

A Successful Presidency

Results of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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France invested greatly in its 12th Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It had made careful preparations and succeeded in completing the programme it had set itself. But it has been France's management of international crises that has been mostly acknowledged. It revealed a new type of dealing with European institutions; France tried to share with others its vision of Europe in the world.

Strong Political Commitment

The French presidency was the focus of strong political commitment on the part of the highest authorities together with a successful media campaign. In the country which said NO to the European Constitution it was clear that an opportunity had to be taken to help bring the French and Europe closer together. For the very first time buildings bore the Union's colours and even the Eiffel Tower did not escape from being covered in the European blue! More than 117 meetings and conferences¹, 4000 meetings² were organised across the country, both in Paris and the provinces. All of the State's services were put to work. Impetus came first from the Presidency of the Republic with the support of experienced services which managed the heavy task efficiently. The consultation of the 27 Member States was undertaken with great professionalism. The French diplomatic service, the second most important in the world was successfully put to work: 8 extremely high level summits with third countries took place over these six months: Union for the Mediterranean, Ukraine, South Africa, India, Canada, ASEM, Brazil and Russia. Three European Councils³ and two informal meetings of Heads of State and Government were organised. French diplomacy and politics took on European colours in a way that has never been seen before.

At the beginning of 2008 an ambitious work programme and four political priorities were announced: the adoption of a European immigration pact, an agreement on the European policy with regard to the climate, the establishment of a European defence policy and an agreement on the Common Agricultural Policy health check.

They represented both a specific French contribution (on the CAP and defence notably) and subjects that were already on the European agenda (energy/climate package and immigration). Presiding over the Union also means carrying on the pending legislative procedures. The work program of the presidency covered wider areas that ranged from social and employment policies to maritime security and competitiveness⁴.

In addition to these subjects came the Union for the Mediterranean which the French President wanted to launch officially and the enforcement of the Lisbon Treaty that was to lead to specific appointments to undertake the new functions detailed in the text.

This agenda was disrupted by three major crises.

¹ Main meetings, conferences and events during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union : http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/ProgrammePFUE/Principaux_colloques_EN_02.pdf

² Official calendar of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union: http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/ProgrammePFUE/Calendrier_officiel_01-08-2008_EN.pdf

³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?lang=en&id=432&mode=g&name=

⁴ Work program of the French presidency: http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/ProgrammePFUE/Programme_EN.pdf

On 12th June some days before the new Presidency was due to start the Irish rejected the Lisbon Treaty. On 8th August Russian troops marched into South Ossetia. On 15th September the American bank, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt.

The French Presidency had to face the consequences of the Irish NO that delayed institutional reform, which the Union has been seeking for the last ten years.

The President of the Union undertook a mediation mission between Moscow and Tbilissi. He succeeded in achieving a ceasefire. On 1st September an extraordinary European Council ratified the agreement negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy between the protagonists in the Russo-Georgian crisis on 12th August; negotiations for a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with Russia which had been put on ice for a time, have now started up again.

In reaction to the financial crisis Nicolas Sarkozy convened the European G8 member countries⁵ in Paris on 4th October and then the Heads of State and Government of the euro area⁶ together with the UK, Slovakia and the presidents of the European Central Bank and the European Commission. They jointly decided on measures to protect the financial system and agreed on minimum guarantees with regard to bank savings.

Nicolas Sarkozy achieved rapid and effective decisions thereby heralding a real change in European habits. He committed himself personally in the quest for joint solutions to all the issues in hand. The Presidency of the Council of the EU can no longer be seen as a simple administrative and logistic function. We now expect the means to drive matters forward together as well as political decisions.

A controversial but effective method

Nicolas Sarkozy believes that the European construction is no longer a question of diplomacy even though it is not yet clearly a matter of internal politics; but in his opinion it is still politics and he wants to "politicise Europe". Over the six months of the presidency he had the opportunity to show what he meant by this.

Even before the French presidency started the French president did not hesitate to brush aside the norms of European politics by multiplying firm and even provocative stances to open the way to debates, which in its eyes, have to be public, thereby establishing a balance of power with its European partners. M. Sarkozy's personal style marked the presidency.

