

# On Europe, Stallone and the American Century

In conversation with Jean-François Deniau

*Jean-François Deniau is a legendary figure in France. It would be no exaggeration to claim that his life has been eventful enough to provide the material for several exciting biographies. His awards include Commandant of the Légion d'honneur and both the Croix de Guerre and the Croix de Guerre with Honours. A highly experienced diplomat, he helped to create the 1957 Treaty of Rome, on which the Common Market, forerunner of today's European Union, was founded. Following the departure of the Spanish dictator General Franco, Jean-François Deniau was one of the authors of the new Constitution which laid the foundations of democracy in Spain. As a Minister, notably for European Affairs and External Trade, he served in six different cabinets of the Fifth Republic. His service as a deputy in the Assemblée nationale lasted 20 years. Always a vigorous campaigner for human rights, Jean-François Deniau was a prime mover for the institution of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought awarded annually by the European Parliament.*

In the last 20 years of the twentieth century he visited all the major conflict zones and was, incidentally, a good friend of the famous commander Massud, who supervised the West's withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. His fame as an author and historian gained him membership of the Académie française which entitles him to occupy Chair number 36 at the Institut Mazarin.

In recent times when doctors diagnosed incurable bone cancer and confined him to a wheelchair his life became a painful and exhausting day-to-day struggle, but his courageous completion of a very difficult course of treatment saw him back on his feet. Jean-François Deniau has a passion for sailing and after the loss at sea of the great yachtsman Eric Tabarly, it was Deniau who inherited his place as a member of the Naval Academy. One of his astonishing feats was to sail across the Atlantic with just one assistant crew only a few weeks after a heart operation.

The correspondent of the **Herald of Europe** met **Jean-François Deniau** at his office in the French Admiralty and asked him to share his opinions on the major issues of today.

**H.E.:** As one who experienced most of the events and met so many of the people of the last century, how did you welcome the third millennium?

**J.-F.D.:** We are entering a time of complete insecurity about the future. The twentieth century brought mankind two world wars, many civil wars, pogroms and violence, but despite this it was a century of concrete achievements. People believed in the progress of science, especially medicine, in the development of mankind and in the democratization of society. However, even if democracy exists in some countries, there is no great faith in it, and there are still many dictatorships

around the world. We have reached a point where people think in theoretical terms without wholeheartedly believing in anything any more. There used to be, on the one hand, the natural sciences, like mathematics, physics, engineering, and on the other hand, the arts. Now the difference between them is lost. You can read a piece on astronomy or biology and start to think it could be a work of poetry.

**H.E.:** Maybe the same thing has happened in politics? It has lost its former clarity and predictability. Recently I read an article by your colleague, the former minister Albin Chalandon. This famous French lawyer wrote that from 1648 onwards the Western world lived according to Westphalian principles. In that year the Treaty of Westphalia brought to an end the Thirty Years War and guided Europe for nearly three centuries right up to the start of the First World War. According to the Westphalian view, a state has the right to start a war, but it must have policies which would make wars less likely, such as recognizing the sovereignty of other states and their right to choose their religion as well as the primacy of diplomacy in solving international conflicts. And it is true to say that, with the exception of the 20 year period of the Napoleonic wars, the number of military conflicts in Europe was greatly reduced. After this, says Chalandon, the Wilson era of history began, named after American President Woodrow Wilson, one of the creators of the international security system after the First World War. The new world order was founded on the principle of democratic states and the resolution of international conflicts through negotiation. Of course all this faith in human reason was destroyed after the formation of the Soviet Union and the appearance of the Bolshevik and Nazi regimes. After that things deteriorated and we had the Second World War, decolonization, endless bloodshed in wars in 'third world' countries. In short the Babel tower of universal democracy was smashed into pieces. We can now recognize the absurdity of the mixed mosaic that had been created.

**J.-F.D.:** The current international situation is far from absurd but it has no precedent. In both the First and the Second World War there was a clearly identifiable enemy. Now in military conflicts the rules of the game are completely different. Where is the front line? Where is the home front? How do we distinguish the military from the civilian, or the ordinary person from the terrorist wired with explosives? Because of the mass-media, news often becomes unintelligible. People are fed so much information they no longer know what to believe. There used to be truths that were accepted without question. For example, ordinary people were persuaded that colonial exploits were necessary for the progress of mankind; that Western powers were invading the 'third world' in order to bring knowledge and enlightenment to the populations of Africa and Asia. The leaders of the French Third Republic founded their empire on this concept. These leaders had nothing in common with Hitler or Mussolini. Quite the reverse; they were benevolent people genuinely dedicated to the idea of democracy. In the same way as the vast majority of Soviet citizens believed that Russia's expansion in Central Asia was necessary for the development of that region, so the West believed in its civilizing mission in Asia and Africa. Now there are no universal truths left. The defining feature of the coming century will not be that people are more good or more evil, but that it will become harder and harder to tell them apart.

