**Of guns, glory hunters and good intentions. How does France do everything it does in Africa and get away with it?**

I am going to start today’s lecture with a thumbnail sketch of three men: Louis Faidherbe, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza and Hubert Lyautey [see insets]. They are three of the founding fathers of France’s African empire and together they embody and symbolise the ‘guns, glory hunters and good intentions’ in the title of today’s lecture. Faidherbe and Lyautey were career military men who played a key role in the French conquest of Africa, while Faidherbe and de Brazza sought glory, both for themselves and for their country; at the same time, all three saw Africa as the ‘Dark Continent’ and shared the ambition not only to win it for France but also to win over the hearts and minds of Africans and improve their lives by bringing French culture, civilisation and know-how to Africa.

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| **Louis Caesar Faidherbe, First Governor of Senegal, 1854-61 & 1863-65**  Born in Lille to a family of milliners, Faidherbe’s father was a former sergeant-major in Napoleon’s army. Destined for a military career from an early age, he volunteered for ‘la Coloniale’ and was sent to Algeria in 1845 where he took part in the military campaigns to bring Algeria under effective French control. He returned to France and then, on a cool September morning in 1852, he left Le Havre by boat, arriving in Senegal for the first time on 6 November, after a voyage lasting two months. As he got off the boat at Gorée he was immediately charmed by ‘les Noirs’ (‘the Blacks’, as he called the Africans) and entranced by the world of ‘wonders and monsters’ about which he had heard so much. He also found the French settlements in Senegal were in reality little more than a ramshackle trading post and resolved to put this to rights. Having learned from his experience in Algeria, he embarked on an ambitious colonisation project into the interior of Senegal and beyond. A charismatic and authoritarian figure, he was determined to ‘pacify’ the country and establish effective French control throughout the region. He sent military expeditions across the country to defeat those, such as El-Hadj Omar, who resisted the imposition of French rule and obstructed the expansion of French trade. In 1857, he created the *tirailleurs sénégalais[[1]](#footnote-2)* (regiments of African troops drawn from throughout west Africa, often referred to as ‘La Coloniale’) to carry out his campaigns of conquest. Yet his colonial ambitions were not only military. He learned Arabic, read widely and travelled throughout the region in an effort to understand it better. He signed treaties with African leaders, set about abolishing slavery, lay the foundations of a colonial administration, built roads and bridges and introduced French schools. As a republican he was a keen promoter of France’s self-appointed ‘civilising mission’ in Africa. |

As colonial enthusiasts they shared the view that France was a power with global reach that rightly sought to exercise its power and influence beyond its national frontiers. This was an important and enduring part of its self-image as a nation, as it was - and still is - for its great colonial rival, Britain. As President De Gaulle put it in 1961: ‘France must fulfil its mission as a world power. We are everywhere in the world. There is no corner of the earth where, at a given time, men do not look to us and ask what France has to say. It is a great responsibility to be France, the humanising power par excellence’.[[2]](#footnote-3) There are two ideas here. First, there is the idea that it is right and proper that France should play a global role that extends beyond the frontiers of mainland France. This is an idea that has underlain French relations with the rest of the world for at least two centuries. Second, this is justified by the notion that French republican values - liberty, equality, fraternity and progress - have a universal reach and that France therefore has an obligation to export these values beyond the hexagon to the rest of the world. Indeed it was this idea that underpinned France’s self-appointed colonial *mission civilisatrice* (‘civilising mission’).

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| **Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, explorer and adventurer, who beat Stanley to the head of navigation on the Middle Congo river in 1880**  A naturalised Frenchmen who was born in Rome in 1852, de Brazza chose French nationality because the French naval minister offered him a place at Naval College and he saw this as the best opportunity to fulfil his early ambition to travel the seas. He landed in Africa for the first time at the age of 21 as a naval cadet on board a French anti-slaving ship and immediately fell in love with the place. Audacious, energetic and determined, de Brazza’s easy manner and his qualities of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation would serve him well as he set off on his first expedition up the Ogooué river in 1875, accompanied by three Europeans and seventeen Africans. At this time the race to control the Congo river was at its height. De Brazza was determined to beat Livingstone and Stanley to the Middle Congo and secure the area along the right bank of the Congo for France. To this end he managed to persuade the new republican government in Paris to fund a ‘scientific mission’ to the Middle Congo and in September 1880, at the age of 28, he reached the area fifteen months before Stanley and signed a treaty with King Makoko giving France territorial rights over the whole region. His was the first great colonial triumph of the Third Republic and he was hailed as a national hero when he returned to Paris. An energetic campaigner for the abolition of slavery, he was one of the early architects of France’s civilising mission in Africa. |

