

DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE INSTITUUT VAN INTERNASIONALE AANGELEENTHEDE THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Jan Smuts House/Huis
1 Jan Smuts Avenue/Laan 1
Braamfontein, Johannesburg
☎ 339-2021



✉ 31596
2017 Braamfontein
South Africa/Suid-Afrika
☎ 'Insintaff' Johannesburg
⚡ 4-27291 SA

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FRANCE TURNS RIGHT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PARIS-PRETORIA RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION:

During the Socialist presidency of Francois Mitterrand, French policy towards South Africa has undergone something of a metamorphosis. In 1985, relations between the two countries reached a nadir when the government of Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, unilaterally imposed limited sanctions on Pretoria. This development was followed by French sponsorship of a UN Security Council resolution calling for voluntary sanctions against South Africa.

The narrow victory of the right in the 16 March parliamentary elections seems likely to impact upon bilateral relations between Paris and Pretoria.

This paper will analyse the central tenets of Mitterrand's South Africa policy, and assess the prospects for qualitative changes under the new Prime Minister and National Assembly (parliament). (1)

DEFINING A MITTERRAND APPROACH:

Francois Mitterrand's electoral victory of 1981 was an event of major importance. For the first time in the twenty-three year history of the Fifth Republic, France had a Socialist President backed by a Socialist majority in the National Assembly. This had important implications for French policy towards Africa in general, and South Africa in particular.

While in opposition, the Socialist Party had been outspoken in its criticism of Giscard d'Estaing's policy towards Pretoria. In particular, the Party's radical CERES⁺ faction, under the able direction of Jean Pierre Chevènement, proposed far-reaching changes; calling, *inter alia*, for the severance of all economic ties with South Africa. By early 1979, Mitterrand, faced with a serious challenge to his leadership of the Socialist Party and, his Presidential ambitions, was compelled to seek a tactical alliance with CERES. As such, the

(1) In accordance with the French Constitution of 1958, executive power is vested in the President who is directly elected by popular vote for a period of seven years. The President, in turn, appoints a Council of Ministers (Cabinet) headed by a Prime Minister who is also appointed by the President. The Council of Ministers, which administers the country, is directly responsible to the National Assembly (Parliament). Furthermore, the Council of Ministers consists of representatives of those parties which form the majority in the National Assembly. The Assembly has 577 members, who are elected directly by universal suffrage for five years, subject to dissolution.

⁺ - Centre d'Etudes de Recherches et d'éducation Socialiste.

left-wing's influence over the formulation of the Socialists' Southern Africa policy, increased significantly.

By 1981, the Socialist Party's electoral manifesto included the following measures with respect to its proposed Southern Africa policy:

- (i) France's considerable investment and trading ties with South Africa would be 'curtailed';
- (ii) France would seek closer relations with the Frontline States; and
- (iii) co-operation on nuclear power projects with South Africa would cease.

Three days before the 1981 Presidential election, Mitterrand told the French Anti-Apartheid movement that he considered the situation in South Africa to be 'contrary to human rights, to which I am profoundly attached'. He subsequently asserted that 'if the French wish to entrust me with their confidence... I will commit myself to developing a rigorous policy in favour of human rights, justice, liberty and peace in Southern Africa'.

Further statements of this nature foreshadowed a significant shift in both the climate and conduct of French-South African relations. However, as President, Mitterrand's electoral rhetoric had to be adapted to the realities and, indeed, exigencies of power.

The following are among the plethora of factors that have had an impact upon Mitterrand's Southern Africa policy:

- (i) South Africa's domestic political situation;
- (ii) South Africa's role as a regional power;
- (iii) the issue of Namibian independence;
- (iv) French relations with black Africa in general, and the Francophone states in particular; and
- (v) domestic political considerations within France itself.

Each of these require further evaluation.

