes intensified, the EU made clear its view that Kostunica was the legitimate winner. When Milosevic did step aside, France took the lead in resuming diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia and argued forcefully for emergency assistance from the EU. Subsequent EU-Balkans summit meetings led to a larger, longer-term aid package and confirmed France's influence in getting the EU to play a greater role in the region.

In Algeria, French reaction to the 1991 elections underscored the selective approach and occasional double standard that France and other Western countries have toward democratic practices, particularly in the developing world. In 1989, amid student protests, riots, and popular demands for governmental reform, Algeria moved toward a more liberalized political system. In December 1991, the FIS, the main Islamic opposition party, won a majority of seats in the National Assembly in the first round of voting and stood poised to win the final round. President Benjedid declared the elections invalid, banned the FIS and dissolved the National Assembly. One week later Benjedid resigned under pressure, and authority passed to General Mohammed Boudiaf,⁴ who was assassinated by the FIS soon after, igniting armed conflict. Not only did France fail to condemn the manipulation of the



electoral process, it also lent full support to the military regime. France has long had a vested interest in maintaining a stable pro-French government in Algeria in order to guarantee the supply of natural gas and oil. In a broader sense, French strategy has been to preserve the political status quo in the Maghreb region, regardless of how undemocratic and repressive the regimes proved to be.

More recently, the French reaction to gross electoral manipulation in Zimbabwe was appreciably different. There, France responded within the framework set forth by the EU and strongly condemned President Mugabe's blatant electoral misconduct and the ensuing violence it spawned. France led the effort to impose sanctions designed to isolate the regime.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

France has built an uneven record of promoting democracy internationally. French governments have steered clear of prescribing general principles, preferring the flexibility of action tailored to specific circumstances—much to the dismay of civil society activists in authoritarian countries with governments friendly toward Paris. France often chooses to advance democracy through a combination of bilateral programs and participation in international organizations. But the country's involvement in the same international organizations has been strongly shaped by de Gaulle's priority of restoring France's prominent position on the world stage, rather than becoming a force for democracy globally.

France has been a member of the UN Security Council since its inception, a powerful perch from which it helps shape UN priorities and programs. Indeed, French support for the UN has been unwavering. France is the fourth largest contributor to the global body and a willing backer of UN peacekeeping operations. France also helped to initiate annual regular meetings of the G-7 group of leading industrial democracies and has often been successful in winning top posts in some of the world's most influential international organizations. These have included the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the Secretariat of the Council of Europe.⁵ Finally, France has been an integral part of NATO,

and has been deeply involved in its military operations, most notably in the Balkans.

Despite France's influential role in these institutions, it has not consistently advanced democracy-promoting objectives. Moreover, France was the only one of over 100 participating governments that refused to endorse the historic Warsaw Declaration of the Community of Democracies, essentially isolating itself from the world's democratic countries, including its former colonies. Explaining its decision not to endorse this document, then French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine stated that democracy is "not a matter which allows sweeping generalizations...the specifics of each case should be taken into consideration."⁶ In response to criticism that French foreign policy is largely driven by cynical power politics, Vedrine wrote that the French approach to fostering democracy "...can, admittedly, involve us cooperating with regimes, which are still quite unsatisfactory. But we are working for their peoples and the future, and the movement thus set in train can but increase pressure on the leaders."⁷

One region where French efforts to promote democracy are evident is Southeast Asia. A former colonial power, France still wields influence in the region. In 1996, the French National Assembly took the lead in forming the French Committee for Democracy in Vietnam. The committee has three goals: 1) advocating on behalf of democratization in Vietnam, 2) developing French and European support for Vietnamese aspirations for freedom and democracy, and 3) supporting organizations that are working to promote democracy in Vietnam. In Cambodia, France facilitated the signing of the Paris Accords in 1991 designed to start the process of national reconciliation and contributed 1,500 blue berets to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). In the run-up to the elections in 1998, France, along with Japan, sent an envoy to facilitate negotiations between Hun Sen's party and the main opposition. The EU also conditionally pledged \$12 million in aid for election observation unit. France also participated, with nine other nations, in the creation of guidelines given to the government of Cambodia to ensure free and fair elections.