So what has this to do with Africa? To be sure, the notion that France has a right and an obligation to project its power overseas applies generally and is not limited to Africa.[[3]](#footnote-4) However, following two wars of French decolonisation in Indochina and Algeria and the consequent loss of French influence in those parts of the world, the maintenance of a ‘*pré carré*’ (privileged sphere of influence or ‘backyard’) in sub-Saharan ‘Black’ Africa became central to France’s national image of itself as a global power. Following a peaceful and relatively smooth decolonisation, sub-Saharan Africa became a privileged arena for the projection of French power overseas and this led to the development of a very special relationship between France and the African continent in the late colonial and post-colonial periods.

Yet the origins of this special relationship lie in the nineteenth century, when France emerged alongside Britain as the major imperial power in much of West and Central Africa, and it maintained this relationship well into the post-colonial period. Indeed, in a 1981 article Tamar Golan expressed amazement that ‘two decades after independence, this “special relationship” [was] still alive, accepted by and acceptable to both France and the francophones’. Even more surprisingly, she suggested, other countries on the continent - Belgium’s former colonies, followed by Portugal’s former colonies - were seeking to get in on the act and join the Franco-African ‘family’.[[4]](#footnote-5) Golan’s article focused on an array of institutional, semi-institutional and informal links constructed prior to, during and after decolonisation that underpinned an exceptional relationship featuring special favours and symbolising the mutual benefits to both France and the governing elites of francophone Africa of a continuing projection of French power and influence in the region. France gained in ‘grandeur’, thereby underpinning its claim to continue to be considered a world power in the post-colonial era, while African leaders benefited from a reliable ally that provided economic, political, technical and - if needed - military support, in a situation in which their hold on power was often fragile.

This lecture is the story of that ‘special relationship’, how it emerged, how it developed and endured and how, in recent years, it has begun to change. It is in many ways a paradoxical relationship. With its roots in the violence of colonial conquest and the imposition of colonial over-rule that was actively resisted in many parts of west and central Africa, it is a relationship from which France has always benefited much more obviously than has Africa. It is shot through with tensions and ambiguities. Yet it is a relationship that has endured for some 150 years and one to which the governing elites of not only France but also Francophone Africa have often appeared equally attached.[[5]](#footnote-6) What is more, after the Second World War Francophone Africans were as keen as the French to ensure that decolonisation did not mean French withdrawal. Unlike British decolonisation in west and central Africa, which for the most part did mean real withdrawal, French decolonisation actually led to an intensification of the ties between France and its former colonies in Francophone Africa. For example there were over 120 French military interventions in Africa in the forty-five years after African independence.[[6]](#footnote-7) Despite this, as we have seen, African political leaders from former Belgian and Portuguese Africa even sought to join this exclusive Franco-African ‘family’ after they gained independence. So this raises the question: how can we explain the enduring nature of this very special Franco-African relationship? Or, to put it another way, how does France do everything that it does in Africa and get away with it?

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| **Hubert Lyautey, French Resident-General in Morocco, 1912-25**  Born in Nancy in 1854 to an aristocratic, military family, much of Lyautey’s early career was spent in the colonies, in Indochina, Madagascar and Algeria. He first came to wider attention when he published an article entitled ‘The social role of the officer’ in 1890 and he was already a general in the French army when he was appointed the first French Resident-General in Morocco in 1912. Serving under his mentor General Galliéni in Indochina, he learned not only the art of colonial military conquest, but also the equally vital one of winning over the local population after the conquest. He understood the importance of building villages and roads, of opening markets, schools and health centres in order to win the bigger battle: the battle of hearts and minds. His aim was to ‘govern with the mandarin and not against him’; thus in Morocco he worked with the sultan and local elites to establish and consolidate French power. Intelligent, energetic and cultured, Lyautey loved to be in command; his motto was: ‘Soul’s joy is in the doing’.[[7]](#footnote-8) He was also a keen proponent of ‘social catholicism’. As Resident-General, he undertook with enthusiasm the task of conquering Morocco, ‘pacifying’ and unifying it, then winning over and ‘civilising’ the local population through education, economic development and social works. Lyautey was a deeply paradoxical figure in many ways. A devout catholic, a traditionalist and instinctively a monarchist, he served the Republic and is celebrated as one of the founding fathers of France’s ‘colonial republic’. |

