The Enduring French Connection

by J. Coleman Kitchen, Jr.

Although de Gaulle's late 1950s dream of reshaping France's colonial empire into a Paris-centered communauté of nations did not win enough converts to become a reality, the predicted withering of French influence in Africa has not occurred. Through an intricate web of governmental and private sector relationships — political, military, economic, cultural — France in 1987 retains a "special relationship" with the continent unparalleled by any other non-African nation. (See "France and Africa, 1982" by Alex Rondos in CSIS Africa Notes no. 6, December 20, 1982.) The thirteenth French-African summit, held November 14-15, 1986 in Lomé, Togo, illustrates the elements of continuity, adaptability, and innovation that have characterized the connection under a sequence of French governments over the past quarter century.

A Family Affair

The first post-colonial French-African summit, held in Paris in 1973, involved presidents or senior ministers from 10 francophone African countries. At the second summit (held in Bangui, Central African Republic) in 1975, it was agreed that the summits would take place annually, with the site alternating between France and Africa. Since then, the circle of participating states has widened beyond former French colonies, and some countries that were never under French governance (Zaire, Rwanda, and Burundi) have hosted summits.

The total roster at Lomé included more than two-thirds of the membership of the Organization of African Unity. (See “Attendance at the Lomé Summit,” page 2.) Twenty-four African member states were present, including nine whose colonial-era links were with European countries other than France. Attending as observers were 14 more African states, only one of which (Tunisia) had formerly been French-ruled. Nineteen delegations were led by heads of state or government, and the others by senior-level substitutes.

Although "francophone Africa's family meeting" opened with keynote speeches by President François Mitterrand and Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadéma, there was no fixed agenda in order to allow ample time for free-flowing discussion and informal bilateral meetings. West Africa (London), quoting press briefings by Élysée officials, reported in its November 24 issue: "[F]ormal sessions were not debates and were . . . not meant to be. Leaders and government representatives presented their positions if they wished and others, particularly France, took note. . . . Even on such delicate topics as [the October expulsion of 101 Malian immigrants from France] and new visa procedures, the tone in formal sessions was . . . gentle."

Logistics

The 1986 gathering opened under the cloud of a mushrooming scandal in Paris involving the disappearance of some 20 million francs ($3 million) of French governmental funds allocated to meet expenses of the 1984 summit in Burundi. Even so, French funding of the Lomé summit appeared to follow the accustomed style — with an open hand and a minimum of formal budgetary paperwork. France's Ministry of Cooperation announced that its allocation for the event was 10 million francs ($1.5 million), largely for security, while other sources noted that dozens of automobiles, new telephone lines, press center materials, and secretarial services were also underwritten by the French government. Africa Confidential (London) estimated the summit's total cost at 60 to 80 million francs ($9.1 to $12.1 million); cited an unnamed official of the Élysée Palace as saying "that he could not tell how much came from the ministries of defense and the interior, since they provided funds from their own budgets"; and noted that "the office of the French prime minister has a secret fund from which authorized payments may be made without informing the public."
government spruced up Lomé's hotels and roads for the occasion, and also hosted a 1,000-guest gala dinner featuring French food and wine. "Giving aid to build schools and hospitals is important," a French presidential aide explained in response to a reporter's question about the price of such meetings, "but direct contact is no less important."

The Two-Headed French Presence
A distinctive aspect of this year's summit was the presence of both France's head of state (President Mitterrand) and its head of government (Prime Minister Jacques Chirac). The two leaders (each with an eye on the next presidential election) have had to endure a tense "cohabitation" since the victory of a right-of-center alliance in the French legislative elections of March 1986 brought Chirac into office as premier, while Mitterrand, a Socialist elected to the presidency in 1981, remains head of state until 1988 (unless he decides to call for an election before that date).

A West Africa editorial (November 10) suggested that Africa, hitherto regarded as a presidential preserve, had become "the scene of a contest for influence" between the president and prime minister, noting that the scandal over the missing funds intended for the 1984 summit (to which the name of a former Socialist minister, Christian Nucci, has been linked) was being "fanned by those on the right who want to discredit the 'good works' development philosophy linked to the Socialists." Socialist newspapers, on the other hand, seemed to have targeted President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire for sharp criticism following the warm reception Ivoirians gave Chirac during an April visit.

Yet, despite their differences, both the left and right in France have a shared interest in maintaining the special character of French influence in Africa, and, as the summit approached, Mitterrand and Chirac sought to convey the impression that they could cooperate in dealing with the extended "family." Le Monde summed up their implicit agreement as "Let's not make our differences into a spectacle and let's avoid being ridiculous." This they achieved, said the newspaper, by a "division of tasks," with Mitterrand representing "the continuity of the French presence" and symbolizing "the role of the wise old man indispensable to Franco-African relations," while Chirac's role was "to speak of finances and concrete prospects." Meanwhile, as West Africa observed, "All [Francophone African leaders] have learnt to play the cohabitation game by cultivating both camps."

