

IS FRANCE STILL A GREAT POWER?



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## *The Martello Papers*

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The Queen's University Centre for International Relations (QCIR) is pleased to present the twenty-second in its series of security studies, the *Martello Papers*. Taking their name from the distinctive towers built during the nineteenth century to defend Kingston, Ontario, these papers cover a wide range of topics and issues relevant to contemporary international strategic relations.

Pascal Boniface poses a question that has been of concern of late for many French policymakers and policy analysts: is their country still among the "great powers"? To hear it said by many (and not just in France), the country is in such a state of "decline" that regarding it as a leading player in international politics comes close to being delusory. Boniface does not share this view, and argues instead that France does continue to be among the key actors globally.

Indeed, he chides those, both in and out of France, who are obsessed with its ostensible "decline," and reminds us that such a notion is predicated upon a belief in a golden age of French "power" founded more upon myth than reality. Not only that, but he argues that power itself has been undergoing a conceptual and operational transformation of late, one that in some ways is beneficial to and in accord with French interests and assets. But French policymakers need to understand fully the altered dimensions of power if they are to conduct a skillful diplomacy. Inter alia, this entails working with and through Europe (not against it), knowing when and how to oppose or otherwise seek to modify American policy (and not just pick fights simply for the sake of a fight), and understanding that the pursuit of traditional policy in Africa through traditional means can be self-defeating. Above all, Boniface argues, French policy must always be guided by a prudential element of realism if it is to be successful.

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## 1. *The Desire for Power and the Anguish of Decline*

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In Paris, the concept of power is usually twinned with that of decline. When leaders and political commentators tackle international questions, their favourite topic always seems to be France's weight in world affairs. To their implied question, in its many forms, there seems to be only one answer: France is declining as a world power; it is losing its rank. Hardly a week goes by without some high-ranking politician or renowned editorialist taking up the refrain, always tinged with nostalgia, of a France in eclipse. How powerful and respected France once was! Like a middle-aged person lamenting the lost radiance of youth, France broods over its bygone glory. How else can we account for the passion displayed by the French for the study of their past, for their pronounced taste for making a cult of commemoration? Are there other countries where the preservation and celebration of the national heritage stimulate so much interest?

Consider, for example, some statements made during the same week a few years ago by a handful of top political figures. On 19 October 1997, Alain Madelin declared himself convinced that "M. Jospin is in the process of dragging France towards decline." Four days later, Raymond Barre was convinced things were deteriorating: "The left commits follies and the right does nothing at all." On 28 October, in *Le Monde*, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing lamented that his countrymen reacted so poorly to being reminded of their demographic weakness, codified in a 1970s' statistic that only one out of every 100 inhabitants of the planet was French: "it is difficult for them to admit that France has become a middle power."

The first statement might lead us to conclude that the rot only set in with the change in government of June 1997. The second statement, however, shows that it was not limited to the foibles of one political party. And the third showed the debate, in fact, to be longstanding. Put them together, and Alain Duhamel is right to number among national phobias the "fear of decline" and "premonitions of insignificance, even of French obliteration" in the 21st century.<sup>1</sup>

When *Commentaire* (with *Le Débat*, the most brilliant and influential of French journals) published, in the spring of 1998, a special number to celebrate its 20th anniversary, it was focussed, naturally enough, on France's standing; equally natural seemed the nearly unanimous tone of its contributors, namely of alarmism. A quick glance at the summary and titles of the articles conveys that tone: Raymond Barre, "A confession of uneasiness"; Nicolas Bavarez, "True happiness is impossible for the citizen of a declining nation"; Alain Besançon, "France saddens me"; Raymond Boudon, "A democracy steeped in Colbertism"; Jean-Louis Bourlanges, "The Kingdom of the exiled prince"; Olivier Debouzy, "Requiem"; Marc Fumaroli, "Restricted thought"; Antoine Jeancourt-Galignani, "The sick man of Europe"; Georges de Ménil, "The ravages of too much state control"; Alain-Gérard Slama, "The crisis of French happiness"; and Paul Thibaud, "A people with broken representation." Thierry de Montbrial, who dared to title his article, "Nonetheless, we do not lack advantages," could almost pass as an agitator!

The following passage from the Bavarez article is revealing: "France,... incapable of regaining mastery over its own destiny and of influencing the organization of the world of the 21st century, reveals itself thus as the sick man of a declining Europe, which, after losing the peace in 1918, after being reduced to the status of object of rivalry between the two superpowers following the second world conflict, is now poised to miss its goal of reunification, the responsibility for which is delegated, *via* NATO, to the United States." Is it now the fashion to be as blue in analysis as it is in song?

France and the French have always fostered a certain self-image, General de Gaulle being only its most obvious incarnation. The introduction to his *Mémoires de guerre* stands out in this regard:

All my life, I have created for myself a certain idea of France... The affective part of my being naturally imagines France ordained for an eminent and exceptional destiny. I have instinctively the impression that Providence created her for signal successes or exemplary misfortunes. The positive side of my nature convinces me, however, that France is not really herself unless she is in the front row, that only immense undertakings can validate the emotional ferments of her people, and that, given its nature, our country should, among the other countries, as they are, aim high and stand proudly — or it should disappear. I believe, in short, that without grandeur, France cannot be France.

François Mitterrand completely bought into this vision of France in the world, notwithstanding his running political opposition to de Gaulle during the latter's years in power. Thus Mitterrand could reveal, on 9 January 1991, his justification for France's entry into the war against Iraq:

France cannot stay away from the place where the defenders of international law stand ... without in some way losing a little of what she has acquired through centuries of courage and of the defence of a few fundamental principles. France went to war in 1792 because she was the bearer of certain principles, which she had just laid down for herself, and which deserved to be universal.... It is in France's interest to

be a party to the settlement that will follow the affairs in the Near East and the Middle East. France could not be absent from this part of the world.... She is one of the great world powers and must be worthy of her obligations, and our people will understand it....

It is possible to speak of a “Gaullo-Miterrandist” legacy, based on the vision of a France that is present and active in the world, an equal member of the Western camp, independent (thanks to its nuclear prowess), and possessed of numerous advantages including a profound history and a particular genius for playing an important and original role in international affairs. And if de Gaulle and Mitterrand could occasionally conjure up the spectre of French decline, it was only in hopes of exorcising it more effectively.

In contrast, the political curse that seemed to haunt Valéry Giscard d’Estaing undoubtedly arose from his being the first president of the Fifth Republic who actually conceded the reality of decline. The French have never really forgiven him for this pessimism, born of rationality yet unaccompanied by any offsetting optimism of will. More to French liking was the pluckiness of Prime Minister Alain Juppé, who in the aftermath of Jacques Chirac’s election in 1995 brought down the house with an inaugural address to the National Assembly that pledged the government to the policy of its predecessor, namely that of affirming the country’s standing as a world power.

We should not allow ourselves to be misled by that rare display of unanimity among the parliamentarians. France’s power and position in the world are a constant source of anguish for its leaders. If Washington fears having too much power, France worries about not having enough. Whereas the United States does not want to be the world’s policeman, France regrets its inability to play that part.

In the opinion of many observers, the strategic revolution of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the sundering of the socialist bloc, and finally the implosion of the USSR and end of the bipolar world all contributed to the devaluation of French power. Notwithstanding its ritual condemnation of the “Yalta order” and the politics of power “blocs,” France had enjoyed a kind of dividend from the strategic dispensation known as bipolarity: it may have decamped from NATO’s integrated military structure, but it continued to benefit from the Atlantic alliance’s protection, if only because of geographical factors. Germany served as its glacis against the Soviet threat.

Despite — or, rather because of — this, France was able to afford the luxury of cocking a snoot at the US, which, for its part, simply could not leave Paris out of major strategic deliberations; in this way, France was able to offset its economic, industrial, and monetary inferiority to Germany with its own strategic autonomy. France initiated and played a key role in the construction of Europe, in respect of which nothing was “do-able” without its assent. The inclusion of Greece, Spain, and Portugal had the merit of placing France at the very geographical centre of that Europe. Moreover, France’s peculiar status as an independent ally in the East/West context did endow it with extraordinary room for maneuver in what was

then called the Third World, where Paris could back divergent interests and still remain internally consistent. France's security was furthermore assured by its possession of autonomous nuclear power, and its quest for independence led it to equip itself with a formidable armaments industry, whose exports — at a time when demand exceeded supply — allowed France to outfit its own military with equipment purchased at the lowest cost as well as to balance its structural trade deficit.

The end of the Cold War has had two very disagreeable consequences for France and its conception of its own power. It has had to acknowledge the supremacy of the Americans in the world. And it has had to acknowledge the supremacy of the Germans in Europe. France can no longer believe or even pretend to believe that it constitutes a credible alternative to the US on the world stage. And it would appear that Europe, which had allowed France a new dimension in the second half of the 20th century, will come to be ruled by Berlin, not Paris.

The facts seem to justify these fears. The Gulf War exposed the inadequacy of the French military arsenal in the face of new requirements directed more at the projection of force than at the sheltering of territory. It also brought an end, if not to France's Arab policy (always based more on myth or false perception than on reality), then at least to its vision of serving as some sort of alternative to the superpowers — a vision France liked to project, with profit, to portions of the world. Unfortunately for it, at a time when Asia was taking off economically, France realized that it had neglected that region, while its weight and influence in Africa proved of little avail, given the disastrous economic and political situation in that continent. Absent from emergent regions, France found itself mired in those quarters that seemed to possess no future; even its influence in Africa began to crumble, because its traditional allies there looked very much to have reached the end of their political or biological cycle. The Fashoda complex, not surprisingly, reemerged: the Anglo-Saxon world, it was said, was plotting to drive the French from Africa.

Finally, globalization, widely regarded as the new "reality" of international relations, has resulted in a loss of autonomous decisionmaking power, which has affected France in particular. As a result, the historical pillars of France's independence have crumbled: the colonial heritage with its captive markets; France's seat on the UN Security Council, a legacy of the Second World War; and its traditional Gaullist orientations in respect of defence policy, Franco-German cooperation, and nuclear weapons. Paris is rivetted to the goal of hanging on to its rank: like a penniless aristocrat obsessed with the grandeur of its past, it clings more tightly to appearances once the reality of power is gone. France today constantly evokes its prestige because it knows it no longer has power.

Yet France fools no one, and is either pitied or mocked as it desperately clings to a bygone era. It is seen as wanting to "travel first class with a second-class ticket" or, in the metaphor of La Fontaine's fable, to become the frog who would be bigger than the ox. According to a poll published in *L'Express* in February

1991, 72 percent of the French still thought of their country as a great power, at a time when such an assessment was far from being shared by the Germans (only 35 percent of whom thought similarly), by the Americans (29 percent), and by the British (25 percent). That was nearly a decade ago; it seems a fair bet that a similar poll today would yield even more mediocre results for France's image. As a result, the French proclivity to give lessons to others and to serve as moral arbiter looks increasingly out of place. General de Gaulle once wanted to be the "spokesman for 200 million people without a voice, who will be secretly grateful to us for speaking for them." Jean Giraudoux has remarked that France was the "world's gadfly"; and even though his diagnosis contains an element of truth, the world finds it increasingly objectionable.

Interestingly, France's intense internal debate on whether its decline is imaginary or real meets with utter indifference abroad, either because world opinion has already pronounced against France, or — worse — because it simply does not care.

## **An Age-Old Debate**

"I lament and mourn the time that is lost to me,  
Valour, honour...  
My name sinks and becomes a mockery.  
I cry out because I shall perish."

These words, penned by Eustache Deschamps to describe the *Lamentations de France* around 1350, demonstrate that time has failed to damp the fires of passion. Indeed, the puzzle of France's decline dates neither from today nor from the fall of the Berlin Wall; for all its apparent topicality, this debate is really 650 years old.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the havoc of the Hundred Years' War motivated the resuscitation of the myth of the fall of Troy (the Capetian monarchy used this myth of Trojan ancestry to affirm its power). Lamentations, based on the systematic opposition of a happy and glorious past with the unfortunate present, were in vogue. Thus, in *Le Champion des dames*, Martin Lefranc presented mid-15th century France as:

A lady, once so powerful,  
Who wanders, aimlessly and listlessly,  
Wearing the habit of a poor Meschine,  
Bewailing the murder and the famine.

At the end of the 15th century, Chastelain again lamented unhappy France, once "a princess, crowned with glory, her head wreathed in fleur-de-lis, seated on the throne of splendour." War had made of her a poor, weeping lady "a princess with changed colour, of diminished estate, languishing."

The myth of decline does not only appeal to such circumstances depicted above. War and other crises are not the only sources of the perceived erosion of French power. In his *Mémoires*, Pierre-Victor de Bésenal, a product of the luminous 18th century (he was the son of a lieutenant in Louis XIV's armies, and succeeded his father in the armies of Louis XV and Louis XVI), ascribes France's decline to his countrymen's lack of virtue. France is nearing "decadence" because "depopulation is depriving her of her defenders; money, limited to the few, is becoming more restricted and this sinew is completely lacking.... Discouragement takes hold everywhere. People find fault with those in charge of government; they are constantly accused, and he who follows a path opposite from that of his predecessor only increases the confusion. No one could fail to see France in this picture." Many today would recognize themselves in de Bésenal's depiction. The rhetoric of decline is an admixture of the indigestion of age and the confusion of traditional thought attempting to grapple with the country's socio-economic changes.

The anguish of France's fall finds expression in the Revolution and its aftermath, and thus intersects with a political current of reaction. After the splendours of the Napoleonic epic, enemy armies camped on the Champs Élysées. The afterglow was harsh, as captured in the conclusion of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*:

The Emperor left us in a condition of fateful turmoil. We, the most mature and advanced state, show numerous signs of decadence. Just as a critically ill person is preoccupied with what awaits him in the tomb, a nation that feels itself weakening worries about its future lot. As a result, one political heresy follows another. The old European order is dying; our current debates will seem puerile to posterity.

More forebodings lay ahead. Anguish regarding the future of French power assumed new intensity after the defeat of 1870. It was only then that the despair over decline really took root, and became a central and obsessive element of the French politico-intellectual debate. The thunderbolt of Sedan shook the national consciousness. For the first time in its history, France had been beaten by a single enemy, and on purely military grounds. The army of the old territorial power had been routed by that of a newly constituted nation, eager to impose itself on the European order. Compared to this, the humiliation of 1815 seemed mild.

Between 1871 and 1914 France cultivated a monomaniacal obsession: the relationship of power with Germany. The humiliation of 1870, the consciousness of a relative loss of stature, and the haunting idea of a further fall dominated the mood. Not only had France undergone a stinging defeat, but demographic and industrial trends both favoured the enemy. The power balance between it and Germany could only worsen. Was there any way out, any solution to the "German crisis in French thought"? The Republicans, who had wanted to continue the war in 1870, looked to European détente, overseas expansion, and internal structural reforms (the latter relating to education, the military, health, and public morality).

The Monarchists, who had favoured capitulation after the defeat of Sedan, came to fix upon a revanchist nationalism, in which they were joined by a radical fringe. The theme of decadence was always the central line of nationalist thought.

By the end of the century, the prevailing current of thought was of “perpetual collapse” (Drumont, *Les tréteaux du succès*, 1900). The emerging industrial society, the reestablished republic, scientific and technical progress — all could and did serve as foils. Modernity was frightening. Maurras dates his political activity from a trip he took to Greece, during the course of which the external political debasement of France was rudely brought home to him.

Moral standards, decadence, the “putrefaction” of politicians, institutions on the road to ruin — all were censured in turn. Even education was collapsing! Drumont stormed: “The standard of classical studies is falling rapidly; it is getting to the point where candidates for the baccalaureate can no longer spell” (*La France juive*, 1886). The established order was disintegrating, the birth rate plummeting, and the motherland undergoing a “foreign invasion” (*Le testament d’un antisémite*, 1891). France’s opening to the world was resulting in its own withdrawal: “Our France, invaded by cosmopolitans, where we, the French, will be no more than strangers” (*Mon vieux Paris*, 1897). And now appeared a new threat: “Americanism has invaded France as much as semitism” (*La France juive*).

For Déroulède, as for many others, only a future war could offer up the prospect of regeneration to France — she “who so foolishly spent her blood for the liberation of neighbouring countries and who finally shows herself ready to spill it usefully, for her own honour, for her own interests, and to regain her position among the nations” (speech given 3 December 1908). A decade later, France would find out what such a prospect really offered. As a result, by the late 1930s, when the question of France’s ability to withstand Germany arose once more, the country’s signing of the Munich accords recognized implicitly the new reality, and in so doing accelerated the very decline France so feared. In a France politically divided and preoccupied by its demographic downturn, the trauma of the war that was to have restored its former position now prevented it from waging war. According to René Girault, “when Reynaud succeeded Daladier in March 1940, nothing beyond the rhetoric actually changed. Could it be because the notion of French power, which is common to all the decisionmakers, is based on a profound feeling of powerlessness? A feeling of decadence is omnipresent. France prepares herself for defeat.”<sup>2</sup> This sentiment would lead directly to the politics of collaboration after June 1940.

