Undersanding French policy toward Chad and Sudan? A difficult task

By Roland Marchal

Over the last year, French official statements addressing the situation in Chad and Sudan have shown discrepancies, to say the least. For instance, after the 14 July announcement that Omar el-Bashir could be indicted by the ICC, the French ambassador at the United Nations claimed that, if the case, French officials and those of all the Rome Treaty's signatories would not meet him. Yet, on 1 May 2009, Bruno Joubert, the Presidential Adviser on Africa met the Sudanese President in Khartoum, the last of a series of meetings since July 2008. While Bernard Kouchner, the minister of Foreign Affairs, has been campaigning for drastic pressure on Sudan based on simplistic arguments, the Elysée Palace has shown a degree of nuance closer to the British assessment of the situation. Yet, concerning Chad, as witnessed in Doha late May, the French Presidential Palace has been adamantly supporting the Chadian President, Idriss Déby, and trying to disconnect the Darfur crisis from the Chadian one, while the ministry of Foreign affairs seems less enthusiastic now that the EUFOR presence is over. One can give many other examples of those differences which have had little or serious implications on key regional actors' perceptions of the French stance.

As expressed many times in the pro-NCP newspapers, Bernard Kouchner is a friend of the SLM chairman, Abdel Wahid al Nur, and did contribute to provide him the means to keep campaigning while a political refugee in France. Khalil Ibrahim, JEM's leader got also political asylum in France and at a later stage his troops appeared to have been

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protected while being in Chad by the French army, willingly or not. France could provide explanations on those facts yet these latter give ground to a number of conspiracy theories.

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The present article proposes a rough analysis of this situation and intends to show that these differences rely first on a dysfunctional institutional setting due to Nicolas Sarkozy's poor management of the French foreign policy and secondly on different assumptions of what France's interests are in the region. To a large extent, Bernard Kouchner's self promotion –one of his very few long term political commitments – could coexist with infringements made by the presidential advisers on key political issues (beyond Chad, one can quote Lebanon, Ivory Coast, DRC among many others). The rationale is more rooted in French internal politics than any strong differences in a vision of France's role in the world and Africa.

The French state is not as transparent as the US Administration: there is no counter power, the Parliament and the Senate hardly play their role and the political opposition has little taste to argue about foreign policy, not to mention African policy. The French newspapers, without much surprise, have reduced their scrutiny on those subjects. Therefore, on many aspects this analysis may appear speculative and hard evidence tenuous. Let us assume that other researchers will dig further on this story, correct the mistakes and expand the analysis. This is written to the best of the author's knowledge and honesty.

FROM WARM FRIENDSHIP TO COLD FRIENDSHIP

At the time of Nicolas Sarkozy's election in May 2007, the French stance towards Sudan and Chad had already significantly evolved. Although the relations between Khartoum and Paris were mostly warm in the 1990s, the Naivasha process and the expectation of a deal between the SPLM and the NCP meant that France was losing ground. On one side, in Khartoum an open normalization with Washington reduced the

value added of the relations with Paris. The SPLM, which had been usually treated with contempt by French officials in the 1990s, was initially not interested to move forward and forget the many humiliations its leaders faced while attempting to engage French authorities. A very concrete illustration was the fact that France was not part of the group of governments supporting the Naivasha mediation for more than a year. Paris got a back seat only once Chad became a questionable mediator in the Darfur conflict late 2003.

The fact that France had little leverage at first was shown by the background of the French Special Envoy for Sudan, Henri Benoît de Coignac: a retired ambassador who had no expertise on the region and was appointed to clear a previous debatable order of Jacques Chirac against him. As responsible for the Elysean protocol in 1986 under François Mitterrand (a left wing President), he had a number of formal decisions that diminished the status of Prime Minister, Jacques Chirac (a right wing politician). When this latter was elected President in 1995, he settled his score with him and recalled him from his prestigious position in Morocco and replaced him by Ambassador Michel de Bonnecorse, who after 2002 became the head of the Africa Cell at the Presidential Palace. As a way to ease the bitterness of his colleague, who happened to be also the brother in law of private office's director of Dominique de Villlepin, then minister of Foreign Affairs, he gave him this position and the material advantages attached to it... Nevertheless, a more substantial change was expressed by the appointment of a new French Ambassador in Khartoum in summer 2004. In contrast to her predecessors,

