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FROM BELGRADE BOMBINGS TO SANCTIONS ON PRISTINA

ERNEST GUERMOUH



MURCIR

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1. Introduction	3
2. Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) and the Allied forces operation	5
2.1 Jacques Chirac, a symbol of continuity	5
2.2 But above all, a following of the US' views	7
3. Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and the recognition of independence	9
3.1 A very atlantist shift	9
3.2 A submission to Washington to be nuanced	10
4. Emmanuel Macron (2017-2027) and the handling of 2020s tensions	11
4.1 The “at the same time” diplomacy	11
4.2 Kosovo as a continuity of this policy	12
5. Conclusion	13
6. References	15

FROM BELGRADE BOMBINGS TO SANCTIONS ON PRISTINA

How has French presidents' perspectives on the conflict opposing Serbia and Kosovo changed since 1999?

Ernest GUERMOUH

Key words :

French foreign policy – Kosovo – Serbia – western Balkans – gaullo-mitterandism

Abstract :

The war and subsequent tensions between Serbia and Kosovo are a key element in France's foreign policy, because of the risk of destabilization of the European continent that this situation represents. Through a study of the foreign policy of three French presidents, involved in three major events in this conflict (war, recognition, new tensions), we will attempt to understand how and why France has evolved its positions on this issue.

1. Introduction

When it comes to influential great powers in the Balkans, France is rarely among the first to be mentioned. It is true that, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the region was dominated by the struggle for influence between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Austria-Hungary and the United-Kingdom. However, it would be a mistake to deny Paris any influence in the history of the Peninsula. As early as the 16th century, François the 1st became involved in the regional battle, allying himself with Suleiman the Magnificent to counter the Habsburgs. Revolutionary ideas (nationalism, the Jacobin model, popular sovereignty, republicanism) and the French language^[1] developed strongly in the 18th and 19th centuries, notably with Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of the Illyrian provinces. Paris also left its mark on the Balkans with its support for various independence movements

[1] DERENS, Jean-Arnault. La France et les Balkans, le poids de longues incompréhensions. SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2002, Vol. 5, no 2, p. 7-18 : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43291937>.

(Greece, Romania) and for the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War. This policy reached its climax during the First World War, when France allied with Serbia. Troops from both countries fought side by side on the Austrian front, even after Russia had withdrawn[2]. This good relationship continued after the war, with France supporting the "Great Serb" project that gave birth to Yugoslavia[3]. The Cold War, however, wiped out this deep-rooted relationship between Belgrade and Paris: Tito supported Algerian independence and executed Serbian nationalist resistance fighters, acts that were unacceptable to Charles de Gaulle and his successors[4]. When the Federation collapsed in 1992, the French reaction was to put off the disintegration as long as possible. Both the army and President François Mitterrand openly showed relative sympathy for the Serbian camp, which they are accused of having allowed to carry out the terrible atrocities in Bosnia[5]. It was only under Jacques Chirac that the situation changed, with France even taking part in the bombing of Serbian positions in Bosnia alongside the United States.

Whether it is a question of Balkan policy or French diplomacy in general, one player largely dominates the others: the President of the Republic. According to the Constitution, he is head of the armed forces (art. 15), appoints ambassadors (art. 14), and negotiates and ratifies treaties (art. 52)[6]. In practice, his power often extends far beyond this, and foreign policy is referred to as the President's "domaine réservé" (preserved area). The minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime minister are often relegated to the status of secondary actors, or even mere executors, although this may vary greatly from one presidency to another[7].

Despite a realist angle is necessary to understand these changes through power shifts on the international scene, we will mostly adopt a constructivist approach. Studying the respective modes of thought, affect and worldview of the different presidents[8], indeed appears to be the best way of grasping the ins and outs of their decisions, because of the importance of their power regarding french foreign policy.

[2] MICHEL, Bernard. Les enjeux des Grandes Puissances dans les Balkans depuis le Congrès de Berlin jusqu'à nos jours. *Relations internationales* [en ligne]. Editions Belin, 2000, no 103, p. 279-288.

[3] GARDE, Paul. Les Balkans vus de France au XX e siècle. *Esprit* (1940-) [en ligne]. Editions Esprit, 2000, no 270 (12), p. 17-43.