As the Second World War drew to a close, the question of French power could legitimately be posed. France’s army, considered in 1939 to be the strongest in the world, had collapsed in the space of a month in the face of German troops. France had lived under foreign occupation for four years (its longest period of occupation ever) and had instituted, with the Vichy government, a policy of collaboration with Germany, which is far from the most glorious page in its history. Franklin D. Roosevelt therefore considered predicating the organization of global

security on agreement among the “four policemen” (US, USSR, Great Britain, and China) — a group excluding France. Joseph Stalin agreed with the group’s composition. France was similarly excluded from the great summits (Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam) convened to plan the postwar order. Only Winston Churchill, recognizing the long-term necessity of a Western continental power able to counteract both Germany and the USSR alike, disagreed, insisting instead that France have an occupation zone in Germany and a permanent seat on the Security Council of the new United Nations.

Within France itself, the joy of the liberation and the enthusiasm concerning the “spirit of resistance” combined to make optimism de rigueur during this otherwise black period. Many regarded French weakness to be only temporary, and with the war won and Germany defeated, it was felt France would naturally reassume its place in the world. Anticipating this outcome, André Siegfried, writing in *Le Figaro* of 21 September 1944, declared that “France does not need to be given a certificate showing that she is a great power, but rather needs to establish herself as such by her own merit....In an almost unprecedented redress General de Gaulle restored to France her honour; thanks to him and to the resisters we can once again look the world in the face. This crisis has nonetheless affected us, and we must fight hard to get back on our feet.” Confidence was infectious, perhaps even obligatory, as de Gaulle demonstrated in proclaiming to the consultative assembly on 2 March 1945: “It will require relentless and furious work, a long time and much initiative. But power is at the end of it, a power which will crush no one and will, on the contrary, help our fellow man. May the attainment of this power become our great national ambition!”

Charles Morazé, something of a realist, did not hesitate to speak of France’s international “decline” in his 1947–48 course at the Institut d’études politiques de Paris, focussed on the topic of “France, an economic and human study.” According to Morazé, France’s ranking at the same level as that of China “would have stupefied the politicians of 1924.” He concluded that “our country has become first among the secondary powers.” Twenty years later, in a celebrated editorial of 15 March 1968 entitled “France is slumping,” Pierre Viansson-Ponté echoed this theme, in describing “a little France, shrunken almost to the Hexagon, which is neither very unfortunate nor very prosperous, at peace with everyone, without much control over world events.”

The trauma of 1940 has to be one of the most profound ever endured by France. It accounts in large part for the government’s lack of vision during the colonial wars. We still suffer from its syndromes and effects.

The summary presented in this section serves to provide some context to the disquiet many feel about French decline. Mark Twain, on reading the news of his own demise, commented famously that the “reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” The news of France’s own decline is so ancient and so recurrent that it can be called permanently premature as well as constantly exaggerated. Above all, merely posing the problem — and doing so for more than seven centuries! —



in terms that compare the declining France of the moment with the superpower it once was betrays a faulty understanding of the nature of power, and rests on an illusion with little relevance for the present.

## **An Idealized Power**

So *can* we speak of the decline of France? It all depends on one's point of reference, of course, which can never be an easy thing to determine. What should serve as our referent for taking the measure of decline? Gaul occupied by the Romans? Hardly. What about 12th-century France, when the kings were still an element of the feudal system, scarcely able to distinguish themselves politically from the surrounding principalities — let alone match the two powers of the epoch, the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire? Obviously not.

The 13th century might offer a better standard for comparison. The privileged relationship that the kings of France developed with Rome (comparable to that of the king of England or the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire) permitted them to enjoy a privileged status as the “sacred and very Christian king,” ruler by divine right, and responsible for the eldest daughter of the Church. France had 21 of the then 39 million inhabitants of Roman Catholic Europe, and it assumed the most active role (what we would today call “leadership”) in the Crusades. Paris was considered an important scientific and artistic centre, and the Champagne fairs offered the greatest opportunity for commerce and exchange in all of medieval Europe. However, many European countries knew such temporary halcyon periods, and the “beautiful 13th century” led straight to the Hundred Years' War, when France was once again reduced to powerlessness. Famine, war, and plague combined to produce a high rate of mortality, and anarchy resulted. Although devastated by the war, the country nonetheless survived to become rich and strong once more, under Louis XI.

At the end of the 15th century, France regained enough economic strength to enter the Italian wars. These profited it little, since by the Treaty of Cambrai of 1529, François I was obliged to cede Flanders and Artois to Charles V. The border with the Spanish lands was only 150 kilometres from Paris.

The religious wars prior to Henri IV's accession to the throne marked another ruinous period for the country. It was not until the beneficial effects of Richelieu's management could be felt during the time of Louis XIV that France reached the height of its power. At the start of the 18th century, Europe had 118 million inhabitants, of whom 19 million were French. Russia, with 15 million, was the only other country that came close to being as populous.

But which of Louis XIV's Frances do we really have in mind? Is it the France of the treaties of Westphalia (1648), the Pyrénées (1659), and Nimwegen (1678-79), which marked the apogee of the kingdom and justified Louis' title of the “Sun King”? Or is it the France of 1713, after the War of the Spanish Succession,

which brought about the ruin of a country whose external ambitions and absolutism had caused the rest of Europe to align against it? Or perhaps it is the France of the Chateau of Versailles, or that of the difficult closing years of Louis' reign?

Maybe we should measure today's "decline" against the France of Louis XV, which was the foremost European power, thanks to its demographic supremacy and early national unification, but which failed to profit from its military successes. After the War of the Austrian Succession, Louis XV, whose troops occupied Brussels, gave up the Netherlands in exchange for the evacuation by the English of the French forts along the St. Lawrence. The Seven Years' War sounded the knell for French colonial possessions and established English supremacy. The Industrial Revolution (1780-1800) allowed England to assume a decisive advantage over all other countries, including France.

Should our referent be revolutionary France, the France of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, offering to the world a model of self-proclaimed universal freedoms, but also the France of the First Republic, forced to defend (with less than complete success) its borders against the First Coalition and to quell internal political upheaval verging upon civil war?

Napoleon's France, the very incarnation of expansion, is the only time when the country could truly be called an empire. But should we use as our point of reference its pinnacle in 1810, when it comprised 130 departments, when Belgium, Holland, the Hanseatic cities, the Left Bank of the Rhine, Piedmont, Genoa, Tuscany, and Rome were all French, and when the Confederations of the Rhine and of Switzerland, the Kingdoms of Naples, Italy, and Spain were all subjected *de facto* to Napoleon I? Or should we rather gauge the state of affairs after the Hundred Days, when a defeated, occupied, and humiliated France saw its territory reduced to 86 departments and governed by a king imposed by foreigners?

The Second Empire (more nominal than real) of Napoleon III experienced, for its part, prodigious economic growth and engaged in foreign military campaigns in Italy and Mexico. It too, however, ended melodramatically with the capitulation of Sedan, leading to a new siege of Paris, to German occupation, and to perhaps the most serious crisis of confidence ever felt by the country to that time.

France managed to overcome this new setback, and even regained its pride by throwing itself *holus-bolus* into colonial adventurism; by 1914 it was able to boast of influence extending from Africa to Indochina, not forgetting Madagascar, the Antilles, and even a few parts of India. The problem is that "imperial" France remained but semi-industrialized and heavily agricultural. Nevertheless, that France was sufficiently confident to enter a war it believed could quickly be won — a belief that would contrast so starkly with the mood three years later, when some of the country's soldiers, so sick of the interminable slaughter, balked at going to the "front." Then came 1918, and the next year's treaty of Versailles, representing the final time France was able to impose its vision on the rest of the world, with consequences that would be nothing short of disastrous.

Perhaps the real point of reference should be June 1940, when what was considered to be the world's strongest army crumbled in three weeks, opening the chapter of collaboration and the Pétain regime? What role did France, absent from the conferences at Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam, have in the planning of the postwar order? It was, as we have seen, only thanks to Churchill that France got its zone of occupation in Germany and permanent seat on the Security Council.

Can it really be said that France today *is* in decline, when set against the France of Dien Bien Phu, of Suez, or of the Algerian war? Was General de Gaulle's France really so powerful, when one considers the domestic situation at the end of his second presidency (viz., May 1968 and the failure of the 1969 referendum)? De Gaulle himself, having been unable either to build the Europe of his dreams or to convince the Europeans to free themselves from Washington, acknowledged failure, confiding to Jacques Foccart that France's place in international affairs had been greatly overrated: "I am on stage, and I pretend to believe, and make others believe, that France is a great country. It is a perpetual illusion."<sup>3</sup>

France has only known two periods in its long history when it actually dominated Europe: during the height of power of Louis XIV, and during the reign of Napoleon I. In each instance this dominance led to aggression against other countries, who in turn forged coalitions against France, cutting it back down to size. For France, as for Rome before it, the Tarpeian Rock remained a feature of the Capitoline Hill. Thus when we consider the current power of France, we should beware the folly of undervaluing the present, for this is as fallacious as to aggrandize the past. Instead, we would be far better to recollect, with Philippe Moreau Defarges, that "since the end of the 18th century, France has known both illusory or ambiguous victories (1802, 1805, 1919, and 1945) and disastrous defeats (1763, 1815, 1871, 1940, even 1954 and 1962). France nonetheless still exists, even enjoying the status of a great power."<sup>4</sup>

Foreign analysts, incidentally, often take a more optimistic view of France's true weight than do the French themselves. In 1995, two respected and influential publications, *Time* and *The Economist*, each published, at about the same time, a special number on France, and judging from what was written, it would appear that the country still has a preeminent place in the world. In the same year, Ezra N. Suleiman argued that the French probably never had become as bogged down as they thought they did, and concluded that the debate over decline constituted, in the end, a non-debate.<sup>5</sup>

The comparison is always made with a past more imaginary (and puffed up) than real. France does not suffer from a sickness that has constantly eaten away at it since the 18th century and that drives it further down in the global pecking order. Rather, its history consists in an uninterrupted stream of high and low points. In sum, contemporary France is far from that condition of degradation so often attributed to it. It retains important advantages; and it is up to it to exploit them to the full.

**Notes**

1. Alain Duhamel, *Les peurs françaises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).
2. René Girault, “Les décideurs français et la puissance française en 1938-1939,” in *La puissance en Europe, 1938-1940*, ed. René Girault and Robert Franck (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1984), p. 39.
3. Quoted by Maurice Vaïsse, *La grandeur: la politique étrangère du général de Gaulle, 1958-1960* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).
4. Philippe Moreau Defarges, *La France dans le monde au XXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette supérieure, 1994).
5. Ezra N. Suleiman, *Les ressorts cachés de la réussite française* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

## 2. *What Is Power?*

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Because the notion of power has always been at the heart of the problem of international relations, analysts have long pondered its definition. A complex notion with multiple meanings has been the result, of which certain major interpretations can be presented here.

For Robert Dahl, for example, power is one's ability to oblige someone else to do what he or she would otherwise have abstained from doing. Karl Deutsch sees it as "the ability to prevail and to surmount the obstacles." Raymond Aron defines it either as the ability to do, produce, or destroy, or as the ability to impose one's will upon others; for him, political power becomes not an absolute, but rather a relative capability. For Arnold Wolfers, power is the possibility of "imposition, and more specifically, the imposition of losses on others"; he distinguishes more precisely power politics, the imposition of one's will by threat or by force, from political influence, which is the bringing of others around to one's own point of view.

Jean-Baptiste Duroselle establishes another distinction, that between power and strength. If strength is the ability of a state to modify the will of groups or individuals in the domestic sphere, power is the ability to impose one's will externally. A power is therefore a state able to modify the will of individuals, groups, or foreign states. Finally, according to Samuel Huntington, power is the ability of an actor, usually but not always a government, to influence the behaviour of others, which also may or may not be governments. International primacy means that a government can exercise more influence on the behaviour of more actors and concerning more matters than can any other government.<sup>1</sup>

If one had to synthesize these various definitions, it might be said that power is characterized by the independence of the powerful vis-à-vis the other actors, with the reverse holding as well — namely the dependence of the latter with respect to the former. In other words, international relations consists in a zero-sum game. According to the classical definitions, power implies being subjected to only the minimum number of constraints while being able to impose the maximum number

of constraints on others. As such, the notion is not far removed from that of “sovereignty,” and, more broadly, freedom of action; if the freedom of the individual stops where that of the others begins, the power of one actor is limited only by the power of the others.

A second and corollary question further complicates these definitional difficulties: how does one reach this objective of exercising “power,” and what are that category’s criteria?

Niccolò Machiavelli grasped the problem in 1513, when he devoted one chapter of *The Prince* to assessing “how the power of each principality should be measured.” The criteria he identified were essentially military and political, involving leadership skill and martial prowess. It was not until the end of the 17th century that economic and demographic considerations would be added to the list, by Gregory Kinc.

The first historical criterion of power was thus military, the key to the survival of political entities. Prior to the 20th century, war was considered a normal means of settling differences between states; to be a military power was therefore an absolute imperative, even a condition of existence. For Clausewitz, a great power was thus a state that could, alone, balance its weight against that of any other individual state.

It is good form nowadays to proclaim this military criterion to be outmoded. It is said that the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the Soviet threat, and the emergence of new dangers (ecological risks, the mafia, drug trafficking, terrorism, grey zones, ethnic conflicts, etc.) against which classic military solutions are ineffective has resulted in the devaluation of military power. In addition, countries that have relied upon it are said either to be overstretched (e.g., the United States) or to have fallen apart (e.g., the Soviet Union), while those countries whose military is constrained (namely Japan and, to a lesser extent, Germany) have been deemed by some to be the real winners of the Cold War. Moreover, it is easier for an economic or technological power such as Japan to militarize, than for a military power such as was the USSR to transform itself into an economic power.

Nevertheless, it has to be conceded that military might does remain a fungible criterion of power. Contrary to Lester Thurow’s assertion that America’s having been the military superpower of the 20th century constitutes the main obstacle to its remaining an economic superpower,<sup>2</sup> it is indisputable that the US knows how to cash in on its formidable military muscle when it comes to obtaining contracts in the Middle East, applying commercial pressure on Japan, exerting a strong power of attraction over Eastern Europe, and maintaining solid leadership in Western Europe. No one doubts its actual will to use this military power should it be necessary; its mere existence is proof enough.

This was not always the case. Even though France may have been the world’s foremost military power between the two World Wars, this status was of little comfort to it, even in the pursuit of its own security. Morally diminished, it could not use that power to impose its views. The US, by contrast, has employed its

military strength in nonmilitary ways, as an instrument of persuasion and influence and in order to obtain diplomatic backing and markets, rather than as a means of winning wars. The most notable direct use of its military force ended in a fiasco, with Vietnam.

While we should think twice before assigning the military factor space in the museum of antiquities alongside the spinning wheel and the stone axe, it is true that military might no longer serves as the only or even the chief element of power. For power's meaning has changed. Troop strength scarcely counts nowadays, and the might of an army is measured not by the number of bodies lined up behind bayonets, but rather by the quality of matériel and its degree of technological sophistication — the precision of its missiles, its ability to observe, detect, and attain its targets, and its communications. Some predict that in future, space-based capabilities will possess the same importance to overall military power as do nuclear weapons today.

In the same manner, the demographic factor (long linked to military power), is now singularly devalued, even though the vague idea that a large population must connote international importance remains widespread in France — a legacy of the pre-World War I obsession with Germany's demographic weight. Although the low birth rate in Canada, Australia, and Japan may be a token of relative decline, and even lead to fears regarding national survival, strong population growth without a vigorous economy can also contribute to weakness not strength. Population can as easily be a problem as an asset. The world's most populous state, China, once reassured itself, under Mao Tse Tung, with the thought that because of its greater population it could better absorb the shock of a nuclear war than could the United States. Nonetheless, more than twenty years ago China implemented the strictest possible birth control policy, forbidding families to have more than one child, in order to limit the growth of a population that was adversely affecting its economic development and thus the affirmation of its power.

It would seem that economic strength has replaced military strength as the principal instrument of power.<sup>3</sup> It might even be queried whether the race to prosperity has not become the new engine of history and whether, at the same time, the quest for power, heretofore always at the heart of international relations, has not become the great loser in this evolution. But how are we to define this economic power?

It is noteworthy that the possession of natural resources, once the principal definitional element, is no longer of much significance: Japan has few raw materials, which does not stop it from being in the first rank of world economic powers, while resource-rich Argentina has seen its position decline since 1945, and the Soviet Union, overflowing with mineral wealth, nevertheless disappeared.

Technological mastery has become much more significant. The industries of tomorrow are those of the brain cells: microelectronics, biotechnologies, software, computers, telecommunications, robots, machine instruments. These industries do not have any predetermined location, but go to the regions able to

organize the intellectual resources necessary to attract them. Winston Churchill, once again proving his visionary nature, affirmed that “the empires of the future are the empires of the spirit.”

For Alvin Toffler,<sup>4</sup> power in the 21st century thus consists not in the classic military or economic criteria, but in the “K” (for knowledge) factor. According to him, “knowledge, once a supplement to the power of money and of muscle, has become their veritable essence. It is, in fact, the ultimate amplifier.” The military powers depend in large part on the degree of technology (knowledge) that they integrate; unlike the economic and military criteria, this criterion knows no limits and is inexhaustible. Toffler asserts, somewhat naively, that knowledge is the most democratic of the sources of power, since it is available to rich and poor alike.

Whether one is for or against globalization, improving a society’s basic levels of competence becomes an imperative, not only because doing this leads to job creation, but also because it accords international power.

According to an OECD study, the dominant societies of the 21st century will be those that master knowledge. The demand for high levels of knowledge will not cease to grow. Governments seek to keep pace by placing education and job training at the centre of their priorities. Britain’s prime minister, Tony Blair, explained in a 1997 interview published by *Le Monde* that education is “today’s liberating force if we want to be competitive. In a world where capital and technology are mobile, the only way to be competitive is based on intelligence and abilities. That is why I say that education represents social justice today.”