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Christine Robichon maintained a better balance between the regime and its opposition and took more seriously the situation in Darfur for what it was; she also campaigned for warmer relationship with SPLM and a decent solution for the conflict between the French oil firm, Total, and While Nile Co. This slow repositioning was genuine but very quickly brought its own problems. First, the SPLM or certain of its leaders had such a predatory ethos that they mishandled this change that eventually could have been very much in the favour of South Sudan: political unrealism and grabbing easy money were too prominent. Second, a number of NCP officials understood that Khartoum should not dismiss old friends while clouds were gathering on their regime. Third, the issue of Darfur became an international issue late spring 2004 and acquired its own dynamic. French politicians at first were not moved but they had to deal with the European and international debate and therefore increasingly endorsed European views. At stake also was the need to get closer to the USA. Too many analyses downplay the cost to France of its opposition to the Iraq war. At the time the Darfur crisis was acknowledged and unfolding at the international level, Paris also wanted to avoid a new difference with Washington and made steps to close the gap. A final point was already the role Chad (in its official and unofficial ways) played in the Darfur crisis (see below).

Although colder, the relationships between Paris and Khartoum did not deteriorate drastically at first. France could justify its stance by its alignment with the international community (i.e. the West) and anyway was not the most inflexible when Darfur was discussed in New York. Even, when clearly Khartoum allowed and even provided the means for some sections of the Chadian armed opposition to gather in summer 2005, the situation was kept under control. This opposition was so fragmented and factional that Idriss Déby at first seemed not vulnerable.

The mood changed after April 2006 and the FUC attack on N'Djamena. Without entering into details, this offensive took the French army by surprise and showed that the king was naked. Despite French support for Déby, rebel columns could reach the capital city of an ally in a very few days. While in Paris, the first move was very much to react against what was seen as an extremely unfriendly act, France eventually decided to push in a strong manner the concept of a military deployment on the border to isolate Chad from the Darfur turmoil. At the same time, France with the Europeans backed the re-hatting of the AMIS with a stronger mandate. It took a year for this to

be accepted by Sudan thanks to Chinese influence.
It is still difficult to understand the support Idriss Déby has enjoyed in Paris. As explained elsewhere, he actually supported French policies in the region (in DRC, CAR, Congo-Brazzaville among others) but many rumours at the then ministry of Cooperation put his honesty in doubt in many regards beyond the liberal use of his own State's money: he may have speculated against his own country when the French F CFA was devaluated in January 1994 and could have been involved in the counterfeit Bahraini dinars saga with some of his colleagues in West Africa, funded a certain French political party and his leader at different occasions. World Bank Governance Indexes put Chad in the last of African countries and oil exploitation that started in 2003, has not improved this poor record.
A turning point in the French attitude towards his regime seems to be July 2003. While attending the AU annual summit in Maputo, Idriss Déby collapsed and went into a coma. Only a very fast reaction of France saved him: when convalescent in Paris, he seemed to have offer a number of rewards and commitments that very much convinced Paris that he was the only State's man in Chad. A new ambassador, Jean-Pierre Berçot, was appointed later in the year: he was a character by himself but, more

