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## FRANCE'S GEOPOLITICAL AMBITIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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For centuries, France was a global powerhouse, permeating its will over five continents. Since those imperial days, it has lost considerable ground in its former domains. Only in Africa did France retain its hold, owing to the monetary system that was put in place. In the decade after World War II, President François Mitterrand was quoted saying: “Without Africa, France will have no history in the 21st century.” Like a foretelling coming true, it is precisely because of Africa that modern-day France is returning as the global force it once was. And it’s using the soft power attributes of language to cement its hegemony.

Starting in the 1990s, the constructs that melded the francophone nations started to show signs of decay. The African youth grew disenfranchised with France’s ceaseless interventions in their socio-political base. It was clear that the French policies were out of touch with the reality on the ground. Although most of the older generation of Africans still viewed Paris as a guardian of sorts, the younger generation, to whom the torch of leadership passed, held more critical views of France and looked to China and the United States for new opportunities. On the other hand, France is now adjusting the way it maintains power in Africa, not through force or finances but by language [1].

In 2018, Macron revealed his plan to rejuvenate the French connection with its former colonies in Africa by planning to spend hundreds of millions of euros in French based primary and secondary schools. The technicalities and curriculums are yet to be determined, but policymakers in Paris see the French language as their single greatest tool to shape policy.

Here’s how it works. Foremost, French is different from English in statecraft. With more than 1.5 billion primary and secondary speakers, English is the most widely spoken language worldwide. Whether it’s in business, science, or entertainment, English is a dynamic and global force. Yet, no state can claim to be the de facto leader of the Anglophone world and confidently steer the masses in its favour. Thus, due to the decentralized nature of English, no government can effectively use that soft power to craft foreign policy.

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French, meanwhile, is a centralized language. The French Academy in Paris is tasked with publishing and safeguarding the official dictionary of its beloved art. This grants the Paris government a tool to regulate the language more efficiently than seen in other nations. Thus, unlike English, the French government acts as the primary representative of the French language in politics, military, business, media, and so on. Other French-speaking nations like Belgium and Switzerland may be wealthy, but it is France that is the undisputed leader of the French-speaking world [2].

Today, the francophone community includes 274 million primary and secondary speakers spread over 5 continents. Just behind Mandarin, English, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi. A recent study by French investment bank Natixis estimated that some 750 million people will speak French by mid-century. Which is an increase of 143% compared to 62% for English in the same duration. This makes French the world's fastest growing language. That is an unusual fact since the French population isn't exactly booming. But of the 29 countries that recognize French as an official language, 21 are sub-Saharan African states, which also happen to be in midst of a dramatic population boom. This is France's ticket to global power [1].

So, by 2050, as the francophone market share climbs to 8%, up from 3% today, 4 out of 5 French-speakers will be Africans. How is this possible and why are Africans embracing the French language? Well, French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese serve as bridge-languages due to the multitude of languages spoken in Africa. Bambara may be one of the native tongues of Mali but, being entirely surrounded by French-speaking nations, Bambara will not get you far in terms of cross-border business. That's why, in the 21st century, languages that lack economic and scientific value are dying like flies.

With a presence in 131 countries, the French Ministry of National Education has one of the largest school networks worldwide and the French state assigns over 700 million euros annually to promoting French. Macron's plan is to amplify those efforts and to enhance the quality of French schools and double the number of students in such institutions [3].

However, the gamble on the French language as a means of soft power is untested and without precedent. It will certainly grant Paris an extensive sphere of influence, as well as coerce new countries to comply with French interests. We're seeing the results of such in Nigeria, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea. But people are not drones. Language alone cannot sway the public will and steer policy. In addition to the soft power traits of language, France will have to construct a physical presence and develop a hard power policy if it is to exercise its command in Africa. An additional point of inquiry is that the weight of soft power often cuts both ways. As Africans make French an

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international language, the centre of gravity of French could move south. It's unlikely that the French Academy in Paris can maintain control over the trajectory of its treasured language. If left unchecked, new French dialects and Creole languages are likely to emerge and thereby decouple French from its European origin.

So, language is certainly a form of influence. But it's uncertain how this soft power policy will yield intangible leverage. And, if Paris does manage to weaponize its language, that influence goes both ways. African French will affect Parisian French and vice versa. By and large, the number of people in francophone countries will eclipse 1 billion by 2065. If the French can capture that demographic wave and retain the CFA monetary system in the meantime, then the 21st century could very well see the return of France as a global powerhouse.

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