Once again, we must place even novelty in its historical context. Did not Alexander’s successors, the Diadochi, found libraries in the great Hellenic capitals after the division of the empire? There they intended to gather together the books of the entire world, with their Greek translations, in order to be able to dominate the world’s peoples through a better understanding of them. It was an early instance of intelligence, in the British usage of the term, being put at the service of power.

In our time, it is estimated that approximately 500,000 new foreign students enter the United States annually; many of the best of these will never return to their own countries. Higher education serves as a drawing card for America, enabling it to benefit from an indisputable brain drain.

Levels of education and job training have for some time been decisive criteria of power. It is nonetheless appropriate to add to them certain other factors, beginning with that of national and social cohesion, without which all countries are powerless. Some consider that law itself is the bedrock of state influence, and they observe that international law is, after all, of Anglo-Saxon origin.

Nor should we overlook the modern methods of influencing thought, especially those involving images and communications. In this regard, Hollywood produces not only dreams but also power and influence. It can in particular contribute to the shaping of the image of numerous strategic situations as either good or evil. It saw heavy service during the Cold War, when it showed the Soviets,



Chinese, Cubans, and Vietnamese in the most negative possible light. Today's legions of overarmed terrorists who want to blow up everything with megabombs seem always of Arab origin. Hollywood's assistance in this task of ideational molding is the more effective because it is not programmed: there is no ideological script to be followed, as there was in the good old days when the Soviets or Chinese deployed their own propaganda offensives. Instead, American films fix on what the American public is ready to receive. CNN has for its part become the symbol of a media no longer merely a means of transmitting information but now a source in itself of the news, since during crises its images are diffused in places of power as well as in editorial offices. CNN is a private channel, not the voice of the American government; but with such a medium it is understandable that the federal government no longer finds it necessary generously to finance the "Voice of America" and the translation of programs into numerous languages. Citizens of the entire planet tune into CNN spontaneously, thus allowing it legitimately to shape the worldview of the urban upper classes.

Power's inordinate complexity renders its evaluation a delicate business. How to measure it? Is it possible to set up a kind of Dow Jones index for power, where the military factor, say, would account for 8 percent, the economic for 12 percent, knowledge for 15, and population for 3? The task is further complicated by the fact that while some of the criteria are measurable (e.g., population, natural resources, geographic location, industrial capability, monetary reserves, even military strength), others are not (e.g., national cohesiveness, quality of diplomacy, ability of the people to innovate and to make sacrifices, and quality of education). Perhaps the simplest solution is to agree with Bertrand Badie and Marie-Claude Smouts when they assert that "power is at present defined by one's ability to control the rules of the game in one or more key areas of international competition."<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Nye contrasts *hard power* (pure or brute power), with *soft power*, thanks to which a country "shows itself capable of structuring a situation in such a manner that the other countries make choices or define interests that are in accordance with its own choices or interests."<sup>6</sup> CNN and Hollywood enable the US to dominate the world at the least expense because they make American standards both attractive and universal: "The universality of the culture of a country and its ability to fix a group of rules and institutions which are favorable to it are important sources of power."<sup>7</sup>

The importance of image is, moreover, the newest element in the determination of power. By this is meant not the images on television, but the perception of a country. This image is itself the result of numerous and extremely diverse factors: power, certainly (if it seems legitimate, respectful of others and dedicated at least in part to a common interest), but also the country's cultural creativity, its place in the leisure industry, the characteristics attributed to its people, and we might even add its popular sports.

In short, on the basis of a calm consideration of the above criteria, whether taken individually or together, it is clear that France does not do so badly, after all.

Although it can hardly claim a first-place standing, it is nevertheless well-ranked; and while it may not be the undisputed leader in any of the categories, for *each* of them it is in the ball park.

But it is probably the level of interdependence that most structures today's power, at the same time rendering footless the classic definitions of power (i.e., influence over the decisionmaking of others, monopoly of control over one's own) discussed earlier in this chapter. The revolution in the categories of power (knowledge instead of force, *soft power* instead of *hard power*) and the evolution of these categories (the replacement of tanks by reconnaissance satellites, and of books by television) stem from an increase in interdependence that has led to the decline in significance of bilateralism, whether as between France and Germany or, formerly, the US and the Soviet Union. The bilateral era, it can be said, is over.

## Notes

1. Samuel Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security* (Spring 1993): 68.
2. Lester Thurow, *La Maison Europe* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992), p. 47.
3. According to Raoul Girardet, this is not new: "The future of the State, writes one of the ministers of King Louis XVIII in 1815, after the second Treaty of Paris, is now in its finances." This affirmation, contrasting as it did a policy of more than twenty years dominated almost exclusively by military imperatives, set the tone of the period then beginning. It underscored the arrival of a new system of values and a new range of preoccupations. "It relegates the soldier to second place." Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 1998), p. 13.
4. Alvin Toffler, *Les nouveaux pouvoirs: Savoir, richesse et violence à la veille du XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1991).
5. Bertrand Badie and Marie-Claude Smouts, *Le retournement du monde*, 2d ed. (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po/Dalloz, 1995).
6. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 173.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

### *3. A Multilateral World*

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Globalization and its diplomatic equivalent of multilateralization inevitably gnaw away at the image of national power. The perception in France of a state never again destined to be a great power results above all from a psychological process linked to multilateralization. French foreign policy, like that of other states, has become increasingly less national, and the country's place on the international chessboard increasingly difficult to evaluate. In comparison to the former national model of power, France finds itself today in an ever more multilateral international system.

Even though the "democratization" of international life remains to a certain extent a smoke screen, thinly disguising the survival of relationships of force, it nevertheless does exist. Its most salient characteristic is its incompatibility with the traditional definition of power. As we saw in the previous chapter, "power" in the contemporary sense conjures up such variables as the economy, culture, and mass-communications. Power as well has a contemporary context, multilateralism.

The situation has become much more complex since Bismarck's time, when international relations were, all in all, rather simple: in a system of five powers, it was necessary, according to the chancellor, always to make sure to be in a coalition of three against the other two. Although the ability to mount coalitions remains important today, these are now multiple, fluid, and superposed, with more and more of the activity revolving around issue-specific formations. Thus while France could once lay down the law to its captive audience(s), it now must convince others of the merits of its proposals. It needs, in short, to have good ideas that can attract others to its various projects, as it seems to have done with the European project. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to claim a monopoly on "right" thinking, and it no longer is enough merely to be in the right to see an enterprise through to fruition. There is an equalizing quality to multilateralism, manifesting itself in the form of negotiations and taking into arithmetic account the weight of each party.

Multilateralism renders power more diffuse, because it forces constant negotiations with everyone, and requires concessions to be made in one negotiation so as to obtain the same from one's partner in another. It also requires that priorities be determined regarding the issues upon which one seeks support, for the good reason that it is impossible to ask for support on all matters and the favours one receives must inevitably be repaid. And it requires knowing how and when to resist the US without upsetting one's partners or making them dig in their heels.

Multilateralism makes compulsory the observance of certain rules: never push your advantage to the limit (why incite desires for revenge?); avoid traditional French arrogance (such narcissistic gratification could prove costly later on); never humiliate or neglect a partner (all votes count); know how to make concessions (without which no gain is possible); avoid the temptation to use force or impose a solution (the means are lacking and, in any case, a project is only really accepted if it appears to represent everyone's point of view); choose which objectives have priority (no one can win all the time); present projects that appear legitimate for the other countries (whose role, after all, is not to promote the French national interest).

Another important rule of the multilateral road is this: forget about privileged bilateral relations, whether between France and the US, Germany, Senegal, Brazil, or whomever. Negotiations will be simultaneous, and global.

No state can impose its solutions alone — not even the US can do this. Richard Haass, director of foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, invokes the imagery of the "reluctant sheriff" to characterize the American position. Washington can no longer be represented as the world's policeman. Instead, it must be the sheriff, forced to act in concert with others in order to fulfil his role. He directs the operation, but must rely on volunteers, whom he must convince to follow him, in order to carry out the most delicate missions.

This results not from any diminution as such of American power, but rather is a product of multilateralism. Whether it concerns development of policy toward Iraq or toward the environment, Washington will have to pay some heed to the opinion of other states, whom it must attempt to convince to go along with it. If it proves unsuccessful in the attempt, and concludes that it is not in its national interest to concede to the desires of others, then Washington will need to defuse their hostility to its chosen course. Although the US is sometimes overcome by hegemonic temptation, the wisest American officials have long understood that to preserve their superiority they must not appear too brutal. When this behavioural code is forgotten, reality takes it upon itself to refresh the memory of those in charge: this was apparent, for example, when in February 1998, the temptation to make "surgical" strikes against Iraq was very strong.

Saddam Hussein, already guilty of having invaded Kuwait in 1990 and of hiding arms programs of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological), had refused UNSCOM inspectors access to certain buildings that he deemed "presidential sites."<sup>1</sup> The Iraqi leader was demonized in the US, both because he

was a bloodthirsty dictator and also (especially, in this context) because he had defied the Americans militarily. Moreover, since he was weakened, Washington had the opportunity of demonstrating its power by furthering the observance of international morality and its own national interests at one and the same time. Thus, if Baghdad persisted in its refusal to open the sites for inspection, Bill Clinton wanted to punish Iraq militarily by means of long-range air strikes, which would not endanger American soldiers. The operation was without risk from a military standpoint; it was simply a question of picking the right moment to strike, taking into account such diverse factors as the necessity of respecting a truce during the winter olympic games at Nagano, waiting for the most favourable meteorological conditions, and working around a visit that the Clintons were to make to their daughter Chelsea on her college's parents' day.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the operation, American diplomacy employed an abundance of energy in its attempts to court the international community. While Great Britain, Germany, and the Central European candidates for membership in NATO immediately fell into line, three permanent members of the Security Council — France, Russia, and China — proved more reluctant to agree to the American solution without first exploring all possible avenues of negotiation with Baghdad. In another era, Washington, having decided that it was in its national interest to undertake certain military action, might not have awaited the green light from the UN. However, apart from the juridico-diplomatic aspect, the Americans wanted to convince the rest of the world that their approach was the proper one. They therefore lobbied Asian, Latin American, and even African countries — in vain. The majority of those countries, along with what is referred to, for want of a better term, as “world public opinion,” did not consider the American approach legitimate; they distinguished between Saddam Hussein, judged guilty, and his people, seen as his victims. The Security Council mandated the secretary general to propose a way out to Saddam Hussein: the establishment of specific procedures providing for access to the presidential sites. Baghdad accepted this solution, which bought it some time but could not, in the end, avert the air strikes that loomed in February.

The sole world superpower thus does not act completely freely, even though the December 1998 Operation Desert Fox (mounted with the British) illustrates that action can be and will be taken outside the confines of the UN Security Council (a point later to be so dramatically reconfirmed to Belgrade's discomfort with Operation Allied Force of March 1999). That being said, power has been “relativized” in a new way, as a result of globalization, with consequences not only for the US and France, but for all states, whether they be military, economic, or demographic giants or dwarves.

The impact of such globalization of course varies according to the power of the country, but none is able to escape its constraints. No country can with impunity take a decision in the international sphere that does not appear legitimate in the eyes of some (if not all) of the other countries. It is still possible to have a national

policy and to make sovereign decisions, but the external aspect is today much more significant than before, and the cost of a departure from what is commonly accepted much greater. If it is not really possible to speak of a genuine “international society” because of the absence of true solidarity between all of its members, there are nonetheless internationally accepted social rules that one ignores at one’s peril.

Some factions of society still harbour the sweet illusion that their government, should they happen to be living in a powerful state, can be made to do their bidding. French editorialists and media intellectuals love to denounce loudly the inaction of their leaders: “What, the war in the former Yugoslavia is not immediately ended? You are unable to put out the Algerian inferno at once? Do you mean to say you cannot establish the magical duo of democracy and development in Africa within twenty-four hours?” Alas, multilateralization means it is no longer possible for a single country to resolve, on its own, a problem of major significance.

In France, where the tradition of intellectual commitment is deeply rooted, the sense of decline is strengthened by the commentators’ own feeling of powerlessness — they have before them any number of opportunities to intervene and make speeches, but they also realize that they have less and less impact on what actually happens. The media explosion gives them a much greater audience, more fame, and far more exposure than their predecessors enjoyed, but multilateralization dramatically restricts their ability to influence events. While their commentary may still have some effect, it tends to be more on the public than on the course of events.

Contemporary international relations does not allow for loners; it no longer counts for much to be the sole champion of a position. François Mitterrand (who was himself at the crossroads of the new and old, and who spoke often of France’s rank) was one of those who did the most to bring France into this new era. Hubert Védrine (who, before becoming minister of foreign affairs, was Mitterrand’s close collaborator during his two seven-year presidential terms) lucidly described the complexity that multilateralization has introduced into foreign policymaking:

Thus France negotiates with her fourteen European partners, the other permanent members of the Security Council and the other members of the G7. In these different institutions, we negotiate always with the same people. And we are at the same time in agreement with these countries on some points and in disagreement on others. Consequently, when we ask in one forum for a concession from one of our partners, we must consider what we are prepared to concede to them in another forum, without upsetting a third country, whose agreement we require in a different negotiation. And so on. This ability is difficult to master, especially since we live in an age of permanent negotiation, rather than one where international meetings were held every thirty years. Therein, in fact, lies the real measure of dependence or interdependence.<sup>2</sup>

France’s grave error in announcing in June 1995 the renewal of nuclear testing (suspended since 1992) stemmed from obliviousness of the weight of this external

constraint. The decision was presented as “Gaullist”: France, thumbing its nose at negative international reactions, decided independently to conduct some supplementary tests because it deemed them necessary and because it wanted to demonstrate its power through nuclear capability. A parallel was drawn between de Gaulle creating the nuclear deterrent in the 1960s, over American opposition and protests from the Third World, and Jacques Chirac wanting to improve this capability in the 1990s. The only difference (but one that was to prove considerable) is this: it was no longer possible in the 1990s to pursue a policy judged illegitimate by the rest of the international community, unless one was prepared to pay a heavy price.

France learned what the price was. In the face of intense opposition not only in the South Pacific, but throughout Asia, in Latin America, and in Western Europe, France found itself obliged to reduce the number of tests (from eight to six), to terminate them earlier than planned (in February, rather than April or May), and to give some proof of its sincerity regarding disarmament (notably by agreeing to the “zero option” on nuclear testing, thereby surrendering the option of conducting low-level tests once the comprehensive test ban treaty [CTBT] entered into force).

Beyond these ineluctable realities, however, multilateralism can be as much a choice as a necessity for France. (How futile, if not downright silly, is the debate heard too often in France on the topic “Globalization: For or Against?”, as though it were possible to choose to accept or reject it! One can only attempt to limit the negative or to maximize the positive effects of this inevitability.) In the present circumstances multilateralism should represent a voluntary choice for France because it amounts to a multiplier of its power: no other country is so actively implicated in so many different international institutions. This of course results in certain political, economic, and legal constraints, but France freely accepts these because it needs multilateralism in order to project its influence and interests.

Accordingly, France has, since 1945, chosen multilateralism, seeing it as the way to have access to forums that permit it to pursue objectives otherwise beyond its capacity. This choice amounts to utilizing someone else’s power for France’s own benefit. Far from constituting the renunciation of power or the effacement of national interests, this choice represents the pursuit of those interests by other means, and is an indirect strategy for power-maximizing. The deliberations that ensued during the drafting of the 1994 white paper of defence, promulgated by the government of Édouard Balladur, confirmed the necessity of resorting to multilateralism and established an explicit link between that necessity and France’s relative weakness: “Our relative weight in the chorus of states incites us to seek out the best alliances and the best instruments to multiply our power. This is why France acts increasingly in a multilateral framework — notably the European Union, the Atlantic alliance, the CSCE, and the UN.” Multilateralism is regarded here, clearly, as a tool for France. When France feels that there is no payoff, it prefers to extricate itself, as Charles de Gaulle did in 1966, in withdrawing France

from NATO's integrated structure. International organizations are a means rather than an end for France, and in de Gaulle's judgement NATO did not contribute to France's power, but on the contrary constrained both its ability to gain influence and its freedom of action.

It is important, however, not to succumb to the very French illusion that having one's own nationals heading multilateral organizations is a ticket to enhancing the "national" interest. From the middle of the 1980s on, the French simultaneously headed the European Commission (Jacques Delors, from 1985 to 1994), the EBRD (Jacques Attali, from 1991 to 1993, followed by Jacques de la Rosière), the IMF (Michel Camdessus, since 1987), the OECD (Jean-Claude Paye, from late 1984 until May 1996), and the Council of Europe (Catherine Lalumière, from June 1989 to May 1994). Despite this, it is far from obvious that these organizations served as direct instruments of French policy.

In 1945 General de Gaulle regarded the UN as a place where, thanks to its permanent seat on the Security Council, eternal France (whose power might have been altered because of its behaviour during the years 1940-44) would be duly recognized, as well as a vehicle for the propagation of universal ideals France personified. It did not turn out that way, because the UN became instead the principal forum for protesting French colonial policy, especially during the war in Algeria. However, once the process of decolonization had been completed and internalized in French political psychology, the UN could emerge as a means for France to project its image beyond the European sphere, and to do so with a certain degree of international legitimacy that owed much to France's willingness to wrestle with fundamental international problems. French is the first of the six languages of the UN and is, most importantly, one of the two languages of the workplace. France is the fourth largest contributor to the UN's budget; its share of that budget in 1998 was 6.32 percent, while its share of the world's wealth was but 3.5 percent.

