



On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Chair of Contemporary Strategic Issues welcomed Michel Duclos, former ambassador and special advisor to the Institut Montaigne, to its lecture series. Author of "France in the upheaval of the world",<sup>1</sup> published in September 2021, Michel Duclos questioned France's place in the modern world, amid new geopolitical and technological challenges. Noting the progressive decline of France on the international stage, the former ambassador first sought to recontextualise the reasons for its evanescence.

According to the former ambassador, the intensification of the Sino-American conflict will inevitably lead to a revised "East-West" confrontation. However, any parallel to the Cold War might be superficial, as the balance of power between China, Russia, and the Western camp is tending to even out. Also, the "battlefields" are no longer the same. It is highly likely that the technological factor will be predominant in the coming decade's confrontations. Finally, the "interconnectedness" of human societies in the face of rising global challenges (ecological, social, etc.) forces governments to reject the idea of a divided and fragmented world; a world in which the European Union will have to play hard to assert the interests of its member states.

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<sup>1</sup> DUCLOS Michel, *La France dans le bouleversement du monde*, l'Observatoire, 2021.

This context is rather unfavourable to the affirmation of a France whose power is relative. Michel Duclos completes his analysis by underlining the consequences of the progressive de-Westernisation of the world. According to him, the abandonment of the use of force in favour of sanctions by the West could be the origin of security gaps that "neo-authoritarian" governments have ended up exploiting and filling.<sup>2</sup>

Michel Duclos' examination of the triptych of recent crises "Kabul, Canberra, Kiev" is paramount to illustrate this analysis: the withdrawal of American forces from Kabul represents the end of "Western military interventionism", the AUKUS crisis and the Ukrainian crisis respectively and simultaneously demonstrate the predominance of the Indo-Pacific region in the American software and the devaluation of the United States' guarantee for Europeans.<sup>3</sup> If Europe is no longer the bone of contention between East and West, as it was during the Cold War, it may become the theatre of peripheral conflicts, as the Pacific used to be in the 1950s.

The situation in which France finds itself, like most European countries, is not the most favourable, but Michel Duclos notes that our country has not entered a phase of decline: France is now evolving in a more competitive world in which certain "emerging powers" are on par with it. Based on his hefty diplomatic experience, Michel Duclos remarks France has three weaknesses that restrict its action on the international scene. While the European level is now a prerequisite for Nations wishing to make their mark on international relations in Europe, the fact that the French economy has fallen behind the German economy weakens its role in "steering the Union". Moreover, France suffers from a "strategic solitude" which can be explained on the one hand by a lack of trust on the part of its EU partners and on the other by a lack of recognition on the part of its Anglo-Saxon allies in the P3, as seen by the AUKUS crisis. As for French soft power, it suffers from a similar situation. French-style universalism is less and less valued, and even decried. During the Samuel Paty affair, France found itself at the heart of a 'storm' between the Muslim world and our Anglo-Saxon allies, refuting its vision of secularism.

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<sup>2</sup> DUCLOS Michel (dir.), *Le monde des nouveaux autoritaires*, l'Observatoire & l'Institut Montaigne, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> GAUTIER Louis, « Fin de partie : retour sur l'interventionnisme militaire occidental, 1991-2021 », *Politique étrangère*, n°4/2021, décembre 2021.

To sum up, Michel Duclos advocates a reconstruction of Western alliances, in which the Union must have a place equal to that of the United States, while avoiding a return to a block against block logic between China and the United States.