

FRANCE IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA: THE END OR RENEWAL OF HEGEMONY?

By
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Introduction

Since modern France established a firm foothold in Sub-Saharan Africa at Saint Louis (Senegal) in 1848, relations between Paris and its African "possessions" have survived two world wars, the decline of the French empire, decolonization, the death of Charles de Gaulle, coups d'etats and economic malperformance on both sides of the Mediterranean sea divide¹. In fact, in the wake of the official demise of colonialism, France, with Western complicity, managed to extend its sphere of influence in Black Africa to areas not historically regarded as parts of the *chasse gardée* (e.g., former Belgium-ruled Africa and Lusophone Africa, especially Cape Verde and Angola). As the 20th century draws to a close, however, there seems to be a fundamental transformation in relations between France and Francophone Africa (broadly defined to include the former Belgian colonies of Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi, where French is widely spoken, but not, for obvious reasons, Lusophone Africa).

What has been the modus operandi of French influence in Francophone Africa; why has it, until now, persisted; and what are the driving factors behind its apparent transformation? Is French hegemony in its former colonies ending for good this time, or is it merely being renewed, perhaps in less visible and heavy-handed ways? What are the consequences, for the rest of Africa, of truly independent Francophone Africa freed from the political, economic, cultural and military shackles of the former metropole? This article examines the above questions with frequent allusions to Gabon and Cameroon, although other cases will also be cited. The concept of hegemony should be succinctly defined at this early point, so as to give the reader a clear idea of its intended use throughout the article.

Defining Hegemony

The author's definition of hegemony is borrowed from Webster's dictionary: "The preponderant influence of a nation in the affairs of another nation²". It is not being suggested that French influence in Francophone Africa has been total or absolute, but it has certainly been 'preponderant' or overwhelming. It would clearly be wrong to suggest that the French and their African clients have always been eye-to-eye on all issues; it would be equally foolhardy to assert that Paris has always had its way with its former colonies. Throughout the post-colonial period, one can certainly find

evidence of policy differences between France and individual Francophone African countries, which occasionally even resulted in outcomes that probably were not to the Elysee's liking. During the Nigerian civil war, for example, former President Ahidjo of Cameroon supported the union forces of General Gowon while the French were known to favour the Biafran secessionist forces. This was not an insignificant difference. Cameroon shares a long border with Nigeria; its territory could have easily been used to supply and hide the Biafrans. However, Ahidjo did hold his own even under French pressure.

The author recognizes that French hegemony in Africa has not been exercised in the same way in all countries. Nor has it gone unchallenged. Instead, French influence has been rather nuanced, its audacity and efficacy shaped by: the personality of individual African leaders, their perception of the 'national interests' as opposed to France's, the certainty (or its reverse) surrounding their hold on power, the extent of their economic dependence, and their political skills in manoeuvring their way through the intricate world of the French foreign policy establishment. French influence, while preponderant, has also been constrained by imperfect and incomplete information and the volatility of African politics. At the same time, however, it is safe to say that in matters of overriding concern to France, where French leaders were willing to use the full weight of the coercive instruments at their disposal, they were probably generally successful in reaching outcomes they preferred. French hegemony in Francophone Africa may not have been as complete as Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, but it was, nevertheless, substantial and certainly accepted (or at least tolerated) by non-Francophone Africa, the West and even the Eastern bloc. With few exceptions (e.g., Benin after 1971, Guinea in the early 1960s and Congo), the Soviet Union did not pay much attention to Francophone Africa, in part because French management of the *pre care* kept out not only Moscow, but also Washington³. To avoid repetition, hegemony, influence and neo-colonialism will be used interchangeably.

Decolonization

The way in which decolonization took place in Francophone Africa facilitated continued French influence in its former colonies, so it is nearly impossible to write on France's post-colonial policy without at least minor references to the decolonization period (roughly between the end of World War II and 1960, with considerable momentum in the two years preceding 1960). As in the rest of Africa, decolonization in Francophone Africa was largely peaceful, except in Cameroon. Its phases were repeated throughout France's Africa empire: the abolition of forced labour after World War II; the granting of overseas territory status to the colonies; limited adult suffrage and African representation to the French National Assembly; establishment of a

legislative assembly and an executive council within the *Loi Cadre* in the colonies; the 1958 referendum, which resulted in Sekou Toure's famous *non*; and independence.

There was at least one significant difference between the pattern of decolonization in Anglophone Africa and that of Francophone Africa: whereas the British relinquished control over their former colonies one by one and treated them as separate new states, independence in French-speaking Africa came *en masse* in 1960 and immediately after that de Gaulle proceeded to rekindle old flames by creating the *communaute*⁴, which all the new French-speaking states, with the exception of Guinea, eventually joined⁴. The French were looking for *interlocuteurs*, that is, leaders within the nascent African elite upon whom they could count to represent and promote French interests, even if it meant (as was often the case) repressing popular demands. Consequently, Paris generally snubbed, to put things very mildly, leaders and groups that evinced an anti-France posture. (After the referendum of 1958, Guinea's Sekou Toure, it is safe to say, was probably not the most welcome guest at the Elysee.) Decolonization was less orderly in Belgium-Africa. In Zaire, in particular, the process took less than one year and almost led to the young country's disintegration. With the instalment and consolidation of Mobutu in power, the French, with tacit American backing and Belgian indifference, were to displace Belgium as the dominant European power in Central Africa; until 1994, they also accomplished a similar feat in the Great Lakes countries of Rwanda and Burundi. Thus, decolonization in French-speaking Africa led to a recasting/enlargement of French hegemony, rather than an end.