Regional Peregrinations
In terms of protocol, Mitterrand outranked Chirac at the summit itself. As West Africa reported, Mitterrand arrived later, spoke for France in the sessions, and held a major end-of-summit press conference "which Mr. Chirac did not even attend." His movements (but not always Chirac's) were "accompanied by the ... lights and pageantry reserved for ... heads of state." Both officials shared more or less equally, however, in the business of squeezing in visits to a number of African states during their time on the continent. En route to Lomé, Chirac made a brief stopover in Congo on November 13, and is accredited by some with having persuaded Congolese President (and 1986-87 OAU Chairman) Denis Sassou-Nguesso to attend the summit. President Sassou-Nguesso had been disturbed by a trip made to France a few days earlier by President P.W. Botha of South Africa, but was apparently mollified after Chirac pointed out that Botha, whose visit was for the specific purpose of inaugurating a memorial to South African soldiers who had died in World Wars I and II and the Korean War, had been received by no government officials. "Anybody can come to France," Chirac said, "and I do not see why Pieter Botha should be refused a private journey."
The French Role in Africa: An Overview

Although seldom acknowledged by U.S. military strategists or the American media, any significant change in the role crafted for France in post-colonial Africa by de Gaulle and his successors would necessitate a major reevaluation of conflict potential in the two thirds of the continent north of the Sahara, the French still constitute the largest single foreign community in most of the countries formerly under France\'s rule . . .

Contrary to many predictions, the French military role in Africa [did not diminish when a] Socialist government came to office in 1981. The new Rapid Action Force — a highly professional unit of 47,000 on standby to be dispatched on presidential order anywhere that French foreign policy dictates — is based in France near Toulouse. Some 7,300 other military personnel are positioned in French bases in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Djibouti, and the Central African Republic. Most other former sub-Saharan colonies have defense agreements with France that could be invoked in cases of external — but ostensibly not internal — threat. When exiles based in Angola launched invasions into Zaire\'s Shaba region in 1977 and 1978, France played a leading role in the international interventions that turned back these challenges to the then shaky regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko. And in 1983, on Mitterrand\'s watch, France responded to a Libyan military move into northern Chad by sending in troops and aircraft to protect the government of President Hissène Habré.

The sub-Saharan economies that are in the least trouble include most of the 14 African members of the Franc Zone, whose common currency, the CFA franc, is linked to the French franc and freely convertible. All members deposit at least 65 percent of their foreign currency holdings in a special franc-denominated Ministry of Finance account in Paris. The ministry\'s regional role, which has been compared to that of the IMF, has enforced a degree of economic discipline that has effectively limited the inflation and drastic currency devaluations experienced by many other African countries.

There is no pretense that the attention France gives to Africa is purely altruistic. The historic French commitment to the mission civilisatrice serves well France\'s energetic commercial penetration of the continent (which extends to such non-francophone countries as Nigeria, now France\'s third-largest African market after Algeria and Egypt). Each of the Franc Zone members conducts between 40 and 60 percent of its trade with France. And there are security dimensions. As a former U.S. ambassador to Morocco and Algeria, Richard B. Parker, observed, "North African real estate . . . has vital implications for French security. The basing of a Soviet fleet at, say, Mers el-Kebir in Algeria, or Tangiers, would pose a direct threat to the French fleet, and require significant changes in military dispositions taken for the defense of France."

There are uniquely French nuances in the interplay of military and diplomatic instruments in President Mitterrand\'s orchestration of African policy. Whatever use a future government with a different party base might decide to make of the Rapid Action Force, Mitterrand has demonstrated in Chad and in his persistent dialogue with Libya\'s Qaddafi and other North African leaders that he regards his military backup as an adjunct of diplomacy, not an end in itself. It is of no small importance that, like his predecessors, Mitterrand has the authority to commit French troops to African missions without prior knowledge or consent of parliament.

Although the confrontation with Qaddafi over Chad has elicited strong criticism of Mitterrand within France, it has not shaken the African view, expressed succinctly by Ivory Coast President Houphouët-Boigny in the late 1970s, that "France is the only Western country on whom we can rely in times of trouble." Tunisia\'s Prime Minister Muhammad Mzali underscored the point in 1985 by contrasting Washington\'s ambivalent position following the October Israeli air raid on the Tunis PLO headquarters with the "unequivocal" attitude of France regarding this "act of international terrorism."


