

# UNSTABLE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Hubert Vedrine

*Unstable multipolar world*

Q. – The United States has re-elected Obama, China has begun her political transition and Europe seems to be emerging from the euro crisis. In 2013, is what you described as the unstable multipolar world going to go through a consolidation phase? HUBERT VEDRINE – Twenty years after the end of the USSR, there is no global order being formed, but competition within the deregulated and not yet sufficiently re-regulated global economy, a free-for-all between states, businesses, financial players and diverse interest groups, both legal and illegal ones. Alliances are ad hoc between centres of power on the up or declining. And this is going to continue in 2013.

US/ENERGY INDEPENDENCE Q. – Is the United States going to overcome the debt crisis? Does the prospect of energy independence change the situation? HUBERT VEDRINE – Political compromise on the debt is likely. But the United States is confronted with the challenge of admitting that her leadership over the world is now no more than relative, and that her power has to be exercised differently. Half of America refuses to do this. Barack Obama understands it and seeking the *modus operandi*. His initial speeches were magnificent; what he lacks is a skilled operative. Energy independence will help the United States; it will not allow her to turn her back either on the rest of the world or even the Middle East. And no country will usurp her leading role, not even China.

CHINA Q. – Is the increased tension in Asia the sign that China wants to create a sphere of influence for herself in the region? HUBERT VEDRINE – Deng Xiaoping wanted China to have a low profile until she achieved sufficient strength. Perhaps the current leaders think that the time has come, at any rate in Asia? But has China got a global project? I don't believe so, not a priori, in any case. She will defend her interests increasingly vigorously, everywhere, but I can't see her interfering in everything in the name of "Chinese universal values".

Q. – Should we hope that China becomes democratic? HUBERT VEDRINE – Of course! Just as I see little future in Western interference, I'm equally convinced that, in every society, even in China and Russia, there's a growing domestic aspiration for a state under the rule of law, even if not for democracy. However, we can't wait for this to happen before having a China policy.

RUSSIA Q. – Vis-à-vis Russia, can we have a hard-headed policy without worrying about the backsliding on human rights? HUBERT VEDRINE – There is backsliding, and above all disappointed expectations. But here too, we can't wait for democracy to be established before having a Russia policy and defending our strategic, economic and cultural interests. Western countries always find it hard to harmonize their two approaches: dealing with the outside world or changing, converting it. When all that really matters to them is propagating their model – religion in the past, democracy and free trade today – they don't know really how to deal with the outside world, "the rest", if it's too different.

SYRIA/ISLAMISTS/MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD Q. – In Syria, the West wanted to get rid of Bashar al-Assad without paying attention to who would replace him. The Russians, on their part, are so concerned about what's going to follow that they are supporting the regime until the bitter end. How can these two antonymic approaches be reconciled? HUBERT VEDRINE – The disagreement is profound. The Russians should have been brought in from the outset. When the Syrian revolt started, the West thought that after the falls of Ben Ali and Mubarak it would be easy to topple Assad. Even today it would be in our interest to find a common approach between Americans, Europeans, Russians, Turks and committed Arab countries to manage the next stage...

Q. – Does the Islamists' increasing power compel us to play the Muslim Brotherhood card, i.e. that of the least radical Islamists? HUBERT VEDRINE – We haven't got that many "cards". Despite the US paying the Egyptian armed forces \$1.3 billion every year, her influence is very weak. Secondly, neither the Islamists' electoral victory nor the subsequent troubling events should have come as a surprise. Democracy isn't an instantaneous conversion, but the culmination of a long process. In every Arab country, civil society, political parties, in some cases, the armed forces, a monarchy, tribes and everywhere the powerful Muslim Brotherhood movement are pitched against each other and, and beyond them, the Salafists, and even Jihadists. It's possible that faced with the challenges of actually exercising power, the Muslim Brotherhood will split between realists and fundamentalists.

ISRAEL/PALESTINE Q. – Is Israeli-Arab peace still possible? HUBERT VEDRINE – Not to have imposed a settlement of the Palestinian question on a national basis before the conflict degenerates into a religious and fanatical clash is a major strategic error by the West. This remains a necessity.

AFGHANISTAN Q. – What is your assessment of the war in Afghanistan? HUBERT VEDRINE – Bringing down the regime which had become a receptacle for al-Qaeda was legitimate. Staying three or four years maximum to help the new government get stabilized could be justified. Beyond that it was, sad to say, delusional.