Modus Operandi of French Influence

France has thrown its weight around francophone Africa through a variety of formal and informal institutions, which here mean "... a set of rules, compliance procedures, moral and ethical behavioural norms designed to constrain the behaviour of individuals in the interest of maximizing the wealth of utility of principals." ⁵ These institutions have functioned to cement what is fundamentally an asymmetrical relationship, whereby French interests as well as those of a tiny African elite are preserved at the expense of the well-being of the vast majority of Africans. Perhaps the most significant institutional arrangement between France and its former colonies has been the fixed exchange rate between the French franc and the West African and Central African CFA franc. Established until January of 1994 at a ratio of 50 to 1 (50 CFA francs for 1 French Franc,) the CFA franc was considered by the French as evidence of their benevolence and largesse toward French-speaking Africa, and in fairness the coupling of the two currencies did give Francophone Africa a measure of monetary respectability and stability. At the same time, the money supply within the *pre care* came to be under the direct influence of Bank of France officials, which meant that

no Francophone African country has really had control of its monetary affairs since independence. Decisions regarding capital flows, interest rates, currency reserves, and foreign exchange earnings from the sale of cash crops, minerals (especially oil), and tourism have been significantly influenced by the non-floatability of the CFA franc, which has also been overvalued.

The maintenance of an overvalued currency in both French-speaking West Africa and Central Africa was a bonanza for the African political elite and its allies. It allowed the *dirigiste* regimes that mushroomed throughout the Francophone zone to promote a parasitic and ostentatious consumerism, fuelled by employment in the bureaucracy and government-owned enterprises and cheap access to imported goods. It also further deepened Francophone Africa's dependence on the former metropole, for when urbanities occasionally clamoured for higher wages, and thus threatened the stability of illegitimate governments, Francophone rulers needed to turn to Paris for financial assistance, the granting (or non-granting) of which usually had an impact on political outcome. When Cameroonian civil servants in 1991 began to make noise about joining the civil disobedience movement, because their salary had become irregular, the former French ambassador at the time was reported to have paid an urgent visit to his superiors for assistance, which was promptly heeded. Partly as a result of continued French support, Paul Biya is still in power in Cameroon.

The French were less generous toward the quasi-military regime of Nguesso in Congo in its latter days. With its oil wealth Congo is technically not a poor country by African standards, but in order to support the habits of the urban elite, whose members' taste for French wine, cheese and baguette became the object of ridicule in much of Francophone Africa, Nguesso had heavily mortgaged the country's future, by accepting payment from the French oil companies Total and Elf-Aquitaine years before new oil sources were discovered and exploited. By the time average Congolese citizens had discovered the racket in 1990 and began to clamour for their rightful piece of the national pie, Nguesso simply had no money to satisfy their demand. Having lost French (and international lending institutions) support, Nguesso also eventually lost Congo's first transition presidential election to Lissouba. Through monetary alliance and its effects France did become, almost literally, a piggy bank for Francophone Africa, and because in the age of finance capital he who has the key to the vault also controls political destiny (amongst other things), France came to have a degree of financial *cum* political influence in its former colonies that was unmatched by any other former colonial power in the rest of Africa.

Monetary symbiosis and direct bilateral economic 'aid' are only a part of the financial web by which France has remained the *eminence grise* in the *pre carre*. Thanks to its prominent role in world bodies such as the European Union, the World Bank and

the International Monetary Fund, France, since World War II, has positioned itself as the defender of African interests. Francophone elites have used Paris as their lobbyist on the world financial and trade scene. Primary goods (such as bananas and pineapples) produced in some former French colonies have historically had preferential access to the European market; they have been subject to lower tariff rates and (or) higher quotas than similar commodities coming from elsewhere (e.g., the Americans). France has used its role as a fiduciary as a lever to achieve its goals in the former colonies.

Military 'cooperation' has been another vehicle for the preservation of French influence. France has military bases in a number of Francophone countries including: Gabon, Senegal, Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic and Djibouti. These bases often serve as expedition points from which to launch military operations in those African countries where France's allies are under threat; they are also used as deterrents against political instability in 'host' countries. French forces in Gabon, for example, have been used, under the guise of 'protecting' and 'evacuating' French citizens living there, to put down opposition to Omar Bongo's regime; they have also been used to conduct 'humanitarian' intervention in Rwanda. In addition to participating directly in combats to maintain friendly regimes in power, French forces have trained and equipped their African counterparts. During Cameroon's counterinsurgency war against the UPC (*Union des Populations du Cameroon*) they helped to create the *Services d'Etudes et de Documentation (SEDOC)* - Cameroon's intelligence agency-which after the war became notorious for torturing political opponents of the Ahidjo and Biya regimes.⁶

The military, of course, remains the ace-in-the-hole in African politics. Like all other institutions and organizations, the military is concerned, first and foremost, about safeguarding its interests. It will lend support to whichever group or person it believes will preserve and advance those interests. It is important not to assume, however, that the military in Africa is an interest-homogeneous institution that is always obedient to hierarchical norms. The African military is saddle by the same kinds of cleavages that are to be found in the rest of society; it is divided by ethnicity, region and religion. Power-holding politicians may deliberately maintain division within the military by promoting loyal officers from particular regions and ethnic groups and putting them in charge of strategic barracks (usually those which are within reach of the centres of powers and equipped with tanks, arms and ammunition depots and fuel supply). The connection between ethnicity and rank in the Cameroon army is revealing. There are more generals from Biya's Centre-South provinces than there are from the rest of the country, even though the Center-South provinces encompass only 20% of the total population.⁷ Military officers may also have a free reign to engage in illegal and extra-legal activities to supplement their officially meagre income, which exacerbates state-sanctioned corruption.