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than anything else, a former member of the Service Action of the DGSE (equivalent of MI-6) and accompanied Idriss Déby from Darfur to N'djamena throughout the last months of 1990. Therefore, he was very close to Déby to the extent that in 2006 some French officials in Paris complained that he had not anymore any personal views but was only repeating what the Chadian President was telling him. This pathetic situation, not so exceptional among diplomats, reproduced itself with his successor, Bruno Foucher, who was appointed in autumn 2006 and was known to be very close to Bruno Joubert, the director of African Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay: a new victim of the Stockholm syndrome that makes some of his colleagues ironically call him the Chad's Ambassador in N'djamena.
In 2005, an unexplained incident happened and the French military attaché had his stay in Chad cut short after one year or so though he should have stayed three years. There are allegations that French and US Special Forces had a common operation related either to Darfur or/and counterterrorism that was carried out without Idriss Déby's knowledge; the Defence attaché was replaced by a new officer, Jean-Marc Marill, who was a brilliant planner, had been involved in the repression of the CAR turmoil in 1996/1997 and quickly insulated himself into Déby's inner circle. As many officials confirmed to the author, he was the real Chadian Army's Chief of Staff in April 2006 and February 2008 through the Cellule de Commandement Opérationnel, an institution based at the Chadian Presidency largely managed by French officers and experts that is not allowed by the military cooperation treaty between France and Chad. Some of his colleagues in 2008 mentioned that he was so well protected by the French and Chadian Presidential entourages that he dared not to follow orders from his Chief of Staff or his regional delegate (Chad is under Dakar in terms of the French military apparatus). At the European summit in Lisbon in December 2007, Idriss Déby convinced Nicolas Sarkozy to keep him an additional year in Chad and without the explicit French Army's Chief of Staff dissent he would even have stayed longer.
It is impossible to actually know the DGSE's stand. Most references in interviews quote the French Secret Services as very supportive of the Chadian President. Certainly, it was very friendly in the early 1990s as the former DGSE representative in Sudan, Paul Fontbonne, who had channelled French support to him while he was in Darfur was his special adviser for years. Nevertheless, the DGSE got some of its representatives expelled in the late 1990s. After this crisis, little is known about the motivation of the French secret services and its actual stances.
Yet, these personalities do not explain why the French were so attached to Idriss Déby at the risk of jeopardizing substantial interests in Sudan (they have no economic

interests in Chad). There is no need here to repeat already known arguments about the values French military may find in Chad, or the political complicity Paris and N'djamena may have enjoyed on dubious operations. One may add two that have become increasingly prominent in the French discourse on the region and may catch some elements of truth.

Over the last 30 years, only France and Libya have had a say in Chadian politics. The USA and Sudan were more than often deeply involved but accepted (or were constrained to do so) to allow the two former to make decisions. To a certain extent, Sudan (and Darfur) was the place where major shifts occurred but the Sudanese regime as such was never powerful enough to have a strategic influence on the outcome. When Hissène Habré decided to play the US card in a more unilateral manner after 1988, he had to deal with a growing French discontent (not only linked to this specific aspect) and eventually had to escape his own country in Décember 1990.

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Certainly, the current ambition by Khartoum to remove an unfriendly regime in N'djamena is seen in Paris (and Tripoli) as an unacceptable innovation.

There is also another face that would deserve greater attention. To a large extent after Tripoli surrendered the two Lockerbie suspects for trial in the Netherlands in April 1999, or after September 2003 when the UN Security Council voted to lift the sanctions against Libya, it became clear in Europe that Libya would not be anymore considered as a "rogue State" and that it could become a strategic Mediterranean partner, in terms of trade, control of the immigration and the like. France was late in normalizing its relations due to the UTA bombing. Certainly, the acknowledgement of Libyan influence in Chad became a way to soften Mu'ammar Gaddafi. It explained as well why France that was very well aware of the military supplies reaching a number of insurgent groups including JEM never expressed any concern: there was too much to lose at the time the European and Atlantic competition was raging. The release of the Bulgarian nurses "by" Nicolas Sarkozy in summer 2007 (despite the fact that most of the work had been done by European officials) is therefore the tip of the iceberg and had to be understood in that context.

ELECTIONS TIME: A NEW DREAM TEAM?

The French presidential elections took place early 2007. Nicolas Sarkozy had no history of contacts and friendships with African leaders; he had also shown little interest toward the continent. Yet, he had been in charge of a region on the outskirts of Paris, the département des Hauts de Seine that had had a long history with Africa, notably through a former minister and Gaullist figure, Charles Pasqua. A closer look at this genealogy would have generated more caution in the description of Sarkozy's lack of interest to Africa and would have foreseen the role Claude Guéant, the Eléysée General Secretary (today de facto but not de jure Prime Minister), is currently playing in framing policies towards Africa. 2007 was also the moment Urgence Darfour, a French offspring of Save Darfur Coalition, emerged in the media. Due to its good connections to some people loved by the French media such as Bernard Kouchner, Bernard Henry Levy and some NGOs – some confessional others not – Urgence Darfour obtained a commitment from Nicolas Sarkozy as well as from the socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal. The picture of Darfur by the French Urgence Darfour was certainly more approximate than the Save Darfur Coalition's one but emotion was the key factor, once more. Bernard Kouchner was very much at the junction between the political class and this sudden (and superficial) interest for Darfur: he was an adviser of Ségolène Royal and a skilled propagandist of some very carefully selected crises.

