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Sarkozy calls for new alliance to steer Europe

James Sturcke and agencies
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The French interior minister said today the Franco-German alliance was outdated and the EU needed a new "engine", composed of up to six of its biggest economies, to lead the union.

Nicolas Sarkozy, France's most popular politician and a frontrunner to succeed Jacques Chirac as president, said France and Germany could not lead a 25-member EU. Instead, the EU's biggest countries, known as the Group of Five and made up of France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain, could be a model for a future "engine" of integration, he said.

"In a Europe of six members, the engine was obviously Franco-German," Mr Sarkozy told Europe 1 radio. "A Europe of 25 needs an engine of five at first and probably six, with Poland."

Mr Sarkozy has begun openly campaigning for the 2007 French presidential race, in which two potential rivals - Mr Chirac and the prime minister, Dominique de Villepin - are closely identified with the Franco-German model.

The interior minister has made his differences with Mr Chirac over Europe increasingly clear since French voters rejected the EU constitution on May 29, saying the bloc should suspend further enlargement and repeating his opposition to Turkey's entry bid.

Mr Sarkozy, 50, who is also leader of his party, the conservative Union for a Popular Majority, was speaking as the biggest countries in the EU are involved in an explosive row over the future direction of the union. Last month the British prime minister, Tony Blair, told MEPs it was time for a "reality check" over the future of Europe. Mr Blair had harsh words for those countries - implicitly including France - calling for a "social model", which had left 20 million unemployed in Europe.

Mr Sarkozy's beliefs tend toward the "Anglo-Saxon" vision of open markets and competition bringing dynamism to economies. A former finance minister, Mr Sarkozy was appointed to the number two position in government after the French voted against the EU constitution.

Mr Sarkozy has enjoyed near pop-star status in his month in the job. Last Thursday, six national publications ran his photo on their covers. He has been likened to the former mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani, whose "zero tolerance" stance on crime became one of Mr Sarkozy's buzzwords during his first stint as interior minister.

The Franco-German alliance has been a cornerstone of both countries' European policy since 1963. They consult each other constantly and their decisions often set the tone for EU action.

Angela Merkel, the Christian Democrat leader expected to challenge Chancellor Gerhard Schroder in a German general election in September, has also expressed reservations about depending so heavily on a bilateral alliance.



Franco-German axis obsolete, says Sarkozy

Minister hits at basis of Chirac's foreign policy

Ewen MacAskill and Kim Willsher in Paris
Wednesday July 6, 2005

Guardian

The French interior minister, Nicholas Sarkozy, sounded the death knell for the 50-year-old Franco-German alliance yesterday and suggested instead a core group of six European states.

Mr Sarkozy, who is a potential candidate for the French presidency in 2007 and who has fraught relations with the president, Jacques Chirac, said the Franco-German alliance was no longer practical in an EU of 25 states.

"In a Europe of six members, the engine was obviously Franco-German," Mr Sarkozy told Europe 1 radio. "A Europe of 25 needs an engine of five at first and probably six, with Poland."

The others would be Britain, Spain and Italy.

Mr Sarkozy said the large countries in Europe had a responsibility to lead. "Countries of 40, 60 or 80 million inhabitants count for more in Europe than countries with a few 100,000 inhabitants."

He was speaking at a meeting of interior ministers in Evian. He made his comments as Mr Chirac was attending the Olympics meeting in Singapore. The president remains wedded to the Franco-German alliance, but Mr Sarkozy's model for Europe is closer to what the British government would like.

A British government source described Mr Sarkozy's comments as "interesting from a senior French politician." The source was reluctant to go further for fear of inflaming Mr Chirac on the eve of his arrival in Britain for the G8 summit, but noted that Mr Sarkozy was only voicing what was already fast becoming reality: extensive contact and discussion between the biggest EU states.

A French government source sought to play down the significance of the interior minister's remarks. He said: "He is saying the Franco-German alliance is essential but not exclusive." The source insisted that Mr Sarkozy was not the first French politician to voice such a view.

In the interview, Mr Sarkozy said that he valued France's alliance, but it was not enough to lead the enlarged EU.

He was chairing a meeting of the Group of Five EU interior ministers, comprising Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. He suggested that such a group, with the addition of Poland, could become the "engine" of integration.

In France, foreign policy is the president's domain. Mr Chirac, fuelled by his personal friendship with the German chancellor, Gerhard Schroder - who has even stood in for the French president at international meetings - has made the Franco-German alliance the foundation of this policy.

Relations between Tony Blair and both Mr Chirac and Mr Schroder have been soured since France's rejection of the EU constitution and the EU's subsequent failure to agree a budget.