NATO/EUROPEAN DEFENCE Q. – Does NATO have a future after Afghanistan? HUBERT VEDRINE – The 1949 treaty has a great future because the United States will not abandon her closest allies and the Europeans would be mad to forgo an alliance with the world's greatest power, which includes, with article 5, a mutual defence obligation. But the actual organization, NATO, will have to be adapted to the reality of the threats to be dealt with, and so slimmed down.

Q. – What role for France within the Atlantic Alliance? HUBERT VEDRINE – A potential major role. This is the subject of the report François Hollande asked me to draw up. It's time to move beyond the outdated quarrels between NATO defenders and detractors and consider the questions of tomorrow. The grounds for France returning to NATO's integrated structures remain debatable, but it's taken place, and there would be no reasons for France now quitting them again. The circumstances bear no comparison with those which had justified General de Gaulle's decision. France has to take the view that NATO is her alliance and adopt a position on its doctrine and strategy: either defensive or deterrence?

Q. – Do you believe in the future of European defence? HUBERT VEDRINE – Almost nothing initiated in the past 25 years has really worked. So let's get our European partners to face up to their responsibilities, taking advantage of the receptability of the Obama II United States which would not frown on the Europeans doing more. This presupposes that Europe emerge from its strategic slumber and take on the role of global player.

Q. – How can public opinion be woken up? HUBERT VEDRINE – By alarming them without scaring them, telling them the truth, getting across to them that if we want to retain control of our destiny we have to become a power, because, if we don't, we will depend on decisions taken elsewhere, by the Chinese, Americans, other emerging countries or markets. For this there's no need to merge the peoples, as those with a fundamentalist view of federalism would have us do. A strategic agreement between European nations on how legitimately to defend our interests in global competition would reconcile the elites absolutely bent on "more Europe", with the peoples, who have become deeply disillusioned with the EU.

EU/GERMANY/France Q. – Angela Merkel is popular by being European while defending her country's interests. Why can't French leaders do the same? HUBERT VEDRINE – Angela Merkel has convinced German taxpayers that more Europe means more German control over Europe. Whereas, in our country (and elsewhere) more Europe is now often perceived, on the contrary, as a loss of power, with any compensation illusory.

Q. – Can't we say the same sort of things without being in a position of strength like Angela Merkel? HUBERT VEDRINE – It's harder! When our elites do nothing but reiterate the need for more integration, a "federal leap forward" etc., they are deepening the gulf between them and public opinion. The French no longer believe in the virtues of abandoning areas of sovereignty because they see that this sovereignty has been hijacked by the markets, themselves uncontrolled. The rebalancing of our relationship with Germany which François Hollande had undertaken is a necessity.

EURO AREA/EU Q. – The crisis has led Europe to get organized. What do you think about the results obtained in the Euro Area? HUBERT VEDRINE – The Euro Area is in the process of painfully giving birth to an economic government it lacked. It's good news. I'd simply add that this economic government must not be reduced to Germany. That would be dangerous for Germany herself. It must not be solely a disciplinary system for monitoring member countries' commitments to budgetary restraint. It will have to deal with real economic policy, i.e. growth and currency and exchange rates. Last point: this economic government must remain democratic, i.e. keep a link with the peoples. It's who decides what in the last resort.

Q. – Is that enough to ensure Europe's future? HUBERT VEDRINE – Each of the three points I have mentioned is very hard to implement. It will take years of work and persuasion, for example on the currency. Look at the political management of the euro. And on Europe and the world, let's have fewer pipe dreams. I have for a long time said that Europe must be careful not to become the "global village idiot".

FRANCE/"GLOBALLY INFLUENTIAL POWER" Q. – In 2000, you were talking about France as a "globally influential power". Thirteen years later, isn't France losing her status? HUBERT VEDRINE – We remain a "globally influential" country because of our presence on the UN Security Council, nuclear deterrent, military projection capability, the international profile of the French language and our culture, our diplomatic heritage, the CAC 40, and the attractiveness of national territory etc. However, we have a serious competitiveness problem which isn't directly geopolitical but which, long term, can undermine our position in the world. I can only say "long live the Gallois report". (1) (1) Louis Gallois' economic report into competitiveness commissioned by President Hollande.





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