Once Sarkozy got elected, he wanted to show some fidelity to the commitments made throughout his electoral campaign. Darfur was one of these, especially because there was very little controversy attached to doing everything to reduce the suffering of the Darfur population and the political gains for him both nationally and internationally were indeed positive.

The appointment of Bernard Kouchner as a minister of Foreign Affairs was marginally dictated by this single issue. The latter was of an older generation, had a political life which reflected well his love for being in the media as a long time activist for humanitarian intervention, (as far as they can be popular with the French public) and the famous "droit d'ingérence". Although popular in the French audience, he was regarded by pundits and politicians with scepticism and sarcasm: he liked himself as much as the causes he defended and was as opportunistic as the rules of the French political arena authorized him to be. His obsession to be seen with those who "count

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for the world order" had no equivalent among the French political class. He was ready to become a minister at any cost and Sarkozy needed to weaken as much as possible its left wing opposition by co-opting people who had paid allegiance to it at one point, a policy he coined as "ouverture".

By appointing him as a minister of Foreign Affairs, the newly elected President could push in front of the media someone who against his past views would support a rightwing politician and show that a former adviser to the Socialist candidate could endorse his policies. To put it in a nutshell, he wanted to demonstrate that all French whatever their political opinions should identify themselves with their new President. Moreover, as Kouchner wanted the title more than the ministry, he could also restructure the ministry of Foreign Affairs that lost a number of its departments to other ministries. Bernard Kouchner was careless because he never paid much attention to others and, yet, could use all attributes of power attached to his position. Among those departments, were those that could have restricted Sarkozy's coercive policies against migrants and protect human rights in a better manner in France. But Kouchner knew that it was more popular to promote them elsewhere.

But this was only one piece in the new institutional puzzle. At the Presidential Palace, a diplomatic cell was appointed that shared little with Bernard Kouchner's views. All were diplomats of high professional records; all were rightwing oriented, sometimes much more conservative than the average Sarkozy's supporters. Moreover, at the difference of the previous Presidents, Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to decide everything on anything. The French governance system is not purely presidential and the Elysée is neither staffed nor organized to do so. Yet, orders had to come from the Presidential Palace on any important issue, the importance being determined by its impact on the French public opinion.

This was a drastic difference with the past on two levels. While in the previous administrations the President had only provided the great political vision and framework, suddenly after May 2007 his advisers became involved in fine-tuning policies though they were not supposed to implement them. While in the past the President and his minister of Foreign Affairs had enjoyed a trustful political relation, with Sarkozy and Kouchner they became potential rivals in front of the media (their common obsession) and with evident differences on many issues. As in other ministries, a way to diminish the discrepancies was to get a Minister's private office more obedient to the Elysée Palace: among those appointed at the Elysée's request, one should quote Laurent Contini (whose attitude was questioned in the Zoe's Arc crisis) and Charlotte Montel. Bernard Kouchner, although unwilling to antagonize his President, had still an autonomy, which he did not use to contradict the most debatable aspects of the French policies on some subjects (use of DNA tests against migrants, arrest of migrant kids attending French school, retention centres and the like, support to debatable regimes).

This institutional setting was dysfunctional in the medium run. Diplomats, for instance, were confused. Should they ask for directives the private office of the Minister as usual or get instructions from the Elysée Palace? Nuances existed and sometimes differences. To make the situation even more confusing, there were also discrepancies inside the Elysée 's team between the diplomatic cell and the General Secretary, a long

Kouchner, who had become a good friend of the SLM leader, Abdel Wahid Mohamed al-Nur, wanted to move things on Darfur. The very first day of his installation at the ministry he organized a meeting with Urgence Darfour and other NGOs and as an outcome proposed to organize "humanitarian corridors" to provide food and assistance to the Darfur population. The NGOs working in Darfur, the experts and eventually the UN strongly disagreed: Darfur was not Bosnia. At a meeting he organized with the former in Khartoum, he left the room in anger when the NGOs told him that what they needed first was a political solution in Darfur not those corridors.