The French president criticised the European Central Bank for not having lowered its interest rates and attacked the Trade Commissioner in highly critical terms ("Whilst every 30 seconds a child dies of hunger in the world Mr Mandelson is trying to reduce agricultural production by 21% in the WTO negotiations")⁷. Just a few days before Irish Prime Minister, Brian Cowen's visit in the wake of the Irish NO to the referendum Nicolas Sarkozy declared that the Irish had no other choice but to vote again.

The French president likes to shake up accepted logic within European circles to provoke changes of course. But once taboos have been lifted he shows by all possible means that he knows and masters the rules by which the 27 are run. He travelled to Ireland on 21st July

⁵ Joint press conference, summit of the European G8 member countries:
http://www.elysee.fr/download/?mode=press&filename=04.10_Conference_de_presse.pdf

⁶ Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the Euro Zone :
http://www.ue2008.fr/PFUE/lang/en/accueil/PFUE-10_2008/PFUE-12.10.2008/reunion_des_chefs_d_etat_et_de_gouvernement_de_la_zone_euro

⁷ Press conference on 19th June.

("The Irish have voted and we have to accept that"⁸). He has paid careful attention to relations with the Commission that he did not hesitate in visiting personally; he has taken care to associate it with all of the initiatives he has undertaken. He played by the institutions' rules. He established a privileged dialogue with the European Parliament. The president of the latter was invited to the major international meetings; the chairmen of the parliamentary groups were consulted and invited three times to Paris. The president of the Union in office took part in three debates with the Parliament in Strasbourg. He answered all of the questions put to him and even debated with some of its members, dedicating time that no Head of State has hitherto offered to the one European institution that is elected by direct universal suffrage.

This style, which is so personal, evolved into a method supported by the belief that the European Union "lacked politics" and that it has to react more rapidly in the face of the present disruption in the world and that it has to accept itself as a world player. This approach might have been a shock to some. The European press was extremely critical of some French initiatives. The style employed came as a surprise, it annoyed and disturbed. In his relations with Chancellor Angela Merkel some believed they perceived doubts, notably with regard to the Franco-German couple which has prepared a number of European decisions. However there is not really anything to prove this theory. All major European decisions are the subject of a Franco-German agreement prior to their settlement and the differences that are expressed between the two countries have already melted away the moment the decision is taken.

Whether we like it or not the Franco-German couple is still the vital motor to progress in Europe. This has been proven once again. The players just have to take care of public opinion whose support is always necessary and which should never be challenged. From this point of view it would have been better not to have shown certain differences publicly especially since these were rapidly overcome thanks to negotiation.

Nicolas Sarkozy scrupulously applied his programme speaking of the necessary establishment of economic government to the European Parliament on 21st October⁹ – however he did not hesitate in taking risks. By travelling to Georgia and Russia to clinch an agreement for a ceasefire between the belligerent parties against all advice to be cautious he saved the Georgian government, took up relations with Russia again, maintained the unanimity of the 27 and also enabled the Union to assert itself with authority in the international arena.

The Quest for European Leadership

Many observers have been demanding European leadership for a long time now. It is vital for the accomplishment of the work of a Council now comprising 27 delegations and inevitable in the relations it entertains with the rest of the world.

The rejection of the Treaty by the Irish was bad news for the authors of this text, mainly comprising France and Germany, but even more so for the Union as a whole. It will now have to face a new euro sceptic challenge that will probably emerge during the upcoming European elections as a transnational party that is openly hostile to the construction of Europe on the right wing and as a stronger anticapitalist and altermondialist contestation on the left wing. Nicolas Sarkozy and the French presidency, together with their partners, invested everything they had into overcoming the personal and occasional hostility of some personalities (the

⁸ Joint Press Conference of Nicolas Sarkozy and George Bush on 14th June:
http://www.elysee.fr/download/?mode=press&filename=14.06_Conference_BUSH-SARKOZY_V2.pdf

⁹ Speech of Nicolas Sarkozy to the European Parliament:
http://www.elysee.fr/download/?mode=press&filename=Allocution_du_PR_a_Strasbourg_du_21.10.pdf

Czech and Polish Presidents for example) who tried to use this new obstacle to question the very content of the new treaty. The Polish president refused to sign the Lisbon Treaty although it had been ratified by Parliament. Czech Vaclav Klaus for his part, unceasingly repeated his anti-European attacks.

