

Gallic Rebuke: France and the US Rules-based Order

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Gérard Araud was not mincing his words. As France's former ambassador to Washington, he had seen enough. At a November 14 [panel](#) hosted by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft titled "Is America Ready for a Multipolar World?", Araud decried the "economic warfare" being waged by the United States against China, expressing the view that Europe was concerned by the evident "containment policy" being pursued.

Araud is very much the diplomat establishment figure, having also served as French representative to the United Nations from 2009 to 2014. But despite his pedigree, he was most keen to fire off a few salvos against such concepts as the "rules-based order" so treasured by the Anglosphere and the "West" more broadly defined. "To be frank, I've always been extremely sceptical about this idea of a 'rules-based order'." Both he and the French in general loved the United Nations, "but the Americans not too much".

With unerring frankness, he also noted that the UN and broader international hierarchy was dominated by the US-European bloc. The undersecretaries to the organisation reflected that fact, as did the stewardship of the World Bank and the IMF. "So that's the first element: this order is our order."

The second element was historical: the balance of power as it was in the war-ruined world of 1945. "Really people forget that, if China and Russia are obliged to oppose [with] their veto, it is because frankly the Security Council is most of the time, 95% of the time, has a Western-oriented majority."

French President Emmanuel Macron has adopted elements of Araud's thinking, notably regarding the problems and limits of US domination, while still reasserting the value of France's own global imprint. Such actions and sombre strategizing are taking place in the shadow of the West's decline. In a recent closed-door meeting with his top diplomats, Macron [remarked](#) that

"the international order is being upended in a whole new way. It is a transformation of the international order. I must admit that Western hegemony may be coming to an end".

This theme of decline in Macron's is an ongoing Spenglerian motif. It surfaced at the end of the G-7 summit in 2019, where he reflected on the decline of Western dominance while pondering the finance-obsessed nature of the global market economy. This was pretty rich coming from a banker, though he was certainly right on the issue of greater multipolarity.

To his diplomats, Macron paddled in the waters of history, reflecting on French power in the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution led by Britain in the 19th century, and the brute dominance of the United States from the 20th century. With typically Gallic, broad stroke synthesis, he suggested that "France is culture, England is industry, and America is war."

Then came the finger pointing, sharply directed at the biggest of culprits and the underminers of the West. "Within Western countries, many wrong choices the United States has made in the face of crises have deeply shaken our hegemony." It was not something that began with the Trump administration; previous US presidents "made other wrong choices long before Trump, Clinton's China policy, Bush's war policy, Obama's world financial crisis, and quantitative easing policy."

To this swipe at Washington could be added the role of emerging powers, which were underestimated by the West "not just two years ago, but as early as ten or twenty years ago." He admitted that "China and Russia have achieved great success over the years under different leadership styles."

Despite such rueful admissions about decline, Macron is still keen to pursue a form of geopolitical balancing, notably in the Indo-Pacific. This is code for the pursuing French interests in a region that is increasingly looking like exploding into a folly-driven conflict between the Chinese and US camps. But Paris is hardly going to miss out pushing the credentials of its defence industry, which took a bruising with the scuppering of the Attack Class submarine deal with the Australian government in September last year.

In February, Macron convinced Jakarta to [ink a deal](#) worth \$8.1 billion for 42 Rafale fighter jets produced by Dassault Aviation. Two diesel-electric Scorpène-class attack submarines produced by the Naval Group have also been added to the mix, along with ammunition, making the arrangements with Jakarta some of the most lucrative for France in Southeast Asia.

On his current visit to Washington, Macron is facing those old problems of US power. While Australia was designated assassin in killing off the submarine contract, the ammunition came from Washington as part of the AUKUS security pact, a spear pointing at China in the Indo-Pacific. President Joe Biden has merely described the handling of the whole matter as "clumsy".

Then come such issues as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which gives advantageous climate subsidies to US companies over their European counterparts, and how the Ukraine War is to be addressed. Biden has no inclination to speak to Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, content to let the war rage as long as it bleeds Russia; Macron has been more than willing to keep the lines open, acknowledging that diplomacy, however frail, must at least be drip-fed.

In his own reflections on what could be done regarding the US-Western parochialism of the rules-based order, Araud made the obvious point. Any genuine international system purporting to be undergirded by rules had to integrate “all the major stakeholders into managing of the world, you know really bringing in the Chinese, the Indians, and really other countries, and trying to build with them, on an equal basis, the world of tomorrow.” What a daring idea, and one that is bound to avoid a global conflict. For that reason, it won’t be embraced.

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