**H.E.:** But can one use good and evil as political concepts?

**J.-F.D.:** It is not something I would recommend. However in the White House the 'good world' and the 'evil empire' became political categories a long time ago,

although this is understandable. This radicalization in America was caused by the fact that the country is essentially a theocracy. God, drilled into people by the mass media every day, is present everywhere: in state symbols, in the statutes of all the institutions of power, in politicians' speeches. This Manichean black-and-white world is instilled into Americans from an early age. The 'good Americans' stand against the 'evil enemies'. The authorities persuade the people that America was chosen by God and is therefore strong and invincible. In other words, he who wins has a monopoly on the glory.

**H.E.:** US President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said something very similar: 'Complete victory means total submission of the vanquished to the victor and should allow the latter to achieve all his political aims without hindrance.' To tell you the truth, I sometimes harbour the wicked notion that if the September 11 kamikaze attack on America had not happened, the White House would have had to invent it. What do you think?

**J.-F.D.:** You mean the gigantic leap the USA made in international politics after September 11 when they unconditionally confirmed their status as superpower number one? If we ask whether America, or more precisely the US establishment, benefited from the attack on the New York skyscrapers, then there is some truth in this. But for me, as someone who has worked a lot in the East, I have not the slightest doubt that al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden exist. I am convinced it was Islamic extremists who flew the Boeings into the Twin Towers. The various rumours on both sides of the Atlantic, that representatives of some pro-military American groups were responsible for the deaths of more than three thousand people in New York, is no more than a conspiracy theory. Of course the actions of the Muslim terrorists succeeded in destroying symbols of American authority, but as time will show, actual American power was only increased by these barbaric acts. And the first to suffer was our 'old Europe'.

**H.E.:** In the political sense?

**J.-F.D.:** Primarily. It quickly became clear that the European Union was completely marginalized to some supernumerary role after the American tragedy. As soon as the Pentagon started military action in Afghanistan, Tony Blair obediently jumped to the orders received from his Presidential ally across the ocean and sent British air and land forces into the region. He didn't even bother to inform his European partners about these 'heroics', no phone calls, no communication with any of them! What could they do about it? Just grit their teeth and make the best of a bad job. Everyone knows how the Afghanistan military operation ended. America pretended that terrorism had been dealt with, assumed responsibility for the rest of the world, and announced in words and deeds that the twenty-first century would be theirs. The American century! Having lost its former enemy with the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the United States has woken up. After half a century of flooding the world with jeans, Coca-Cola and stultifying movies, the USA showed who is boss with the Gulf War.

**H.E.:** And have the Americans really dealt with terrorism?

**J.-F.D.:** It's strange isn't it? A power that can read a number plate anywhere on earth from space, allowed Mullah Omar, spiritual leader of the Taliban, to escape. The reason given is that Omar got away on a motorbike, which had no identification plates. I'm not joking! I heard this said in a completely serious context from an apparently serious American politician, who was searching for an explanation as to why both Taliban leaders Bin Laden and Mullah Omar were still alive and

free. So where could America turn next to defend its authority against the terrorist threat? It needed to find a credible alternative to the Taliban, and this was done very effectively when Saddam Hussein was portrayed as the personification of evil.

**H.E.:** The situation has become paradoxical: in maximizing security for itself America, the world's only superpower, is creating a very dangerous climate for the rest of the world. And the UN seems to be out of the picture! Are there any international authorities left today?

**J.-F.D.:** There is no longer any international authority. Not one! No one can take the UN seriously when its leadership always collapses during times of crisis. This is what happened with Iraq. How many thousands of lives were ruined because the UN's charter denies it the competence to intervene in such a dispute? The aim of the UN when it was founded was to avoid a Third World War. This was decided between the Americans and Soviets during the Second World War. The British, French and Chinese were also involved but they did not make the key decisions. The UN is a strange, inadequate child of compromise born between the USSR and the USA. Their tacit bilateral agreement meant that the organization's headquarters were located in New York, with other UN offices in the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Belarus. One country with three sites!

**H.E.:** Are you saying that the UN's failings, which became obvious during the second Iraq war, were predetermined from the start?