[4] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »? Genève : Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

[5] GUISNEL, Jean. Les discrètes amitiés franco-serbes. Dans : *Histoire secrète de la Ve République* [en ligne]. Paris : La Découverte, 2007, p. 361-364.

[6] Qu'est-ce que le domaine réservé au président de la République ? | *vie-publique.fr* [en ligne]. 18 avril 2023.

[7] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »? Genève : Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

[8] WENDT, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Based on this double-postulate (the historical importance of the Balkans in French foreign policy, and the President's predominant role in shaping it), it seems appropriate to examine in detail the relationship between the Élysée Palace and the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, a former Serbian province mostly populated with Albanians. From its participation in the NATO strikes on Belgrade, through the recognition of Kosovar independence, to the current mediation process between the two countries, France's position on the issue has been marked by considerable discontinuity.

The aim of this research paper will therefore be to understand how the perspective of French presidents has evolved in relation to the conflict that has pitted Kosovo against Serbia since 1999.

We will therefore analyze each president way of handling foreign policy, according to which great principles, worldview, and international power balance. We will start by looking at Jacques Chirac's position during the Washington-led bombing raids on Serbia, a clear act of support for the US's views on Kosovo, albeit marked by some resistance on certain points. We will then look at Nicolas Sarkozy's highly symbolic decision to recognize Kosovo's independence, which, as we shall see, marked a real turning point. We will finish with an analysis of the mediation process led by Emmanuel Macron, which for the first time seems to be putting the two rivals back to back to face up to their responsibility for regional instability.

II) Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) and the Allied forces operation

1) Jacques Chirac, a symbol of continuity

Jacques Chirac belonged to the right-wing Gaullist party, and thus officially followed in the footsteps of the emblematic head of state Charles de Gaulle (1958-1969). This was also the case for his predecessor, François Mitterrand, who, despite his membership of the Socialist Party, followed in de Gaulle's views regarding foreign policy. The term "gaullo-mitterrandism" is used to describe the doctrine traditionally followed by France since the end of the Second World War, which consists of emphasizing the primacy of nation-states in the face of international organizations, preserving France's independence (particularly vis-à-vis the United States),

and considering France as a universal power that should not be confined to the Western world[9]. Such was also the case with Jacques Chirac. Fascinated by Russian culture, fan of sumo wrestling, lover of African art, and genuinely friend with some Arab leaders, he has repeatedly distinguished himself by his refusal to follow American policy, notably in Iraq and on the Palestinian issue.

War broke out in Kosovo in 1998, when the Serbian army intervened against the pro-Albanian independence militia, the Kosovo liberation army (UÇK), formed shortly after Milosevic suspended Kosovo's autonomy in 1989. At the time, President Chirac was in trouble after losing the parliamentary elections and had to deal with an opposition government led by the left. Nevertheless, there was consensus on international issues. His foreign affairs minister, Hubert Védrine, was a convinced gaullo-mitterandian, like himself. Chirac even said that the only good news in this forced cohabitation of the two parties was the presence of Védrine at his side[10]. Regarding the United States, Védrine's doctrine was simple: "friends, allies, but not aligned". The duo set about tempering American ardor as Kosovo war broke out. More confident than ever after the collapse of the USSR, the Americans saw themselves as the "world's policemen" and wanted to extend their influence in the Balkans by overthrowing Milosevic by force of arms[11]. France, on the other hand, tried to promote a peaceful settlement to the situation, organizing negotiations under the aegis of the "Contact Group", which brought together Western powers as well as Russia, which it did not want to antagonize. Paris also favored moderate players over UÇK militiamen, which was not the case for the United States[12]. As the prospect of an armed Western operation became more and more likely, Chirac and Védrine pleaded that, if it were to take place, it should be with the approval of the UN. France then organized negotiations in Rambouillet in February 1999, and it was only after these failed that it agreed to intervene militarily alongside the United States against Serbia.

Once the conflict was over, Jacques Chirac strongly criticized US' Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's plan to set up a NATO self-initiation detached from the UN, and sought to free Europe from Washington by attempting to set up a European defense. Chirac's plan to turn Kosovo into a European protectorate failed, as NATO forces (KFOR) now maintain the regional status quo[13].