But at the same time Sweden ratified the Lisbon Treaty on 20th November and Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek reassured his partners, whilst postponing debate within parliament until 3rd February 2009.

At the European Council on 11th and 12th December Ireland promised to submit the Treaty to a second referendum before the end of 2009, achieving in compensation guarantees with regard to its European Commissioner and its military neutrality as well as its fiscal and moral sovereignty (abortion).

With regard to institutional reform the Council's patience is only equalled by its pragmatism. The French presidency did not sway from this approach and facilitated a unanimous decision taken by all 27.

In addition to this and for the very first time the Union managed to enter the real world of international politics. It succeeded in its international mediation mission, putting an end to the Russo-Georgian conflict. This was an unquestionable diplomatic success that highlighted the need for a more sophisticated, more stable European policy with regard to Russia; it also showed that it was vital to have greater political and financial investment in the Union's neighbourhood. In spite of differences in appreciation the Presidency's "Blitzkrieg" showed that Europeans accepted unity to achieve a precise, limited goal: the long term halt to fighting. The Baltic States, Poland and some countries in Central Europe who were at first reticent, finally approved the agreements negotiated by the French Presidency.

Likewise the meeting of the most industrialised and emerging countries (G20), requested by the Union justified several past requests made by Europe, thereby extending *de facto* the format of the world's major economic summits of old (G8). The content of the decisions taken bears witness to the real influence of European theories put forward by the French Presidency in terms of the transparency of the financial markets, the role of the IMF and with regard to accounting standards.

The Heads of State and Government of the Eurogroup, who met for the first time in such a configuration, drew up a decision that was taken up by the 27 Members of the European Council on 15th and 16th October. The co-ordination of the economic policy in Europe is therefore possible with the euro as its focus and with the participation of the European Central Bank. This French request, which for a long time was under suspicion of concealing some kind of political manipulation of the currency, revealed itself to be effective during this time of crisis and adapted to major economic decisions. It is now considered legitimate.

Unquestionable Results

The French Presidency's exposure to the media should not overshadow the real achievements that it accomplished in the completion of an agenda that had been planned ahead and which allowed it be part of a legislative sequence and thereby clinch some major decisions.

Immigration and asylum were already subjects that the European institutions had been obliged to take on board. In June 2008 the Council and Parliament approved the "return directive" which regulated the return of illegal immigrants; the European Commission is working on a directive on the immigration of qualified workers (Blue Card Directive). The work undertaken

by European Commission Vice-President Jacques Barrot rekindled the Commission's policy with regard to asylum on bases which use more consensus and professionalism.

The European Pact for Immigration and Asylum put forward by France is an additional stage towards greater harmonisation of legislation Europe wide. The negotiations it implied started several months before the beginning of the French Presidency and French Minister, Brice Hortefeux, visited all of the European capitals between May and July, meeting with unquestionable success.

The Pact which was adopted on 15th October by the European Council includes five commitments on the part of the signatories: organising legal immigration and facilitating integration, controlling illegal immigration and organising the return of illegal immigrants to their country, better controlling the borders, establishing a single asylum procedure before 2012, concluding readmission agreements with countries from which the illegal immigrants originate.

Mediterranean

Nicolas Sarkozy launched the idea of a "Mediterranean Union" during his presidential campaign. From his election he transformed it into a proposal to his partners – to replace the Barcelona Process (1995) that did not succeed in creating close relations between the EU and the countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. From the start this initiative was the source of great reserve notably on the part of Germany and then it fostered the public controversy as it competed with the European construction. Finally France and Germany agreed to take on board these reactions and to present the project together at the European Council of March 2008.