**The historical context**

France was a key player in the ‘scramble for Africa’ that it launched in 1830 with the occupation of Algiers and during the next sixty or so years it carved out for itself a colonial empire stretching across vast areas of north, west and central Africa. If it is true that Britain acquired its empire in a fit of absence of mind, then this is even more true of France. France carved out an empire second in size only to that of Britain in the face of general public indifference and ignorance about what was being done in its name. As John Chipman put it: ‘The French Empire in Africa was constructed by adventurers and justified propagandists. The acquisition of African colonies in the late nineteenth century was by and large an operation in which the state eventually acquiesced, but which was in no sense centrally directed’.[[8]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, French empire at its outset was even more of an elite affair than the British empire. The motivations of this motley band of settlers, soldiers, missionaries and glory hunters who created the French empire were not primarily economic. Of course there were fortune hunters amongst them; there were also missionaries seeking to convert the heathen to the Catholic faith (although their relationship with the avowedly secular republic was often a problematic one) but, in general, personal ambition mixed with nationalism - promoting the greatness of France - were far more powerful motivators for the creators of ‘Greater France’ than trade or making money.[[9]](#footnote-10) This was especially important in the aftermath of the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, which led to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. Experienced as a national disgrace, as well as a personal humiliation by many military officers, the acquisition of colonies was seen as a way of restoring France’s great power status. The competition with Britain also played a significant part in the French drive for overseas expansion; de Brazza wanted to beat Livingstone and Stanley to the Middle Congo navigation and was hailed as a national hero on his return in no small part because he was successful in this. Indeed it was usually only at moments when the nation’s honour was perceived as being at stake that the public took an interest in colonial affairs. One such moment was the 1898 military stand-off between General Kitchener and Captain Marchand in Sudan, as a result of which the French were forced to withdraw from Egypt. Referred to by English-speaking historians simply as the Fashoda incident, the term ‘Fashoda syndrome’ entered the French language and is still used to this day to refer to the French fear of an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ threat to its African *pré carré*.

This general public indifference began to change after the First World War. France was not alone in using colonial troops for the defence of the empire during the war, but it was unique in calling up large numbers of colonial troops for the defence of the mainland. In total, over half a million colonial troops, some 175,000 of whom came from sub-Saharan Africa, were called up to the European front. Of these 175,000, approximately 30,000 were killed. In addition, a further 200,000 workers were recruited from the colonies, many of whom also came from Africa. Not only this, but in 1917 Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy to be elected to the French parliament in Paris, agreed to spearhead an ambitious recruitment drive to boost the number of African troops on the European front, in return for a promise of guaranteed citizenship for residents of the Four Communes of Senegal.[[10]](#footnote-11) Diagne himself came from the island of Gorée, one of the Four Communes, which gained the right to send a deputy to the French parliament in 1871 under the newly established Third Republic. Initially deputies from the Four Communes came from one of the mixed-race families of merchants that were closely linked to the Bordeaux trading houses but to general surprise Diagne won the election in 1914 and became the first black African deputy to represent Senegal. His recruitment campaign succeeded beyond all expectations and even exceeded the 50,000 men that he was expected to recruit.

The *tirailleurs sénégalais* had regularly served beyond their home region, first in west and central Africa where, as we have seen, they played a key role in the French conquest, but then in such far-away places as Morocco, Guyana and Madagascar. As early as 1910 General Mangin had called for greater use of African troops in the French army. He saw Africa as a useful source of manpower and a way of making good France’s ‘demographic deficit’ vis-a-vis Germany, hence the title of his book *La Force noire* (‘black force’)*.[[11]](#footnote-12)* However, the call-up of Africans between 1914 and 1918 was on an altogether different scale and brought home for the first time to many French people the existence of the French empire. African soldiers fought in the trenches alongside French soldiers and were billeted on French towns and villages that often had little contact with people from other regions of France, let alone from another continent. At the same time Africans met ordinary French people, as opposed to colonial settlers or officials, for the first time and discovered that they were normal people who were vulnerable, experienced fear and - importantly - were mortal, just like them. The bedrock of colonial rule - the dual myth of European superiority and invincibility - was shattered. While this did not have an immediate impact on colonial policy, it did lead to changes in attitude. First, after the war there was much greater awareness of empire, and especially of France’s African empire, among the French public than had been the case before the war. The fact that eight million people visited the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 is one sign of this upsurge of interest in empire. Second, in official circles there was the widespread realisation of the huge economic and military potential of empire.[[12]](#footnote-13) Third, as a direct result of the imperial contribution to the war effort, a new bond between France and its colonies began to be forged at both popular and official level. One key element of this feeling of solidarity was the notion of a partnership between France and Africa, from which, it was claimed, both parties stood to benefit: France would gain from access to African manpower and raw materials while Africa would gain from the penetration of French civilisation and scientific and technical expertise. A neologism was even introduced to the French language to describe this new partnership: ‘Eurafrique’ (Eurafrica).[[13]](#footnote-14) It was to be a remarkably durable idea, as we shall see.