Meanwhile, on November 12-13, Mitterrand was paying his first visit since entering office in 1981 to Guinea, whose relations with France had been stormy from independence in 1958 well into the 1970s. (See "A New Guinea?" by L. Gray Cowan in CSIS Africa Notes no. 59, June 30, 1986.) On November 17, Agence France-Presse (AFP), citing "a French diplomatic source in Conakry," reported that the visit was to be followed by several new aid packages, including a 30 million franc ($4.5 million) road/sewer repair program; provision of university teaching staff members; a donation of 820,000 primary school textbooks; and a loan program designed to help civil servants set up their own small-scale private enterprises. In an interview with
Conakry radio during the visit, French Minister of Cooperation Michel Aurilliac indicated that France would participate in a joint Guinean-Liberian venture to exploit minerals in the Mt. Nimba area.

The two French leaders were again in motion as soon as the summit was over. Chirac arrived in Côte d'Ivoire on November 15 for a quick fence-mending visit with President Houphouët-Boigny. The premier's stopover coincided with a week-long series of Ivoirian military maneuvers that were in part a rehearsal for a larger joint French-Ivoirian exercise scheduled for December 1987.

From November 15 to 17, Mitterrand was in Mali for an official visit (his first as president) which included a side trip to Timbuktu and discussions with President Moussa Traoré. The two agreed to focus French-Malian cooperation on the areas of rural development, education, and health, with special emphasis on food self-sufficiency and anti-desertification efforts. Mitterrand also promised to help the government catch up in its lagging salary payments to civil servants and to provide support for the ailing national airline. On the touchy subject of France's recent expulsion of Malian immigrants, Mitterrand noted that Chirac had already affirmed that the harsh methods used in that incident would be avoided in future.

The Case of Burkina Faso

The most challenging encounter in Mitterrand's swing through Africa may have been his November 17-18 stop in Burkina Faso, whose 36-year-old president, Captain Thomas Sankara, had refused to attend the "neo-colonial" French-African summits of 1984, 1985, and 1986. While Mitterrand had made two visits to Burkina Faso (then known as Upper Volta) prior to becoming president and had met with Sankara in February 1986 when the latter came to Paris to attend the first international conference on trees and forests, the French president said upon his arrival that he considered it important to meet with the Burkinabe leader in his own capital city of Ouagadougou because "the conversation will be different" and "I need to gain a further understanding and appreciation of what he thinks and how he acts."

The two heads of state held private discussions, and also fenced publicly at a November 17 banquet at the presidential palace. Sankara opened with a 30-minute speech denouncing "imperialism" and criticizing France for allowing the Botha visit, as well as one by Angola's Jonas Savimbi: "[W]e did not understand how bandits like Jonas Savimbi and killers like Pieter Botha were given the right to travel through France, which is so beautiful and so clean. They have stained it; they have stained it with their blood-covered hands and feet, and all those who allowed them to commit these actions will bear the entire responsibility for them."

Setting aside his prepared text, Mitterrand replied with a 66-minute improvised speech. He responded to Sankara's remarks about the right of the Nicaraguan people to live in peace by reminding him about the cases of Afghanistan and Cambodia; pointed out that "France is an open country" which does not exclude visitors on the basis of "any political consideration"; and in general emphasized the importance of law in international relations. Turning to Sankara's leadership style, the 70-year-old Mitterrand offered the following wry evaluation:

For myself, I could not listen to President Sankara, then pay him a nice little compliment, and then go to bed and sleep. President Sankara is a rather disturbing man, isn't he? . . . He gets you worked up, he asks you questions. With him it is not easy to sleep peacefully. He does not leave you with an easy conscience . . . . Well, I am encouraging him, but not too much. But, finally, the fact that here is a young, disturbing, sometimes a bit insolent team that uses words freely is not a reason for us to do less, to withdraw on tiptoe; it is because it is there that we have to talk straight, saying to each other: We respect you, you represent a chance for your people. What can we do for it to work?

In a joint news conference the next day, Mitterrand said that relations between the two countries "during the past three years have not been more complicated than before," while Sankara expressed "greatest satisfaction" at "the quality of the discussions and the frankness of the statements" in his talks with Mitterrand. The latter cautioned that "I have not come here with loans in my briefcase," but suggested that France might offer Burkina Faso a structural adjustment loan. On his non-appearance at Lomé, Sankara said:

The fact that Burkina Faso did not attend the French-African summit does not in any way mean that we have turned our back on France. On the contrary, all occasions and opportunities which may be offered to meet French leaders and speak to them to drive home our message to the French people should be seized. We made our position clear on the French-African summit in 1984. We do not want to come back to it again. But I want it to be clear that we did not deliberately seek to avoid meeting France by taking the opposite route, as if France were a dangerous animal that frightens us.