Kouchner could have reflected about the discrepancies between what he understood about Darfur and what humanitarian actors on the ground were telling him but this would have been a sign of humility that he was not ready for. He likes to be in the headlines but does not like to be criticized and mocked for his amateurism. He needed to take again the initiative by proposing a new idea. This is how Eufor/Minurcat came out.

The Eufor/Minurcat initiative is at the convergence of three different logics. First, while in June 2007 Khartoum had endorsed the idea of a new international force in Darfur, it had made clear that no Western countries should provide troops. There was no way French politicians could claim any role in that acceptance despite the pathetic summit organized late June in Paris to celebrate an agreement that Beijing succeeded to get, not Paris. So where were the French flag and the twin media-addicted politicians, Nicolas and Bernard? The second trend was the policy pursued by Paris concerning the deployment of UN troops at the border between Chad and Sudan. Paris had convinced the UN DPKO to send a mission in November/December 2006 that had to travel again to Chad in February 2007 because of rebels' activities in Eastern Chad during their first stay. The DPKO was not enthusiastic about the concept: as always, it had to handle too many operations with too few troops and such an operation had a taste of France using the UN to achieve its own political agenda. So, it designed options that were unlikely and Idriss Déby himself felt not comfortable with a UN operation that would require a political mandate and was perceived by his whimsical neighbour, Mu'ammar Qaddafi, as a possible plot against him. Inclusive dialogue with the armed opposition was absolutely not an option. Although the proposal was refused by Chad, France kept pushing for a compromise between the two less numerous deployments discussed by the UN report and twisted arms at the UN to deprive such an operation of any political mandate.

As described above, Bernard Kouchner was reacting against a previous failure within a context that prohibited humanitarian military presence in Darfur. Chad was not the best option but was not meaningless since more than 250,000 Darfuri refugees were settled there and about 150,000 Chadian displaced. There was little understanding of why refugees and displaced were there: everything was linked to the conflict in Darfur in Kouchner's eyes. The project was endorsed by Idriss Déby since he was reassured that there were no political strings attached to the operation. Moreover, as the operation was European, France would have a leading role and the UN would give up any ambition to infringe the Chadian political realm. Idriss Déby was right.

Paris wanted to promote the idea because it merged different goals in one policy. Moreover, it allowed Paris that was going to chair the European Union in Chad for the whole year 2008 to show its leadership at the European level and get the EU also to share the financial burden of such an operation. Among diplomats and military, there were also a group that pushed the project as the best way to close the Epervier

(Sparrowhawk) Operation, save some money and get these French troops out of a country with such a debatable record.
Amazingly, the discussion among EU member States in Brussels was not as frank as this author would have expected. A number of countries, UK, Germany, Poland, had doubt about a possible French hidden agenda that had little to do with the claimed aim of Eufor. As always, there were remonstrations that but the more reluctant States used financial arguments and did not antagonize the project as such despite strong reservations: the figures of 27 countries for less than 3500 soldiers is a good illustration of this mixed support or opposition, France got in that period, taking also into account that Paris provided more than 50% of the troops. Nobody wanted to appear as not doing much to help Darfur; nobody was convinced that carrying out Eufor met this aim. But, no harm was done.
Without discussing here the operational concept, it is interesting to note how the French military tried to keep the full control of the deployment, keeping the foreign Chief of Staff team in Suresnes (at the outskirts of Paris) and disaggregating the operation between N'djamena and Abéché. While in the early weeks of the planning, the focus was on communal conflicts, banditry and land issues, in summer 2007 the French Military Intelligence reframed the concept: the problem was created by the rebels' columns and janjaweed. It took months to Eufor to accept that most of the violence and insecurity in Eastern Chad was coming from Chad, not Darfur and that the Chadian officials and military had their good share of responsibility in the predicament of the population. The French general leading the operation in Abéché, Jean-Philippe Ganascia, intended to behave as an European and was heavily criticized by the French Embassy in N'djamena to the extent that in September 2008 many observers thought that he would be recalled in Paris. An unfortunate pressure on the operation was the wish expressed many times by Bernard Kouchner that Eufor success would be measurable by the number of displaced going back home. This created many tensions between Eufor and the humanitarian NGOs.
To a large extent, Eufor was a public relations success for the French The mission despite its cost (between € 900 million-1 billion) did not face major casualties and offered to the European public the well appreciated pictures of European soldiers bringing peace and aid to destitute people. The situation in Darfur deteriorated throughout the period but journalists wanted to promote the good job done by their national contingents and hardly connected the Eufor fragile achievements with the lack of perspective on Darfur conflict. Despite a number of incidents between the Chadian local administration and Eufor, the French Embassy contained the tensions and the experience was good enough to convince Idriss Déby that he could accept a UN force, when the European mission was over in March 2009. Again France made sure at the UN HQ that Minurcat II would not have any political mandate. No journalists investigated how much the infrastructures built by Eufor and handed over to the Chadian State were rented by the following Minurcat II: European taxpayers would have been happy to know their contribution to Idriss Déby's military apparatus...
SUPPORTING THE ICC OR PLAYING REALISM?
The end of Eufor mission in Chad was a relief for Bernard Kouchner. At that time, he was attacked in a book on his consultancy activities commissioned by African heads of State. He especially needed to distance himself from Idriss Déby, whom he had proposed to write a study on Darfur in December 2006. When pundits and journalists asked questions about the long term impact of Eufor, he stated that he was proud of
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what he did and that those who criticized him would do so forever anyway. As a detailed promotion of Eufor achievements would have raised question on the sustainability of the improvements and the situation in Chad, the best strategy was to move to ethics and discuss the ICC indictment of Omar el-Bashir. Doing so had only