Because the African military is often politicized and steeped in corruption, the institutional threat it poses to democratization is enormous. External support for the African military, in the absence of a fundamental change in its ethos and operations, can have grave consequences. The French, by military supporting Habyarimana in Rwanda until the very end, probably affected the willingness of the government to make genuine concessions to the Rwanda Patriotic Front, and when those were belatedly and half-heartedly extended, Hutu-extremists moved to action. Le Marchand is worth quoting at length here: "By turning a deaf ear to persistent and massive violations of human rights, France helped to give the Habyarimana regime a degree of legitimacy that proved totally illusory, and thus created false expectations about its commitment to democracy. By preaching harmony and reconciliation at Arusha, while at the same time arming and training MNRD death squads and militias, France's two-track' diplomacy emerges as singularly disingenuous, and highly counterproductive."⁸

Once the genocide was underway, France's decision to create a 'safe heaven' for Rwandan refugees resulted in many of the perpetrators slipping through the killing fields to continue their sordid acts. This time largely against their 'own', in the camps of eastern Zaire. If there is one irrefutable piece of evidence of the dangers of French post-colonial military misadventure in Africa, Rwanda is probably it. The author is not suggesting that France was behind the genocide of 1994, but that practices developed during the Cold War, especially blind military support for murderous client regimes, no matter how volatile the situation, can have (and have had) consequences far beyond those which were intended; moreover, once the genie is out of the bottle, it may not be possible to put it back. The outcome of the Rwanda conflict in favour of the RPF was, it will be contended later, a significant turning point in French-Francophone Africa relations; it may have ended French influence in the Great Lakes French-speaking countries as well as in Zaire.

French influence in the post-colonial period has also been exercised through informal channels, involving personal contacts between French and Francophone African leaders. To understand this aspect of French-Francophone Africa relations, it is necessary to know how French foreign policy is made generally, as well as the history of the first generation of post-colonial African leaders. French foreign policy has historically been the reserved domain of the presidency, with the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the other national security-related ministries playing a relatively subservient role. Thus, even during the period of co-habitation in the late 1980s' when Mitterand had to share power with Chirac as his Prime Minister, he maintained control of foreign policy. As a medium power that does not really have a global reach, it is simply more convenient for French heads of state to conduct foreign policy based on their personal rapport with leaders abroad, than to rely on formal

and impersonal bureaucratic procedures. Unlike the United States, France's foreign interests have included a small group of core countries including its fellow European Union partners, the former Eastern Bloc Countries, the former African colonies and some countries in the Middle East (especially Lebanon, Syria and the oil producing states). French heads of state could therefore have one-on-one contacts with their counterparts in a way that the president of the United States could not without difficulties. Finally, de Gaulle was such a towering figure in post-world War II French politics that his almost imperial conduct of foreign policy may have set the tone for successive French heads of state.

Where Africa is concerned, the Elysee has always jealously guarded the Africa 'portfolio' from other ministries and agencies of the French government. Under de Gaulle, the secretive and legendary Jacques Foccart responded directly and only to the famous general; during the first administration of Mitterand, none other than the president's son, Jean-Christophe Mitterand, was in charge of the Africa dossier. Under Chirac, the key players in the design of the Elysee's Africa policy would appear to be Jacques Foccart and Fernand Wibaux. The personal interest that French presidents have taken in Africa has allowed them to know their African counterparts very well and to nurture deep paternalistic ties with them. In his autobiography, Foccart has pointed out how de Gaulle was fond of Leopold Senghor of Senegal and how when stability in Senegal was threatened by an army uprising, de Gaulle was determined to 'save' Senghor's government, in spite of his alleged misgiving about intervening militarily in African Affairs. In other words, de Gaulle's personal feelings toward individual African leaders apparently drove French foreign policy in the early years of independence. This view is challenged later. Foccart has also reported that Omar Bongo of Gabon was practically interviewed for the post of head of state in Paris, before receiving the former colonial master's blessing.⁹

The apparent intimacy of France's Africa policy can also be explained by the nature of the leadership of the anti-colonial struggle and its ideology. With few exceptions, those who led the independence movement in Francophone Africa were Francophile, either as a matter of political expediency or conviction. *Negritude*, the politico-literary movement, which, beginning in the 1930s, provided the ideological underpinning of anti-colonialist sentiments in Francophone Africa, was not nearly as radical and anti-metropole as Kwame Nkrumah's pan-Africanism, Frantz Fanon's Marxism, or even Julius Nyerere's African socialism (Ujamaa). Even though it affirmed the glory and humanity of African traditions and rejected French attempts to 'Europeanize' Africa, *negritude* writers, such as Senghor and Aime Cesaire, essentially were pleading for African cultural autonomy and equality with European culture; they were not advocating a break between Africa and Europe (read: France mainly), but a more balanced and respectful partnership between the two

civilizations.¹⁰ These were demands and ideas that French leaders could conditionally live with.

Many of the Francophone African founding fathers had studied in Paris; some, like Senghor and Boigny of Ivory Coast, had served in the National Assembly, while others (e.g., Bokassa of the Central African Republic) had even fought with great honour for France's liberation from the Nazis. The 'authentiques' who remained behind in Africa had jobs with the French colonial administration (e.g., Ahidjo, before plunging into politics, was a post master in Cameroon), and they too were known by French officials on the ground. In sum, most Francophone African leaders were no strangers to the French elite, and since many did manage to remain in office for a long time, they came to develop strong personal ties to the Elysee, no matter the party affiliation of the occupant. French policy toward Africa has thus been shaped by the way in which foreign policy in general is structured within the French governmental system, as well as by the circumstances and personalities who led Francophone Africa to independence.

