

# *L'Impuissance Française: Une diplomatie qui a fait son temps*

by Isabelle Lasserre, Flammarion, 2007, 224 pp.

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It is a truism in French public discourse, from either the nationalist or transnationalist perspective, that *La Grande Nation* has long been in need of a foreign policy overhaul. In 2001, it was the Socialist and former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine who insisted that 'all that constitutes our power, our influence, and our position in today's world, our ideas and our projects, must be defended and enhanced by new, dynamic, and forward-leaning policies and diplomacy.' [1] Three years later, at the French Conference of Ambassadors, one of Védrine's successors as Foreign Minister, Michel Barnier, exhorted his colleagues:

*Je vous engage à faire que notre pays, et d'abord sa diplomatie, ajoute à sa culture traditionnelle de souveraineté une culture d'influence et de partenariat* (I encourage you to make our country, and initially our diplomacy, add to the traditional culture of sovereignty a culture of influence and partnership). [2]

These rather guarded comments by policymaking elites grievously understate the true extent of France's 21st century diplomatic crisis, as described in *Le Figaro* journalist Isabelle Lasserre's latest book, *L'Impuissance Française: Une diplomatie qui a fait son temps* (*French Powerlessness: a diplomacy that has had its day*). Though unlikely to be translated for an Anglophone public, *L'Impuissance Française* nevertheless deserves attention outside *L'Hexagone* for both its bold critique of French foreign policy from 1989 to the present day as well as for its perspicacious assessment of potential future developments.

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Lasserre's chief concern in *L'Impuissance Française* is the stark contrast between *'l'idée que la France se fait d'elle-même et l'influence qu'elle exerce réellement sur la planète* (France's self-image and its actual global influence)' (p. 10). For Lasserre, *'[l]a France n'est plus aujourd'hui qu'une puissance moyenne* (France is today nothing more than a middle power),' regarded by fellow European nations with *'méfiance et*

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*incomprehension* (distrust and incomprehension)' while the United States 'evident de nous consulter (avoids consulting us)' (p. 11). This loss of influence has a moral dimension for Lasserre. She recounts a conversation with an Iraqi in May 2003, during which she was scolded in the following terms:

*Vous avez soutenu Saddam Hussein, vous avez voulu empêcher que les Américains provoquent la chute de notre bourreau, vous n'avez rien à faire ici* (You supported Saddam Hussein, you tried to stop the Americans from overthrowing our executioner, you have nothing to do here) (p. 13).

Lasserre acknowledges the changes in Iraqi public opinion that have no doubt occurred since that time, but, *mutatis mutandis*, the moral shock from such a condemnation is palpable. Equally discomfiting is the fact that the French have '*rien à faire*' in one of the defining struggles of our time. For Lasserre, this is the sad state of '*l'impuissance française*.'

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Lasserre's *L'Impuissance Française* is a model of organisation, divided as it is into four sections: '*La chute de l'influence française* (The decline of French influence)', '*Les raisons idéologiques* (Ideological reasons)', '*Les raisons techniques* (Technical reasons)' and '*Vers un redressement de la diplomatie française?*' (Towards a rectification of French diplomacy?). It is also, incidentally, a model of French prose, eschewing the Baroque, obscurantist journalistic style of, for example, Lasserre's *Le Figaro* colleague Patrick de Saint-Exupéry. More important, however, is the book's substance.

Lasserre's opening salvo, concerning the recent crisis in Transatlantic relations, defines France's failings thusly: '*La France, le pays des "idées," n'a pas offert d'alternative aux États-Unis, aucune proposition pour régler le problème*' (France, the nation of "ideas," has yet to offer an alternative to the United States, and offers no proposition for settling the problem') (p. 29). Though referring to Iraq specifically, Lasserre's ironic reference to France as a nation of ideas but without solutions is a theme that recurs throughout *L'Impuissance Française*. To blame is '*l'immobilisme de la période Chirac* (immobility of the Chirac era)' (p. 22), where principle took a back seat to the quest for 'stability.'

While emphasising Transatlantic tensions, Lasserre's critique is truly global. With regard to the Middle Eastern arena, Lasserre archly notes an underground *Dictionary of Received Ideas* that recently circulated in the Quai d'Orsay (France's Foreign Ministry), which lampooned France's Arab policy: '*recevoir des bombes, vendre des avions, protéger des assassins, et donner des leçons au reste du monde* (import bombs, export planes, protect assassins, and give lessons to the rest of the world)' (p. 85). Reductive, perhaps, but indicative of a certain dissatisfaction with the sclerotic nature of France's engagement with this most volatile of regions. Lasserre describes a situation where, due to the ravages of time and geopolitics, '*la France n'a plus guère d'alliés dans le monde arabo-musulman* (France has hardly any allies left in the Arab world)' (p. 107), a fact poignantly emphasised by former President Jacques Chirac's presence at the funerals of long-time allies King Fahd (2005), Hussein of Jordan (1999), Hassan II of Morocco (1999), Hafez el-Assad (2000), and Yasser Arafat (2004). Oftentimes cack-handed French efforts at rebuilding credibility in the Middle East, most notoriously on display when then-Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy remarked in 2006 that '*Il est évident que l'Iran joue un rôle stabilisateur* (It is clear that Iran plays a stabilising role [in the Middle East]);' have led to little in the way of regained puissance.