SOUTH AFRICA: INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS

The President's commitment to human rights and social justice have defined his approach to the domestic policies of the South African government. The dismantling of the apartheid system has, from the outset, been a major objective of Mitterrand's foreign policy coterie. As such, both the Élysée Palace and Quai d'Orsay have viewed the deteriorating political situation in South Africa with growing concern. (1)

In particular, the limits on freedom of movement and the nature of South Africa's security legislation are anathema to Mitterrand's libertarian values. The absence of due process of law and the practice of detention without trial, are particularly sensitive issues. Indeed, within France itself, the Socialists have, inter alia, abolished the death penalty as well as De Gaulle's

(1) The Élysée Palace is the Presidential Office and Residence; whereas the Quai d'Orsay is the Foreign Office.

State Security Court that had been set up for political offences. Pretoria's policies regarding forced removals and curbs on press freedoms, have also elicited a hostile reaction.

However, until 1985, French rhetoric condemning South Africa's internal policies was not matched with any meaningful substantive action. The eruption of widespread township violence, followed by the imposition of a partial state of emergency and the introduction of defence force troops to these areas, finally led to the French decision to institute punitive economic measures against South Africa. It is, therefore, axiomatic that the militarisation of South African society and the 'deteriorating human rights situation' were matters of primary concern to the President and to the government of Laurent Fabius. Indeed, the dismantling of the entire apartheid edifice was being demanded ever more frequently, and vociferously, by the French government.

SOUTH AFRICA AS A REGIONAL POWER: THE POLITICS OF DESTABILISATION :

During the second half of the 1970s, the French role as the West's gendarme d'Afrique was ostensibly aimed at providing a counterweight to what was termed the growing Soviet and Cuban destabilisation of the continent. South Africa on the other hand, was perceived as a stabilising factor, counteracting Soviet and Cuban intrusions further into the sub-continent.

In sharp contradistinction to its predecessor, the Mitterrand government viewed Pretoria as the major cause of regional destabilisation. As such, France condemned South African incursions and cross-border raids aimed at African National Congress (ANC) strongholds in Maputo, Maseru and Gaborone. Indeed, the French voting record at the United Nations indicated a perceptible trend away from abstention, towards support for Security Council resolutions condemning Pretoria's 'regional aggression', or from support to abstention. In addition, France repeatedly called for the withdrawal of South African troops from Angola, while simultaneously rejecting the linkage between Namibian independence and the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Mitterrand's desire to forge closer links with the Frontline States in general, and Angola in particular, encouraged a greater sympathy with these governments and a more sustained hardline approach vis-a-vis both South Africa's domestic and regional policies. However, France, like most other Western powers, welcomed South Africa's March 1984 non-aggression pact with Mozambique.

THE ISSUE OF NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE

From the outset, the Mitterrand government gave its unequivocal support to Security Council Resolution 435, the United Nations' blueprint for Namibian independence. France also broke ranks with other Western powers, by opposing any departure from this resolution. The linking of Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola, represented to the French, just such a departure.

In August 1981, France warned its four partners in the Namibian Contact Group, that it was losing patience with the 'perpetual talks that are leading nowhere'. On 7 December 1983, the French Foreign Minister, Claude Cheysson, announced that France was 'quitting' the Group. (However, the US State Department subsequently confirmed that it had received assurances from Paris that it was 'neither withdrawing from the Contact Group, nor calling for its break-up'. Since December 1983, France has, in fact, attended only a few of the ad hoc meetings of the group and even then, only at ambassadorial

level.) The French decision ultimately to remain a member, albeit a less active one, of the Contact Group, may have been influenced by the fact that the six Frontline States support the initiative of the Western powers.

During the Mitterrand presidency, France came close to recognising the South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) as the sole de facto representative of the Namibian people. In September 1981, the Socialist government authorised both SWAPO and the ANC to open 'information' offices in Paris. An article in the Johannesburg Star (9 November 1981) alluded to the fact that the French Socialist Party was preparing to contribute financial aid to the offices of SWAPO and the ANC in Paris. Clearly then, the Quai d'Orsay regards SWAPO as a legitimate nationalist movement, rather than one that is Marxist in orientation and closely allied to the socialist bloc.