The informal, emotional ties that have governed Franco-African relations do not involve only French and African leaders. They are, instead, multilayered, involving multiple actors in both continents. In Gabon, relations with France are conducted through formal and informal institutions, with neither *de jure* nor *de facto* separation between the private and public realms.¹¹ A personalized network, known as Le Clan des Gabonais, (the Gabonese Clan) which includes Gabonese officials, French intelligence agents, former members of the Service d'Action Civique (SAC), mercenaries, money launderers and legitimate businessmen, ensure that business is conducted in a secretive way.¹² At one point, the personal staff of Omar Bongo was entirely French, and French Ambassadors used to attend cabinet meetings dealing with matters of importance to France and Gabon. Such structures and relations have fostered various types of opportunistic behaviour by French governments of all ideological stripes. To wit, the first French-led military intervention in Gabon in the post-colonial period occurred in 1964 under De Gaulle to restore Leon Mba (Gabon's first president) to power; the second took place under the socialist government of Mitterand in 1990, much to the chagrin of democratic forces.

As in other industrialized countries, there is a good deal of occupational intercourse between members of the French elite, meaning that business executives and government officials stomp in and out of each other's turf. They are, needless to say, also socialized in the same institution. As graduates of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (generally), members of the French elite know each other very well and protect each other's interests.¹³ Some members of the Francophone African elite are also former classmates of members of the French elite. Edem Kodjo, until recently Prime Minister

of Togo, and Alain Juppe, the current French Prime Minister, are both fellow enarques.¹⁴ The French state has often used its influence with African leaders to ensure that French companies are granted lucrative government contracts. Weapons sales to Africa, by private merchants or the French government, are also subject to arm-twisting by French officials. In this confusing atmosphere of back-room dealings and thin separation between private and government agents, issues of concern to the average African, such as receiving adequate prices for his (or her) products, the ability to buy consumer goods other than those produced by the French, and even travelling abroad without an obligatory (often overnight) stop in Paris, are generally lost in the shuffle.

To summarize, French hegemony in Africa is exercised in complex ways. In the formal realm, the author has identified at least seven institutions that have something to do with France's Africa policy: the Bank of France, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Cooperation, the Central Fund for Economic Cooperation, the Ministry of Defence and the Secretary of State for the Francophone. Towering above all of these is the Elysee and the cornucopia of informal ties between the African elite and French political, business and military leaders. It is hard to imagine any other major power that has so many of its formal and informal institutions dealing with one sub-region. The question has often been raised as to what exactly the French get out of Africa. French leaders, academics and newspapers have in recent years hinted that it might be time for France to abandon Francophone Africa, since French money might allegedly be used more judiciously elsewhere;¹⁵ and non-French writers, such as McKesson, have bluntly stated that "... Africa needs France more than France needs Africa."¹⁶

This author disagrees. The French are not fools. France is one of the oldest nation-states in the world; war has shaped French history and diplomacy its political soul. The ideas that French presence in Francophone Africa is based more on romance and altruism than other considerations is sheer nonsense. Was it not De Gaulle who said: People have friends, nations have interests? If the French have been somewhere in Africa, in one capacity or another, continuously since the 1840s, it can only be concluded that it is because they have reaped some benefits from their involvement. It is not only to maintain a sense of grandeur (greatness) that the French have played a preponderant role in states that, at first sight, are marginal in world affairs. It smacks credulity to argue that the *raison d'être* of French heavy-handedness in Francophone Africa is to simply keep its former colonies as trophies, in order to solidify its position in the rest of the world. It is hard to see how French neo-colonialism in Africa, without tangible economic benefits, strengthens France's hand *vis-a-vis* Bonn or Washington, especially in the post-Cold War. Nor does it make sense to suggest that France suffers from a kind of visceral attachment to its former

colonies, such that, like a heartbroken romantic who cannot forget the sweet services of a former lover, Paris has to pursue its *mignons*. How then would one explain that Angola, which was never part of the French empire and which is hardly poor, is now the third largest recipient of French aid on the continent? One does not give something for nothing in this world, even love.

The argument being made here is simple, may be even simplistic and old-fashioned to some. It follows in the footsteps of Walter Rodney: France has been in Africa because it has extracted (and continues to extract) significant economic benefits from the continent.¹⁷ To ask whether France needs Africa more than Africa needs it is to ask the wrong question, for the answer will inevitably boil down to aggregate and quite abstract statistics. One might easily be tempted to conclude that a \$2 trillion-plus economy has no need for those in 'mere' billions. A better question might be what specific interests stand to lose the most should France and Francophone Africa decide to initiate a friendly divorce, and how much access do those interests have to the people who wield state power? The reason why the second question is more relevant is that the foreign policy of nations is generally significantly shaped by rent-seeking elites, who, even while pursuing parochial interests, have to cloak the latter in 'national security' terms to make them palatable to the masses. To digress for a moment, Guatemala in 1954 had a largely peasant economy, and the nationalization of land 'belonging' to the United Fruit Company by the Jacobo Arbenz government would probably have had zero effect on the then booming U.S. economy. But thanks to United Fruit Company executives' contact with the Eisenhower administration, especially the Dulles brothers, American policy toward Guatemala was tilted decisively toward a CIA-supported coup that deposed the Arbenz government.¹⁸ Similar, perhaps less overt, examples of special interest-driven foreign policy can probably be found in the case of France. The proof of the devil is always in the details rather than the aggregates.