[9] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. *La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »?* Genève: Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

[10] Hubert Védrine, *la passion de la diplomatie*. Dans: *À voix nue*. France Culture, avril 2020.

[11] DERENS, Jean-Arnault. *La France et les Balkans, le poids de longues incompréhensions*. SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe [en ligne]. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2002, Vol. 5, no 2, p. 7-18.

[12] ROULEAU, Eric. *Errements de la diplomatie française au Kosovo*. *Le Monde diplomatique* [en ligne]. 1 décembre 1999.

[13] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. *La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »?* Genève: Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

Finally, it is important to note the rejection of a totally Western-oriented policy, in favor of a strategy focused on France's own interests. This can be perceived in the determination not to bring Serbia to its knees, but only the Milosevic regime. As part of KFOR, France has deployed in Mitrovica, one of the few Kosovar towns where a large number of Serbs live. It also directly resumed relations with Belgrade once Milosevic was overthrown and defended the Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo despite the autonomy status. This was due to regional rivalry with Germany: Paris viewed the country's reunification with fear. Berlin's early recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence rekindled Paris's fear of the "Mitteleuropa" project, i.e. the formation of a German sphere of influence in former communist Europe. Serbia thus appeared as a pole to be stabilized and to have on its side to prevent an imbalance of power in Europe, even if Germany and the United States were opposed to it[13].

2) But above all, a following of the US' views

We have seen that Chirac was determined to maintain a foreign policy independent of Washington about Kosovo. In practice, however, this had no major consequences, and we must not exaggerate its significance. France took part in NATO Operation Allied Forces between March and June 1999, thus participating in massive bombing raids against its former Serbian ally, without UN backing, without any NATO member being threatened, and in defiance of the Russian position, even though these dimensions had previously appeared essential to Paris[14]. While there are important elements of continuity, Chirac therefore also presented significant differences with his predecessor François Mitterrand on the Serbian question. Younger than Mitterrand, he did not live through the interwar period, during which a genuine state propaganda campaign promoted friendship with Serbia (Serbian day in schools once a year for example)[15]. As soon as he came to power in 1995, Chirac broke with Mitterrand's tolerance towards Belgrade and committed himself to the intervention in Bosnia alongside NATO.

[14] GARDE, Paul. Les Balkans vus de France au XX e siècle. *Esprit* (1940-) [en ligne]. Editions Esprit, 2000, no 270 (12), p. 17-43.

[15] MICHEL, Bernard. Les enjeux des Grandes Puissances dans les Balkans depuis le Congrès de Berlin jusqu'à nos jours. *Relations internationales* [en ligne]. Editions Belin, 2000, no 103, p. 279-288.

[16] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. *La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »?* Genève: Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

He also rejoined the alliance's military committee and political council. During the Kosovo conflict, France even showed a certain zeal once the operation had begun, as if to erase its image of support for Serbia once and for all. It opposed the pause in the strikes proposed by Italy and was the second-largest contributor of soldiers to the alliance (even though six countries chose not to participate)[17]. Throughout the conflict, Chirac legitimized the strikes in televised speeches, declaring, for example, that "strikes are not war", and blaming Serbia alone for the conflict. Chirac went so far as to implicitly compare Serbia to Nazi regime, echoing Germany's accusations that Belgrade was preparing a massive ethnic cleansing in Kosovo: the Potkova ("horseshoe") plan. It later emerged that the document on which this accusation was based was a fake created by the Bulgarian secret services to facilitate their entry into NATO. The document should have inspired even greater suspicion, given that the Serbian word for "horseshoe" is potkovica, not potkova[18].

French attempts of mediation can also be called into question. There are several indications that the failure of the Rambouillet negotiations was not primarily due to Serbian ill will, but rather to a Western desire to justify the future operation. Indeed, the de facto independence of Kosovo and NATO's demand to be able to move in and control the whole of Serbian territory (in other words: a total armed occupation) that NATO countries tried to impose could never be accepted by Serbia[19].