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: RECONCILING FRENCH-AFRICA POLICY WITH FRENCH-SOUTH AFRICA POLICY

During the 1970s, President Giscard d'Estaing had skilfully performed a balancing act in which France's co-operative relations with Pretoria co-existed alongside excellent relations between the metropole and its former colonies. However, by the late 1970s, a number of militant Francophone (and non-Francophone) African states began to criticise Giscard's South Africa policy. Within France itself, both the Socialist and Communist Parties condemned Giscard's 'collaborative' policy, warning that it would ultimately lead to a deterioration in relations between France and black Africa.

Since coming to power, Mitterrand has sought to strengthen France's 'special relationship' with French-speaking African states. In particular, he (the President) has courted radical governments such as those in Algeria, Benin and Madagascar. He has simultaneously distanced himself from those regimes which have flagrantly disregarded human rights (e.g. Zaïre and Gabon). In addition, the French government also cultivated closer ties with other (non-French speaking) African states, and especially those of Southern Africa.

These fundamental shifts in policy have, of necessity, had an impact upon French-South African relations. In order to mollify the more radical black African states, the French government's anti-South African rhetoric and actions have intensified. At the 12th Franco-African Summit held in Paris in December 1985, Mitterrand referred in detail to South Africa, condemning apartheid as 'an intolerable defiance of the international community that violated international law, the right to self-determination and human rights'. The French President also paid tribute to Nelson Mandela who, he said, 'was convicted on treason charges and sentenced to life imprisonment for defending a just cause.'

While it would be naive to see French policy towards Pretoria as being influenced solely by Mitterrand's attempts to consolidate and expand his country's influence in Africa, it is evident that the possibility of maintaining close relations with both South Africa and the OAU countries was no longer tenable. Indeed, once having taken concrete action against Pretoria, France seemed incapable of reversing this trend.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The French government's South Africa policy has also been influenced by a myriad of governmental and non-governmental political interest groups, (and) especially those operating on the left of the French political spectrum. In deed, even within the Socialist Party itself, there is no monolithic consensus

on policy towards Pretoria. The Socialist Party essentially consists of three central factions - the Mitterrandistes, the Rocardians and the minority left-wing CERES. Mitterrand's post-election movement away from the influence of CERES enabled his Africa policy to be cast in a less ideological mould. Indeed, those who were far-sighted enough to realise that Mitterrand's entente with CERES was merely an ephemeral and expedient electoral tactic, were not surprised by the President's centrist and essentially moderate policy towards South Africa.

Mitterrand also rejected the hardline approach advocated by the Quai d'Orsay during Claude Cheysson's tenure as Foreign Minister. Indeed Cheysson, together with the Socialist Party's General Secretary, Lionel Jospin, rank among France's most vocal anti-apartheid crusaders.

The French Communist Party (PCF), which was a coalition partner with the Socialists until 1984, has consistently urged Mitterrand to impose stringent economic and political measures on Pretoria. After leaving the government, the PCF, spearheaded by Party leader, Georges Marchais, became increasingly critical of Socialist policy towards South Africa. When Socialist leader, Laurent Fabius, imposed limited economic sanctions last July, the PCF, although welcoming the move, complained that 'it was too little too late'.

The largest French trade union, the pro-PCF Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) has also been outspoken in its demand for economic sanctions.

Another powerful interest group operating on the periphery of mainstream politics is the French Olympic Committee (CNOSF). Its President, Nelson Pailou has continually stressed that France's chances of hosting the 1992 Olympic Games will be adversely affected should sporting links between Paris and Pretoria be maintained. In 1982, in his efforts to facilitate the cancellation of the scheduled French rugby tour of South Africa, Pailou commented that 'apartheid can only be swept away by isolating South Africa'.

On the other side of the political divide, Jacques Chirac, leader of the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), has consistently rejected all forms of economic sanctions against South Africa. As the then de facto leader of the opposition, Chirac stated that while he was opposed to apartheid, he did not believe 'that anything could be gained' by isolating South Africa through disinvestment and boycotts. Opposing the Fabius government's limited sanctions package, Chirac suggested that there would 'be repercussions in the Gaullist party about the move'.