French interests in countries like Gabon, Cameroon and Ivory Coast are significant. France's dependence on Gabon's raw materials, e.g., timber and oil; its need for Cameroon's oil, timber and rubber; its exploitation of Ivorian cash crops such as pineapples, cocoa and now oil, are worth a lot.¹⁹ Moreover, the French nuclear power industry, amongst the largest in the world, needs uranium, which the Creator (or, depending on one's religious belief, luck) bestowed upon Niger, Mali and Gabon in abundance. In addition to France's dependence on Francophone Africa's raw materials, one also has to look at the needs of African countries to modernize their infrastructure, especially roads and telecommunications, and the huge contracts that can be expected from this endeavour. Oil discovery off Ivory Coast and in Chad's Doba basin will also mean significant investments in the construction of pipelines, sea platforms, storage and processing facilities, etc.²⁰ In addition, Francophone

African leaders have been known to contribute money to the political campaigns of French politicians. In fact, as this article is being written, there is a major scandal in France involving the former head of Elf-Aquitaine (Loik Le Floch Prigent), its subsidiary in Gabon (Elf - Gabon) and alleged campaign contributions to *president Chirac's Rassemblement pour la Republique*.²¹ Nearly 20 years ago, there was also the matter of former Emperor Bokassa's diamond gift to former President Giscard D'Estaing, which probably helped to elect Mitterand to office.

Recent sniping between the U.S. State Department and the Commerce Department and France may not have been unrelated to pocketbook issues and the propensity of the French to exclude 'outsiders' from feasting on the *chasse garde* (literal translation: the protected kill.) The argument is not that without Francophone Africa the French economy would collapse, but rather that: (a) the French presence in Africa has not been benevolent and based on nostalgia, and (b) in case of a divorce some sectors of the French economy, and influential figures within the French political establishment, would be severely affected. Avoidance of precisely such a possibility has been one of the cornerstones of France's post-colonial Africa policy. Its implementation was undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that during the Cold War France also had a 'sub-contract' to reign in anti-Western elements in its former colonies, which it did effectively while also keeping out certain Western powers, especially the U.S.

How can the realist position just taken here be reconciled with what was said earlier about personal ties between French and African leaders? The contradiction is more apparent than real, in so far as personal ties are important only because they have allowed French leaders to know their African *interlocuteurs* better and gauge their performance on the job. De Gaulle did get along better with some African leaders than others, but that probably was not the determining factor in French policy toward its ex-colonies. As Foccart conceded, the famous general and Ahidjo were not exactly hunting buddies; the Cameroonian President was considered aloof and difficult to deal with, even on the most 'trivial' issues (e.g., the location of the French embassy in Yaounde).²² But because of extensive contact, the French also respected Ahidjo's political skills and instincts since they knew that in closed settings it was easier to induce cooperation from him. Means and ends must not be confused. Personal and ostensibly affective ties between French leaders and Francophone leaders are an instrument of France's Africa policy, not a goal.

The question of who needs whom in Franco-African relations having been reconceptualized in the above manner, the answer is clearly that the French (or, more accurately, specific actors within the French business class) must be gaining something from Africa (or hope to), otherwise they would have voluntarily packed their bags a long time ago and not have to be possibly forced out of the continent in

the near future. Furthermore, if one considers that most African governments, including Francophone ones, pursued economic policies that were averse to farmers' interests (overvalued currencies which penalized exports, price control of staple crops and underpricing of cash crops), it is safe to say that the vast majority of Africans would not be substantially worse off than they are now following a break-up between Francophone Africa and France.²³ The \$3 billion dollars in 'aid' that France 'gives' each year to Africa (not just Francophone Africa) has clearly not benefited ordinary Africans. And, while the average French person might conceivably benefit from the withdrawal of this sum, the same cannot be said of French business interests who have profited handsomely from historically closed markets, where they have not faced serious competition. Dishonourable mention must also be made of the hordes of French 'development specialists' whom African governments, in order to be eligible for French 'largesse,' have had to hire at European wages when qualified African experts are plentiful and underpaid; they too would be negatively affected.

If the French have employed various stratagems to remain the power behind the throne in much of Africa, is their duplicity about to end? What evidence might be most appropriate to answer the question? What are the possible consequences? While the author is not prepared to sing the eulogy of French hegemony in Francophone Africa (as human ingenuity and the capacity of our species to adjust to changing circumstances should never be underestimated), Paris' influence in the *pre carre* is definitely under strains, and those strains may not be merely temporary; they may just be significant enough to pose a permanent transformation or reconsideration in France's role in the sub-region. An analysis of recent developments in the formal and informal institutions upon which French influence has rested, as well as of political events in Africa, exposes the fissures.

Cracks in the Pre Carre?

The first sign of declining French prestige in Africa was not the wave of 'democratization' elections in the early 1990s (even though the French were lukewarm toward political change in many countries, including Ivory Coast, Cameroon and Gabon), but the devaluation of the CFA franc at a new ratio of 100 CFA francs to 1 French franc in January 1994. This policy change was pushed more by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund than the Mitterand-Balladur government, which did not resist as much as might have been expected. Until then it was standard Gaullist policy to favor a strong currency, whether the French franc itself or its junior (the CFA franc).²⁴ Paris' acceptance of devaluation can only be understood in terms of the French leaders' inability to resist the diktat of the Bretton Woods institutions, and indirectly the U.S. Government's. The capitulation was all the more remarkable, since France was under enormous pressure by some Francophone African

leaders (e.g., Bongo of Gabon) to resist. The French did, however, successfully push for a compensatory financial package, to make up for the expected negative side-effects of devaluation.