The UN is the ideal multiplier of power for a country like France, which has some heft in the organization even though it is not a superpower. The international body is only of interest to those countries that already have some authority there, because there is a certain threshold before the multiplier takes effect — France was never able to attain this threshold level in NATO, where it could not influence fundamental decisions. By contrast, the UN embodies for France the great dream of world management. French leaders never tire of calling attention to the fact that their country is a permanent member of the Security Council and it was, as we have seen, the desire to preserve this status that motivated François Mitterrand's decision to send French troops to the Gulf War.

For a superpower, conversely, the world organization can only be a constraint — it cannot provide any additional power, and can only serve as a nuisance, whose impact must be countered. The US may need the UN to provide a veneer of international legality and public benefit to its actions, but it can more easily achieve its goals by bypassing the organization. France, on the contrary, considers that



circumventing the UN usually means keeping the other permanent members of the Security Council out of decisionmaking, something it prefers (within limits) to avoid.

French enthusiasm for the UN finds expression particularly in the area of peacekeeping: during 1992 and 1993, France quickly turned into one of the most active contributors to UN peacekeeping operations. Doing so provided it with a privileged means of expression. Through its leading role in these operations, France justifies its status as a permanent member of the Security Council and as a great military power working for the general interest. By participating in multilateral peacekeeping forces, France shows that it is capable of providing the manpower and the necessary military, strategic, and financial assets. It can bring its weight to bear on the resolution of conflicts backed by the international legitimacy that inheres in placing its power at the service of others rather than of its own egotistical aims.

France has also sought reliance upon the UN as a means of codifying a right or an obligation to intervene, in the process drawing on favourable images of French nongovernmental organizations that, during the 1960s and 1970s, strove to aid peoples suffering from natural disasters or political upheaval. The ubiquitous “French doctors,” present wherever war, famine, or disease raged, succeeded in establishing the principle that all victims deserved to be rescued. France sought to translate this moral imperative into a legal and political one, and Paris successfully argued the principle that the actions of states are subject to a humanitarian law.

Following the Gulf War, the Security Council ratified this stance by adopting, on 5 April 1991, resolution 688, which required Iraq to allow international humanitarian organizations access to all those in need of assistance on Iraqi territory. The necessity of aiding the Kurdish population, which had taken refuge in the mountains after the assaults of the Iraqi army, thus became the first occasion for the practical application of a new concept promoted by French diplomacy, that of the right to humanitarian intervention.

## Notes

1. UNSCOM was the United Nations Special Commission created by Security Council resolution 687 in April 1991.
2. Hubert Védrine, “La politique étrangère de la France de 1981 à 1995,” *Relations internationales et stratégiques*, no. 24 (Winter 1996), p. 16.



## 4. *Is France Just a Middle Power?*

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Let us now revisit the criteria of power discussed previously, and ask not only to what extent these can be applied to contemporary states, but how they can be said to “structure” the international system itself.

A quick historical survey reveals that the world has known a succession of preponderant powers since the 15th century: Spain, the Netherlands, France, Britain, and the United States. The dominance of each of these leading powers occurred within the context of a particular configuration of the distribution of power. In the 17th century, France, England, the Netherlands, Spain, Austria, and the Ottoman empire could all be considered great powers. In the 18th century, Spain, the Netherlands, and the Ottoman empire were supplanted by Russia and Prussia.

Scholars have suggested classifying the European states of this period into four categories: first were those able to conduct on their own a land or sea war (France and England); second were those obliged to form coalitions (Austria, Russia, Prussia, Spain, and Denmark); third were those able only to provide support; and fourth were the nonpowers. The landscape changed only slightly in the 19th century with the emergence of Italy (and its process of unification), the replacement of Prussia by Germany, and the accession to membership at the end of the century of the US and Japan. The First World War eliminated Austria as a power, and the Second changed the very notion of power.

According to Robert Franck, an essential change occurred in the nature of international relations as a result of the latter conflict.<sup>1</sup> From the time of the Renaissance up until 1942, the number of great powers had in fact varied little, between five and eight. “They formed a club having renewable memberships, with England and France always being renewed.” However, after 1942, “there were only two powers with a high degree of independence of action left. The use of the term superpower refers not only to a difference of degree but also to a difference of nature.” The emergence of the two superpowers left little room for the others. Germany and Japan, once defeated, were not burdened by severe capitulation penalties. France and Italy, respectively enemy and ally of Germany, scarcely

made a difference to the fighting or its outcome. England quickly realized its limits. With the domination of the world at stake during the period 1945 to 1991, the global configuration became bipolar.

During those years, the Soviet Union and the US grouped vast coalitions about them, and confronted each other without actually going to war; despite challenges on the part of some who rejected this dispensation, there really were only two antagonistic blocs, and they ran the world. The Soviet-American condominium basically managed world affairs and few events could truly be said to be independent of one or the other bloc. The margins of freedom of action and maneuver were extremely limited, and even the movement of nonaligned countries, created specifically to escape this double stranglehold, degenerated rapidly into pro-Soviet and pro-American camps.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union raises the question whether the world has become unipolar, with the US in sole command, or multipolar, with a more balanced power distribution. The reality is in fact neither one nor the other — the system can now be considered a bit of a hybrid.

The world is not unipolar because the Americans (despite their wishes and although they believe they embody universal values) cannot impose their will in all circumstances. How to speak of a unipolar world when one sees what little notice Benjamin Netanyahu took of American power (even though it protected Israel), how the Americans were obliged during the Kyoto conference on the protection of the environment to support certain propositions that they had initially considered unacceptable, and finally, how the Europeans were able to resist the American threats of sanctions arising from the Helms-Burton and D'Amato laws? If the world were really unipolar, could the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests have occurred, given that the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons is a major tenet of American diplomacy? Do the Chinese, by their attitude towards Washington, give the impression that they live in a unipolar world?

Neither do we live, however, in a multipolar world. None of the other poles can compete with the US. Neither Japan nor Europe, China nor Russia, India nor any other emerging power — no one country has the ability to exercise influence over the whole spectrum. The principal point of reference for power remains America. A multipolar world requires a certain balance between the poles. Such is not the case in the current system, heavily tilted as it is toward the American side. Our system could therefore be qualified as either both uni- and multipolar simultaneously, or as neither one nor the other.

How, then, should we characterize French power within this framework? The term most frequently used is “middle power.” At times, this construe is modified as “great middle power,” or “major middle power,” or even “middle superpower.” Apart from the contradictions inherent in such terms, it is clear that the search for terminology is fuelled by dissatisfaction with the inaccurate and misleading adjective “middle.”

If France truly were a “middle power” in the literal sense of the word, it would rank somewhere between 90th and 95th among today’s 190 or so states. Neither those who daily lament France’s decline nor those who eagerly take delight in it would place France at such a modest level. The reality is that of these 190 states, there are very few who are true powers — that is, who enjoy genuine independence, who can assure their own security for the most part, and who can exert an influence over other states or the course of world events. There are really only about a dozen such states, apart from the US, who can fulfil the criterion of being able to influence others. None of them, however, satisfies all the criteria of power. While they have some attributes, they lack others — whether those be a permanent seat on the Security Council, nuclear arms, economic strength, or a strong currency. The current typology of power allows us, then, to distinguish one superpower and, on the basis of very different factors, a dozen or so other powers, among whose ranks are such countries as Russia, China, India, Italy, Japan, Great Britain, Germany, Brazil, South Africa — and France. France is one of the few countries of this group able to act on the world stage.

Zbigniew Brzezinski uses the term “geopolitical actors of the first order” to refer to states with the ability and the national will to exercise power beyond their borders. They, as a result, are in a position to modify international relations and thus can potentially affect American interests. He identifies at least five pivotal points on the contemporary political map of Eurasia: France, Germany, Russia, China, and India. Missing from this grouping are the undoubtedly important countries of Britain, Japan, and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

Another, more operational, approach distinguishes the superpower, which can have a determinative effect on matters of world importance, from both the great power, which can play a role outside its own regional sphere and have a strong influence on some, but not all, global matters, and the regional power, which is a major actor only in its own geographical sphere.

Hubert Védrine, in an interview with Jean Daniel published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (28 May 1998), referred to the American “hyperpower,” a term that captured American hegemony and is analytically distinct from the concept of “superpower” (seen as too exclusively military) and of “great power” (held to be too traditional). Védrine classified France in the category of “powers having world influence,” that is, those states who wield global influence, directly or indirectly, albeit without possessing all of the attributes of power. According to the foreign minister, the following seven countries belong to this group: France, Germany, Britain, Russia, China, Japan, and India. Twenty to thirty other countries could be lumped in the category of “powers with more limited influence.” All of the remaining states constitute a final category: while their opinion must be considered in a multilateral world, they cannot be deemed “powers” because they lack direct and active influence on decisionmaking processes.

France, then, must be distinguished from those states that “count” in some international matters, but that do not play a role across the whole of the power

spectrum. From time to time such states as South Africa, Korea, Argentina, Mexico, Canada, Egypt, Cuba, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia may well have an influence in certain areas, but it is only intermittent, targeted, or regional. France must furthermore be distinguished from the approximately 140 states that are more onlookers than actors in international affairs.

In the Western public imagination, France is often depicted as a country of good living, elegance, incomparable wine, haute cuisine, and haute couture. Just as often, the French are annoyed by these prevalent clichés and dissatisfied with a stereotype of luxury and refinement — derived largely from an inherited life-style — that is implicitly incompatible with modernity and power. They respond by pointing out that their country does not dwell in the past, however agreeable that might seem. It is also the homeland of the *Ariane*, the Airbus, and high-speed trains (TGV), and is a country that means to compete internationally in the aerospace, nuclear, and electronic industries, as well as in transportation, telecommunication, and software. French leaders intend to lead a country that has influence on the direction of the world, and a voice in its important strategic decisions.

But has France, objectively speaking, the means to realize these ambitions? The current situation supplies no cause for anguish on this score, provided it is accepted that France cannot be the premier world power. That said, France has been and remains able to exploit its favourable geostrategic position, and it possesses the political, military, demographic, and economic attributes of a genuine power.

France's physical size is admittedly modest; it is only the 47th largest country (despite occasional boasts of being the third largest, on the basis an expansive exclusive economic zone under the law of the sea), and its territory represents only .37 percent of the earth's landmass. Nonetheless, France's overseas presence, which includes four departments (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, and Réunion), three territories (Polynesia, Wallis-et-Futuna, and the Antarctic zones), two territorial aggregations (Mayotte and Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon) and New Caledonia, projects its national presence into four oceans (Indian, Atlantic, Pacific, and Antarctic) as well as into the reaches of the African and American continents. A Western European country of profound strategic importance, France's opening on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans extends to some 3,500 kilometres.

When population not territory serves as the measure, France ranks 19th in the world. If the measure becomes average annual growth in population over the period 1985-94, then France plummets to 139th overall. Since 1870, France has been preoccupied by its demographic differential with Germany. This demographic datum, considered an important element of power in the 18th century (when France saw itself as populating half of the "thinking world"), and taken as incontrovertible evidence of its 19th-century "decline," continues to be greatly overestimated in France. The fallacy resides in the failure to consider other criteria of power in association with the demographic one. Seen in this light, it really matters little

that France is less populous than Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, or Thailand, or that its size is only 1/15th of Australia's, a fifth of Sudan's, or a third of Mongolia's.

France, because of its long tradition of state control and centralized government, can accomplish things. It has stable institutions and a political system in which power regularly alternates (as in 1981, 1986, 1988, 1993, and 1997) without generating political turmoil. Even the period of "cohabitation," when the president is not of the same political persuasion as the government and the National Assembly, does not handicap French diplomacy, as all factions make it a point of honour to present a united face to the world.

France's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council is not in question, whatever reforms may come to that body. There may one day be new permanent members, with or without a veto, but the current members are assuredly not prepared to give up their privileges.

In the military arena, France's position as one of the handful of officially declared nuclear powers guarantees it the same right to possess nuclear weapons as the US, Russia, China, and the UK — a right that may, grudgingly, be extended to India and Pakistan. Nuclear weapons are held to safeguard the country's physical security. France is, moreover, one of the few countries capable of projecting its armed forces; in addition to permanent stationed units, France can and does take part in peacekeeping operations and is currently developing, within the context of the European security and defence identity (ESDI) a deployable intervention force of 60,000.

France likewise remains a real economic power. Its gross national product represents 3.5 percent of the world's GNP, ranking it fourth overall — to be sure, only one-fifth that of the US, a third that of Japan, and 30 percent smaller than Germany — and well out in front of the rest of the pack. In per capita GNP, France ranks 11th, trailing frontrunners Luxembourg and Switzerland, as well as such other traditional nonpowers as Denmark, Norway, Austria, Iceland, and Sweden. Among the traditional powers, however, only Japan (3rd in GNP per capita), Germany (7th), and the US (8th) outrank France, while both Russia (55th) and China (105th) are far in the rear.

With 5.3 percent of world exports, France stands as the fourth largest exporter — and second only to the US in the export of services. France's per capita exports are twice those of the US, and half again as large as Japan's. France has furthermore been able to retain its share of the world market over the last quarter-century, and this in the face of an increasing share of that market accounted for by the emerging economies; by contrast, the relative shares of the US, Germany, and Britain have all diminished.

This result is all the more remarkable in that it stems from the country's post-Second World War opening to international competition, which constituted a profound break with France's inward-looking economic tradition. The high points in this process of beneficial rupture were the 1957 creation of the Common Market, the 1969 stabilization plan, the 1983 decision to follow a competitive

disinflation, the liberalization of prices and capital during the period 1986 to 1990, and the forging of monetary union. Whereas France was in a chronic deficit position during the 1970s and 1980s (the 1988 trade deficit amounted to FF 88 billion), it enjoyed a surplus of more than FF 174 billion in 1997. In secondary manufacturing alone, France was able to turn a 1988 deficit of FF 85 billion into a 1997 surplus of FF 117 billion. Analysts agree that France's overall foreign trade is now structurally in a position of surplus: deficits of FF 50 billion and FF 30 billion in 1990 and 1991, respectively, were followed by surpluses of FF 31 billion in 1992, FF 88 billion in 1993, FF 82 billion in 1994, FF 104 billion in 1995, and FF 91 billion in 1996.

Since 1993, France has also become a net exporter of long-term capital. It is also becoming a magnet for foreign investment, ranking number two (after the UK) on the European hit parade. According to data published in February 1998 by Ernst & Young, France attracted 19.3 percent of the 2,076 international investment projects recorded in Europe in 1997; this compared with 28.8 percent for Britain, 7 percent for Ireland, 6.4 percent for Germany, 5.7 percent for Poland, and 4.9 percent for Hungary. That same source commented that France "remains a very desirable region for foreign investors, especially for the United States (with 22.3 percent of the investments), Germany (16.3 percent), and the United Kingdom (10 percent)." Among the French advantages identified were its position in the centre of Europe, the size of its domestic market, the quality of its infrastructure, and the productivity of its workforce. France today ranks third overall as a recipient of foreign investment (\$142 billion in 1994), behind the UK (\$214 billion) and the US (\$509 billion), but ahead of Germany (\$132 billion). It also ranks fourth among the world's investors abroad.

It should also be noted that France is by far the leading exporter of food products, and that, with 60 million visitors annually, it is the world's premier tourist destination.

Steven Kaplan, a professor at Cornell University, states categorically that the French are "serious players on all levels of the international landscape. If we look at the criteria of power — culture, economy, politics, defense — the French are among the best in each of these areas."<sup>3</sup> The UN's index of human development ranks France seventh overall, after Canada, the US, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and Finland.

France has been a major player in all of the critical events of the past decade — perestroika, fall of the Berlin wall, German reunification, ending of the division of Europe, unlimited extension of the treaty on nuclear nonproliferation (NPT), Gulf War, introduction of the Euro, Kosovo, tackling of environmental problems, advances made in the fight against AIDS, problem of Third World debt, etc. Above and beyond the question of whether or not French leaders actually "negotiated" or even anticipated these developments, it is sufficient to note that in each instance France has played a part. Its role was never, on its own, determinative, but are there any countries capable of resolving such a list of problems on their own?



France was, in any event, deeply implicated in the management of these matters. The only other country involved more deeply was the obviously much more influential US.

If, therefore, we look at the world as it is and not as we might wish it to be, we see the debate over French power in a different light. It is only those for whom first place is all that counts who consider France no longer to be a great power; their sense of France's having fallen is also undoubtedly accentuated by the fact that it once stood so high in the international hierarchy. France, nonetheless, remains part of a very small group of countries that can have a decisive effect on many issues.

The perception of a France in inevitable decline and relegated to an inferior, even negligible, role in the management of world affairs is based, as we have glimpsed in this and the preceding chapters, upon a threefold analytical mistake, consisting of 1) an erroneous interpretation of France's past that saw it as a permanent triumphal march; 2) a fallacious definition of international power, the nature of which changed completely during the latter part of the 20th century; and 3) a mistaken idea of the contemporary international hierarchy.

## Notes

1. Robert Franck, *La hantise du déclin: Le rang de la France en Europe, 1920-1960 — Finances, défense et identité nationale* (Paris: Belin, 1994).
2. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
3. *Time*, 5 December 1995.