Chirac's Kosovo policy thus appears to mark a form of transition. Despite maintaining a gaullo-mitterandian accents and in its his management of the conflict and rethoric, the President has in fact bypassed some of its principles. "Orthodox" Gaullists have publicly expressed their dismay at this in the media, viewing Chirac's Kosovar policy as a betrayal[20]. This paradox can clearly be explained by the importance of American hegemony in the 1990s. Chirac surely thought that, in a unipolar world dominated by the United States, the most realistic, pragmatic and perhaps even Gaullist attitude was not to isolate France, and therefore to try to convince Washington, but never to oppose it.

[17] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »? Genève: Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

[18] RIMBERT, Serge Halimi & Pierre. Le plus gros bobard de la fin du XXe siècle. Le Monde diplomatique [en ligne]. 1 avril 2019.

[19] ROULEAU, Eric. Errements de la diplomatie française au Kosovo. Le Monde diplomatique [en ligne]. 1 décembre 1999.

[20] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »? Genève: Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.q

III) Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and the recognition of independence

1) A very atlantist shift

Although he comes from the same party as Jacques Chirac, and was his minister of home affairs, Nicolas Sarkozy is very different from his predecessor. He was determined to set himself apart from him, who was seen as too soft, and stood out for his dynamism. Sarkozy was omnipresent on the international scene and runned France's foreign policy on his own. Unlike Chirac, who always surrounded himself with charismatic foreign ministers who had a real influence on the course of events, Sarkozy sought to eliminate any potential competitor[21] and only listened to his faithful and discreet advisors.

He scorned the diplomatic administration, slashing their budgets, and reacted on the spot to international events, putting his own personality to the fore. He even involved his wife and mother-in-law in his foreign policy[22]. Form is not the only thing that has changed: Sarkozy has gone much further than Chirac in his rapprochement with the United States. He completely reintegrated France into NATO structures, fully supported Israel, declared that he "would rather shake hands with Bush than Putin"[23] and threatened Iran.

His Kosovo policy followed this logic. He appointed as Foreign affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner, the French representative in Kosovo under Jacques Chirac, against who he strongly opposed as he renewed ties with Belgrade[24]. In defiance of the rules of the UN, Russia, several EU member states (Spain, Greece, Romania...), and the EU itself, Sarkozy went so far as to recognize Kosovo's independence, following in the footsteps of the United States and the United Kingdom, on February 18, 2008[25]. This decision was Sarkozy's way of clearly reintegrating France into the Western family, in a typically neo-conservative perspective[26], with the idea of making the US forgive its refusal to take part in the second Iraq war under Chirac[27]. It continued over time, notably when Sarkozy's visited Kosovo the following year, during which he assured Hashim Thaçi, former UÇK leader and new Prime minister, of his utmost support[28].

[21] MAXIMIN, Louis. Politique étrangère : des « ruptures » de Nicolas Sarkozy aux alternatives pour la gauche. Dans : Fondation Jean-Jaurès [en ligne]. [s. d.].

[22] ANDRÉANI, Gilles. La politique étrangère de Nicolas Sarkozy [en ligne]. AFRI - Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales, Janvier 2010. [Consulté le 22 décembre 2023]. Disponible à l'adresse : <https://www.afri-ct.org/article/la-politique-etrangere-de-nicolas/>.

[23] Idem

[24] PAQUEZ, Anne-Sophie. La Politique de la France au Kosovo, était-elle « gaulliste »? Genève : Institut européen de l' Université de Genève, 2003. ISBN 978-2-940174-19-5. DC417 .P36 2003.

[25] SAMARY, Catherine. L'indépendance du Kosovo divise les diplomates. Dans : Le Monde diplomatique [en ligne]. 2009.

[26] VAÏSSE, Justin. Le passé d'un oxymore. Le débat français de politique étrangère | Revue Esprit. Esprit Presse [en ligne]. Novembre 2017.

[27] DEMESMAY, Claire. L'Allemagne face à l'Europe de Nicolas Sarkozy. Politique étrangère [en ligne]. Paris : Institut français des relations internationales, 2008, Vol. Été, no 2, p. 373-384.

[28] KOSOVO PRIME MINISTER OFFICE. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, received strong guarantees of continuing support for Kosovo from the President of the Republic of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. Dans : Zyra e Kryeministrit [en ligne]. 8 juin 2009.