*L'Impuissance Française* likewise announces the end of *la Françafrique*. One standout case is that of France's botched intervention in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, wherein French soldiers found themselves fighting the Tutsi-led forces that were attempting to stop the massacres. The aftermath of this incident – an execrable example of picking 'stability' over decency – entailed a total Franco-Rwandan diplomatic falling-out, the closing down of French schools in the theretofore Francophone country, and the concomitant ascendancy of the English language (and cricket). Lasserre also notes tensions with the Ivory Coast, Gabon, Cameroon, and Chad, while expressing dismay over French overtures to Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe, who was invited to the 2003 Franco-African summit over the objections of Great Britain. The waning of influence in the African continent, together with the waxing of that of the Americans and Chinese, could have significant consequences for France's diplomatic status, Lasserre contends:

*Car c'est cette présence en Afrique qui a procuré à la France une bonne part de son influence diplomatique dans le monde et justifie en partie son siège permanent au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU* (It was this presence in Africa that procured for France a good part of its global diplomatic influence and in part justifies its permanent seat at the UN Security Council)' (p. 84).

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Without this sort of post-colonial influence, it would only be history – and perhaps the *force de frappe* – keeping France in the P-5.

Lasserre, unsurprisingly, finds significant faults with France's European policies as well. By now one increasingly begins to note that the *République* is rarely accorded the benefit of the doubt in *L'Impuissance Française*, and Lasserre's analysis of French European Union policy is a prime example. Lasserre rebukes French officials for their tendency to '*hisser le drapeau français* (hoist up the French flag)' during EU negotiations (p. 57), but it would be altogether naïve to assume that EU member states should be above instrumentalising the institution for national advantage. As Derk-Jan Eppink has noted elsewhere, even the most Europhilic member states, such as Belgium, have a way of ensuring that domestic benefits flow from transnational initiatives (albeit typically 'via the back door'). [3]

Lasserre is perhaps on firmer ground when attacking France's contemporary *Ostpolitik*. Particularly troubling for Lasserre is the fact that President Jacques Chirac was perfectly willing to treat Vladimir Putin's Russia as part of the 'premier rang des démocraties (highest rank of democracies) (p. 62), as Chirac put it in a 2003 speech in Saint Petersburg, while elsewhere claiming that '*les nouveaux pays de l'Union européenne sont "mal élevés," "immatures" et "irresponsables"* (the new [Central and Eastern European] nations of the European Union are "badly raised," "immature" and "irresponsible")' (p. 44). This, for Lasserre, is not the international behaviour of a republic of ideas and ideals, a republic that has historically contributed so much to the spread human rights values, a republic that should be a firm friend to the burgeoning democracies of Eastern Europe.

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In addressing the ideological reasons for the inability of French diplomacy to adapt to present circumstances, Lasserre rightly points to the combined legacies of Jacobinism, conservatism, pacifism, anti-liberalism, and anti-Americanism (as well various technical, essentially bureaucratic, shortcomings). These ideologies are firmly rooted in French history, and account for much of France's diplomatic intransigence. The very birth of the French Republic was accompanied by far-reaching rhetoric like that of Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, who declaimed: 'What puny projects were those of Richelieu ... compared with the worldwide risings, the gigantic revolutions, that we are called upon to achieve.' [4] The

subsequent Napoleonic conquests reinforced this attitude, and the Bonapartemanism of quondam Foreign (and Prime) Minister Dominique de Villepin attests to the continuing impact of this formative era on French global politics. As Villepin himself put it,

*La richesse de son histoire et la qualité de son action diplomatique lui permettent aujourd'hui de rappeler la puissance à la raison et d'œuvrer à la perpétuation de la paix* (The richness of France's history and the quality of its diplomatic practice enable it to today reconcile power and reason while working for the perpetuation of peace). [5]

It will be an ongoing challenge to adjust such a grandiose ideology to present middle-status circumstances. Likewise, the anti-liberal bent of certain Chiracist policies was rooted in the past, as part of the 'old quarrel between the heirs of Colbert and of Adam Smith,' [6] with the former regarding economic liberalism as merely what Édouard Balladur called 'the law of the jungle.' [7] The consequence of this ideological *enracinement* is clear to Lasserre. The historical fascination with authority and respect for the state means that

*La France aime les régimes, pas les sociétés civiles. Et tant pis si, trop souvent, nous soutenons des tyrans ou des dirigeants autoritaires* (France prefers regimes to civil societies. It is too bad that, all too often, we support tyrants or state-interventionist authorities.) (p. 134).