None of the dire predictions regarding devaluation has materialized. Instead, Francophone Africa has rebounded economically since 1994. As usual, Ivory Coast has led the way, but in 1996 even the economy of Cameroon, which had been shrinking throughout the 1990s, grew at a modest rate of 2 percent, as did Gabon.²⁵ One of the impacts of the devaluation of the CFA franc, in addition to the apparent economic recovery, might be greater faith on the part of African leaders in their ability to solve their own problems without France. The 1994 devaluation may have been one of those rare instances when the Bretton Woods institutions have been right, and their support for the policy may have opened the eyes of African leaders to new possibilities, especially in the monetary sphere where, as stated earlier, French influence has been most pronounced. The big question mark is whether the recovery will continue, and how devaluation will, in the long run, affect the standard of living of the poor and the urban middle class. Even if things were to turn for the worse soon, it is most unlikely that there would be a reappreciation of the CFA franc. More plausible is further depreciation of the CFA franc vis-a-vis the French franc, and perhaps eventually a complete decoupling between the two.

There are also signs that the French military stranglehold is eroding, for reasons having to do with developments in Africa and France itself. The victory of the Rwanda Patriotic Front over the Hutu-led government was significant not only because it ended one of the worst cases of genocide in this century, but it also underscored the limits of French military support for client regimes. There was a time in Francophone Africa when Africans thought that a green light from Paris was necessary for ending autocratic rule. Opposition groups would not dream of not having an office in the French capital, which they would use to try to garner French support for their cause (usually to no avail). In 1994, Kampala, not Paris, was more consequential to the RPF's victory. In 1997, Laurent Kabila routed Zaire's ragtag army thanks to support from Kigali, Bujumbura, Kampala and Luanda. France has been relegated to the sidelines and has thus been rebuffed by the international community, after numerous suggestions of sending a 'humanitarian' force to eastern Zaire.

The French military presence is likely to become even less consequential as the French government, in order to deal with continued economic problems at home, scales back its military commitment abroad. Unemployment in France is at an all-time post-World War II high (about 12%). Moreover, under the terms of the Maastrich Treaty, the French budget deficit has to be brought to more than 2% of the Gross Domestic Product by 1998, if France is to join the single currency union known as the Euro.

Domestic and continental pressures have forced France to propose the abolition of 103 regiments, reducing the number of soldiers from 240,000 to about 140,000. French forces serving abroad would be reduced from 33,000 to 25,000, with troops in Africa stationed at three, rather than seven, bases.²⁶ A reduction in France's military presence in Africa would mean that some autocrats would be left without the immediate protection of Paris.²⁷ Of course, given rapid advances in communication and transportation technologies, troops can, in principle, always be readily dispatched to 'trouble spots'. But in countries where coup outcomes are still decided by the ability of plotters to take over a few strategic buildings and installations (c.g., state house, parliament, radio and television stations, electric power stations, military barracks, etc.) military deployment from the outside, no matter how rapid, is no substitute for a visible presence. Besides, it cannot be guaranteed that the French would be willing to intervene whenever hostilities break out.

Africa may be entering a period where, for better or worse, African affairs will be shaped by Africans rather than outsiders - and this can only come at the detriment of France. One can easily envision the emergence of at least four core African states, whose role would be to serve as anchors in their respective region. Nigeria is in too poor a shape to be a benevolent regional hegemony in West Africa at this time, but it is certainly well-endowed in human and natural resources to do so in the future. Indeed, even with a corrupt and authoritarian military regime Nigeria was able, after many failures, to play a key role in resolving the Liberian crisis. In Central Africa, a post-Mobutu, democratic Zaire could serve as a core state, becoming an engine for economic growth and political stability in the Equator zone. In East Africa, either Kenya or Tanzania could emerge as a core state; and in Southern Africa, South Africa clearly has the wherewithal to be a regional, and perhaps even a continental, power. What is interesting about all of the fore mentioned states, with the exception of Zaire, is that they are non-Francophone, and therefore France would not presumably be able to work through them to maintain influence. Even in Zaire, should Laurent Kabila become the next leader, he would likely turn East to Uganda and Rwanda, South to Angola and South Africa, and West to the United States for support. In sum, any shift from an external hegemony to Africa-centered hegemony is likely to come at the expense of the external power which has had the most extensive influence in its former colonies - France.

La Baule notwithstanding, the ongoing process of democratization on the continent, the author believes, has weakened French influence in Francophone Africa, although, given that it has been botched (often with French connivance) in many countries, not as significantly as might be expected.²⁸ French support for various regimes in Africa during the Cold War was not based on their democratic inclination. Indeed, with the exception of Senegal, no country in Francophone Africa was even remotely democratic

until 1990. Democratization poses a dilemma for France in its relations with its ex-colonies, in that the more democratic countries become, the more uncertain their politics and policy orientation tend to be. Personnel and policies may come and go with each election. It is in this context that the dictum 'love uncertainty and you will love democracy' can be understood. As was seen earlier, however, France's Africa policy has been determined by French leaders' familiarity with various autocrats (better the devil one knows). Francophone Africa is now under pressure from civil societies that France is unfamiliar with, and in some cases, very suspicious of. When faced with a choice between democracy with uncertainty and autocracy with certainty, the French have a preference for the latter, especially in states where they have significant economic interests. French support for Henri Konan Bedie in Ivory Coast, Omar Bongo in Gabon and Paul Biya in Cameroon can be explained thus.