2) A submission to Washington to be nuanced

The break with gaullo-mitterandism, already begun under Chirac, was thus clearly accomplished under Sarkozy, as demonstrated by his policy in Kosovo. He preferred an ideological Western-bloc policy to the more cautious, pragmatic one that characterized his predecessors. However, it is important to temper this view with some nuance, as there was in fact a number of elements of continuity. The desire to be forgiven by the US for the 2003 refusal already existed under Chirac[29]. Full reintegration into NATO was above all symbolic, as a country can be a full member while at the same time distancing itself from Washington (Hungary, Turkey), or vice versa (France in 1999)[30].

Moreover, Sarkozy chose the very atlantist Bernard Kouchner as Foreign affairs minister only after Hubert Védrine rejected his offer, showing that he still wanted to show ties with the former doctrine[31].

Even though he had very pro-American rhetoric, Sarkozy actually opposed Washington on a number of points, notably Turkey's application to the EU, and Ukraine and Georgia's application to NATO[32]. His relationship with Barack Obama was also rather poor. And therein lied the paradox: Sarkozy was developing a very Westernist policy at a time when the United States wanted to move away from it in favor of multilateralism.

Despite his unwavering support for Kosovo, Sarkozy has also shown many signs of appeasement towards Serbia. He received President Boris Tadic in 2011, signing a strategic partnership with him, and ardently supported Serbia's bid to join the European Union, describing himself as "their best advocate"[33].

Sarkozy also continued to maintain important ties with the non-Western world, notably via his (subsequently aborted) project for a Mediterranean Union with the countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East, a prospect widely rejected by his allies[34].

[29] VÉDRINE, Hubert, BONIFACE, Pascal et LEQUESNE, Christian. La politique étrangère de la France en débat. Esprit. Mars 2018, p. 103-106.

[30] ANDRÉANI, Gilles. La politique étrangère de Nicolas Sarkozy [en ligne]. AFRI - Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales, Janvier 2010. [Consulté le 22 décembre 2023]. Disponible à l'adresse : <https://www.afri-ct.org/article/la-politique-etrangere-de-nicolas/>.

[31] Hubert Védrine, la passion de la diplomatie. Dans : À voix nue. France Culture, avril 2020.

[32] DEMESMAY, Claire. L'Allemagne face à l'Europe de Nicolas Sarkozy. Politique étrangère [en ligne]. Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 2008, Vol. Eté, no 2, p. 373-384.

[33] Sarkozy promet aux Serbes d'être leur « meilleur avocat » pour entrer dans l'UE. Le Point [en ligne]. 8 avril 2011.

[34] DEMESMAY, Claire. L'Allemagne face à l'Europe de Nicolas Sarkozy. Politique étrangère [en ligne]. Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 2008, Vol. Eté, no 2, p. 373-384.

IV) Emmanuel Macron (2017-2027) and the handling of 2020s tensions

1) The “at the same time” diplomacy

We will pass on François Hollande's term of office (2012-2017), during which relations between Kosovo and Serbia changed little, to his successor, Emmanuel Macron. Minister of the Economy in Hollande's center-left government, Macron presents himself as "neither right nor left". His repeated use of the expression "at the same time" characterizes his resolutely centrist policy, although his second term is marked by a shift to the right. In terms of international policy, this observation also applies[35]. Macron claims a gaullo-mitterandian heritage, rejecting in his first years in office the "diplomacy of values" characteristic of neo-conservatism. He has repeatedly asserted his willingness to talk to all players on the international stage, including India, China and Russia[36]. He has been critical of NATO (using the term "brain-dead" to describe his condition) and, like Chirac, defends a European defense. However, this position is mainly rhetorical. Despite some criticisms, notably regarding the situation in Lebanon, Macron shows great support towards Israel and stopped his criticism of NATO after the war in Ukraine, returning to the rhetoric of the "Western family". This situation can be explained by the fiasco of Sarkozy's neo-conservative policy, particularly in Libya, which has made him very unpopular. gaullo-mitterandism is therefore making a logical comeback in the rhetoric, but France no longer has the means and the power to really implement it. Russia[37], Africa[38] and Arab countries[39] no longer trust the country, seen as too close to the US and Israël, and pursuing a neocolonialist policy.