In 1939, as in the First World War, France's African empire was again called upon to come to the aid of France in its hour of need. Africans answered the call in large numbers and some 120,000 men in total were mobilised from French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. This was in fact a considerably higher proportion of the French army than in the First World War - some nine per cent in 1939-40 compared to only three per cent in the First World War. Moreover, it was from African territory - first Brazzaville, then Algiers - that Gaullists launched their four-year campaign for the liberation of France and, among the populations colonised by France, it was African troops who made the largest contribution to the liberation campaign. Africans’ contribution to the war effort profoundly altered the face of Franco-African politics after the war and marked the beginning of a process of renegotiation of the colonial ‘settlement’.

In the case of France’s African empire this process of renegotiation had actually started at the Brazzaville African Conference in 1944. De Gaulle and his soon-to-be provisional government acknowledged that the old colonial regime could not be sustained after the war and that reforms would be needed in recognition of the loyalty of the empire to France and the sacrifices made by Africans during the war. Although De Gaulle resigned before the Fourth Republic came into being, the reformist spirit of the Conference’s recommendations and its aspiration to bind France and its African empire more closely together were enshrined in the 1946 constitution that brought the French Union into being. The constitution renamed the empire the French Union, the colonies were renamed ‘France d’Outre-mer’ (‘Overseas France’) and the former colonial subjects of the empire became citizens of the French Union. Against this background, under the Fourth Republic (1946-58) African war veterans and their political leaders used the notion of a 'blood debt' to France to justify and give political force to their demand that the rhetoric of a 'one and indivisible republic', uniting the populations of metropolitan and overseas France, should be made a reality.[[14]](#footnote-15) More generally, at a time when their counterparts in British Africa were campaigning for political independence, Francophone African politicians were demanding equality with Europeans within the context of the French Union. In the discourse of Francophone Africa’s political leaders, the achievement of liberty was linked to economic development and social progress, not to political independence, and their objectives were to be achieved within the context of the French Union, through the adoption and application of the core, modernising and progressive values of the ‘one and indivisible’ republic, not by secession from it. Thus, whereas decolonisation rapidly became inseparable from political independence in the British context, in Francophone Africa decolonisation was conceived by both French and African political leaders as meaning the forging of a new and closer partnership between France and Africa rooted in the French republican values of liberty, equality, fraternity and social and economic progress. Thus the colonial settlement was constantly renegotiated in the post-war years in response to African demands to improve living conditions; to put an end to the colonial system and its racist structures; and to restore African dignity.

When the Fourth Republic fell and De Gaulle returned to power in 1958, he renamed the French Union the Community. The 1958 Constitution establishing the Fifth Republic granted internal autonomy to the member-states of the Community, but defence, security, the currency, financial and economic affairs and strategically important raw materials were to be Community - in effect French government - responsibilities. Of course not everyone in Francophone Africa bought into this idea of reforming and modernising colonial rule from within and internationally the independence tide had by 1959 developed a momentum of its own that it was difficult for political leaders in France and Francophone Africa any longer to ignore or to resist. At this point De Gaulle finally abandoned the French government’s Canute-like efforts to hold back the rising tide of anti-colonialism and announced that he would grant independence to any colonial territories that requested it. Never an unqualified supporter of colonialism as a form of government, De Gaulle was by 1959 convinced that it had had its day and that a new means of projecting French power on the world stage was required. Within little more than twelve months the decolonisation process in sub-Saharan Africa was complete and all the territories of Francophone West and Central Africa had achieved political independence or, to use the term that De Gaulle preferred, ‘international sovereignty’. However for De Gaulle, as indeed for most of the leaders of Francophone Africa, the granting of ‘international sovereignty’ was not intended to mean secession from France. On the contrary, only once they had achieved international sovereignty did he believe that France would be in a position to develop a real partnership with them, based on bilateral agreements and grounded in French humanism and the universal values of liberty, equality and fraternity that did away with the old, now outmoded, colonial relationship of dominance. Working together, these countries would form a grouping with the potential to have real influence in the global arena. It was a vision from which all the partners, French and African, stood to benefit. The granting of international sovereignty was conceived in effect as a further reconfiguration of the colonial settlement in order to maintain the ties between France and Africa, rather than as a separation.