The 27 EU Member States solemnly approved the project on 13th July with the 17 countries of the region in attendance. For the first time in a European conference the Israelis and the Arab countries sat at the same table and took part in the same project. The Union for the Mediterranean was officially launched. In Marseilles on 4th November they established the Permanent Secretariat whose HQ is in Barcelona and agreed on the election of a Secretary General and five Deputy Secretary Generals amongst the Mediterranean countries involved¹⁰. The Arab League joined in and the joint presence of Israel and the Arab countries in the managing organisations was a diplomatic success for the Union. France still hopes to have its partners accept that it takes on the co-presidency until 2010.

Agriculture

The Agriculture Council of 20th November¹¹ gave rise to the long time planned health check of the Common Agricultural Policy¹². The agreement follows on from the reform started in 2003 with the decoupling of aid. The last coupled payments will be abolished. The transfer of direct aid over to rural development work will increase to reach 10% in 2013. The obligatory 10% fallow land quota has been abolished. The principle of interventions (public market/storage) has been maintained in the dairy sector but this now applies to reduced quantities only. Intervention with regard to other products has been abolished. In addition to this the Council decided to distribute fruit and vegetables to schools. The future CAP reform has been postponed to a later date. The legal and budgetary framework remains the same.

¹⁰ Final statement, Marseille, 3-4 November 2008,

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/empa/home/final_statement_marseille_04nov2008_en.pdf

¹¹ Press Release after the meeting of the Council Agriculture and Fisheries on 18-20 November 2008:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/agricult/104240.pdf

¹² <http://www.robert-schuman.org/notes.php?num=44>

France pushed for a technical approach which led to improvements but did not affect the basic principles of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Defence

France announced that it intended to provide impetus to the European defence policy. Several initiatives were launched or gathered pace during the presidency: a report completing and enhancing the European Security Strategy adopted in 2003; the operation against piracy in Somalia; the modernisation of European helicopters and pilot training; the establishment of a European Air Transport Fleet; the creation of a naval and air intervention group; new capabilities for the European Union Satellite Centre; the enhancement of the role played by the European Defence Agency¹³. These initiatives gave rise to the European Council's ratification which clearly supported the enhancement of military capabilities, the improvement of response on the part of European forces, the co-ordination of operations to evacuate European citizens from war zones, the contribution made by troops in terms of maritime surveillance and the establishment of joint officer training. The Union will now be able to deploy 60,000 men in 60 days, to undertake two major peacekeeping operations or two rapid reaction operations simultaneously; Member States have committed to other precise objectives. European Defence is taking shape. It is now acquiring true credibility¹⁴.

Climate Change

The Union adopted the principle whereby in 2020 it will have reduced its CO2 emissions by 20%, reduced its energy consumption by 20% and diversified its energy sources to reach 20% of renewable energies.

The industries which emit two billion tonnes of CO2 per year, half of all Union emissions, have to reduce them by 21%. To encourage them to do this a system of "pollution rights" purchase and auction will be established as from 2013. Some of these rights will be free others fee paying. A solidarity mechanism has been established for States that are the most dependent on "dirty" energies to help them modernise their production instruments. Complex applications methods are to be established. These are designed to make the transformations demanded of entire sections of the European economy "easier" over time and in accordance with exposure to competition. They were the focus of difficult negotiations during the European Council in December¹⁵.

Economic Revival

The French Presidency's intuition led the European institutions to mobilise in support of the economy and an ambitious recovery plan. After consultation the Member States announced national measures. On 26th November the European Commission published a "plan" to counter the economic crisis¹⁶. This document included some major shifts in approach in comparison with the usual line adopted by the European Executive. For the first time it called for the support of consumption going as far as to advise reductions in VAT rates and to come to the aid of the poorest. It confirmed that the criteria of the Stability and Growth Pact had been put on hold and noted the exceptional nature of the crisis in hand. The European Council

¹³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/104048.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/reports/104630.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104672.pdf

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/president/pdf/Comm_20081126.pdf

of 11th and 12th December adopted this modified recovery plan that consolidated the effort made by Member States (170 billion) and the European institutions (30 billion) to a total of 200 billion euros (1.5% of the European GDP) in support of the economy. Long discussions revealed differences in appreciation on the measures to take. They were the focus of a joint text, a true framework for concerted action to guide the States' action which alone have the necessary budgetary resources and for the of launch complementary community actions¹⁷.