In terms of his methods, he is also very similar to Sarkozy. His foreign ministers are low-profile, and diplomats are more than ever sidelined[40]. He dominates the country's foreign policy single-handedly, preferring face-to-face, "man-to-man" confrontations that showcase his leadership[41].

[35] Une du jour. Macron, ou la diplomatie du “en même temps”. Dans: Courrier international [en ligne]. 2 décembre 2022.

[36] DUCLOS, Michel. Le premier quinquennat d’Emmanuel Macron en politique étrangère. Dans: Annuaire français de relations internationales [en ligne]. [S. l.]: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 27 juin 2023, p. 555-567.

[37] ENDEWELD, Marc. Les paris diplomatiques perdus du président Macron. Dans: Le Monde diplomatique [en ligne]. 1 avril 2022.

[38] En Afrique de l’Ouest, la France désavouée par les opinions publiques. Le Monde.fr [en ligne]. 2 novembre 2023.

[39] BAUCHARD, Denis. La France et le Moyen-Orient en 2020: une année difficile. L’ENA hors les murs [en ligne]. Association des Anciens Élèves de l’École Nationale d’Administration, 2021, Vol. 502, no 1, p. 37-40..

[40] Idem

[41] DUCLOS, Michel. Le premier quinquennat d’Emmanuel Macron en politique étrangère. Dans: Annuaire français de relations internationales [en ligne]. [S. l.]: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 27 juin 2023, p. 555-567.

2) Kosovo as a continuity of this policy

Macron has made the Balkans countries a priority. Under his mandate, Serbian-Kosovar relations entered a new period of crisis after several years of status quo. Indeed, in November 2022, Kosovo forbids Serbian immatriculation plates, which lead to a massive resignation in Serbian majority municipalities. This was followed by the meeting of the two presidents in the frame of the Ohrid agreement on the model of the 1972 FRD-GDR normalization treaty. They did not sign it but accepted its conditions. In April 2023, new elections were organized in the Serbian-majority cities but were massively boycotted and ethnic Albanians were elected with ridiculous turnout. At the same moment, fights happened in Mitrovica and KFOR soldiers got injured. The peak of the tension happened in September, when a Serbian commando, possibly backed by Belgrade, killed a policeman in Kosovo and retreated in a monastery[42].

Although he did not go back on Kosovo's independence, Macron is not sparing in his criticism of its president, Albin Kurti[43], who, in his view, does not allow the country's Serbian minority enough autonomy. EU, and France with it, went as far as subjecting Kosovo to economic sanctions because of this crisis[44]. The Serbian president is not exempt from criticism either, with Macron reproaching him for his suspicious reaction to the September attack and his refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence at least unofficially. Macron has threatened to cut off visa access to both countries[45].

Despite its balanced appearance (which was once again demonstrated by the invitation of the presidents of the two countries to the inauguration of Notre-Dame de Paris on December 7, 2024), this position is comparatively to the advantage of Serbia. Macron has given President Vučić reassurances, offering him the first French visit in eighteen years in 2019[46], and came back in August 2024, while he never visited Kosovo. This enabled Belgrade to order Dassault fighter jets[47]. The aim for France is clear: to turn Serbia away from Russia. Jean-Noël Barrot, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, openly assumed this objective.

[44] TAYLOR, Alice. First effects of EU sanctions sting Kosovo. Euractiv [en ligne]. 5 juillet 2023.

[45] DÉPÊCHE AFP. Tensions Serbie-Kosovo : Emmanuel Macron en appelle à la «responsabilité», menace sur les visas. Dans : Le Figaro [en ligne]. 17 octobre 2023.

[46] LAJON, Karen. En Serbie, Macron veut rassurer le président Aleksandar Vucic. lejdd.fr [en ligne]. 14 juillet 2019.