## 5. *The Franco-American Relationship*

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Any discussion concerning French power necessarily involves an examination of the relationship between France and the United States. Power being a relative concept, and because France wishes to be a great power, it naturally compares itself with the country that is the point of reference in this sphere.

Both countries have always been obsessed by their position in the world. From its very beginnings, America questioned whether it should be involved in global affairs. Since Harry S Truman's 1947 answer in the affirmative, a constant fear of overcommitment has regularly informed the debate about the proper degree of US involvement. And although the US sometimes tires of being responsible for the world, it does not want anyone else to take over the task.

France has fears that are both similar and different. It believes that it has a mission in the world. As the eldest daughter of the Church and the birthplace of the Enlightenment and of human rights, France has always seen itself as both exceptional and universal. Very much like America, France regards it as its duty to export its "universal" values for the good of all. It has even justified its forays into territorial expansion — the Napoleonic wars and colonization — by a discourse premised on the general interest, one emphasizing the diffusion of the rights of man, the principle of legality, and the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Given that both countries see themselves as bearing a universal message, the competition between them is obvious. Two formidable narcissisms confront each other, the only societies in the world who believe in their own mission of civilizing the world and in the universal applicability of their own model. (That said, it could only be an American president who could boast, as has Bill Clinton, of his land being the world's "indispensable" country.)

The irreversible difference of power between the two countries has meant that a competition between equals is impossible; history has already decided that issue. Since 1945, American supremacy has been unequalled, and the breakup of

the Soviet Union has deprived France of its delightful role as a reluctant ally, albeit one “indispensable” in its own way to the cohesiveness of the Atlantic alliance during moments of greatest peril. Franco-American relations have thus long been characterized by contradiction, with France oscillating between misplaced arrogance and submission.

When in August 1997 the new French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, announced at a gathering of ambassadors that Paris recognized without bitterness America’s status as the world’s uncontested superpower, and that Paris (while able to defend its legitimate interests) would no longer delude itself with visions of rivalry, his simple statement of the obvious amounted to a Copernican revolution in French diplomacy.

It would be not only illusory but quite simply foolish to think that France could compete with the US in terms of power. Mere pretension by Paris to such a role suffices to unleash reactions from Eastern Europe to the Middle East that run the gamut from hostility to derision. The US, having neither equals nor rivals, is the first historical global power: it is the only state with the full range of military assets — nuclear weapons, power-projection capability, satellites, technologically sophisticated arms, etc. As well, it is the world’s premier economy, with uncontested innovative and adaptive abilities. If that were not enough, it possesses a culture that has universal appeal.

The world’s earlier empires (Roman, Chinese, Mongol) were more regional than global. No other power can compete with America in the four essential areas (military, economic, technological, and cultural) that make for global preponderance. Its strength is, moreover, reinforced by a belief in American superiority that has been psychologically integrated by most world leaders. This is without doubt the sign of true hegemony: at a time when the US seems more and more reluctant to use force, others are convinced that the Americans are their only entirely credible protectors!

Faced with this American colossus, France must learn to avoid the twin pitfalls of arrogance and resignation, between which it seems all too often to alternate. Realism provides the only means for avoiding a head-on collision. It may have been necessary in de Gaulle’s time to make impassioned, even inflammatory, declarations in order to shake off the American yoke; such behaviour today, however, gives the impression not of a great and independent country, but rather of a power whose ability to reason is made fuzzy by its decline, one whose verbal aggression increases in direct proportion to the *decrease* in its ability to act. It is important never to fight the US alone, and especially not in public. Each time France has tried this, it has been roundly thumped.

Thus, in obstinately supporting Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s candidacy for a second term as secretary general of the United Nations, France only proved, if proof were needed, that geopolitical realities count for much more than legal fictions. Consider the following. After the secretary general announced he would stand for a second term, the Clinton administration came out against his candidacy; at the

same time (20 June 1996), it stated that it would support another African candidate. On 8 July, France gave its backing to Boutros-Ghali. In the first vote, held on 19 November 1996, the US vetoed the latter's candidacy, despite the fact that the other 14 members of the Security Council favoured it. France refused to countenance the candidacy of any other African. On 4 December, Boutros-Ghali withdrew from the race, while three other Africans announced their candidacy. A straw vote held in the Security Council on 10 December revealed that Kofi Annan had the greatest support (10 to 4, with France voting against). Not until 12 June would the logjam be broken, through a Franco-American agreement that had France lifting its veto of Kofi Annan in return for a French diplomat's being awarded the post of assistant secretary general responsible for peacekeeping, as well as for an American pledge to pay arrears owing to the UN. The Security Council then named Kofi Annan secretary general by acclamation.

The American veto had effectively prohibited the election of Boutros-Ghali, while France's veto only survived one round of voting. The fact that France was current in its financial obligations to the UN while the US was not had no effect on veto rights. Many countries condemned the American decision in the corridors and even publicly, but they resigned themselves to accepting it, as an element of nature that simply could not be withstood. Had France maintained its veto, the others, including France's own supporters, would soon have found its attitude to be tiresome as well as misguided.

Similarly, in April 1996 France sent its foreign minister on a series of trips to the Middle East (in the manner of an American secretary of state, but without the weight of American power behind him), where he purported to speak for Europe without even having taken the time to find a common position or even to consult France's European partners. Not surprisingly, France found itself disavowed by those partners, shunned by Israel, and isolated by the US.

France's preservation of its status as a power will in large measure depend upon the attitude it takes towards the US. Zbigniew Brzezinski evinces optimism about America's being too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad, and argues that democracy simply precludes any imperial temptation on Washington's part.<sup>1</sup> He quickly modifies his own conclusion, however, in relating that the US considers disagreements between Washington and European capitals as insubordination rather than as simple differences between equals. He goes on to affirm that Western Europe today is largely an American protectorate, its countries reminiscent of the vassal states of earlier empires. This situation he finds to be as unhealthy for the US as it is for the European countries.

In these circumstances, a policy of realism is the only approach open to France that holds out the prospect of actually working. It must neither overestimate its own weight nor underestimate the extent of the problem. This is precisely the course France did *not* follow in 1995, when it decided, in the context of its policy toward NATO, to reenter the integrated military command structure of the Atlantic alliance.

The argument in favour of this decision can be summarized as follows. The countries of Europe do not want a European pillar of defence outside NATO. This truth, however regrettable, must be recognized, and France should therefore no longer seek to fashion a European identity apart from NATO, but should prepare instead to reenter the organization in order to continue to exert influence. The objective thus became one of France completely reintegrating in NATO in return for a Europeanization of the alliance and a greater sharing of power between Europeans and Americans.

French leaders in this matter both underestimated France's weight ("France cannot do anything outside of NATO") yet overestimated the value of its reintegration into the military command structure, thinking that this position (or even its mere announcement) would be sufficient to modify the internal situation of the alliance and permit its Europeanization. In order to justify their decision in the face of domestic criticism, French leaders were obliged to multiply their declarations concerning the impossibility of accomplishing anything tangible outside the alliance, and to emphasize the meagre harvest of their European diplomatic efforts.

In doing so, however, they contributed mightily to a reevaluation of the alliance's perceived strength. This homage to NATO, ironically, was coming from the only member state that had ever claimed to offer an alternative to atlanticism. Such an admission of American supremacy by the only European country that had proposed an alternative to the US could only serve to whet Washington's rediscovered appetite for hegemony. The element of resignation implicit in France's action was accentuated by its being accompanied by a simultaneous sharp decrease in military spending.

Having now said that it was going to reenter NATO because it proved impossible to accomplish anything outside of it, France nonetheless did stay on the outside when it realized — what a surprise! — that the Americans were unprepared to grant the Europeans a greater say in running the organization. How was it possible to believe that the Americans would allow a European autonomy to develop at the very core of NATO, to think that they would renounce their accustomed, longstanding, and deeply rooted supremacy? France now finds itself obliged to avoid reintegrating militarily since so doing, given the recent history, would be tantamount to an abdication — yet at the same time it must avoid the trap of systematically obstructing, or passionately decrying, the course of events, since that would only drive its European allies further into the comforting arms of the Americans.

France, the symbol of independence from the US, submitted and fell into line just when it was most important to stand fast. It exchanged its familiar and universally accepted role, not as a substitute for America but rather as an alternative voice, in order to enter the race for second place, but with neither the weight of Germany nor the influence of Britain. In order to count, France cannot be integrated, but must instead continue to work for greater European strategic autonomy, all the while remaining an active and loyal partner of the alliance, which continues to be the essential axis of contemporary European security.

When France does take a diplomatic stance different from that of the US (but without embellishing it with vitriol), it actually can make itself heard, providing its cause possesses a certain legitimacy. This was the case during the early 1998 crisis over the Iraqi presidential sites, when the world prepared itself (with similar media frenzy) to experience “Gulf War 2.” French diplomacy, under the leadership of President Jacques Chirac and Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, was able for a time to effect a peaceful solution, all the more exemplary in that it employed the ingredients of a policy permitting France to play a more important role in an international crisis than was justified by its actual power. Starting from a credible political and military position (if France had not participated in the Gulf War, it would have lacked all legitimacy to propose a peaceful solution to the crisis), proposing an alternative way without appearing to be primarily and systematically anti-American, consulting abundantly with its partners, relying intelligently on its status as permanent member of the Security Council, and refraining from crowing over its success at the time, leaving to the French and foreign media the task of paying homage to its diplomacy — such were the bases of an effective French diplomatic intervention in early 1998.

The differing viewpoints of Paris and Washington became apparent on 29 January, during a working dinner between Madeleine Albright and Hubert Védrine. However, the lines of communication were never cut, and Paris’ sending of an envoy (the secretary-general of the Quai d’Orsay) to Baghdad was not perceived as an attempt to get unwarranted recognition, much less to go it alone. Although Paris’ attitude to Iraq is usually thought to be tainted by commercial interests (even when that country is under embargo), France’s continual consultations with Washington and London, fortified by leaks deftly managed by American leaders, prevented the Anglo-Saxon press from fulminating against its position. The French envoy, while stressing the necessity of complying with the various Security Council resolutions, suggested a compromise concerning access to the presidential sites that bought some short-term resolution of the crisis, by providing a means of distinguishing between the places of habitation, on the one hand, and the surrounding areas on the other. A visit by the secretary general from 20 to 22 February enabled Baghdad’s agreement, and put off for ten more months the military operations desired by the Americans.

France does not have the means to compete with the US. Europe itself lacks both the means and the desire to do so. But France need not transform herself into a zealous subordinate preoccupied with the preemption of its own desires and with the most diligent application of a policy defined in Washington. France, Europe, and the US will have similar and even shared perceptions and positions in the majority of international problems they confront. There may, nevertheless, be cases where they differ and even diverge; at least between democracies, alliance cannot mean blind submission.

The US has a tendency to confuse leadership and hegemony, especially because it considers its mission to be altruistic and undertaken at the behest of other

countries; this is not always the case. In the long run, this attitude bespeaks a lack of understanding between the Western allies. France's role, in this context, is to pose the hard questions about readjusting the poles of power. This must be done with intelligent arguments and in the proper tone. It would be senseless to contest gratuitously American superiority. By the same token, it would be just as foolhardy for France to conclude that it had best do everything it can to please the world's leader, refraining from even the hint of action that might displease Washington, in the hopes of being well rewarded.

The road to a rebalancing the bilateral relationship between France and the US is to be found in a candid recognition of points of agreement and disagreement, a lucid analysis of the relationship of strength, a recognition of what needs to be changed, the forging of coalitions (with other Europeans, other power poles, and other regional groups) whose shapes may change with the matters at issue — and through never speaking too loudly in an attempt to make up for the small stick France carries. These Americans are the world's greatest power. But is it not in their own long-term interest to be able to count on a strong Europe to help them run the world in the least chaotic manner possible?

## Note

1. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).



## 6. *France and Europe*

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The transformation of the European Community into the European Union and the ratification by referendum of the treaty of Maastricht, rekindled the debate about the significance for France of the construction of the European house.

France was deeply divided during the years 1952 to 1954 by the debate over the European Defence Community (EDC). Partisans of a genuine community saw the building of a common European defence (in tandem with the American protective embrace) as a way to guarantee France's security in the face of the Soviet menace. The EDC also had the advantage of allowing German participation in the common effort without incurring the risk of rebuilding an autonomous German army. The opponents of the EDC denounced the melding of the French army into an illusory European ensemble, implying as it did the renunciation of *national* defence.

What would the situation be like today had France, back in 1954, not killed the very project that it itself had proposed a scant two years earlier? Perhaps France would have been prevented from building its nuclear arsenal. Perhaps Europe might have been able to construct a security system less dependent upon the United States. It is, of course, too difficult — or maybe too easy? — to rewrite history. It remains nonetheless possible to conclude that in the early 1950s it was simply premature to begin the construction of Europe with what should have been its final element, namely defence.

The French debate on the issue may have subsequently subsided, but it did not disappear. Although it would be inexact to pretend that from 1956 on a French consensus about Europe existed, it is true that the divergences that so often cropped up between the Gaullists and the Communists on the one hand, and the Socialists on the other, never reached the same level of intensity as they had earlier. Even the 1972 referendum on the entry of Britain, Ireland, and Denmark into the EC generated little controversy, despite the fact that an ulterior motive of its organizer, President Georges Pompidou, was to divide the Socialists and the Communists

(then on the brink of concluding a common government program) — since one of their principal points of disagreement was over the construction of Europe.

Things would not be so tranquil at the beginning of the 1990s, given the novelty of such developments as the deepening of European integration; the progressive transfer of certain decisionmaking powers to common authorities, held to represent a relinquishing of “national” power; the efforts at fiscal probity in order to facilitate the move to a common currency, regarded simultaneously as nothing other than a blind following of German national monetary policy and as the cause of a worsening social crisis at home; the disquietude experienced by many over German reunification; the feeble European actions to extinguish the conflict in Yugoslavia; the general lassitude induced by twenty years of economic crisis, worsening unemployment, and broken promises of recovery, despite repeated changes in government.

All of this resulted in an evident disenchantment with Europe at a time when the objective was nothing other than to *accelerate* the building of Europe, so as better to deal with those very challenges. François Mitterrand’s plumping for Europe helped to transform this disenchantment into outright hostility, predicated upon a fear of the unknown and the pessimistic conviction that any change would only result in the further fraying of the social fabric.

The manner of conducting European affairs changed, due to the consequences of the quest for integration. With its enlargement, Europe’s centre of gravity shifted. France was no longer able to impose its ideas on the European partners. The right of veto, practical perhaps in a Europe of six, became a purely defensive device in a Europe of fifteen.

Just as clearly, French leadership was something very different in that smaller Europe, where France’s principal partners included a divided and politically inhibited Germany and an economically weak Italy without international ambitions, than it would be in the larger Europe, where Germany and Italy have shed their respective handicaps, where the United Kingdom is important, where Spain has a voice, where the Nordic countries have a culture different from that of France, and where the Benelux countries no longer feel obliged automatically to align themselves with France.

France can no longer impose solutions by dint of its status as the most important founding member, and the only partner with a relatively ample margin of diplomatic maneuver. Today, France must continually negotiate with the other fourteen member states; tomorrow, it must do so with the other twenty or twenty-five.

This near-mathematical necessity for France to make a greater investment of energy at the same time as its relative authority was being diluted and its influence weakened happened to coincide with the distressing image of a Europe that was clearly faltering. No sooner had it been proclaimed that the treaty of Maastricht endowed Europe with a common foreign and security policy than Jacques Poos, prime minister of Luxembourg and president of the European Council, declared,

in respect of the growing conflict in Yugoslavia, the “hour of Europe had arrived.” Disillusionment set in quickly, as the hour turned into a long and uncomfortable one in which Europe showed itself incapable of halting the conflict. Was it even possible for it to do so at that time? Did anyone upbraid the US during the 1980s for not putting an end to the civil wars in Central America? In any event, many began to ask if France was not losing out on the European deal, if it had not abandoned national independence for the shadow of a Europe unable to behave like a power, and if, contrary to Georges Bidault’s formula, it was simply impossible to make Europe without unmaking France?

On the diplomatic level, Europe was said to have the double defect of paralyzing autonomous national action without permitting collective decisionmaking, the latter demerit stemming from differing historical perceptions of common interest. In effect, Europe is a congeries of 1) countries that are profoundly atlanticist, 2) countries that have long renounced any international ambitions, 3) neutral countries still mistrustful of even the whiff of power, 4) countries possessed of an extroverted vision of their own security needs, and 5) countries possessed of just the opposite!

Thus the three great European countries (Germany, the United Kingdom, and France), which could provide the impetus for the formation of a common foreign and security policy, have proved too diverse to act in concert. Britain, a nuclear power with world interests and ambitions, is hampered by a specific link with the US, known as the “special relationship.” It believes that its influence stems more from NATO than from EU membership, and thus insists that the development of the latter not be to the detriment of the former. If France regards Europe as its “force multiplier,” then Britain sees NATO in the same way.

For its part, Germany remains moulded by the Second World War, as evidenced both by the modesty of its global strategic presence and by its dependence on the US. It is afraid of itself, and of the negative consequences of an overly strong assertion of its national interests. It fears a renationalization of its defence policy, and that of others. NATO, less necessary than it used to be for assuring Germany’s security and defence, is more than ever needed to prevent the country from becoming “unhinged” once more. Just as the gambler who, fearful of the consequences of an irresistible passion, swears off going to the casino, so does Germany, thanks to NATO, deny itself national independence. However, this does not mean that it works for genuine European autonomy.