As more Francophone African countries become democratic, French influence can be expected to wane, as the ballot box replaces the bullet as the source of power. African leaders will no longer need France's legionnaires for their survival, once their legitimacy becomes rooted in the voting process. Admittedly, this is not automatic and it has not happened on a large scale in Africa. The African military continues to display a marked disrespect for the supremacy of civilian rule, elected or not. In Niger and Burundi, democratically elected governments have been overthrown by the military in the past two years. Nevertheless, in those countries where the power of elected governments has been relatively secure, Francophone leaders have shown signs of greater independence from France. President Alpha Oumar Konare's decision not to meet Jacques Chirac in Dakar during the French leader's 1995 West Africa tour was a manifestation of diplomatic brinkmanship, made possible in part by Mali's stature as an African political 'success story'. On the other hand, President Chirac has been decidedly cool toward Africa's fragile democracies. Benin and Mali have not been the recipients of increased 'aid,' in spite of their success.²⁹

Finally, with the end of the Cold War there is no longer a need for France to play the role of sub-contractor for the West in its former colonies. Why should other countries voluntarily abstain from a good chunk of the world's last untapped market when there is no longer a 'red menace'? Although it is too soon to know how serious recent American overtures toward Africa are, the French have nevertheless felt concerned enough to publicly express their displeasure with the Clinton administration. Should American interest in Africa turn out to be genuine and not be the result of the cynical machinations of a democratic administration in search of the African-American vote on the cheap in the year 2000, the emergence of the United States as a major player in African affairs is definitely a threat to French hegemony. Already, Africa's urban youth look to American popular culture (i.e., Chicago Bulls T-shirts and caps, Nike sneakers, rap songs) for much of their identity; increasingly, even the Francophone

elite is sending its sons and daughters to the U.S., rather than Paris, for study; American television shows and films, especially those featuring African Diaspora stars, can be found throughout Africa; finally, the advent of the internet, whose messages are sent in the English language at least 80% of the time, can only open the cracks further.

The newly industrialized countries of East Asia may also be looking for new markets as well. Malaysia and Indonesia are becoming major investors in West and Southern Africa.²⁸ The streets of Yaounde and Douala are populated by taxi cabs made by Toyota, not Peugeot or Renault. In sum, above and beyond what outside governments do to pry open the African market, there are global socio-cultural, technological and economic forces at work that are strongly stacked against the French. Besides, the African leaders upon whom France has relied are not immortal, as Mobutu's case reveals, and there is no reason to expect the next generation to be as emotionally attached to the former metropole as its forebears. The more Paris resists 'outside' encroachment in the *pre carre*, the more it will be resented by Africa's new generation and, ironically, the faster French hegemony will likely end. This does not mean that French hegemony will cease everywhere at the same time. In fact, the French may have 'lost' the Great Lakes French-speaking countries and possibly Zaire, but they still have significant influence in key states like Cameroon, Gabon, Ivory coast and Senegal. Erosion in French influence is likely to be incremental rather than synoptic and sudden; however, there is no question that French neo-colonialism is under greater strains now than at any point in its history. It should also be emphasized that should the French lose hegemony in their ex-colonies, they would still have presence; nearly 150 years of more or less continuous involvement will not vanish overnight. All that is being suggested is that in the age of globalization, Paris will have to compete with other nations for Francophone Africa's attention.

Conclusion

This article concludes by examining the possible ramifications of the end of French hegemony in the *domaine reserve*. Specifically, what economic and political consequences might the disappearance of French hegemony in Francophone Africa have for the rest of Africa? While most social scientists are not especially good forecasters, this has never stopped us from trying. First, not all of the consequences will be positive. France has had a stabilizing role in its colonies; that it has tended to stabilize autocracy should not be overlooked, but stability is good and someone has to provide it. France's military presence has probably staved off possible military coups in many of its ex-colonies, and a pull-out of French forces, while beneficial in the long-run, could be an invitation for the African military to move against fragile democratically elected governments.³⁰ There is no question, for example, that Felix-Ange Patasse might not be president of the CAR today were it not for the French.

How French demilitarization is achieved is thus very important. On the other hand, because, as stated earlier, French hegemony is likely to end gradually in many places, political instability caused by unruly soldiers is only a possibility, not a certainty.

Second, the French, it must be conceded, did a better job than the other colonial powers in developing effective administrative structures throughout the *pre carre*. The prefectural system of public administration, whereby centralized authority is represented at local levels, while not problem-free, generally facilitates state-building. Especially in the stronger Francophone states, it is a rare village that is not in some ways connected to authority at the center. The Western caricature of 'weak' African states with limited spatial reach and moribund administrative capacity has not been observed by the author in Francophone Africa. There are cadres of highly trained civil servants and independent professionals, whose talent has unfortunately been made invisible by obscurantist governments. There is also a vibrant cultural scene in many countries. Ouagadougou is, improbably, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most important centers for the visual arts, especially cinema. Much of the support has been given by the French Culture Ministry. The end of French hegemony, if it is accompanied by the destruction of all vestiges of French rule (which it not need be), could have negative impacts in some areas.

On balance, however, there is no question in the author's mind that the end of French hegemony will do more good than harm. France has been a very divisive force in Africa; it has kept its African ex-colonies and neo-colonies not only from having normal relations with the rest of the world, but more invidiously, with their own brethren. Francophone leaders have looked to France more than they have to other African countries; as a result, it is often easier to travel from one Francophone capital to Paris than it is to travel from one Francophone capital to a non-Francophone capital. Telecommunications follow a similar pattern. The end of French hegemony would open at least the possibility of greater cooperation between African countries, without the colonial dividing lines between Francophone, Anglophones, Lusophones and others. The dream of African unity might just be achievable with a Francophone Africa that does not have to look over its shoulders every time it makes overtures to the rest of Africa (or every time overtures are made to it).