Legislative Continuity

Many important decisions have been taken in other areas. These include the adoption of the European 2009 budget (116.1 billion € and 133.7 in commitment appropriations), less than in 2008 (0.89% of the European GDP), the establishment of a "Small Business Act" designed to support SME's, a global European plan to fight counterfeiting and piracy, measures in support of careers and the mobility of researchers, new funding for the European Space Policy¹⁸ (10.5 billion € for the European Space Agency over 10 years).

The Justice and Internal Affairs Council adopted framework-decisions to fight racism and xenophobia, to protect personal data, to promote mutual acknowledgement in terms of probation, with regard to the definition of terrorism and mutual acknowledgement of sentences with regard to criminal matters.

The Energy Council notably modified the management rules governing strategic oil stocks and transport ministers¹⁹ adopted the "Erika 3" package with regard to ship-owners' and the flag States' obligations in the event of sea pollution; they agreed on the Euro-vignette and on various measures relative to the "Single European Sky".

France asked for the creation of a Reflection Group on the future of the Union that would be responsible for looking into the real strategic issues facing the construction of Europe. Chaired by Felipe Gonzales, assisted by Vaira-Vike Freiberga and Jorma Ollila, the Group was completed and finally made official²⁰. It is due to deliver its conclusions in 2010.

International

The Presidency's management of recent crises was excellent. France, which had for a long time put forward ideas with regard to the need for a strong presidency of the Council, managed to provide an effective example. Except in its relations with China, all the major subjects of international politics provided an opportunity to boost relations with other major partners and to offer a more active profile of Europe that was easier to identify in the international arena.

It offered the Ukraine a "strategic partnership". It asserted a sensible vision of relations with Russia without however approving of the present Russian regime. The Union cannot ignore its most important neighbour and it is in its interest to co-operate with Russia which really needs its European client for its energy and for the modernisation of its economy. With its major partners (USA, Canada, India, Brazil) the Union has proven that it is more unified and more active. Undoubtedly the French vision of matters has brought progress to European identity in the international arena by making it more aware of its strength and advantages. The Chinese exception is all the more remarkable. After the serious incidents that occurred in

¹⁷ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf

¹⁸ http://www.ue2008.fr/PFUE/lang/en/accueil/PFUE-09_2008/PFUE-26.09.2008/conseil_espace_bruelles_26_septembre_2008_12956

¹⁹ http://www.ue2008.fr/PFUE/lang/en/accueil/PFUE-12_2008/PFUE-09.12.2008/pid/20975

²⁰ Others members are: Lykke Friis, Rem Koolhaas, Richard Lambert,,Mario Monti, Rainer Münz, Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Nicole Notat, Wolfgang Schuster, Lech Walesa

Tibet the leaders of the Asian giant which hosted the Olympic Games in August intimated that they would give in to the European authorities by taking up discussions with the Tibetans for a time, but finally they hardened their positions to focus their attacks on the French presidency. Nicolas Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama on 6th December was used as a pretext to question their bilateral relations with France. The Union urgently requires a common strategy with regard to China²¹ which cannot avoid having normal relations with Europe, which is still the biggest consumer market in the world. The Chinese should expect to see a more demanding stance on the part of Europe in terms of rule of law and the respect of Human Rights. The way the French presidency undertook the Union's external relations has been publicly acknowledged by several Heads of State and Government as having been effective and successful. Several of them expressed their concern about the rotating presidency given the issues raised by developments in the international situation and the world economic crisis. The Czech presidency finds itself therefore questioned.

The Czech Presidency

As from 1st January 2009 the Czech Republic will exercise the Presidency of the Council for six months. The provocative euro-scepticism of Czech President Vaclav Klaus (who is not constitutionally responsible for his country's European and foreign policy) and the discussions over the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (debate postponed until 3rd February 2009) throws doubt over Czech commitment to continue the action undertaken by the French Presidency. Although the programme of the three Presidencies (French, Czech and Swedish) is co-ordinated as part of a cooperative programme, the vision and methods recommended for the implementation of those measures are very different.