The other European countries, lacking the weight or the status of the three majors, see NATO as a way of counterbalancing both France and Germany, seen singly or together to exert too strong an influence at the heart of Europe. Their comfortable habit of depending on the US, their fear of the unknown (defined as anything other than such dependence), their preference for an external guardian, and their budgetary constraints all steer them in the same direction.

Since the French project of strategic autonomy for Europe is so difficult to implement, the European option becomes counterproductive for French power, or

so it is said. Those who are against Europe are not unfamiliar with the argument that Europe can have a multiplier role in respect of French power; they simply reject the argument. Their criticism of the European house is not based on social or economic grounds. Instead, in a manner similar to how NATO is glimpsed by some in the US (as a curb on American sovereignty), Europe is denounced because the thousands of links it creates are held to restrain French power.

Thus, for Marie-France Garaud,

if France is, from many standpoints, no longer anything more than a middle power, then only by preserving its independence can it influence the course of events. Because its agreement will always be necessary, others will have to take its point of view into account. The moment that France is reduced to a minority representation in a European organism where the majority rules, it will have lost the means to defend its interests, to make its principles heard, and (no matter how able its government may be) to recover France's rank and its role. It will also have renounced democracy, which is a national conception. The Maastricht rules ... place national sovereignty under foreign domination.<sup>1</sup>

Philippe Séguin goes even further: "The Europe that is proposed to us is neither free, just, nor efficient. It buries the idea of national sovereignty and the great principles arising from the Revolution. Nineteen-ninety-two is the true antithesis of 1789."<sup>2</sup>

On the left, Jean-Pierre Chevènement makes a comparable case. "The European Community," he writes, "is a technocratic structure that, under the cover of liberalism, constitutes an instrument in the hands of the Americans. It does not defend the industry, agriculture, or culture of its member states in commercial negotiations." During a debate on the government's European policy held on 18 May 1993, Chevènement deplored the fact that, in connection with the GATT negotiations, the "liberal philosophy of the Commission only reflects the reign of the religion of free trade at GATT, a religion largely inspired by the United States on the condition that it applies to the others only. This religion has been relayed by certain European countries for commercial, geopolitical, or simply ideological reasons, as it has by the majority of the establishment in the other countries." Since France apparently exerts no control over the Commission, especially in matters of foreign trade, and since the enlargement of the EC had further marginalized it, why not choose sovereignty, to "act for oneself within the limits of one's power and in the context of one's agreements"? The sovereignty of a nation is "characterized less by the extent of its prerogatives than by its existence and its participation in history."<sup>3</sup>

Philippe de Villiers laments the fact that, diluted into Europe, the French people can only form 11.5 percent of the electorate, a figure that would further be reduced to 7.7 percent after enlargement to fifteen members. Accordingly, French sovereignty would become "confiscated by the European institutions."<sup>4</sup>

Even worse: the "European corset" would encircle all aspects of everyday life. Two examples are typically provided. In March 1997, the French president

announced that he had asked his economics minister to reduce to 5.6 percent the VAT on multimedia products and services. Alas, this measure, designed to stimulate the market for domestic computers, proved difficult to introduce — for European reasons, of course. The list of so-called “essential” products, which can benefit from a reduced VAT rate, can only be modified by the unanimous consent of the fifteen EU members.

Similarly, Prime Minister Alain Juppé pronounced himself personally in favour of the abandonment of daylight savings time, which he believed disturbed the rhythm of children and of farm animals. A UDF member (François-Michel Gonnot) was in charge of this reform, which Ségolène Royal, on the left, had long favoured. Once again, a European directive prevented a national decision from being taken. This prompted Philippe Séguin (who charged that all France’s governments had taken decisions without pondering the consequences) to announce that “we’re on a toboggan ride with no means of hanging on.”<sup>5</sup>

The Maastricht treaty, successor to the Single European Act, is seen as attempting to regiment and coordinate national legislation, by negotiation or force. White, green, and blue papers proliferate, describing procedures designed to give the European peoples a common destiny. The Commission and the Court of Justice band together to impose a uniform Europe against both national specificities and, of course, national interests. Brussels is heralded as the capital of the “ayatollahs” of European conformism, who rule by “ukase.” France is sidelined by an evolutionary process it can no longer control.

The creation of the euro and the disappearance of the franc provoke further anguish. Curiously, the opponents of the euro, who simultaneously denounce Germany’s domination of Europe, do not notice that Berlin, in giving up the mark, is making a greater sacrifice on the altar of European construction than is France. Instead, they denounce the abandonment of sovereignty to a Central European Bank that, in their eyes, will be dominated by Germany.

French monetary autonomy with respect to the mark is, and has for some time been, only theoretical. The franc has not been strong enough to be a prop of sovereignty. The euro can, however, enable France to reclaim real, albeit shared, monetary sovereignty. In addition, the euro, in allowing for a final unification of the European market, avoiding the fluctuations of monetary values between European countries, and symbolizing European identity itself, can reinforce European power.

The euro, internal currency of the European Union, is destined to become, like the dollar and the yen, an international currency. It is quoted in the major financial centres, and plays an essential role on the exchange markets. If it can remain strong, it will enable Europe, potentially the world’s greatest commercial power, to give expression to its economic prowess. Its adoption further allows Europe to appear to be a genuine monetary union, and will thus contribute to the attainment of multipolarity. Europe should, as a result, be strengthened in international negotiations.

The euro can permit Europe to become a world financial and economic actor of the first order. The EU, creator of more than 30 percent of the world's wealth, has not heretofore had any monetary presence, whereas the US, which creates 20 percent of world wealth, has benefited from the dollar's being used in 40 percent of world trade. The euro has in fact become the dollar's leading competitor since its introduction in January 1999, admittedly with indifferent results in the early going.

But over the long haul, the most important consequences of the euro will be politico-strategic. It should enable the Europeans to appreciate their own strength and thus to become more sure of themselves. It should facilitate the completion of the construction of Europe, by adding economic, commercial, and financial dimensions to a political and strategic Europe. And it should demonstrate to Europeans how fungible their military strength can be.

The choice of Europe as the multiplier of French power is not a partisan one; in fact, it has been made by all presidents of the Fifth Republic. For Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, it was in France's interest to "direct the organization" of Europe. "France is our homeland, Europe is our future," echoed François Mitterrand. The expanded framework of Europe in fact enables France to achieve what it cannot accomplish alone. "Europe" is not only the means of avoiding the outbreak of another war on the continent, and of stimulating the economies of the member countries; it also provides the means of assuring France's own influence.

This latter explains the remarkable conversion of Jacques Chirac who, in his 1978 appeal at Cochin, said "No to the international obliteration of France.... No to a vassal France in a merchant Empire, no to a France who resigns today in order to wipe itself out tomorrow." Fourteen years later, Chirac defied the majority opinion of his own party to campaign, courageously, in favour of Maastricht, and after becoming president he continued to place Europe at the centre of his diplomacy, thereby favouring the long-term national interest over short-term partisan interests.

Let us imagine for a moment what would happen were France to apply the brakes to the building of Europe, or if the latter were to be halted or to backslide for any reason. Does anyone believe that the crumbling of Europe would endow France with more power? While still carrying on a discourse of power, would France follow instead the model of Switzerland (without the advantages of the latter's long-established prosperity), of Salazar's Portugal, or of Hoxa's Albania? That is why the European course has held steady, despite all the appeals for a "policy" and all of the anathema against the "pensée unique."

There are countless examples of situations in which France has been able to impose its viewpoint because it could rely on the concerted strength of other European countries. It is because the Europeans banded together that they were able to resist the Helms-Burton and D'Amato acts which, without preliminary consultation, aimed at preventing them and others from trading with Cuba, Iran, and Libya. The Europeans were also able to attach some conditions to the Boeing/

McDonnell-Douglas merger. France was also able to obtain certain concessions on the Common Agricultural Policy and on culture during the Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations — by making an appeal to European solidarity.

During the international conference on climate held in early December 1997 at Kyoto, European strength revealed itself in a most remarkable way. The objective was to limit and reduce gases harmful to the ozone layer, which result in the warming of the planet. Since the dawn of the industrial age the temperature of the earth has risen by .5°C and the level of the oceans by between 10 and 25 cm; it is possible that over the course of a century temperatures may rise at a rate ten to twenty times that of the previous 10,000 years. The absolute increase could be of between 1° and 3.5° or even as much as 5°C by the year 2100, which could unleash one of the greatest climatic changes of all time.

At the beginning of the conference, positions varied. The OPEC countries denied the gravity of the situation. The US wanted to stabilize levels of emissions in 2010 at 1990 levels, and to introduce a system of exchanges similar to “negotiable licences,” with pollution becoming as freely traded as wheat on the Chicago exchange or metals on the London exchange. For its part, the EU, supported by Latin America (except Argentina) and the Third World, proposed reducing emissions by 15 percent. The Europeans refused the system of exchanges except if those could be used to reduce not just stabilize emissions; they proposed the initial exemption of the Third World countries so as not to penalize their development.

During the opening session of 1 December 1997, the US announced that it would not approve an accord that was ineffective and contrary to its interests. By the end of the summit, a compromise had nevertheless been reached. It called for an average 5.2 percent reduction in toxic emissions in the industrialized countries, before the period 2008-2012. The fifteen EU countries undertook to lower their emissions by 8 percent, on a scale of their choosing; Canada and Japan agreed to a 6 percent reduction. In the face of international pressure as well as pressure from domestic opinion, the US accepted the principle of a 7 percent lowering and gave up both the system of exchanges and the binding of Third World countries.

The EU had been successful; it did not bow to the Americans. The solidarity of its members paid off. In the end, the US had to accept seven additional constraints, while the EU had seven fewer than at the outset. France was able to rediscover a leadership role in the negotiations and to play a large part in maintaining a firm European position against the Americans. It is clear that this outcome would have been impossible without the backdrop of European strength. The Kyoto conference thus stands out as an excellent illustration of the right way for France to use Europe as a force multiplier: pick a legitimate position to defend; garner support from the other Europeans; and show initiative yet not to the point of acting like a free-lancer.

When surveyed on Europe, the majority of French voters respond favourably: 52 percent believe that, all in all, France benefits from membership in the EU; 60

percent support a common currency; 73 percent envisage a strengthening of the political powers of the EU; 54 percent think the continued construction of the European house will have positive effects on economic growth; and 62 percent are of the opinion that with the EU, France will be better protected against the downside risks of globalization.

As for life-style issues, which touch on the specificity of a culture, the designers of this poll, Gérard Grunberg and Pascal Perrineau, emphasize that “contrary to the discourse on the loss of cultural identity, the French do not appear to fear assimilation into the European whole. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents even hope for positive effects in this area, leading to a relativization of the range of identity discourses.”<sup>6</sup> They conclude that the country’s pro-European parties have been too timid, since the French are convinced not only that building Europe is inevitable, but that it is also beneficial.

It is understandable that political groupings whose agendas do not include the promotion of French power (e.g., the Communists or the ecologists) do not declare themselves in favour of Europe. What is more curious are those who, in the same breath, spout an anti-European rhetoric yet constantly appeal to the grandeur of France. This is a complete contradiction. An isolated France could not create an attractive alternative to American positions. What, it might be asked, could France have hoped to accomplish regarding the host of issues upon which it has had differences with Washington without the European consensus in which it managed to wrap itself?

Although they purport to combat Europe for the good of France, the anti-Europeans actually do injury to the French national cause. However, this type of contradiction is not novel in French history: the same debate, *mutatis mutandis*, arose concerning both colonization and decolonization. In both of those controversies, those who invoked most frequently the grandeur of France, those who held themselves out as the most nationalistic, would not have been able to serve the cause they claimed to represent if they *had* applied their policies.

After the 1870 defeat, the debate about French power was in fact largely tied to the debate on colonization. Would France be strengthened through the colonial adventure, or did the latter represent instead a dangerous scattering of French forces? Raoul Girardet sees this debate as a confrontation between two contradictory types of nationalism, one with ambitions of world expansion, the other limited to the continent.<sup>7</sup>

Gambetta held the first opinion to be correct. If France truly wanted to regain its proper standing, it could not withdraw from the world: “It is through expanding, through influencing the external world, through taking one’s place in the common life of mankind that nations continue and endure.” (Speech made at Angers, 7 April 1872.) Jules Ferry favoured colonial expansion so that France would not be outpaced by rival powers; it should cover every available square on the global chessboard to ensure the supply of raw materials and a market for its products. In 1890 he described colonial policy as the product of industrial policy.



Nevertheless, he saw the imperial impetus being provided by humanitarian motives, which legitimized the whole endeavour: colonialization, he argued, furthered the struggle, begun more than a century earlier, between the spirit of the Enlightenment and that of injustice, between slavery and submission to the forces of darkness. It was a crusade for civilization. (Speech by Jules Ferry to the Chamber of Deputies, 28 July 1885.)

The anticolonialists, for their part, believed that France was dissipating, that it was wasting scarce resources on useless expeditions, and that because of its declining birth rate, it did not have a surplus population sufficient to sustain true emigration. In their eyes, the country was too unstable and politically divided to permit itself the luxury of global adventurism. Colonization drastically drained the budget, deprived the country of troops needed in Europe, isolated France diplomatically through the competition with London, and diverted French public opinion from what should have been its sole preoccupation — the reconquest of Alsace-Lorraine. Paul Déroulède put it bitterly: “I have lost two sisters, and you offer me twenty servants.”

The Fachoda episode was thus seen as proof of the weakening of French power: France had extended itself too far afield, and lacked the means of defending its empire. Colonialism had also blinded France’s leaders to the rise of a new threat right next door. Revision of its military policy was unavoidable: could France really expect to have both an army as strong as Germany’s and a navy as strong as Britain’s? The Socialists reiterated their objection in principle to colonization, which “brings no happiness to the working class,” and one party on the right considered it absolutely pointless, since France (unlike England) had a “balanced” economy, and thus did not need to search for external markets in which it might dispose of its industrial surplus.

Decolonization would similarly unleash an anguished debate among the country’s political class. Echoes of the preceding century’s polemics over colonization reappeared in different form, moral and power issues were once again confused, and bitterly opposing coalitions were forged.

Some defended decolonization in the name of the right of a people to determine its own future; others did so in the name of French interests. Raymond Aron and Raymond Cartier both belonged to the second group, though for different reasons. Denouncing the costs involved in maintaining French tutelage, Aron pointed to the example of the Netherlands, which had prospered *after* the independence of Indonesia, something that at first had not been considered likely. Aron further understood that it was impossible to preserve a colonial link against the wishes of the colonized, and that France would have to face up to this fact: “France needs reality therapy. It can no longer act the part of a great power, and the Algerian drama merely marks French passage from a world to a continental power.”

The nationalists, on the contrary, maintained that the government did not have the right to dispose of this colonial heritage. As Gaston Monnerville put it in

1945, “without an empire, France would simply be a liberated country. Thanks to its empire, it is a conquering country.” In this spirit, the colonialists recalled that the reign of Louis XV, who gave up Canada and India to the British in the 1763 treaty of Paris, constituted one of the worst episodes in the country’s history. Without its colonies, France would be second rank, incapable of influencing the great decisions of history. For Jacques Soustelle, “to abandon Algeria is to condemn France to decline. To save Algeria is to put a stop to the horrendous process of degradation, and to give back hope and opportunities to our country, its people and its youth.”

As Raoul Girardet explained it, all this arose from a profound crisis in French society, triggered by the reality of having to learn to live with powerlessness. The post-1945 leaders had witnessed the “overwhelming spectacle of an army crumbling, of a nation giving way, of a people giving up. The great movement away from colonies is simply assimilated to a new capitulation.... Patriotism developed in the same climate of anguish: it remains haunted by the idea of decline.” François Mitterrand’s 1957 book, *Présence française et abandon*, was not just a defence of the Mendès-France government (in which he had participated); it was also a warning against a “blind” refusal to take into account the nationalistic aspirations of the colonized peoples, which could eventually result in the complete disappearance of France’s overseas presence. Mitterrand argued for negotiation and evolution, in order to preserve some of France’s foreign heritage.

Was not de Gaulle’s great historical contribution his recognition that France had to rid itself of the Algerian millstone if it wanted to regain its diplomatic freedom of action, and orient itself towards the future in strategic matters? Once again, those who most often spoke of France’s “grandeur” were probably those who least contributed to its preservation.

Today’s anti-Europeans, like the anticolonialists of the 19th century or those who favoured maintaining the colonial link in the latter half of our own century (in the name of the national interest), would have harmed France had they succeeded in imposing their political agenda. But they have not succeeded, and it is a good thing they have failed.

The anti-Europeans harbour a strong fear that France’s national identity will be swallowed up by Europe. But does the European construction really threaten national identity, or is the threat instead being posed by a set of technological and strategic changes that France alone cannot control? For France, Europe can be both a bulwark and a trampoline. A bulwark, because France can best protect its identity within a group of European countries all of whom, while conscious of their need for cooperation, share its concern for preservation of identity. To contrast French identity with European identity makes no sense, for the good reason that today identities themselves are less “unique” than they once were; states, like individuals, are characterized by a multitude of identifications that are complementary rather than contradictory. Just as an individual is defined by such factors as profession, place of residence, and family, so too can a country be, at one and

the same time, France, a member of the EU, the UN, or a series of other international organizations.

But Europe is also a trampoline. France is one of the rare countries today that want to make Europe a power, rather than a simple economic space. Just as political Europe was not built in a day, so strategic Europe will not be built in the twinkling of an eye. Over time, however, Europe can become *the* major power in a multipolar world. France may not be the boss of this Europe, but it will be one of the most influential countries at its heart. Europe functions, more than any other multilateral entity, as a “mega-multiplier” of French power.