The preferential access that French companies have had to the Francophone African market has prevented French-speaking countries from engaging in commercial intercourse with the rest of the world on terms that are advantageous to the sub-region. This has resulted in scarce resources flowing out of Africa since the end of colonialism. The demise of French hegemony would give Francophone Africa more trading partners from which to buy; it would also, as events since the devaluation of the CFA franc show, open the sub-region's access to foreign markets and increase

exports. Politically, without a group of autocratic leaders propped up by Paris, the process of democratization in key states such as Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Gabon would finally get underway in earnest. Because these same leaders have often been used to create mischief in neighbouring states, their demise, along with that of their patron, would make for less adversarial, intrigue-filled inter-African relations. Peace would also be achieved, in the long-run, as a result of gradual demilitarization. No one should be under any illusion: the end of French hegemony will not automatically bring Eden to Francophone Africa (or, for that matter, the rest of Africa), but it will almost certainly open the way for a more independent, less shackled, sub-region.

Notes

- 1 To be historically accurate, French presence in Saint Louis goes as far back as 1659, the year they founded and named the city after the then occupant of the French Crown. Saint Louis (and Goree) alternated for the next 100-plus years between French and British rule, until the Treaty of Paris gave Saint Louis to France in 1815. In 1848, the city officially became part of the French empire.
- 2 *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam Company, 1981.
- 3 Various terms are used to designate France's ex-African colonies and, implicitly, those of Belgium. The most common are: *pre carre*, *domaine reserve* and *chasse garde*. All of these terms are used in this article; to French speakers, they are rather amusing.
- 4 Gerard Premier, "The Fall of the French Empire," *New York Times*, January 24, 1997.
- 5 Douglas North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 6 See Phillippe Gaillard, *Foccart Parle, Fayart/Jeune Afrique*, 1995, p. 208.
- 7 Cameroon Tribune, no. 1627, March 15, 1993, p. 3.
- 8 Rene LeMarchand, "Managing Transition Anarchies: Rwanda, Burundi and South Africa in Comparative Perspective," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 32, no. 4, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- 9 Phillippe Gaillard, op. cit., p. 278.
- 10 Rene Depestre, *Bonjour et Adieu a' la Ne'gritude*, Paris: Laffont, 1980.
- 11 Jean-Germain Gros and Nelson N. Messon, "The Dynamics of Transformative Politics in Gabon," *In Coping with Ambiguity: Political Transformation in Late 20th Century Africa*, Jean-Germain Gros (ed.), forthcoming.
- 12 Michael Reed, "Gabon: A Neocolonial Enclave of Enduring French Interest," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 25, of 1987.

- 13 Ezra Suleiman, *Elites in French Society: The Politics of Survival*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- 14 An *enarque* is an alumnus of ENA - *Ecole Nationale D'Administration*.
- 15 Jacques Almaric, "Plaies D'Afrique, la France Embourbee," *Le Monde*, July 14, 1990, p. 2.
- 16 John Mc.Kesson, "France and Africa: The Evolving Saga," *French Politics and Society*, vol. 11, no.2, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993.
- 17 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications 1972.
- 18 Jose Aybar de Soto, *Dependency and Intervention: The Case of Guatemala in 1954*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978. See especially chapter 8.
- 19 French dependence on Gabon is 100% for cobalt; 83% for phosphate; 35% for manganese. See "La France et L'Afrique," *Marches Tropicaux*, 2041, December 21, 1984, p. 3169.
- 20 *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 38, no. 7, March 28, 1997.
- 21 "Chasse Gardee," *Africa Confidential*, vol. 37, no. 17, August 23, 1996.
- 22 Philippe Gaillart, op. cit., p. 206.
- 23 For a 'classic' analysis of how government policy has hurt African farmers, see Robert Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- 24 See Paul Godt (ed.), *Policy-Making in France: From de Gaulle to Mitterand*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- 25 See section four "1996 Regional Perspectives," *World Bank Annual Report*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1996. According to this report, in 1995, ... the sharpest increases in African exports were registered by the group of countries in the CFA zone that had adjusted their exchange rate in early 1994.
- 26 Julian Nundy and Tim Butcher, "France 'to Cut 103 Tegiments'," *The Electronic Telegraph*, February 14, 1996.
- 27 The announcement of a possible withdrawal of French troops in Africa was greeted with trepidation in some Francophone capitals. Omar bongo and Henri Konan Bedie, in particular, were said to have lobbied President Chirac heavily against it, as did a resurgent Foccart. After an army mutiny almost toppled Patasse in the Central African Republic, the French announced there would be no troop cuts in Africa for the time being. It remains to be seen, in light of continued economic problems in France and the fast-approaching currency unification deadline, whether the hexagon will keep its apparent commitment, as did a resurgent Foccart who died on March 19, 1997.
- 28 It was at the 1990 Francophone summit at La Baule, a French town, that the late President Mitterand first publicly suggested that France might link economic 'aid' to progress toward

democratization. The event has been hailed as the beginning point of political reform in Francophone Africa. In fact, however, the significance of La Baule is rather murky, for Mitterand appeared to have backed away from the statement soon after it was made. Moreover, his successor, Jacques Chirac, now only talks in general terms about development, good government and democracy. Indeed, Any link between democracy and French economic 'aid' disappeared when Paris reopened the coffers to Mobutu in 1995 and 1996.

- 29 "Surviving and Thriving," *Africa Confidential*, vol. 37, no. 23, 1996.
- 30 Howard French, "Wave of Strongmen Make West Africa Their Oyster," *New York Times*, October 24, 1996.