The Czech Republic has already announced its priorities in 2009²²: "A competitive Europe" that implies the deepening of the internal market, the promotion of energy security and the liberalisation of the gas and electricity markets, "an open and safe Europe", thanks to the deepening of the transatlantic partnership, the acceleration of accession negotiations with Croatia and Turkey and the development of an area of Justice, Freedom and Security.

The Czech presidency will also have to set up the "eastern partnership" an idea launched by several Eastern European Member States who want to find inspiration in the Union for the Mediterranean to stabilise six non-EU member States (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan).

In all the Czech agenda is extremely traditional and in line with usual practice within the European institutions. But will it be adapted to the situation of international crisis and the rise of foreseeable tension (Iran, Afghanistan)? Doubt is running through all capital cities, since France has shown that only an active, strong presidency can maintain unity in the face of adversity.

²¹ Karine Lisbonne de Vergeron, *Contemporary Chinese views of Europe*, November 2007: <http://www.robert-schuman.org/ouvrage.php?num=104>

²² What are the main priorities and the programme of the Czech presidency: <http://www.eu2009.cz/en/what-are-the-main-priorities-an-the-programme-of-the-czech-eu-presidency-2974>

Some Lessons to be Learned from the French Presidency

The French presidency took place at a key moment for the European Union which is trying to complete the reform of its institutions and finds itself in demand on the part of a world in transition.

Undoubtedly the Union's institutional balance is developing as the political dimension reasserts itself. It is vital for the Union to reform its institutions; political leadership is essential.

The essence of the European Union has developed greatly. It is both more intergovernmental than the Founding Fathers ever thought it would be and more federal than its critics ever wanted it to be. The European institutions function even with 27 members. Decisions are taken, prerogatives that are delegated to them are undertaken. The integration of the single market continues and all areas of national legislation are now committed to harmonisation, the pace of which varies depending on the subject. The euro is a federating element, it rallies and protects. Within this trend the European Parliament is strengthening its influence and is proving its worth whilst the Commission finds itself challenged by a new political balance. Community matters are naturally political. Increasingly European legislation is a matter of internal policy. European institutions can no longer simply be managed according to a diplomatic mode. European Affairs are now also an integral part of internal policy.

Again Franco-German co-operation emerged when dealing with real subjects submitted to the European Council. It enabled decisions to be taken. Co-operation between the two countries has achieved a new level of confidence and effectiveness with regard to specific subjects. Never have diplomats and those responsible for the negotiations worked together so much on the preparation of European decisions. However differences, which were once obscured or withheld, relative to economic policy have emerged. They reveal the different situations experienced by the two countries. They demand renewed Franco-German debates that should be organised with regard to European goals and the political means available to the community. These two historic partners must obviously find again the means to demonstrate their joint view of the Union's future in spite of their own habits and customs.

The French presidency has demonstrated strong internal political leadership that allowed the Union to overcome difficulties that diplomatic negotiation alone would have made insurmountable. The Council's promise to take up the Commission's proposals on the environment is in itself a major political choice which led to the adoption of an exemplary programme in spite of the economic crisis. The way the Council works, which has been severely criticised, has revealed the need for a stable, strong presidency as planned for in the Lisbon Treaty. The choice of the future president will obviously be decisive.

Member States now employ a "European attitude" more freely and more naturally and do not hesitate in creating coalitions of circumstance to face certain issues. With regard to the major issues of foreign policy, such as Iran, the Middle East and Russia, intergovernmental meetings have taken place between some Member States which sometimes form temporary or even permanent coalitions. These examples of "differentiation" are the forerunners of a long term development. The States should however be careful not to weaken the common institutions which, as far as they are concerned, should be able to adapt to new requirements. The Union can only win from the accumulation of the specific features of its Member States and take advantage of major diplomatic or specific regional situations. The Union which has invested

all its energy over the last fifty years in abolishing barriers between Member States must now rise to an external challenges and imagine its position in the world.