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| **Léopold Sédar Senghor, poet, member of the Académie Française and first president of independent Senegal**  Senghor was one of the first Africans to gain a place at the lycée in Dakar, from where he won a scholarship to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. There he studied with the future French president Georges Pompidou and discovered French literature and culture. From there he gained a place at the Sorbonne and went on to study for the very difficult *agrégation* degree, which no African had ever obtained. To get it, he had to take French citizenship and do military service. In 1935, he became the first African *agrégé* in French grammar. He was co-founder of the *négritude* movement and, at the outbreak of the second world war, rejoined the French army. With the fall of France in 1940, he became a prisoner-of-war. Released because of illness in 1942, Senghor returned to teaching and research, completing his doctorate at the Sorbonne. These were years of ferment, especially after the liberation of Paris in 1944, and he was increasingly drawn into politics. He became a member of the constituent assembly and helped draft the constitution of the French Fourth Republic. From 1946-58, he was one of the deputies representing Senegal in the French National Assembly. By the late 1950s changes loomed, and, in the face of decolonisation, Senghor was one of those who tried to preserve close links with France. For many in France he embodied the ideal of the ‘French-African’. |

To be sure there was an element of the conjuring trick to all of this since, the notion of international sovereignty notwithstanding, the partnership was clearly never an equal one.[[15]](#footnote-16) Yet African political leaders such as Senghor [see inset] of Senegal and Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, bought into it. The role of De Gaulle was crucial here. To many Africans of their generation, De Gaulle was the ‘man of Brazzaville’ and, as the leader of Free France, was also seen as the liberator of Africa. Senghor’s poem ‘Guelowar’ (The Noble One), written to De Gaulle from a prison camp in 1940, expresses his admiration for the man:

Your voice speaks of honour, of hope and of the combat, and its wings flutter in

our breasts.

Your voice tells of the republic, that we will build in the City in the blue day.

In the equality of fraternal peoples and we tell ourselves “We are present, O

Guelowar!.[[16]](#footnote-17)

His reputation as a decoloniser may, as some have suggested, been scarcely deserved[[17]](#footnote-18), but it was nonetheless how he was perceived by many French-educated Africans at the time.

**The ‘golden age’ of the special relationship, 1960-94: from political independence to the Rwanda genocide**

After political independence France’s special relationship with Africa was based on two pillars: neo-colonialism and the projection of France overseas’. The latter, as we have seen, is a feature of French foreign policy generally and not limited to Africa.[[18]](#footnote-19) However, following the traumatic experience of French decolonisation in Indochina and Algeria and the consequent loss of French influence in those parts of the world, the maintenance of a privileged sphere of influence in Black Africa became central to French foreign policy.

The neo-colonial relationship has traditionally manifested itself at a number of different levels. At the institutional level, the Franc zone, which at the end of the Second World War pegged the currency of France’s former colonies in Black Africa to the French franc at a fixed rate, was maintained into the post-colonial period. Ironically, the franc, which has been abolished in metropolitan France, still lives on in Francophone Africa today, although the exchange rate is now pegged to the euro. However, the 16 member countries are still required, as they have always been, to deposit two-thirds of their foreign currency holdings with the Bank of France in Paris. The Ministry of Cooperation, which emerged from the old Ministry for Overseas France and after independence became effectively the ministry for Francophone Black Africa, also had its roots in the colonial period. The cultural, technical, military cooperation and defence accords that France signed with its former colonies at independence were a further institutional manifestation of this relationship, as were the frequent military interventions - at least one a year from 1960 to 1994 - that resulted from them. Cultural cooperation served French interests by propagating the French language and culture, while French public development aid reinforced the ties with its former colonies in Africa, maintained dependency and gave privileged access to African markets and raw materials. In the years after 1960 up to 40,000 French nationals, half of whom were French teachers, were sent to Africa as ‘*coopérants*’. These staff often had a deep knowledge of, and commitment to, Africa and formed part of the dense web of ties that bound France to Africa in the post-colonial period. Other links, such as the annual Franco-African summits initiated in 1973 at the instigation of the president of Niger, Hamani Diori, lie somewhere between the institutional and the non-institutional. They are institutionalised to the extent that they bring together French and African political leaders and their officials, but insofar as they do not have any published agenda or make formal policy recommendations, they resemble more informal ‘family’ gatherings than official inter-governmental meetings.