advantages. This kept the attention out of Chad, put moral values at the forefront and could reconcile the superficial vision of the Darfuri predicament with the priorities set up by Bernard Kouchner. Again moral values were mobilised to just prove how great our policy and policy makers are.

The Elysée Palace had quite another set of priorities. As in many countries, the Foreign Service in France is cautious about the ICC because it knows some of its structural flaws and certainly does not like to have a possible autonomous actor inviting itself into an already complex game. But the political understanding was also different. At the Elysée Palace, Abdel Wahid al-Nur sounds like a demagogue who is playing the most extreme cards because he is in the West, not in the IDPs camps sharing the insecurity of his fellow Furs. Khalil Ibrahim, the JEM leader, is not seen more positively: a good political son of Hassan Turabi, whose ambition is to destabilize the whole Sudan, not to reconcile Darfur and Khartoum through a peace agreement. In their views, the NCP is no better but a long time interlocutor that cannot be changed at this stage. Even Idriss Déby, beyond his personal courage, is not seen as a good guy in town, though the best one among the current players. The only policy for the Presidential team seems to act in good coordination with Tripoli to dismantle the Chadian armed opposition (seen as a pure tool of Khartoum), improve somewhat governance in Chad in order to disconnect the Darfur and Chad crises and get an agreement in Darfur that does not jeopardize long term interests in Sudan (also in terms of preferred interlocutors).

Meanwhile Bernard Kouchner is dealing with his many conflicts of interest and deteriorating image among the French public, the Elysée Palace is also facing contradictions. First, Libya is not an easy partner that can share concerns and solutions. Qatar is more popular than Riyadh in Tripoli, yet not so appreciated because it diminishes Libya's role. Idriss Déby has lost prestige in Tripoli after he repeatedly criticized Libya and the AU (currently chaired by Tripoli). Second, Idriss Déby has his own agenda that several times already left some of his French supporters voiceless. Governance has not improved in his country and there is even less hope it will now that he was able to beat the rebels in May 2009 without a strong French support. The implementation of the August 2007 agreement with the civilian opposition – a true mantra of French diplomats - is at best debatable and has not yet produced any confidence in free and fair elections that anyway are recurrently postponed. His relations with the Darfur insurgent groups have become deeper and more problematic than ever as witnessed by the attacks on Kornoi and Umm Baru when JEM was reinforced by Chadian soldiers who also brought military hardware. Third, the international attention Chad got due to Eufor and Minurcat produced unpredictable effects. For instance, on several occasions other European military intelligence services contradicted information provided by Paris to Brussels: suddenly, even the French had to be accountable in Chad! These incidents won't deteriorate into a crisis within the EU for sure but the political cost for Paris is real. Should the stalemate both in Darfur and Chad deserve it?

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artcile is also published at Making Sense of Darfur blog