## Notes

1. Marie-France Garaud, “Avertissement,” in *De l’Europe en général et de la France en particulier*, ed. Marie-France Garaud and Philippe Séguin (Paris: Belfond-Le Pré aux Clercs, 1992).
2. *Discours pour la France: Assemblée nationale, 6 mai 1992* (Paris: Grasset, 1992).
3. Paul Thibaud, “De l’Europe imaginaire à la France réelle”, *Le Monde*, 27 December 1996.
4. *Le Monde*, 31 December 1997.
5. *Le Point*, 15 March 1997.
6. Cevipof-Sofre poll, conducted 26-31 May 1997, *Libération*, 4 June 1997.
7. Raoul Girardet, *L’idée coloniale en France* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1972).



## 7. *Toward a Multipolar World?*

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France likes to think of itself as the birthplace of individual and collective freedoms. It derives a special aura from being the home of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Ignorant of the earlier British and American contributions in this regard, France considers itself to be the one and only cradle of these universal values, entitling it to great and eternal world prestige. It is true that this was for a long time an important element of France's influence, a major factor accounting for the attraction of its model, and the current of sympathy it excited abroad. This influence was all the stronger in that France's national interest was held to *be* the interest of all peoples; the promotion of public freedoms was to everyone's benefit.

A number of factors combined to gnaw away at this image. First of these is that France did not and does not have a monopoly on these values; if it did, they could hardly be labelled "universal." France was, to be sure, one of the first countries to have declared and put these values into practice, but theirs is a shared parentage. Furthermore, France's conception of its interests defined as power tarnished more than a little the brilliance of its vision. "Rights" were too often sent packing in the face of the perceived national interest — commercial imperatives (or so judged) in China, the perceived need to deal with Algerian power, the support given to a repressive Tunisian regime on behalf of the fight against Islamic rule, the unremitting defence of Mobutu in the name of regional stability — but then the same reproach might be made of the other "moralistic" world powers. In brief, the promotion of democracy and of the rights of man was eroded by the effects both of time and, on a more positive note, of the values' own spread. They are not yet universally respected, but since the beginning of this century they have become undeniably more generalized in application.

Because a country's image (provided it bears a reasonable resemblance to reality) can be advantageous to it, France should seek some other symbolic combat to champion, in the process once again incarnating some new, universally acceptable

principle that corresponds to the aspirations of the majority of the world's people. If all France wants to send aloft is its own balloon, it cannot be too long before it pops and drags the national image down with it...

Aid to developing countries is one area in which France retains legitimacy, combining both a promising discourse and a coherent practice. The theme of North-South relations has been stressed equally by General de Gaulle, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand, and Jacques Chirac.

France's activity in favour of development draws upon a widely shared domestic base of support. This is reflected in the country's level of contributions: in 1995, France's development assistance amounted to .55% of its GNP, compared with an average of only .27% for the other rich countries. This stood it first among the seven leading industrialized states (the G7), and fifth among the member countries of the OECD. France has continually argued the case of the developing countries within international bodies, particularly on the matter of their debt; in 1992 it went so far as to cancel debts owed it by the very poorest countries. Development has to be one of the major challenges facing the world, since the resolution of so many other problems (migratory flows, environmental protection, international public health) depends to a large extent on whether the fight against international economic inequalities can succeed.

If France were as powerful as the United States, it is more than likely that it too would try to profit from that power. Since all states would act similarly, there is no point reproaching a dominant power for wanting to derive benefit from its power. This is why multipolarity is in the general interest. And this, in turn, suggests a second cause that France might champion, one essential to the future health of the balance of power: the cause of multipolarity.

The emergence of a multipolar world satisfies the dual dictates of (economic) development and political stability. Who could fail to benefit from its emergence? A unipolar world is unhealthy, since the dominant power has a natural tendency to confuse its national interests with universal values. The international orchestra does not lend itself well to direction by a sole conductor, especially if that conductor lacks the necessary internal motivation required to lead properly. In contrast, a multipolar system — provided it is well organized — makes possible a balance between stability, peaceful relations, and the right of nations to self-determination.

In the same way that de Gaulle's anti-American nationalism of the 1960s served the interests of other countries that, for instance in the Third World, needed some breathing space from the US, so France's sponsorship of a multipolar world would also promote the French national interest. Thanks to Europe, France would be part of one of the principal poles of power — if not *the* principal pole — of a rebalanced international system.

The emergence of such a multipolar world (which has become the dominant theme of President Chirac's strategic discourse) requires, of course, the counterbalancing of American (super)power. France is not alone in desiring a new division of power. To think the contrary clearly reflects a traditional (but now outdated)

assumption, no doubt related to the image of the Western Europeans as being content to batten forever on their strategic dependence upon Washington — a dependence of which the Eastern Europeans can only dream. However, many countries outside Europe do share France's desire for multipolarity, which is synonymous in their eyes with a democratization of the international community. France should turn to them for support.

France might, for example, establish a strategic partnership with South Africa, without being obsessed with the linguistic reality of that part of Africa, where France never did establish a colonial presence. France, after all, was one of the strongest opponents of apartheid. During his term as prime minister, Laurent Fabius made combating the racist regime in Pretoria a major plank in his foreign policy, as well as providing support to those fighting the regime in South Africa itself. Because of this policy, France can draw upon a reservoir of warm feelings in the most economically and strategically important country of Africa.

For a variety of reasons — relating to its recent history, the quality of its élites, the strength of its economy and military, and its ability to influence international outcomes — South Africa is one of those rare African states that possess a global vision. After a lengthy meeting with President Clinton during the latter's visit to South Africa in March 1998, President Nelson Mandela took advantage of the presence of the world media to defend his country's diplomatic relations with countries regularly diabolized by Washington. Cuba, Iran, and Libya had stood firmly against apartheid, and South Africa would repay that support. Mandela also expressed reservations about Washington's diplomatic offensive on the African continent.

Reconfiguring France's African policy, however, needs to be part of a larger diplomatic picture. Traditionally, French policy toward the continent reflected the pursuit of such classical ends as territory, status, and clients within a "sphere of influence." During the Cold War, the French sphere represented an oasis of peace in an otherwise turbulent continent, and this allowed France to justify the special links it had with its clients, whose means of governance France rarely questioned. Today, the poles of power in Africa have shifted, and include Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea (despite their differences), Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa. None of these states is aligned with a former colonial power. By contrast, France's traditional sphere of influence now smacks of being one of the continent's chief zones of turbulence, as a result of a series of succession crises.

Faced with this situation, France has two options, each of which reflects a different conception of power. It can try to tighten its hold over its own "sphere," and defend to the end the most indefensible of leaders, as it did for so long with Mobutu. In so doing, it risks losing everything, including its credibility in Africa. If by chance France were to succeed in stabilizing its sphere of influence, its gain would be slight, since its former colonies are among the least wealthy, most insecure, and most aid-dependent states in the heart of the continent.

France's other option is to loosen its ties with francophone Africa and implement a policy for the continent as a whole. This would allow it to have a presence in such emergent poles as South Africa, and to further stabilize the African balance of power. This policy would put the spotlight on France's universalistic vocation, in favour of economic development, rather than deplete scarce political and fiscal resources in a bid to shore up "loyal" clients.

France needs to give up both its Fashoda complex and its sphere of influence, and it should understand that nothing will be gained by the defence, beyond all rationality, of regimes that are politically, economically, and even (as in the case of Mobutu) physically doomed. Could anything have been more obtuse than to have done what France did with Mobutu back in 1996, and present him as the *guarantor* of stability in Zaire? A new Africa is being born, and France can have a place in it, if it acts wisely.

In Latin America, France is the beneficiary of an exceptional fund of good feeling. The absence of historical disputes, the adoption of French models to liberate the continent from Spanish and Portuguese rule, and the cultural prestige of Paris have all given France an advantage whose effects are still palpable today.

After having lost a bit of ground there following the war, France is now making a comeback: it has the stimulating and reassuring profile, as it did during the period 1810 to 1820, of a country standing for international equilibrium, autonomy, and freedom. In all of the Latin countries, France's role as an inspiration for democracy and independence was enhanced by its educational system: in the 19th century, newly independent republics followed the French model in numerous areas, among them being the Civil Code, territorial organization, military organization, teaching and universities, literary creation, and medicine. Some countries constructed their national identities using French points of reference: Brazil, for example, chose as its national motto "order and progress," so dear to the positivists.

Brazil is also, today, committed to a regional grouping, the Mercosur, whose objectives have much in common with the European Communities of a few decades ago: the attenuation of regional rivalries, and the fostering of peaceful rapprochement and economic development. Mercosur thus brings together the two traditional rivals of South America, Argentina and Brazil, whose competition has long structured Latin American history. This region, with a combined GNP of \$750 billion, ranks fourth among the world economic zones, after the EU (\$7.2 trillion), NAFTA (\$6.76 trillion) and Japan (\$3.5 trillion), and ahead of Russia (\$400 billion) and Southeast Asia (\$375 billion). Just as entry into the common European market put paid to France's attachment to protectionism, the Mercosur marks the end of an era of protectionist development fashioned along the lines of "import substitution," a popular nostrum among South American governments from the Second World War until the early 1980s. The opening up of the continent facilitates the spread of economic exchanges with Europe.

But if the US has become used to the idea of the EU (although regularly concerned about its rise in power and preferring to deal with its component parts



rather than treating it as a bloc), it has, since 1995, painted an enticing picture to the Latin American countries of an enlarged NAFTA in the near future. While Argentina seems to be interested, Brazil, following the model of France and Europe, prefers to play the enlargement (of Mercosur) card. It is to the interest of both Europe and Latin America alike to unite their forces against the US.

Brazil defends the Portuguese-speaking world and France the French-speaking world. The Spanish-, French-, and Portuguese-speaking families struggle to preserve cultural diversity in realm of communications. Brazil and France have a policy of being present both culturally and economically in Africa. Brazil is particularly active in the former Portuguese colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Guinea-Bissau), and France has also tried to foster cooperation with the former Portuguese Africa. Two political wills thus meet there in an effort to stabilize and develop countries badly scarred by underdevelopment and lengthy civil wars. Portuguese-speaking Africa presents an opportunity for long-term cooperation between France and Brazil, aimed at lifting the region's countries out of their current stagnation.

An agreement was signed at Madrid, in December 1995, between Mercosur and the EU, the first-ever global tariff accord signed between two regional entities, and 500 French companies are represented in Brazil. However, French investments in Brazil, which in 1987 amounted to 27 percent of all foreign investment there, fell to 7.5 percent in 1990 and to 2.3 percent in 1994. Franco-Brazilian trade does not represent more than 2 percent of total French foreign trade.

South America has, in many respects, dwelt on the margins of history during the 19th and 20th centuries, and its opening to the world is one of the major challenges of our time. Europe is able to contribute to a stimulation of its economic expansion thanks in large part to its own regained political stability. It is vital to reinforce (or perhaps just create) the link from Europe to South America, today the weakest point in the triangular relationship between South America, North America, and Europe. Such a link would constitute an undoubtedly privileged channel of cooperation: a modern manifestation of power and strategic autonomy without any traces of aggression.

According to Théodore Zeldin, "France can play an exceptional role as intermediary in avoiding a clash between Islam and the West, which is the great challenge of the coming twenty years."<sup>1</sup> France can thus serve as a bridge between those countries and Europe. This is certainly the most important initiative that France could undertake, thanks to its historic links with the Maghreb, to its strong image in the Arab world, and to the formidable advantage given it by its sizable population of Arabic and Maghrebian origin.

France's Arab policy is, nonetheless, largely a myth. It had a much more active policy toward Israel, based on commercial agreements. De Gaulle only really broke with Israel after the 1967 war, following his vain protests against Israel's interventions in Lebanon: the condemnation of "a confident and dominating Israel" was made at the time of an Israeli operation in Lebanon just after the Six Days

War. Even though Lebanon had traditionally been a sphere of French interest — viz., the protection of minorities, and the creation of the Lebanese state — France never really succeeded in protecting it. During a visit to Israel, Mitterrand gave his support to what he believed to be a military penetration of only 20 kilometres inside Lebanon, but which turned out to be the “Peace in Galilee” operation. The measure of power, it is sometimes said, is to be taken in one’s attachment to numerous outdated things. In this regard, it is perhaps noteworthy that Britain has tended to concentrate its interest in the Islamic majorities of the Middle East, while France has favoured the minorities. In Lebanon, for example, France has ignored the Shi’ites, despite the fact that they are important not only in that country, but in all of the Middle East.

Moreover, their difficulty in obtaining visas cuts France off from a large part of the élites of the region, who are increasingly being educated in the American universities in Beirut and in Cairo, notwithstanding the excellent French secondary schools in many of the countries of the region. The prestigious French research centres in Cairo or in Istanbul would certainly benefit from studying contemporary matters rather than erudite topics, which, although fascinating, are perhaps of limited direct interest. It would, for instance, be more advisable to study contemporary Egyptian foreign policy than the sewerage system of 19th century Alexandria.

Although there are potential partners for French power in Asia, this would require a reconsideration of the priorities and preconditions of French policy toward that area. There is, first of all, India, whose apparent chaos should not be allowed to mask its undeniable progress: it had a growth rate of 6 percent in 1997. Its official growth rate has not been much lower than that of China (though both must be read with caution). India also desires the emergence of a multipolar world, and is very unhappy with its isolation, caught as it is between China, Pakistan, and, from a strategic standpoint, the US. India’s nuclear tests were not aimed at getting it into the nuclear club — it was already there — but rather at breaking down the doors of the five great powers’ club.

The Europe-Japan leg of the US/Europe/Japan triangle remains atrophied. Strategic exchanges and contacts between the US and Europe, on the one hand, and between the US and Japan on the other, are frequent, sustained, and very well developed. They are almost nonexistent between Europe and Japan. These two regions see their relations essentially through the economic prism, which is often reduced to the question of balance (or imbalance, from the European side) of trade.

Economic differences cannot, however, be allowed to prevent the beginning of a true strategic debate between Europe and Japan. Earlier, it was Japan that stressed economic issues and overlooked diplomatic ones: hence de Gaulle’s acerbic comment after his visit with Prime Minister Ikeda, “I wanted to meet a Japanese politician, but I hosted only a transistor-radio salesman.” It is important that Europe not reverse the roles and become preoccupied only with short-term economic

interests at a time when Japan is beginning to ponder the redefinition of its strategic interests. During the period of strengthening of Euro-Japanese relations, Europeans must bear in mind not only Asia's economic weight but also its strategic and political importance.

Neither Japan nor Europe is currently autonomous from a strategic standpoint. They are both dependent on the United States for reasons that differ, but which are all traceable to the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall has been a cause of frustration for both: the Europeans and the Japanese alike are dissatisfied with a unipolar world, and aspire to a certain multipolarity in which can be redefined their place and role in the post-Cold War world. It is easier for Japan to be a world actor than a regional one, due to its difficult relations with the neighbouring countries, a heritage of the Second World War. In order for it to be a world power, Japan must establish links with Europe. Europe, for its part, wants to be a power rather than simply a region — such, at least, is the French project. Europe must therefore also develop relations with Japan in order to transcend the regional power stage, where involvement in world affairs is a function of historical links. The fullest consolidation of the third side of the US/Europe/Japan triangle, rather than relegating it to simple commercial matters, is in the common interest of both parties.

Some progress has been registered since July 1991, when the first Japan-EU joint declaration was issued, calling for political cooperation, notably in security matters. Annual summits (called the Asian-Europe meeting) have been established — the first held in Bangkok in 1996, the second in Great Britain in April 1998 — placing the European-Japanese dialogue in a larger, Euro-Asian context. Some concrete cooperative measures have been implemented: Japanese participation in the reconstruction of Bosnia, and European participation in the Kedo program monitoring North Korean nuclear activity. The strengthening of this cooperation could begin with such “soft” areas as the protection of the environment and development assistance, and progress to more sensitive topics touching on the reform of the UN, international security, and global stability.

Contemporary Japan is in search of reassurance. It has the uncomfortable feeling of being deprived of alternatives, as much with regard to the US as with China; it cannot afford to upset China by forging a closer partnership with the Americans. This is a profoundly destabilizing situation for Japan, which remembers the 1972 US decision, without forewarning, to establish diplomatic relations with China. It is thus in Japan's interest to promote multilateral relations through the agency of Europe.

The improvement of political cooperation, and perhaps even the establishment of a true strategic dialogue, between Europe and Japan will facilitate multipolarization through a consolidation of these two poles of power. Their respective positions as major players on the international scene will in turn be reinforced, and their hand as against the US improved.

France's distinctive position as both a member of the UN Security Council and a prime mover of the EU gives Paris a degree of influence with Japan that no other European country can match. This dual "belonging" is what so interests Japan: the European aspect of French power, and the UN aspect, important to Japan because of its hopes of reshaping the balance of the Security Council. The Japanese entertain expectations of France predicated on the assumption that France remains a great power.

Beijing regularly makes use of a certain ultra-Gaullist "great power conspiracy," as well as a shared discourse on national independence, the latter inclining it verbally to stake out a defence of multipolarity. This discourse is based, for both the French and the Chinese, on the memory of de Gaulle's historical 1964 gesture in recognizing the People's Republic of China.