Chad

One of the major substantive issues discussed at Lomé was the French role in Chad's kaleidoscopic 20-year-old civil war (for background, see "Why Chad?" by Alex Rondos in CSIS Africa Notes no. 18, August 31, 1983). Although France had established a military defense line at the 16th parallel in 1984 to protect the southern-based government of President Hissène Habré from a northern coalition of forces supported by Libya, Paris had resisted pressure from Habré and the United States to support an offensive against the rebels. This wait-and-see policy (on which Mitterrand and Chirac agreed) had apparently been vindicated in October 1986, when soldiers of the principal northern faction, known as the Gouvernement d'Union Nationale de Transition, had begun to clash with their Libyan patrons. After GUNT leader Goukouni Oueddei had
request a discussion with Habré about possible cooperation, the Libyans reportedly tried to abduct him; in any case, he had been wounded and was said to be in a Tripoli hospital. Meanwhile, Libya seemed to have shifted its support to another anti-Habré northerner, Achetkh ibn Umar.

Habré was present at the summit, and at a November 14 breakfast meeting with Mitterrand and Chirac presumably pressed for French support of a drive against the weakened rebels. Habré also met in Lomé with visiting U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs James Bishop, who was reported to have reaffirmed that Washington was ready to provide support for a new military initiative if France were to decide in favor of such a move.

In a November 15 press conference, Habré said that he had met with a GUNT envoy in Lomé. He asserted that Goukouni Oueddei and his followers had “cut themselves off from Libya,” and said that “I can tell you that, today, we are siding with them.” Goukouni was apparently still in Libyan custody: Habré called for the press to focus on the shift in alliances “so that Goukouni’s life at least is preserved.” He brushed off the notion of a fixed “red line” at the 16th parallel as “a French and perhaps Libyan idea... alien to all Chadians, including the Chadians who are in the opposition.”

Despite Habré’s hopes, Mitterrand stated in his post-summit press conference that France had not changed its policy — it supported Habré’s efforts, but it did not intend to intervene militarily north of the 16th parallel. According to Le Monde, however, a compromise of sorts had been reached: “Paris... has apparently agreed to send additional aid to N’Djamena [Chad’s capital]. This aid apparently includes light weapons, communications equipment, humanitarian and medical aid (field surgical units in particular), uniforms, and so forth. All this amounts to saying that France has given [Habré] the go-ahead to carry out a number of lightning raids well beyond the 16th parallel. ... [This solution] enables France to avoid sending air cover to [Habré’s] forces at this stage, which neither the president of the republic nor Mr. Chirac wishes to do at present.”

Mitterrand’s Aid Blueprint
In his speech at the opening of the summit, Mitterrand said that in the five years after 1981 France had increased its foreign development aid from 0.36 percent of GDP to 0.55 percent, and eventually hoped to reach 0.7 percent. This aid has been concentrated in the areas of agriculture, energy, and basic industry. Now, he said, Paris was prepared to increase its aid (particularly in agriculture) to the poorest countries and to double over five years its contribution to anti-desertification efforts.

In addition to discussing bilateral aid, Mitterrand called for five steps to promote collective North-South cooperation:
(1) “[T]he richest countries should ensure that there is increased and long-lasting growth by solving their own problem of structures and by reducing their deficit.”
(2) “[T]hey should increase their public aid to development, to states, and to international organizations, and they should direct this aid first and foremost to the poorest countries.”
(3) “[O]pen up markets. Indeed, of what use would increased aid be if the beneficiaries cannot sell their products on the markets of the developed countries under reasonable conditions?”
(4) “[F]ind real solutions to the problem of indebtedness... so private and public loans at favorable conditions can once more go to feed the economies of the indebted countries.”
(5) “[D]isarmament... if only five percent of arms expenditures were devoted to development, the world would begin to free itself from misery and fear.”

Evoking the memory of the Marshall Plan, Mitterrand called for “the whole of the North to give alms, on a worldwide scale, in the mutual interest of the North and South.”

An Affirmation of Continuity
The Lomé summit’s importance is not a matter of concrete developments, but rather of its function as a channel for the unique kind of intimate contact that France, alone among the extra-continental powers, has been willing and able to maintain with a significant portion of Africa since the end of the colonial era. And apart from whatever overt or covert agreements may have been reached between France and members of “the family” at the summit and in associated travels, the tradition of the gathering, as West Africa put it, was “reassuring for [its] adherents by the very fact that it does endure.” The next summit is scheduled to take place in France in 1987.

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