As a result, Lasserre argues, both French moral and geopolitical authority have waned in the globalising period since the fall of the Berlin Wall to the present.

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Yet 'France is not wed to Chiracism,' argued Jean-Marie Colombani in 2004. 'Illusion may satisfy the national ego, but it is certainly not satisfactory for the future of France.' [8] The 2007 French presidential election served to vindicate Colombani, and the political sea change resulting from the victory of relative outsider Nicolas Sarkozy is a matter of considerable international import. According to Lasserre, Sarkozy is the necessary agent of change, providing '*une nouvelle vision française du monde* (a new French global vision)' (p. 197). Indeed, Sarkozy would appear to be taking Lasserre's advice that '*[l]es droits de l'homme devraient être replacés au coeur*

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*de l'action diplomatique de la France* (the rights of man must return to the heart of French diplomatic practice)' (p. 199), as evidenced in part by the appointment to the Foreign Ministry of Bernard Kouchner, a vocal supporter of the droit d'ingérence (right of humanitarian intervention). The early January 2008 disruption in Franco-Syrian ties, the result of a statement by Sarkozy in Cairo warning that France 'will have no more contact with Syria ... until we have proof of Syrian willingness to let Lebanon appoint a president by consensus,' [9] is further evidence of the Sarkozian diplomatic renversement. In any event, it would certainly be gratifying for one of Lasserre's politico-philosophical bent to find Dominique de Villepin lately reduced to sniping at Sarkozy's concept of '*la politique de civilisation*' in the Belgian daily *Le Soir*, preferring instead '*une politique "des" civilisations. Il n'y a pas de droit à s'arroger "la" civilisation* (the politics of civilisations. He does not have the right to claim one civilisation),' [10] which, at least from a human rights perspective, is to miss the point entirely. What Lasserre would think of Sarkozy's expeditious congratulation to Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the flawed Duma elections on 3 December 2007 is another matter. For strategic or pragmatic reasons, it would seem France's '*tropisme russe*' is here to stay. Whether it is appropriate for France, '*[le] pays des droits de l'homme et de la liberté* (the country of the rights of man and of liberty)' (p. 63), to adopt such a policy is another question, one which Lasserre so eloquently poses in *L'Impuissance Française*.

The modern-day political paragone debate between idealism and realism rages on, and Lasserre's latest work – like Brendan Simms' *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (2001) and Patrick de Saint-Exupéry's *L'Inavouable: La France au Rwanda* (2004) before it – expertly portrays the profound moral and political consequences of stability-oriented diplomatic choices. Stability may in effect be, in that venerable Polish phrase, 'the stability of the graveyard,' a sentiment echoed in a 7 March 2007 defence speech by Sarkozy that touched on the lessons of the Cold War for the present day:

*[J]e ne me reconnais pas dans l'objectif d'une politique étrangère qui n'aurait pour seul objectif que la stabilité. C'était la stabilité de la cruauté et de l'injustice et nos frères européens ont payé à cause d'elle. Ce n'est pas ma conception de la politique étrangère consistant à garder les dictatures pour ne rien changer* (I do not recognise a foreign policy that has the sole objective of stability. It was the stability of cruelty and injustice [that was in place during the Cold War], and our European brothers paid the price for it. My conception of foreign policy does not consist of protecting dictators to keep things from changing) (p. 19).

These are indeed welcome words to Lasserre and likeminded observers. Given the history of French diplomatic practice from 1989 to 2007, such a speech is nothing short of revolutionary, and the concepts expressed therein are of far more value than the vague notions of ‘new, dynamic, and forward-leaning policies’ and ‘a [diplomatic] culture of influence and partnership’ proposed by Socialists and Gaullists like the aforementioned Védrine and Barnier. Dealing as it does with these unprecedented developments, Isabelle Lasserre’s *L’Impuissance Française* makes an invaluable contribution by so effectively describing this crucial fulcrum in French history.

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### Notes

- [1] Védrine and Moïsi 2001, p. 18. (NB: All parenthetical translations in the text are my own.)
- [2] Vaïsse 2005, p. 558.
- [3] Eppink 2007, p. 134.

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- [4] Casto 2006, p. 5.
- [5] Villepin 2005, p. 38.
- [6] Langellier 2005.
- [7] Tombs 2007, p. 62.
- [8] Colombani and Wells 2004, p. 143.
- [9] Abdallah 2008.
- [10] Berns and Meskens 2008.