**J.-F.D.:** The UN's essential problems stem from the second chapter of its charter, about which there were long debates between the USSR and the USA. At that difficult time, the Soviet Union was convinced that most UN members were Western countries and pro-American satellites. The Soviets did not want the Americans to interfere in the internal business of other countries, especially regarding the observance of democratic principles in Soviet bloc countries. Therefore Article 2 in chapter 1 of the UN charter states: 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.' This means there was a serious limitation to the UN's ability to take action. If a dictator were to attack a neighbouring country this would be covered by the UN's jurisdiction. But if a dictator destroys the population of his own country, the UN has no right to get involved. Where, I ask you, is the morality in this? Furthermore, the Cold War was starting, but instead of regulating world developments, members of the Security Council limited themselves to establishing spheres of influence. How many times did Molotov rush to use the veto? How many times the Americans? The UN was forced to manage the clash of two camps, and not the development of mankind. The UN does not solve problems; it is simply not vested with the necessary powers. The organization functions only to assuage the contradictions between East and West, North and South.

**H.E.:** In that case there is no point in the UN's existence?

**J.-F.D.:** Don't misunderstand me! The UN is necessary to maintain global balance. But the organization was never an international court or guarantor of peace. Not one single world or regional conflict was ever solved by the UN. It can help to contain military action, but it cannot reconcile the different sides in a conflict. We only have to recall Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan. Now there is another important factor: there is only one superpower. It is true China is growing, but that is for the long term. So what does this mean? America can easily do what it wants without agreement from the UN

**H.E.:** In that case why do the Americans stay in the UN?

**J.-F.D.:** But they need the UN! Not as a court, but for a platform. They need a club, which allows them to communicate with the world. It is not in the USA's interests to leave a vacuum in the international arena. But don't be deluded into thinking that the UN can guarantee peace. The organization never did and probably never will fulfil this function.

**H.E.:** And NATO? Is that an effective organization?

**J.-F.D.:** NATO remains for European countries, or more precisely the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the only permanent and effective guarantee of their security. Look how the former Soviet satellites and the Republics of the USSR jumped to support the United States in the war against Iraq. The point is that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are still afraid of Russia.

**H.E.:** The war in Iraq was a kind of litmus test for many recent problems. For example, in the light of the disagreement between the French and Germans on the one hand and the British on the other, the idea of a European Union was shown to be almost a myth.

**J.-F.D.:** The European Union is far from finished! To talk of its burial during the Iraq crisis would be a premature and superficial reaction. Even without the Americans the relationships inside Europe are already sufficiently complex and tense.

**H.E.:** It's like in the old song: 'Everything is fine dear marquis! But...'

**J.-F.D.:** No, no, not like that! The world has gone through a difficult crisis. The fact that there is only one superpower has completely unsettled political commentators and forces us to start reading history in a new light. We also have to start to re-evaluate international law. We are only at the beginning of this new reading. Europe is split between the French and the British camps. But the fact that George Bush started the war in Iraq without even consulting his European colleagues does not mean the end for Europe. Figuratively speaking, Europe was not hijacked! But the Americans do not at all like the idea of a strong and independent Europe.

**H.E.:** But you wouldn't deny there is a crisis in Europe's institutions?

**J.-F.D.:** In today's crisis of Europe's institutions there is one powerful positive factor. Three of the original founders of the European Union – France, Germany and Belgium – have stated that they are ready to build a Europe which is at last truly independent of America. Three members of the original Common Market! Exactly half of the six countries that started the creation of a united Europe. It is very significant there is a momentum to create a new 'old Europe'.

**H.E.:** But isn't the European Union now too extended, moving continually to the East and South?

**J.-F.D.:** Europe can be built on the basis of several spheres. The first enlargement is the new Europe of 25, a further step would see the inclusion of six more members, amongst which will be Russia.

**H.E.:** So all is not lost for Europe?

**J.-F.D.:** Of course not. As an old European I am convinced of this. A new and completely radical trend has appeared – that is the new Paris – Berlin – Moscow axis. This is an event of great historical importance. The nineteenth century, and to an even greater extent the twentieth, were marked by a tragic ballet with three dancers: France, Germany and Russia. This cost the world two world wars. And now at last there is a new political reality, the Paris – Berlin – Moscow axis, an event equal in importance to the introduction of the single European currency.

**H.E.:** Maybe Beijing should be included?

**J.-F.D.:** Maybe not. As French peasants say: you shouldn't put all your eggs in one basket. The Chinese have 5,000 years of history; this is an entirely separate topic. There will be conflicts in the future between China and Russia, China and Japan, China and America. China is a very particular world. One of my political friends when in China asked Zhou Enlai, head of the Chinese government under Mao Tse-tung: 'What do you think the consequences of the French revolution of 1789 are for our time?' Zhou Enlai tapped together his long mandarin fingers, listened carefully to the interpreter, and replied: 'It is too early to say yet.' And really, how could this barbarian ask such a question! Chinese history is measured in millennia, not decades.