In the Middle East, France has been a vocal supporter of the Arab-Israeli peace process, particularly the 1991 Madrid conference. In this context, France backed the establishment of a Palestinian homeland and Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive peace agreement, France supports the



involvement of all Arab parties and Israel in a multilateral peace process. France has been active in promoting a regional economic dialogue, and has played an active role in providing assistance to the Palestinian Authority. But again, as with the other Western powers involved in the Middle East, France has generally been reluctant to condemn the human rights abuses and anti-democratic practices of countries with which it is aligned or seek to curry favor.

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

France's record with respect to entrenched dictatorships has been only fair. France has generally pursued a policy of constructive engagement with undemocratic regimes, particularly where economic and trade interests are a significant factor. While France was active within the EU in applying pressure on the Milosevic regime, and instrumental in providing aid to the democratically-elected Kostunica government, its track record towards entrenched dictatorships in other parts of the world has not been nearly as positive.

French economic interests in China have been the paramount factor in Franco-Chinese relations. In 1999, a lucrative \$2.5 billion Airbus deal with China was sealed with an official state visit by Chinese leader Jiang Zemin that was widely criticized by human rights organizations as helping to legitimize the repressive regime. The following year, France refused to back a resolution in the UN Human Rights Commission criticizing China for its terrible human rights record. The French government asserted that its preferred strategy of closer engagement with China would be more effective in bringing about greater political liberalization. Detractors denounced the French stance as a self-serving excuse to cozy up to the Chinese in order to

procure lucrative business deals and doubt that democracy and human rights issues are part of the bilateral agenda.

In Burma, the pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi has criticized the French government for supporting France's major petroleum company, Total, in a project to develop a \$200 million pipeline to Thailand. Human rights groups in France and around the world have decried French support for commercial projects, such as these, that serve to legitimize and indirectly finance authoritarian regimes. The Federation International des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH), the Paris-based independent international human rights organization, has called on the French government to pressure Total to discontinue its Burma operations, but no action has yet been taken.

France's strategy on Cuba has been similar to that towards other dictatorial regimes. France has long been a proponent of strengthening trade ties with Cuba as an effective means to foster economic and political reform. But there is little evidence that France has pressed the Cuban government to ease its repressive rule.

With regard to Iraq, France has taken an increasingly tougher line against Saddam Hussein's regime even at the risk of potential economic harm. Since the inception of the UN oil-for-food program, France was the single largest beneficiary, signing deals with the Iraqi government worth over \$3 billion. But despite significant commercial interests, France has supported the U.S.-British position that Iraq not be allowed to impose illegal surcharges on oil exports. Paris' backing of this plan has drawn severe criticism from Baghdad, with Iraqi government officials warning France that it is jeopardizing profitable business interests in the country.

¹ De Gaulle, Charles. *War Memoirs: Unity (1942-1944), Salvation (1944-1946)*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959-1960.

² The two countries codified bilateral ties in 1963. The Treaty of Franco-German Cooperation has served as a framework for wide-ranging institutionalized cooperation for over 40 years. Many of the key components of EU integration, in particular the 1992 Treaty of European Union (the Maastricht Treaty) have resulted from Franco-German initiatives.

³ "French leaders worried over talks for far-right role in Austria." *Agence France-Presse* 27 Jan. 2000.

⁴ General Boudiaf declared that new elections would be held in two years. The FIS rejected this unilaterally imposed arrangement.

⁵ More recently, France's grip on key international posts has loosened somewhat, although the presidency of the European Central bank should pass into French hands in 2003.



⁶ Vedrine, Hubert. “La diplomatie au service de la democratie (Diplomacy Serving Democracy).” Le Monde 22 Feb. 2001.

⁷ Ibid.