Within the international arena it has a distinct position and status. A peaceful, voluntary Union of sovereign States - it naturally embodies the values of multilateralism, the peaceful settlement of conflicts and prosperity thanks to peace. It is however facing very real challenges which force it to act in a more unified manner.

It succeeded in bringing together a G20 that was extended for the first time to the emerging and developing countries whereas neither the UN nor the G8 have never succeeded in reforming in that way. The content of the decisions taken in Washington on 15th November will give rise to another international meeting in London in April 2009, heralding the triumph of European ideas that have never been made formal but which correspond perfectly with shared beliefs and the very interests of every European country: a real settlement supported by international organisations that enjoy real power, the transparency of the markets and economic players and their legitimacy in the face of the real economy.

With regard to economic matters the 27 who represent the main pool of wealth in the world have succeeded in mobilising nearly 1,800 billion euros, to guarantee the financial system; this is nearly three times that proffered by the USA to support its banks. Its recovery plan of 200 billion euros developed by the Member States and the mobilisation of the small community budget is far from being insignificant. With the support of the euro and the Central Bank whose wisdom and strength comprise the best advantages for the European economy it can still be increased and Europe appears to be better armed than in the past to face the crisis if it were to last for a time.

With regard to the environment and in answer to the UN Secretary General to ensure "leadership" with regard to the fight against global warming²³ the Union will tackle the post-Kyoto international negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009, in the position of exemplary leader. If Barack Obama's America were to follow suite, it would be able to say that it helped in a decisive manner to save the planet.

The transatlantic relation will probably be the focus of European policy in 2009. The stance adopted by the new American president elated European opinions but everything points to the new administration's foreign policy not differing much from the previous one. The Union must also promote its advantages and demand a more balanced relationship with the USA. This was the idea behind the process taken by Foreign Ministers, under the initiative of Bernard Kouchner who sent a list of subjects to the president elect with regard to which they would like to have renewed dialogue. In the definition of this new relationship, which must take on board specific European interests and advantages, France and Germany, which share the same opinion must adopt a lead position rapidly in this to avoid further European division.

The new stance set by Nicolas Sarkozy with regard to France's American policy will allow the European Union greater room to manoeuvre within NATO and in the East as long as Europe remains united. The confidence that has been regained between France and the USA should allow the Union to be in control of its defence policy, of its choices in terms of enlargement that must not be affected by global considerations which do not meet with Europe's own interests.

²³ Ban Ki-Moon, 11 December 2008

Indeed the Union's neighbours still find it attractive. It disturbs the traditional game of the major global players. Pressure with regard to future enlargement will not cease. It has to develop a true foreign policy on its borders by means of association and partnership agreements. The Russo-Georgian crisis highlighted the need to look at the enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic area again and to develop a true policy for the Union in terms of involvement and investment on its borders. The signature of the agreement with the Ukraine, European re-investment in the Southern Caucasus and the revival of negotiations with Russia are good news for the stability of the European continent. However the Union's surprise entry as mediator in the Russo-Georgian crisis was not considered as such by the major powers, starting with Russia and China. United Europe is too strong and complicates their traditional power games! Chinese provocations of the French president have to be considered in this light.

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Based on the principle of opening that from the start led it to practice what it preaches in terms of free trade, which is now the rule everywhere, the Union must consider itself more as a player just like the others in international trade. In terms of economy and trade, it has to reject protectionism always and carefully negotiate more balanced agreements with its partners in which reciprocity must become the rule. It must for example know how to protect its future technologies which a State does naturally but which the Union finds hard to imagine as far as rules of the large market are concerned.

It has succeeded in asserting itself. It must continue on this road and accept the goal "of a powerful Europe" (Europe puissance), which until now has been overly identified as a French demand.

It seems that it does not have the choice. Will a consensus emerge with regard to this goal and how long will it take? Thanks to its positive, committed action that respects the Union's essence whilst challenging practices and customs that are taken for granted, the French Presidency has shown that this is possible. No one would deny that the Union still has a long way to go before it accepts itself for what it is.