However, other prominent figures on the right, including former President, Giscard d'Estaing and his former Foreign Minister, Jean Francois-Poncet have displayed a degree of ambivalence supporting some, whilst rejecting other, aspects of the Socialists' Southern Africa policy.

FRENCH-SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Nowhere was pragmatism and continuity more evident than in the realm of Franco-South African economic relations. The Socialists' manifesto had, inter alia, called for disinvestment and the eventual cessation of trading links with Pretoria. However, it soon became evident that behind the anti-South African diatribe, business as usual prevailed. This became apparent after the May 1981 election, when the newly-appointed Finance Minister, Jacques Delors, stressed that Socialist France would honour all contracts (with South Africa) drawn up by the Giscard administration, including contracts for the delivery of nuclear technology and construction of the Koeberg nuclear power station, awarded to the French Francatom consortium.

CORRECTION

PAGE 6. HAS BEEN
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However, while existing contracts would be fulfilled, the then Foreign Minister, Claude Cheysson, warned ominously that 'future relations are another matter'. Notwithstanding this veiled threat, bilateral trade increased significantly from 1981 to 1983. Indeed, Franco-South African trade, far from being cut off or curbed, increased by about 15 percent during this period. This trend was confirmed in 1984, when two-way trade further increased by some 34 percent.

In particular, French imports from South Africa have increased significantly. During the first quarter of 1985, imports grew by 10,9 percent, while French exports to South Africa decreased by nearly 12 percent. France remains heavily dependent on South Africa as a major supplier of uranium and coal, while also importing textiles, metals and various animal and vegetable products. For its part, South Africa imports nuclear technology, enriched uranium, machinery, mechanical appliances and electrical equipment from France. French efforts to reduce its reliance on South African coal have, ever since 1981, been a major concern of the French Government. By 1984, attempts in this direction were showing signs of success with imports of South African coal falling from 7,5 million tons (1981) to only 4,4 million tons (1984).

While figures for both direct and indirect French investment in South Africa remain a closely-guarded secret, it would appear that this has increased since 1981 when it amounted to about 7,4 percent of total French foreign investments.

In this generally favourable climate, the clamour for economic sanctions dissipated. Indeed, even radical cabinet-ministers such as Chevènement and Jean-Pierre Cot eschewed such a policy option after the Socialists had come to power. In March 1983, Foreign Minister Cheysson stated that economic sanctions against Pretoria would be 'pointless and ineffective' - a stance reiterated by President Mitterrand himself. As recently as May 1985 (just two months before imposing limited sanctions), Cheysson's successor at the Quai d'Orsay, Roland Dumas, told the French National Assembly that a trade embargo, as advocated by United Nations resolutions 'would not work and in any event might end up achieving the reverse of its aim'.

However, by July 1985, the French, in an astonishing volte face adopted a sanctions package that, among other things, called for an end to new investment in South Africa, the (temporary) recall of the French ambassador, (Pierre Boyer), and French sponsorship of a UN Security Council resolution calling for trade sanctions against Pretoria.

The immediate explanation for these substantive punitive measures, was that they were a response to President Botha's imposition of the State of Emergency and concomitant security force excesses. However, only two months earlier, Premier Fabius had set a time limit of eighteen months for the South African government to improve 'human rights for South African blacks' or face the prospect of (French) economic sanctions. Interviewed on French television in September 1985, Fabius said that 'a walk with Bishop Desmond Tutu inspired the decision to impose limited sanctions'. Two months later, the French Prime Minister informed the National Assembly that France would consider taking further steps against South Africa 'because of apartheid'.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the efficacy of the French sanctions has hitherto, been limited, and that trade between the two countries does not appear to have been adversely affected. Nonetheless, the move, the first by a major Western power, set in motion a process that will be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.

CO-OPERATION IN THE NUCLEAR FIELD

The question of nuclear co-operation with South Africa has remained a controversial issue within French governmental circles. The Socialists had come to power vowing to end all co-operation in this field. The government of Pierre Mauroy reaffirmed its commitment to honour all existing contracts, including those pertaining to the transfer of nuclear technology. However, the surprise resignation of French Co-operation Minister, Jean-Pierre Cot, in December 1982, revealed a major split in the French cabinet over nuclear links with South Africa.