However, the feature of Franco-African relations that marks them as truly exceptional is the highly personalised, non-institutionalised forms of the relationship, which has led some commentators to use the image of the ‘family’ to describe it. Once again, as in the 1930s, a neologism has been coined to denote this very special relationship: ‘la Françafrique’ (‘France-Africa). The origins of ‘la Françafrique’ lie in the close personal links that were forged in the corridors of power in Paris under the Fourth Republic between members of France’s governing elites and African political leaders, many of whom sat in the French National Assembly and on several occasions served as government ministers. Among the colonial powers this practice was unique to France: the British government, for example, never countenanced the possibility of Nigeria or Kenya becoming constituencies of the United Kingdom and electing honourable members to Westminster. These links continued into the post-colonial era and are exemplified by the close, personal relationships that existed, and in some cases continue to exist, between French presidents and African political leaders under the Fifth Republic. Moreover, although according to the Fifth Republic constitution African policy is the shared responsibility of the president and prime minister, as early as 1958 De Gaulle made African policy in effect the exclusive responsibility of the president and since then each president has had his own personal adviser on African affairs as part of an Africa ‘cell’ which operates outside the normal government channels.

The best known of these presidential advisors was Jacques Foccart, whose links with De Gaulle went back to their time together in the Free French during the Second World War. He knew most of the heads of state of the newly independent Francophone African states personally. Foccart was responsible for establishing the system of *réseaux*’, or networks, that are a unique feature of the Franco-African special relationship. A ‘*réseau*’ has been defined as: ‘An informal, indeed secret, association of individuals, some of whom are civil servants, who pursue common objectives, the realisation of which implicates the State and, ultimately, the Nation or some other high idea’.[[19]](#footnote-20) The origins of the ‘*réseaux*’ lie in the underground networks that Foccart used to organise on De Gaulle’s behalf during the war and the term has been used to describe the dense web of official channels and unofficial contacts that linked France and Africa in the post-colonial period. Foccart also served as African affairs advisor and general political ‘fixer’ to presidents Pompidou and Chirac, while president Mitterrand appointed his own son, Jean-Christophe, as his African affairs advisor. A key feature of this system of ‘*réseaux*’ is the combination of official and unofficial channels through which they function. For example, their activities have often been ‘covered’ by high ranking politicians or civil servants in Paris, or they have operated in conjunction with one of France’s secret service agencies. One result of this system is that Franco-African relations have traditionally been highly personalised, conducted outside the normal diplomatic channels that characterise inter-governmental relations and those charged with responsibility for French African policy are not accountable either to the government or parliament. Indeed African policy is rarely if ever discussed by the Council of Ministers (the French equivalent of the British cabinet) or by parliament.

This special relationship between France and Africa began to attract criticism in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent democratic revolutions in central and eastern Europe. Questions began to be asked in France about the desirability of maintaining close relations with authoritarian regimes that had poor human rights records. Questions were also asked about the value and effectiveness of French development aid, which had signally failed to promote economic take-off in Africa despite thirty years of cooperation policy.[[20]](#footnote-21) However, it was French implication in the events leading up to the Rwanda genocide of 1994 and French actions in the aftermath of that genocide that were to lead to the most far-reaching re-evaluation of French African policy. For the first time, members of France’s governing elites began openly to question the benefits – diplomatic, political and economic – to France of the special relationship.[[21]](#footnote-22)

**The Rwanda watershed: crisis in the special relationship**

French forces had been in Rwanda since 1990 to provide support for the Hutu-dominated government of Juvénal Habyarimana, with whom president Mitterrand’s son, Jean-Christophe, had close ties. Habyarimana’s government was coming under threat from the Tutsi-controlled and well organised Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and needed French military support as the ramshackle Rwandan army was incapable of blocking the progress of the RPF on its own. This French involvement in Rwanda is difficult to understand other than by reference to the ‘Fashoda syndrome’ - the fear that the RPF was an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ trojan horse and that the loss of Rwanda to the English-speaking RPF would have a domino effect, leading to the loss of other countries from the Franco-African ‘family’, with potentially serious implications for French influence throughout the region. The French government was therefore determined to shore up the fragile regime of president Habyarimana.

