

INTRODUCTION

Many people in France and elsewhere still remember the concluding lines of the speech delivered on 14 February 2003 to the United Nations Security Council by the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, during the run-up to the US-led military intervention against Saddam Hussein's Iraq:

In this temple of the United Nations, we are the guardians of an ideal, the guardians of a conscience. The onerous responsibility and the immense honor that fall to us must lead us to give priority to disarmament in peace. And it is an old country, France, from an old continent like mine, Europe, which tells you this today. . . . It believes in our ability to construct, together, a better world.

The speech – something almost unheard of in this usually solemn chamber – elicited spontaneous applause from those present. According to some, it was lyrical; for others, it was over the top; yet it is hard for commentators not to see in it an echo – albeit a rather muffled one – of the epic struggles of the Gaullist era: the last time France had faced up to an all-powerful United States so squarely was the speech given by President Charles de Gaulle in Phnom Penh in September 1966, in which the General denounced the error of the United States in waging war in Vietnam. The recent Iraq episode thus resonates with the long history of French foreign policy, and in so doing highlights one of its recurrent themes: the ambition – some would say the pretension – shown by France, despite having lost its status as a great power, in seeking to hold onto a certain ‘rank’ on the world stage.

Ambition, or pretension? The man who rallied the Free French on 18 June 1940 not only embodied these two terms, but he also theorized them: ‘It is because we are no longer a great power that we need a grand policy, because if we do not have a grand policy, given that we are no longer a great power, we will no longer be anything at all.’¹ This brutally honest appraisal, given by de Gaulle towards the end of his life, sums up the problem faced

by French foreign policy for more than half a century: that of balancing the country's aspirations to a major role on the international stage against a realistic assessment of its actual capabilities.

This reality and this ambition are not necessarily doomed to contradiction: the aim of a country's foreign policy – which is both a discourse on and the actual conduct of foreign affairs – aims precisely to reconcile them. This book, which can only claim to be a brief introduction to the subject, seeks merely to sketch a broad outline of the history of French foreign policy, to locate its guiding principles and reveal its inherent logic. It also aims to uncover its principal constants: not only the quest for 'rank' but also, inextricably linked to this, the pursuit of the European project and the search for a world order, which are the two other perennial themes in French foreign policy – the former because the extra leverage afforded by Europe has long provided France's only hope of continuing to carry any weight on the world stage, and the latter because only a stable and balanced international system can guarantee the interests of France and of Europe. Yet this book also seeks to tease out the still unresolved dilemmas and contradictions of French foreign policy, torn as it is between the competing needs of France's national project, its European ambitions, its place in the Western world and its universalist ideals.

The historian's task, however, is not to freeze reality within timeless, unchanging paradigms. What follows is therefore above all the narrative of a shifting dialectic – sometimes favourable, sometimes less so – between France's ambitions and the reality of the means at its disposal. While de Gaulle, having started with absolutely nothing on 18 June 1940, achieved the almost miraculous feat of carving out a place for his country alongside the victors of 1945 and making France a great power once again, he had in reality re-established a status that existed only on paper. After de Gaulle left power in 1946, the Fourth Republic believed it truly possessed this great power status, and so France was able to put off the redefinition of its international role until the country was forced to do so by the eventual realization of its powerlessness – which resulted, most obviously but not exclusively, from decolonization. After returning to power in 1958 de Gaulle would effectuate this redefinition of France's international role and succeed in creating, together with the foundation of the Fifth Republic, not merely a policy of 'grandeur', but a truly grand policy whose ambition was no less than the reconsideration of the superpower bloc system and the creation of a new alternative to the order of 'Yalta'.

In an international context long characterized by the persistence of the East-West status quo, de Gaulle's successors, from Georges Pompidou (1969–1974) to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974–1981) and to François Mitterrand (1981–1995), strove to perpetuate his legacy. Wasn't this defence of a long-

term vision that changing realities seemed increasingly to contradict, but which nonetheless allowed France to retain a national policy in the face of the resilience of the established order, the best option open to them? Be that as it may, while holding for more than two decades the dismantling of the bipolar bloc system as its declared objective, French foreign policy progressively adapted to the East-West status quo. Did France and its leaders thus fail in their proclaimed ambition to exit from the Cold War in 1989–1991? Was France reluctant vis-à-vis the central and eastern European revolutions, German reunification and the splintering of the Soviet Union? This was, in fact, far less the case, as we shall see, than is commonly thought.

Still, the end of 'Yalta' has dealt a whole new set of cards: the era of the blocs has been replaced by globalization, for better or worse. From Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) to Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) and to François Hollande (since 2012), maintaining continuity with the foreign policy legacy handed down by the founder of the Fifth Republic has appeared, as it had in the past, to be a tempting lifeline in the face of an international system that has become increasingly unwieldy and unpredictable. But are the guiding principles of Gaullist foreign policy and its modes of action still valid in this new world and its new realities of power? Can France, in a multipolar system in which, alone at least, the country carries less and less weight, still deploy a foreign policy it can really call its own?

Note

1. Philippe de Saint-Robert, *Le Secret des jours. Une chronique sous la Ve République*, Paris: Lattès, 1995, p. 131.