[47] MOYSAN, Eva. En Serbie, la négociation de Rafale français désarme les pro-européens. Libération [en ligne]. 12 octobre 2022

. According to him, if France does nothing to bring Serbia closer, “this enclave in the middle of the European Union will become an entry point for instability on our continent and for all authoritarian regimes from Russia to China”[48]. If Moscow has a serious advantage in seducing Belgrade with its refusal to recognize Kosovo, Paris (and the EU with it) is seeking to compete by offering Serbia the prospect of EU membership (which can only be achieved on condition of a definitive appeasement with Pristina) as a “carrot”, and the end of subsidies and visas as a “stick”[49].

However, Macron's policy of influence in the region is twofold: on the one hand, it works alongside the EU to counter Russia; on the other, within the EU, it seeks to impose France's views on foreign policy, as France wishes to impose its own pace on the Balkan countries' accession process and prevent other powers, notably Germany, from reaping the benefits alone. This is why he usually plays his own game, putting forward his personal relationship with Aleksandar Vučić. His encounters with the authoritarian president of Serbia did not please everybody in the Union[50], whereas the fact that both the high representative of the EU and the special representative for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue are from countries not recognizing Kosovo also worries France[51].

Conclusion

As we have seen, the foreign policy orientations of each of the three presidents were rather different as the conflict evolved. Jacques Chirac, who traditionally followed the policy of autonomy from the United States promoted by his predecessors, chose to support NATO's unilateral intervention in Kosovo, although he tried to limit certain aspects of it. He is far less pro-Serbian than his predecessor Mitterrand, who in his younger years experienced the high degree of closeness that bound Paris and Belgrade together. Chirac's choice appears above all pragmatic, as he probably did not want to isolate the country in Europe at a time when Germany was making a strong comeback and the United States was experiencing the zenith of its power, a veritable global hegemony against which it was hard to fight. Nevertheless, it seems that this intervention without any UN mandate and in defiance of other regional partners, notably Russia, was the last bitter pill Chirac would swallow to satisfy the United States, since he later refused to follow them in Iraq.

[48] Emmanuel Macron à Belgrade, la Serbie achète douze avions de combat Rafale. www.euractiv.fr [en ligne]. 30 août 2024.

[49] OTAŠEVIĆ, Ana et DESCAMPS, Philippe. Une «normalisation» aux forceps. *Le Monde diplomatique* [en ligne]. 1 avril 2023.

[50] MOYSAN, Eva. En Serbie, la négociation de Rafale français désarme les pro-européens. *Libération* [en ligne]. 12 octobre 2022.

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His successor, Sarkozy, took an even less balanced stance, choosing to place France squarely within the Western family, tying its destiny more than ever to that of Washington by adopting a clearly neoconservative rhetoric. This change of footing included the official recognition of Kosovo's independence, a measure firmly opposed by Chirac because it called into question the territorial integrity of a sovereign state.

Finally, Emmanuel Macron's term in office seems to mark a rhetorical return to gaullo-mitterandism, although in practice it is more a continuation of Sarkozy's policies. The situation in Kosovo is now very different. The US has lost its pre-eminence on the matter, leaving the EU to manage the problem. France is very active on the issue and is seeking to impose normalization on Pristina and Belgrade, not hesitating to criticize the former as much as the latter, and even seeming to favorize Belgrade, which is a first since Kosovo exists as a country.

The stakes are twofold for Macron: to ensure that the EU competes with Russia in the Balkans, and that France competes with its rivals in the EU by forging privileged links with both countries.

Despite these differences, elements of continuity are perceptible. Serbia has always been seen as an element of regional stability, whose power must be maintained and which must be spared. Kosovo's national ambitions have also always been supported, albeit to differing degrees. The alliance with the United States is also an enduring relatively stable variable.

Finally, France's involvement in the region has always been aimed at containing a rival country, but not in the same way. In 1999, Chirac became involved also to avoid German hegemony in the Balkans, a fear rekindled by Berlin's strong support for Croatia during the first Yugoslav war. His motivation was a national one, to ensure the triumph of France's interests in a typically gaullo-mitterandian perspective. Under Sarkozy, recognition of Kosovo was more about strengthening the presence of the Western world (and not just France) in Eastern Europe, in particular to counter Russia. In Macron's case, the idea is still to oppose Moscow's influence, but this time the reference group is above all the European Union. France, the West and Europe are therefore three different points of reference to which the three presidents have successively given priority, explaining their different political choices in the Western Balkans.

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