Following the shooting down of Habyarimana’s presidential plane in mysterious circumstances in April 1994, some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by government-sponsored militias in a genocide that lasted two months. No one in the international community intervened to stop the genocide. However in July, once the killing was largely over, France launched Opération Turquoise, which involved the dispatch of French forces to the south-west of the country in order to establish a humanitarian ‘safe zone’. Opération Turquoise was justified at the time by the need to protect refugees from the Rwandan civil war, although in practice its main consequence was to provide a safe haven and escape route into neighbouring Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) for many of those who had been involved in the genocide and were fleeing the advancing forces of the RPF. The latter, led by Rwandan exiles, had entered the country from the former British colony of Uganda. The RPF had by this time defeated the army of former president Habyarimana and was in control of most of the rest of the country. French military and logistical support for Habyarimana in the run-up to the genocide, and the consequent implication of the French government in preparations for the genocide, followed by the belated and highly questionable Turquoise operation, focused the attention of both international and domestic opinion on French military intervention in Black Africa in a manner that was hitherto unprecedented.[[22]](#footnote-23) Not only this, but France had not been able to prevent the English-speaking RPF from taking power in Kigali. The result was the replacement of a pro-French government with a new government that was hostile to France and the loss of Rwanda from the Franco-African ‘family’.[[23]](#footnote-24) Moreover, once they had escaped into Zaire, the fleeing *génocidaires* regrouped as Interahamwe militias that then proceeded to create instability throughout the region, as a result of which it is estimated that over four million people died during the following ten years The resulting turmoil also led to president Mobutu of Zaire, another French ally, being ousted from power. Rwanda and its aftermath thus marked an important turning-point for French policy in Africa. Not only was its African policy subjected to unprecedented criticism at both domestic and international level, but also its claim to a ‘special relationship’ with Africa was discredited by its support for the genocidal regime of Habyarimana and for the dictator Mobutu in Zaire.

In the aftermath of these setbacks a series of new policy initiatives was launched, the central aim of which was to share the responsibility for, and cost of, French African policy. For example old-style unilateral military interventions were to be replaced by a new multilateral peace-keeping initiative. Called RECAMP (Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix: Strengthening African Peace-keeping Capability), this new French-led peace-keeping programme aimed at enabling Africans to take greater responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security on the continent. The idea underlying the plan is that European countries such as France can help to keep the peace in Africa by providing training, transport and equipment for troops, whose deployment is coordinated by Africa’s regional organisations. France also sought to coordinate its aid policy more closely with international organisations such as the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and the EU. Most surprisingly perhaps, given the long history of competition between the two nations on the continent, at the 1998 Franco-British summit, one hundred years after Fashoda, France declared its willingness to put an end to over a century of rivalry on the continent and cooperate with Britain on African policy.

However, despite these changes, there was - and is - no sense that France wishes to reduce its commitment to Africa. Despite promises by successive presidents to reform Franco-African relations and put them on a more normal state-to-state footing, neither of president Mitterrand’s successors - Jacques Chirac or Nicolas Sarkozy - has shown any sign of wishing to reduce France’s commitment to Africa. Even more surprisingly, Francophone African leaders, despite their increasingly frequent and vocal criticisms of French policy in Africa, continue to look to France to intervene when problems arise. For example, in the 2002 crisis in Ivory Coast and this year’s crisis in Chad, it was to France that the respective presidents of these two countries turned for support when their regimes were threatened by invasions from neighbouring countries.

**Conclusion: so how does France do everything it does in Africa and get away with it?**

The international context and domestic political consensus on which the Franco-African special relationship depended have now gone. With increased US interest in Africa in the context of its post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ and growing Asian interest in Africa not only from China, but also from Japan and India, it is no longer possible to talk of an exclusive sphere of French influence in Africa. Today it is more difficult for France to claim, as its foreign minister once did in 1979, that it can ‘change the course of history [in Africa] with 500 men’.[[24]](#footnote-25) And president Chirac was probably the last of the generation of French political leaders to have close personal ties with African presidents. In this respect we have in recent years been witnessing the end of an era.

Yet French interest in Africa has shown no sign of waning. Large French companies have done very well out of the enforced privatisation of African countries’ public services such as water, electricity and telephones. Moreover, despite criticising the Franco-African special relationship during his election campaign as ‘paternalist’ and calling for a ‘healthier’ relationship with African states, president Sarkozy has been a regular visitor to the continent since his election, especially to France’s traditional African friends and allies such as Senegal, Gabon, Chad and Morocco.[[25]](#footnote-26) He even relaunched the old French idea of Eurafrique (‘Eurafrica’) at a speech he gave in Dakar last August.[[26]](#footnote-27) With its origins in the colonial era, it was a proposal that surprised - and shocked - many African observers as a throwback to a bygone age. Finally, France’s ‘exceptional’ relationship with Black Africa continues to be underpinned by an array of institutions and levers of state power that has no parallel in the other G8 nations.

