

SPEECH BY M.HUBERT VEDRINE AT THE WORLD POLICY CONFERENCE IN MARRAKECH, 2009

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to open our round-table discussions on the subject of governance but I should say at the outset that I have a problem: I am almost entirely in agreement with the remarkable speech made by Thierry de Montbrial, who has comprehensively pre-empted the debates taking place over the next few days and set a very ambitious framework for our discussions. That said, I would like to share my thoughts on two points. Firstly, I want to look at the word “governance”, the concept it represents and how it can be used, or not, in discussions during this and future meetings. Secondly, I would like to examine what is happening in the G20 and the consequences thereof. To take the first point, we tend to use the word “governance” for the sake of convenience. Thierry de Montbrial gave a positive, concrete definition of the term: governance is the requisite method of coordinating, consulting and cooperating with all the players involved, beginning with national governments, who retain the primacy of their position. The word took on a different meaning in the period of euphoria in which the West was caught up, particularly in the heroic interpretation of the “fall” of the Berlin Wall, which was in fact the opening of the Wall by an exhausted regime. “Governance” is what linguists call a “portmanteau” word. Individuals ascribe to it whatever meaning suits their purposes. What does it involve? Is it the governance of someone over someone else or something over someone or someone over something? What rules over people or things does it involve, and who creates them? There are several questions to be answered, and one of them is the issue of national governments. But are these necessarily the strongest ones? You may recall the triumphant attitude of the United States after the end of the USSR, when I used the word “super power” (which was not aggressive in French, unlike “super” in English), but simply referred to the greatest power of all time. I agree that the US will maintain its position as a leader for a long time to come. Is “governance” another way of referring to the government of the strongest? Or another word for traditional national government? We know that even though national governments have retained the primacy of their position, they have not been the only players on the international scene for some time now. Does it refer to belief in the market, which is gradually taking over from all other centres of decision-making, orientation and forecasting and is supposed to be capable of regulating itself (which is a joke, as we have seen)? Many people have said so and believe it to be true. I suggest that the word should be accompanied by a strict definition whenever it is used during these round-table discussions and at subsequent meetings. There are many vague words that have a negative impact on clear thinking. “International community” is a nice phrase but not yet a fully fledged one; whenever it is used it derives its value from whatever it is being used to describe. The same applies to “governance”. There is another point I would like to make. We need to pay attention to the potential of the adjective “global” to take away a sense of responsibility. Today, it has become commonplace to say, “Everything is global”. And what then? If everything is global, who does what? People tell us: everything is global, so there must be a global response. What does that mean? It may mean: fundamentally, it doesn’t concern me (me as an individual, or me as a government), if “global” is some kind of abstract entity that sits above national governments, like the idea people used to have of the United Nations, before they became disillusioned. In practice there is not and will never be a global president of a global people because the illusion of a homogeneous world, based either on the (poorly translated) ideas of Fukuyama or the theses put forward by Thomas Friedman, is largely inaccurate. It would be better to say that global problems require not a global response but a collective one. If we want to clarify the term “global”, we quickly find ourselves confronting the question of who does what. And that brings me to the issue of the G20. The very existence of the G20 is itself an admission. If Western governments could manage it, you can be sure they would decide everything as a threesome, as they did after the First World War, with Wilson, Lloyd George and Clémenceau, or after the Second World War, when Stalin, Roosevelt followed by Truman, and Churchill decided everything. Today, Western governments are resigned to the G20 – those same Western governments that have had the monopoly on power and strategic action in the world for around four centuries. The change is phenomenal. In the 1970s there was the G7, within which only five countries really counted. In 1989 President Mitterrand attempted to set up some kind of north/south summit before the G7 meeting held at La Défense, but the G7 nations objected to any link being made with it. Another attempt was made by Jacques Chirac, who invited 27 countries rather than eight to the G8 summit in Evian, but again it was blocked by the members of the group. It took a serious set of circumstances, the economic crisis, a president, George Bush, who was running out of steam, the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and his personal energy for the G20 to be created. What will happen next? It will depend on the attitude of the various nations within the G20. It would be illusory to think that the G20 represented some kind of global government and would mean many more years were wasted. This is wrong. The G20 will be one of the frameworks within which competition will continue. We do not live within a stable, multi-centric world, but in a multi-centric competitive environment, and potentially a multi-centric confrontation. The way this develops within the G20 will depend on the behaviour of the main protagonists. If Western governments, starting with the United States, accept a shift towards relative leadership (since they have lost the historic monopoly they once had and, as Socrates and Brezinski both said, this is the first time in the history of the world that all nations have been politically active), they may serve their own interests well by accepting the change. Barack Obama is an intelligent enough man to see this, but will others follow suit? It is impossible to know. Assuming that they did, Western governments would find themselves engaged in what I referred to in one of my essays as smart realpolitik, i.e. a kind of politics that is both realistic and intelligent and incorporates the new circumstances in which the world finds itself. If Europeans were able to get beyond their own navel-gazing, they would organise themselves within the G20 to manage the change, which will be painful for them but which is inevitable. But there are others to consider, namely the major emerging nations. China has long said: “Everything you say about international rules, social questions, human rights and the environment is simply a way of hindering our development. It is Western hypocrisy. You did the same yourselves when you were developing.” I have taken China as an example because I don’t have the time to list all the emerging countries. If emerging countries reason along these lines, they enter the world system not because people have been kind enough to make room for them but simply because they have made it for themselves and there is no other way of achieving it, but without trying to build a responsible commitment. They advance their pawns as far as possible before they accept any new rules. The outcome is not a foregone conclusion. For years, the Chinese have been saying: “Don’t worry; China’s emergence will be peaceful, etc.” I listened to what Thierry de Montbrial said on Chinese views of how Western governments have a way of getting caught up in mistaken policies in the Middle East and elsewhere. As a result, we cannot know in advance how the major emerging countries will behave. Will they continue to accept the idea of collective responsibility in Copenhagen and afterwards? It may be that there will be a period of latency before they get there. The development of the G20 will also depend on knowing, as some people are predicting, whether there will be a G2, made up of China and the United States. My intuition suggests that for China, it would be flattering as a transitional step but that for the United States, even if it is inevitable in financial and commercial terms, it would not be acceptable, and that the US would do everything in its power to retain a leadership position that may be relative but would still be superior in order not to be locked into an exclusive face-to-face confrontation. Finally, there is still one question of interest to those countries that are not part of the G20 (although there are not quite 190, because the G20 includes some 30 countries). There are between 150 and 160 countries that are not represented in the G20 at all. Will the G20 be able to connect with these other nations? It will have to in one way or another, but it is not a foregone conclusion. We are therefore faced with a disappointing scenario involving further endless debates, conferences that achieve nothing and commitments that are as illusory as the “Millennium Development Goals”, which were clearly unachievable when the United Nations adopted them, as everyone knew. There is also a more positive scenario, in which Western governments would react more intelligently and emerging countries would gradually make greater commitments, together forming a “worldwide alliance”. This could lead to a kind of virtuous circle, involving both sides in a new process. Then, but only then, would it become possible to speak of governance based on new principles and a new, reformulated universality in which all partners would be involved, which would mark progress on the famous reference to “We the people of the United Nations”, written in 1945 by three legal advisers! This meeting is before us, not behind us, on the basis that we have already adopted the universal texts. If this positive dynamic really develops, we can even hope to see the reform of the United Nations unblocked by the roundabout means of a G20 that has succeeded in creating a new political climate and made blocking the reform of the Council either futile or outdated. Let me end on that positive and encouraging picture.



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31/10/2009