While political niceties prevent the British government from openly interfering in another country's elections, it would welcome the replacement of Mr Schroder in German elections later this year and Mr Chirac in France in 2007 by politicians closer to the British view of Europe.

Angela Merkel, the German Christian Democrat leader who could replace Mr Schroder in September and is being courted by Mr Blair, has also expressed reservations about depending so heavily on a bilateral alliance.

It is not the first time, nor the first subject, on which Mr Sarkozy has publicly broken ranks with France's leader.

In June, Mr Sarkozy, who opposes Turkey joining the EU, announced that future enlargement had to be suspended, and that European politics had to be "rethought and recast".

At the same time he questioned the Franco-German axis, saying it was not strong enough to pull Europe.

His view is that France should be strengthening its ties with other European countries, including Britain, Poland and Italy, and even repairing cross-Atlantic links with the US that were damaged by the Iraq war.

This approach is diametrically opposed to that of Mr Chirac, who, even before the great falling out with Washington on Iraq, preferred to cosy up to Germany and remain aloof from the US.

Enduring friendship built on ruins of war

The Franco-German alliance grew out of a determination after the second world war to try to achieve reconciliation and prevent future conflicts.

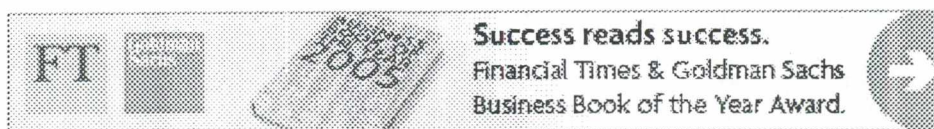
The close cooperation led to the creation in 1952 of the European Coal and Steel Commission, the forerunner of the European Union.

In 1963 the two countries formalised their links in an Elysee treaty. Their frequent bilateral meetings meant that EU summits were often stitched up in advance. Such was the closeness that French leaders at times asked their German counterparts to stand in for them at international talks.

Despite occasional differences, the Franco-German alliance has remained the dominant force on the continent, pushing for a federal Europe.

In the late 1990s, the former French socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, spoke about expanding the alliance to include Britain, but policy differences and personal rivalry with Tony Blair meant this never went very far.

Mr Chirac's approach led to rumours that Paris and Berlin planned to form a political union leading to a two-track Europe within the EU, leaving behind recalcitrant states such as Britain. That approach has been left in ruins by enlargement.



Sarkozy calls on big five to drive EU 'engine'

>By John Thornhill in Paris and Sarah Laitner in Brussels

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Nicolas Sarkozy, France's interior minister and presidential contender, yesterday questioned one of the central pillars of his country's foreign policy, suggesting that the Franco-German "engine" was now insufficient to drive the enlarged European Union of 25 countries.

Instead, Mr Sarkozy said that an inner core of five big EU countries comprising France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain should jointly drive the integration process.

"In a Europe of six members, the engine was obviously Franco-German. A Europe of 25 needs an engine of five at first and probabl'... six, with Poland," he said in a radio interview.

Mr Sarkozy's comments on a subject well outside his portfolio highlight how far the ambitious politician is laying out his vision for a post-Chirac France after presidential elections in 2007. Foreign policy has traditionally been the exclusive responsibility of the president. Jacques Chirac has jealously guarded this domain during his 10 years as president and has kept the Franco-German alliance at the heart of foreign policy. Mr Sarkozy, whom Mr Chirac forced out of government last year when he took the helm of the centre-right UMP party, has become increasingly outspoken on a range of policies since rejoining government last month.

He has already declared that he would "cleanse" crime-ridden suburbs and ensure that judges paid for their mistakes, provoking howls of protests from the Parisian political class.

Hosting a meeting of interior ministers from the

five biggest EU countries yesterday in Evian, Mr Sarkozy announced a joint agreement to crackdown on illegal immigration and people smuggling.

"Our idea is simple: we think that foreigners with no right or entitlement to be in our countries should not stay. They are in breach of our laws," he said.

"The solution is to send them home. So we have decided to combine our political and financial efforts and organise return flights for those foreigners whose residence papers are not in order."

The five countries agreed to work more closely on returning illegal immigrants to their home countries, as part of a drive to get tough on undocumented workers.

Interior ministers also agreed to share more information on lost and forged documents in their efforts to share crime-fighting information within the EU.

Mr Sarkozy called on the five countries to agree on common goals for controlled migration, one of

the

most controversial questions facing policy-makers. But member states jealously guard their right to determine policies on admitting economic migrants and setting immigration quotas.

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