I should like to conclude, then, by putting forward a tentative, and inevitably partial, answer to the question: how does France do everything it does in Africa and get away with it? A comparison with the UK may be instructive here. Tony Blair once described Africa as a ‘scar on the conscience of the world’ and promised action to change the situation. Yet afterwards there was no sustained follow-up to ensure that the pledges on debt relief and aid were delivered on. Africa fell off the UK’s political radar, only to re-emerge sporadically when some new crisis emerges. This is a familiar pattern in British African policy, which has been characterised historically by upsurges of interest interspersed by sustained periods of indifference.[[27]](#footnote-28) In contrast, French governments have, since the Second World War, displayed a consistency of purpose with respect to Africa that British governments have never shown. To be sure, this commitment has not been disinterested: guns, glory hunters and good intentions have all played a part. French African policy has been motivated by the promotion of French interests, whether political, economic, diplomatic, military or cultural, in the region. It has also been a relationship of dependence between a powerful ‘patron’ and a series of weaker ‘clients’. However, the point is that African leaders enjoyed the regular contacts and attention that the special relationship afforded them. Furthermore, in pursuing this constellation of objectives in Africa, France drew in an array of actors, in both France and Africa, who then developed a stake in the continuation of the Franco-African special relationship. It was thus a multilayered relationship, characterised by a dense network of links that bound France to Africa. The international context in which that relationship emerged has now changed profoundly. The challenge for the twenty-first century will be to see whether, in the context of globalisation and the continuing crisis of poverty and under-development in Africa, a new ‘special relationship’ between France and Africa can be forged that benefits Africa, and more especially Africans, as much as the old-style relationship has benefited France.

1. The name *tirailleurs sénégalais* is actually misleading as they were drawn from throughout west Africa.. The *tirailleurs* were finally disbanded in 1964, having also played a major role in the defence of French during two world wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Quoted in J.-B. Duroselle, ‘Changes in French foreign policy’, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cf. P. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. T. Golan, ‘A certain mystery’, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The earliest origins of the French presence in west Africa actually stretch back even further, to the middle of the seventeenth century, when a handful of settlers established the first French trading post at Saint-Louis on the mouth of the River Senegal in 1659 and named it after Louis XIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. B. Charbonneau, France and the New Imperialism, pp. 68-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Wrongly attributed by Lyautey to Shelley, the quotation is in fact almost certainly a misquote from Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, Scene 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Chipman, *French Power in Africa*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Girardet, *L’idée coloniale en Franc.e.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The Four Communes of Senegal were the earliest French settlements in west Africa. They were Saint-Louis, Gorée, Dakar and Rufisque. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Mangin, *La Force noire*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Evans, *Empire and Culture*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Chipman, *French Power in Africa*, pp. 61-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Mann, *Native Sons*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Lavroff, ‘Avoir des amis’, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Quoted in White, 1979, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Person, ‘French West Africa’, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Cf. P. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Glaser and Smith, *Ces Messieurs Afrique 2,* p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See for example J.-C. Smouts and J. Adda, *La France face au sud*; S. Brunel, *Le Gaspillage de l’aide publique*; V. Chesnault, ‘Que faire de l’Afrique?’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See for example ‘Rocard: «Le déshonneur» de la France’. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. See P. de Saint-Exupéry’s series of articles, ‘Quatre ans après le génocide rwandais’; Agir ici/Survie, *Les Dossiers noirs de la politique africaine*; pp. 16-18 and report by the Mission d’information parlementaire sur le rôle joué par la France au Rwanda de 1990 à 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. It should be noted that Rwanda was not originally part of the ‘family’ as it is an ex-Belgian colony. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Louis de Guiringaud, quoted in D’Epenoux and Hoche, ‘Giscard, l’Africain’, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. H. Astier, ‘Sarkozy’s Africa policy shift’; V. Schneider, ‘Sarkozy veut nettoyer la «Françafrique»’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. N. Sarkozy, ‘Discours à l’Université de Dakar’. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. G. Cumming, ‘From Realpolitik to the Third Way’. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)