Nevertheless, Chinese testimonials to French power in the context of the Paris/Beijing/Washington triangle poorly mask the absolute priority that China accords to the Sino-American relationship which, for reasons of prestige, dominates Chinese foreign policy. Beijing constantly stresses the links that join the world's "greatest" developed power with its "greatest" developing power. In this context, both France and Europe are simply pawns used by China in its relations with America. Behind the screen of a periodic resort to the discourse on French power, China does not actually see France as a great power — even though France's ambitions in that regard do give China an increased margin of maneuver.

The fact that France deferred to Beijing on the question of arms sales to Taiwan, and that France is almost craven before Chinese authorities with whom it raises such disagreeable matters as the question of human rights in China, does not strengthen France's prestige in that country — on the contrary. The Chinese respect force and are contemptuous of weakness.

The shaping of a multipolar world, in which France can play an important role only by relying on Europe, thus represents not only the most legitimate cause that France can champion on the world stage today, but also the one cause that is most in harmony with French interests. It is the cause that allows France best to reconcile global balance and national interest.

## Note

1. *Time*, special issue on France, December 1995.

## 8. *The Thirst for Power: Consume in Moderation*

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The pursuit of power does not always result in its attainment. On the contrary, just as too many taxes are deadly for a tax system, so the quest for power often leads to weakness or exhaustion. It was the Soviet Union's desire for absolute security and the prevention of another humiliating invasion of its territory that led it to expand its military apparatus far beyond what its economic capacities could bear, thereby causing its collapse. In France, those who have been most vociferous in their support of the expansion of French power and who have presented this as the sole motivation of their actions have actually done the country a disservice.

Italy, which under Mussolini wanted to become a great European power, lay in ruins after the war. Germany and Japan paid dearly for their unbridled pursuit of power. As a result, the word "power" is today a taboo in those two latter countries, where strategic modesty characterizes foreign policy.

At the end of the reign of a Louis XIV obsessed by power, the "radiance" of the Sun King's realm was in reality far from brilliant. Napoleon's quest for the complete domination of Europe not only caused the destruction of the Empire, the death on the battlefield of 1,800,000 Frenchmen, the occupation (twice) of French territory, and the accession of a foreign-imposed king; it was also a national catastrophe. The Revolution and the Empire brought about the destruction of France's great maritime commerce, the basis of its 18th-century growth.

The First World War, far from being "fresh and joyful," resulted in the death of 10 percent of the 1913 male population of France and Germany; Great Britain's loss was "limited" to 5.5 percent, and that of the US to a mere 0.4 percent. Apart from the 1,400,000 dead and 1 million wounded, the war's demographic toll on France included an estimated deficit of 1,800,000 births, and an enduring imbalance between the sexes that would continue to affect the birth rate 20 years later. One need only refer to France's share of the total reparations (52 percent) assessed

against Germany to get an idea of the extent of the country's suffering. The distinction between those countries that served as battlefields and those that were not (or only lightly) affected, was, in fact, much more significant than that separating the victors from the vanquished.

France must avoid two pitfalls in its conjuring with "power." On the one hand, it would be senseless to abandon all ambition to power and retire to the lesser ranks, playing a role similar to that of the Netherlands — albeit with greater topographical diversity and more cheeses. It would not only be contrary to France's history and its interests, but it would also work against the general interest, which needs France to play the part of civilized protester and democratic opponent of the established order.

On the other hand, to get one's hackles up, to talk interminably about France's destiny, mission, grandeur, and to call for more power would only irritate the rest of the world and thereby weaken France. Just as with the consumption of fine wines, France's quest for power must be taken in moderation. Abstinence would be very depressing and drunkenness extremely dangerous.

When the minister of defence justified the renewal of nuclear testing in 1995 on the grounds that France needed to remain a great power, he hardly furthered the stated objective. Instead, he entrenched the very damaging — and incorrect — notion that France needed nuclear arms only to maintain its "rank," and not to further its national security. A large segment of international public opinion thinks that France's pride makes it lose its head, and this further increases the country's unpopularity.

Nuclear arms are increasingly illegitimate in the eyes of world public opinion.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly regrettable that the idea of their deterrent effect is scarcely considered, because it cannot compete with the drastic and striking nature of the destruction they can cause. However, France must keep nuclear weapons, since nuclear deterrence is a purely defensive concept that serves not to provoke but to avoid wars, and does so by permitting France to guarantee its physical security and defend its vital interests without threatening anyone else.

In order to maintain its deterrent effect and to limit the negative effects of the loss of legitimacy of nuclear arms, France should emphasize the dissuasive nature of nuclear weapons, and avoid discussing their use. Doing so would put the stress where it belongs, on the political not military role of these weapons. Above all, France must cease justifying retaining such arms on the basis of grandeur or the necessity of maintaining its rank, for doing so will not only weaken the credibility of its nuclear arsenal, it will provoke a backlash against nuclear energy in general.

The French-speaking world is a good example of an element of power that can become counterproductive if misused. A defensive policy that is fixated upon the past will not serve France's interests, whereas one that is used as a tool of developing new opportunities could be beneficial, since language has always gone hand in hand with power.

Between 1714 and 1919, French was the primary language of diplomacy. The European élites, whether royal or intellectual, spoke French in both the 18th and the 19th centuries. Illustratively, Austria's ultimatum to Serbia following the assassination of the Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which touched off the First World War, was written in French.

The deterioration of the status of French as an international language occurred suddenly during the 20th century. Between 1919, when Clemenceau accepted English as the other language for the treaty of Versailles, and the 1970s, French basically disappeared in Latin America, and by the 1980s was a rarity as well in Southern Europe.

The attachment of France's leaders for the French-speaking world has two sources. The first is nostalgia for the time when France was the greatest European power, and French the leading language. If demographics explained France's ascent to power in the first place, then the development of French as the common language of the élites seemed to be the natural resultant of this power. French was not, of course, directly exported by French troops. The concentration of European intellectual power in France played a much greater role in the language's spread. However, there is a psychological link between the two, and for many defenders of the French-speaking world, the latter aspect represents the lost Golden Age of French domination.

But there is a second reason for attachment to the French-speaking world: it is a means of preserving one's cultural identity and avoiding the Anglo-American steamroller. For the Egyptian film maker, Youssef Chahine, the "French-speaking world allows us to organize — Arabs, Africans, and other identities threatened by the steamroller of the American cultural industries — because alone, we would not be strong enough to defend ourselves."

Is the French-speaking world a prison or a trampoline? Should it be a forum for old warriors, ready to unsheathe their swords at the sound of a syllable of English? If so, it would discredit the very cause these champions are supposed to defend. The declaration by the French minister of education, Claude Allègre, that the French *should* learn English, unleashed the wrath of the ayatollahs of the French-speaking world. However, is the cause of French power really well served if one does not face up to the reality that English, like it or not, is the international language, and that a knowledge of it is essential if one wishes to be understood, and to convey a message beyond France's borders? Who still believes that he can oppose its triumph? Who can deny that many people, even in France, are prepared to go to some lengths to learn another language? Does it strengthen France's influence when a parliamentarian seriously proposes that the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) be forbidden to conduct a small meeting on the Middle East in English?

French military attachés in Eastern Europe ensure that the foreign officers learning French also have instruction in English so that they are not marginalized in their own army. When conceived of as defending a pluralist project permitting

cultural diversity, the French-speaking world is more acceptable to others, and is more well regarded.

President Jacques Chirac gave the most legitimate definition of the French-speaking world when on a trip to Hungary in 1997: “The vocation of the French-speaking world is to call upon all the other languages of the world to join together to ensure that cultural diversity, which results from linguistic diversity, is protected. Beyond French, beyond the French-speaking world, we must be the militants of multiculturalism in the world, fighting against the suffocation by one sole language of the diverse cultures representing the richness and the dignity of humanity.”

French may only occupy ninth place in terms of numbers of its speakers worldwide, but the two principal languages of international communication nevertheless remain it and English. It is still taught in the educational systems and universities of almost all the world’s countries. The advancement of the French-speaking world would be assured by depicting French neither as a would-be hegemonical tongue nor a member of the linguistic endangered-species list; instead, it suffices to emphasize the right to be different, as well as to be open to others — meaning not just to other French-speakers, but to all of the world’s other languages and cultures.

It would also be desirable to establish a dividing line between domestic and foreign policy. When there is a conflict between the two, the latter must naturally yield to the former, since voters are more sensitive to domestic policy decisions, the effects of which they feel in their daily lives.

Without waxing nostalgic for the days of Richelieu (when the government could, in the secrecy of cabinet, define the contours of diplomacy with no concern for the public’s reaction), it has to be admitted that such a foreign-policy style could and did prove advantageous to France. Sometimes, however, the style was little short of catastrophic. There is no point lamenting that foreign policy has been caught up in the democratization of public life; the public *is* interested in what goes on outside France’s borders. In this age of globalization, what truly would be lamentable is public indifference.

The desire to derive domestic political benefit from foreign affairs is not in itself objectionable. The French were grateful to de Gaulle for the image he gave them of pride restored. They appreciated Mitterrand’s steadfastness against the Soviets during the Euromissile affair, and approved his desire to make known his differences with the Americans over such subjects as SDI and North-South relations. Jacques Chirac’s economic diplomacy — his emphasis upon French exports during his travels outside the country — is also popular at home.

Another positive effect of this link between domestic and foreign policy stems from the need for every important French politician to be interested in international affairs. Even if foreign policy does not determine the outcome of French elections (polls put it at the bottom of the list of voter concern), and even though it figures only minimally on the hustings, no candidate for president can get by without at least one major speech on foreign policy. It is also the case that when a



political figure has reached a certain stature and wishes to go beyond being a specialist in a certain area and become a central political leader, he or she invariably feels the urge to demonstrate an interest in foreign affairs. It is a matter of being credible as a leader on the national scale. Foreign affairs and strategic problems do not gain votes, but they can lose them if the electors feel that the candidate does not measure up to an opponent on these issues. French citizens thus show their awareness that France's role as a great power makes it essential that these questions not be overlooked.

It is, however, another matter entirely to decide a question of foreign policy solely or principally on the basis of what is thought to be popular domestically. Henry Kissinger describes admirably in *Diplomacy* how Napoleon III went astray at the international level, by engaging in foreign expeditions he thought would please the public but that were detrimental to the French national interest.

For almost three decades immigration has been one of the most politically sensitive topics in France. Restrictive and repressive policies concerning not only immigration but also foreigners living in France are well regarded by a large portion of the electorate, representing both the right and the left, the working class and the more well-off segments of the population alike. There is thus a great temptation to pander to the electorate on this one issue. This often goes hand in hand with the exaltation of patriotism. It is certain, however, that the problems ensuing from such a policy are pernicious to the national interest.

France has thus severely altered its image abroad, not so much by the principle of restrictive immigration as by the way it implements the policy. It is difficult to have a "grand strategy" for Africa when images of illegal immigrants being ejected from their place of refuge in Saint Bernard's Church are being broadcast in African capitals.

Increasingly restrictive French immigration legislation and an often humiliating, even arbitrary, visa-application process do nothing to boost France's image in the Maghreb, elsewhere in Africa, and in other francophone countries sentimentally attached to the former metropole; yet these are all countries with which French leaders constantly stress the importance of preserving strong ties. By seeing a potential illegal immigrant in every visa applicant, France contradicts its declared policy of cooperation, of promotion of the French language and culture, and even its struggle against religious fundamentalism, which flourishes on such rebuffs.

This policy clashes directly with the stated aim of the *Francophonie*. In July 1997, Hubert Védrine, shortly after being named minister of foreign affairs, hosted a luncheon for a small group of French experts on international relations. While the discussion centred on France's world position, there was rare unanimity on one matter, that the visa process become more respectful of the dignity of the individual. Attendees confessed to fearing that they could not invite a Maghrebian or other African colleague to a conference or seminar, for fear of exposing that colleague to the humiliation of the application procedure. A decent reception in

French consulates, and procedures that respect others — these, too, are matters that affect France's global status.

In the area of the "hard" sciences, there exist impediments to international scientific cooperation that have prevented many foreign researchers and students from working in French laboratories. In May 1998, Védérine therefore instructed consulates on new procedures for granting visas to foreign scientists. His instructions underscored that France "means to encourage the arrival of foreign researchers and teacher-researchers, given the context of increased competition at the international level. It is of the utmost interest to our country that it not be deprived of these capabilities if it wishes to remain at the highest level in matters of scientific exchanges."

The May 1998 vote by deputies representing cities with a strong Armenian community, in favour of a law recognizing the genocide of Armenians, is another case in point. The deputies incurred the risk of adverse consequences for Franco-Turkish relations, at a time when Paris had established a fruitful partnership with Turkey and was using its influence to foster the development of pro-European political forces there. That the motives of these politicians were preeminently electoral is obvious, given that they were not similarly moved to recognize the genocide of the Gypsies — which recognition would have had little political pay-off for them.

There is a further risk involved, of making French foreign policy the prisoner of lobby groups of different communities within France. France cannot have a foreign policy that varies geographically in order to please the French of differing ethnic origins. This does not mean, of course, that France must, because of a partnership or the fact that contracts are under negotiation, accept any Turkish behaviour. However, in this particular instance, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the deputies were primarily motivated by a desire to please an important and very well-organized community in their constituency.

By the same token, it is counterproductive to evoke in any and all cases the prestige or the grandeur of France. When a politician, hoping to pander to the electorate, justifies a decision on these grounds, international public opinion gets turned against France for reasons that, although obvious, seem nevertheless to escape certain French leaders: the supreme goal of the other peoples of the planet cannot be the advancement of French interests, or the celebration of French grandeur.

National interest should determine French diplomacy, but it cannot be allowed to justify any activity beyond France's borders. Speeches on the hackneyed theme of the need to maintain French rank — a theme both complementary and contradictory to the myth of decline — so often appear ridiculous to even the moderately objective observer. Such speeches are intended to reinforce the image of a France steeped in itself, motivated primarily by the defence of its own interests. There is a striking gap in perception between the politicians most ready to pluck the nationalistic string — they claim to be convinced that the whole world is struck

dumb with admiration for, and overwhelmed with gratitude toward, France because of the universal brilliance of its values — and the conclusions that international public opinion derives from such bombast.

Hypernationalism is detrimental to the French national interest. The uncontrolled celebration of power weakens that interest. True ambition lies in realism.

## **Note**

1. See Pascal Boniface, *Repenser la dissuasion nucléaire* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1997).



## 9. Conclusion

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How could a soccer fan, reading the page proofs of the French edition of this book right on the heels of France's World Cup victory over Brazil, resist the temptation to add several concluding lines?

Long before this happy outcome, I was convinced that soccer had become an element of strategy.<sup>1</sup> It is undeniable that the French team's progress throughout its World Cup season produced shock waves that were felt not only in the sports world, but also beyond, into the political and social spheres. Could it be that the team had become a vehicle of international power for France, achieving in its own way the same things France gets from its permanent seat on the Security Council, its nuclear deterrent, or its status as the world's fourth-ranking exporter?

To be sure, even the most perfect World Cup season would hardly enable France to negotiate with the US as an equal, impose peace in the Middle East or the Balkans, or resolve the problem of North-South disparity. Nonetheless, the victories on the soccer field are sure to have a positive impact on France's global status. They will alter the image that we project of ourselves to the world.

Thus it was possible to read in the *New York Times*, even before the championship game: "This ungovernable country, never agreeing on anything, eternally divided, profoundly skeptical, has found itself united around a soccer team.... The team has become the positive symbol of a country renewing its acquaintance with growth after a long depression."

France's team exudes the aura of successful integration, of internal cohesion. It unified the whole society around it, regardless of social, ethnic, or partisan rifts. It proved that France could open up to and cross swords with the rest of the world, could win without aggression and, above all, without arrogance. The World Cup triumph showed that France need not fear globalization, that it can, on the contrary, take up the challenge, and that Europe has allowed for the strengthening of its enterprises as much as of its soccer players.

Apart from soccer, France does not dominate the world. This is true, yet not regrettable. Were France to dominate, it would have all the faults of a dominating

power: confusing its own interests with the general interest, getting irritated over the expression of desires different from its own, expressing incomprehension that other points of view might exist and be acceptable. These defects are neither French nor English, Soviet nor American — they are those of a power without equal. Such a power inevitably incites collective resistance to its hegemony. No dominant power has been able to preserve its dominance forever. The outcome will be the same for the US as it was for the others, even if the periods of transition, on a historical scale, may be longer this time.

France, for all that, is neither a nonpower nor a middle power. It is a “power” in the full sense of the term, and even though it cannot claim first rank, it is part of the group of states whose point of view counts on all international matters. France can only be collectively in the first rank by using the European multiplier. This should not be alarming for the other EU members, as the European decisionmaking process is made up of reciprocal concessions, of the taking into account of the interests of different countries — in short of a permanent dialogue on a relatively equal footing, where no one state can alone impose a decision.

Moreover, France’s plan for a multipolar world arises within a framework where the general interest is incompatible neither with that of Europe nor of France.

To bewail French decline is not only intellectually spurious but also politically perilous. One gives credence to that which one wants to resist. To deny that the multilateral world exists and that France can do nothing without taking into account the international environment is as inexact as it is dangerous. True ambition today needs first to be nourished by a precise analysis of the prevailing relations of strength. This demonstrates not only the limits of the impossible, but also the field of the possible.

Just as remembering is not the abandonment of the future but the condition of its confrontation, so realism is not the abandonment of ambitions but the condition of their realization.

## Note

1. *Géopolitique du football* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1998).

## *About the Author*

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