SYMBOLIC GESTURES

During Mitterrand's tenure at the Élysée, the Socialists have adopted a series of symbolic gestures, designed to express French abhorrence of apartheid. Former Premier, Mauroy refused to meet Prime Minister Botha during the latter's visit to France in 1984, as did the then Foreign Minister, Claude Cheysson.

The former Socialist Minister of Sport, Mme Edwige Alice, endorsed the French sport boycott against South Africa that led to the cancellation of the 1982 rugby tour.

It is thus clear that, prior to mid-1985, Mitterrand's policy towards Pretoria was characterised by anti-South African rhetoric and gestures juxtaposed against continuity and pragmatism in economic relations. However, since July last year, it appears that with the adoption of substantive economic measures, relations between the two countries have taken a decided turn for the worse. What then are the prospects for a reversal of this trend now that a neo-Gaullist premier is backed by a centre-right National Assembly?

FUTURE PROSPECTS

From the outset it should be understood that Francois Mitterrand effectively remains President of France until the 1988 Presidential election. Since General Charles de Gaulle founded the Fifth Republic, every French President has indelibly stamped his own authority on both the formulation and execution of French foreign policy. Thus, even though President Mitterrand will now be forced to 'co-habit' with the centre-right government headed by Jacques Chirac, foreign policy is likely to remain a Presidential domain. It should be remembered that with ministerial appointments being a Presidential prerogative, Mitterrand, in consultation with his new Prime Minister, has endeavoured to select policy-makers who would ensure the greatest degree of continuity in matters relating to defence and foreign policy.

In any event, it appears evident that a growing consensus is beginning to emerge on policy. The most likely scenario is one in which the existing sanctions will remain in place, while the possibility of a second, and more comprehensive sanctions instalment, is likely to diminish. This would, in and of itself, represent something of a compromise between a Socialist President and a Gaullist Prime Minister. However, the future of French-South African relations is fraught with imponderables. Certainly, developments inside South Africa will ultimately dictate the course of French policy towards this country - irrespective of who commands a majority in the National Assembly.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the narrow victory of the centre-right coalition, the real victor in the 16 March election would appear to be President Mitterrand himself. The Socialist Party did better than expected, retaining their position as the largest political party in the National Assembly. (1) The failure of the right to win overwhelmingly, has increased Mitterrand's room for manoeuvre while simultaneously weakening the right's argument that it enjoys a popular mandate. This augurs well for policy continuity and increases the prospects for 'co-habitation' between a Socialist President and a right-wing government.

Indeed any right-wing Prime Minister, especially someone such as Jacques Chirac, would be reluctant to precipitate a major constitutional crisis, which could, inadvertently, damage the right's chances in any forthcoming Presidential election. Compromise, rather than conflict, may yet prevail. However, such a situation may lead to a fairly stagnant and unimaginative foreign policy, rather than one characterised by activism or independent initiatives.

Thus, as far as Franco-South African relations are concerned, this anticipated paralysis in French foreign policy is likely to result in the continuance of anti-South African rhetoric, but little in the way of further concrete action. According to this configuration, the limited sanctions imposed on Pretoria by the Fabius government last July, are likely to remain in place. However, unless the situation in South Africa deteriorates considerably, the extension of such measures will remain on the political backburner.

(1) See election results below.

RESULTS OF FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF 16 MARCH '86

LEFT

Communist (PCF)	35
Socialist (PS)	202
Left Republic Movement (MRG)	6
Miscellaneous Left	7
	<hr/>
	250

RIGHT

RPR (Chirac)	147
U D F (Giscard/Barre)	123
Miscellaneous Right	12
National Centre of Independence	4
National Front	32
	<hr/>
	323

At the time of publication 4 overseas territory results were not yet known, yet known.

This Background Briefing was prepared for the Institute by Larry Benjamin, Tutor in the Department of International Relations, at the University of the Witwatersrand.