**H.E.:** But Europe also has a rich history!

**J.-F.D.:** The former Soviet Anthem, the Internationale, goes 'we will destroy the whole world to the foundations, and then we shall build our own new world...' As if to say, we would cultivate a completely new person, Homo Sovieticus. This is nothing more than a utopian dream! There can be no future for those without a past. You can only build Europe by knowing its history. The recent Iraq crisis is a good lesson for Europeans.

**H.E.:** For those Europeans who have to accept Pax Americana as a given, the world is now built along American lines.

**J.-F.D.:** For many years I have been battling against the world turning into Pax Americana, and there was nothing anti-American in this. An independent Europe does not mean an anti-American Europe. It is true that Europeans and Americans see their political ends and means in completely different ways. But what does that matter? Everyone lives life in his own way.

**H.E.:** What if this way leads to a dead end? As at the time of the Iraq crisis? How many Americans were searching for weapons of mass destruction in that country but none were to be found?

**J.-F.D.:** From the beginning of the Iraq campaign it was clear that there were too many unknowns in that war. First of all in the post-war settlement for Iraq and the whole region. The Americans created havoc in Kurdistan; I would not be surprised if a conflict with Turkey flares up. Syria is tense, Iran is near boiling point. The main problem of the region, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is not only no closer to a solution but is in fact getting worse. When Blair decided to make his speech more weighty by saying that after the fall of Saddam Hussein the coalition would proceed to solve the Palestinian problem, Ariel Sharon within 24 hours said 'No! No! No!' In the Iraq war everything was clear: the Americans were supposed to win and they did. But at what price? What will they do with this victory? There are too many uncertainties. Only one thing is clear: any solution to the Middle East conflict is more distant.

**H.E.:** One thing I cannot understand. When the UN passed the famous Article 1441, on the disarmament of Iraq and banning its development or storage of weapons of mass destruction, both the Americans and the Europeans were happy. Then the Americans started the war and it turned out that it was this Article that caused all the misunderstandings – how did that happen?

**J.-F.D.:** The explanation is different interpretations of Article 1441. Each side saw in it what they wanted and interpreted it their own way. This kind of vagueness is characteristic of all official texts drawn up in English. English is ideal for reaching consensus, but not for making concrete distinctions. French is the classical lan-

guage of diplomacy. It has a Cartesian accuracy. But now, unfortunately, international institutions prefer to work in English. This is the cause of many diplomatic misunderstandings, legal lacunae, differing interpretations. Take the word of an experienced diplomat: there is nothing worse for politics than false compromises. Starting from the same words, each leader draws his own conclusions. This can be the cause of conflicts and wars.

**H.E.:** Nevertheless, English is now indispensable. The rise in American patriotism has seen to that.

**J.-F.D.:** This periodic rise in American patriotism has always worried me. After September 11 patriotic fervour reached such a pitch that the actions American leaders may take in the future have become completely unpredictable. For example the 'Patriot Act', which makes police action easier and limits civic freedom, was used for the arrest and detention of several hundred people. It is significant that only one Senator, Russell Feingold, voted against this legislation. It was only thanks to debate in the American press, that a decision to create a state network of informers was withdrawn at the last moment! The TIPS project (Terrorist Information and Prevention System) was intended to recruit more than a million citizens: taxi drivers, postmen, plumbers, bus drivers and so on.

**H.E.:** A totally Stalinist idea you might say!

**J.-F.D.:** Sometimes I even wonder who is more dangerous for the fragile minds across the Atlantic – Stalin or Stallone? American imperialism is expressed not in a colonial form similar to the British, French and Russian-Soviet type, but in a completely different way: in economic, financial and of course cultural expansion. Hollywood films, Broadway musicals, rock and roll, pulp fiction...a powerful force!

**H.E.:** Overall you are not too optimistic for the future?

**J.-F.D.:** At the moment we cannot talk about optimism or pessimism: the world has become too unpredictable a place. I love precise sciences like physics and maths but precise sciences hardly exist anymore. People are happy to study sociology, politics, historical theory. I see this is as a dangerous trend. I don't think that in the future the Americans will be able to lay down their laws and dictate to others so easily. For today and tomorrow America will remain the superpower. But the world will preserve itself only when we learn to live together as one big family. We may have different ideas, but we should all live side by side without interference. I believe in a multipolar world. Everyone would benefit from this, including the Americans.

Interview by Kirill Privalov  
Paris.