

Foreword

The idea for this essay started with my conviction that in the 1990s, the end of communism and the fall of the Russian Empire would not mean the much-heralded dawn of happy globalisation and everlasting peace. The current international system is tainted with the resurgence of old quarters. It is rendered increasingly complex by an unprecedented technological and economic revolution. Sustainable peace and prosperity can only be based on a shared understanding of the nature and effects of interdependence in every area — the bedrock of what is commonly called “global governance”, which cannot be conceived in an ivory tower. Its emergence can only stem from continuous cooperation between international relations players, analysts and thinkers from the five continents.

Fostering that interaction is one of the main tasks of think tanks, a category of institutions that appeared in the 20th century.¹ Though it can be said that any initiative of this nature is just a drop in the ocean, the ocean needs every drop it can get.² To this end, in 2007, I set up the World Policy Conference,³ a non-governmental organisation aiming to improve global governance by nurturing the viability of a world that is reasonably open, prosperous, and, therefore, fairer and more respectful of the diversity of states and nations. The problem is viability. As luck would have it, the first World Policy Conference took place in October 2008, several days after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, setting the stage for an economic meltdown comparable to the Great Depression. Moreover, peacekeeping in the post-Soviet world has proved challenging, especially in the Near and Middle East.

I mentioned that global governance cannot be conceived in an ivory tower. That touches upon an old philosophical question: the limits of knowledge without experience. I admire authors of treatises on the establishment of everlasting peace, such as the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and Immanuel Kant in former times or Jürgen Habermas today. Even law, to be effective, must

1 See “*Think tanks à la française*”, an article co-written with Thomas Gomart, published in *Le Débat*, no. 181, September-October 2014, and “*Qu’est-ce qu’un think tank?*”, a talk by the author at the Académie des sciences morales et politiques on 28 February 2011. Both texts were published in Thierry de Montbrial’s *La pensée et l’action*, Academia Româna, 2015.

2 See Thierry de Montbrial, *Une goutte d’eau et l’océan*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2015.

3 See www.worldpolicyconference.com

be embodied. And the time when peace can be achieved and embodied in the law, has not yet arrived.

The goal of this book is at once both modest and far-reaching: to contribute to a better understanding of our times and to spur a wide-ranging debate on the state of the world today that is capable of reaching a consensus broad enough to better lay the groundwork for the future. I am aware that a perfect, lasting consensus is impossible outside moments of grace, such as the climate change agreement. But I think that it is realistic to hope for sufficient consensus to move forward on governance.

This essay begins with the notion that the present is the intersection of a future already here and a past not yet over. I shall start with the future, for the outlook has never seemed so exciting yet disturbing at once. Some upheavals are already underway in embryonic states. Others, more or less foreseeable, are yet to come. Much of what is expected will remain a matter of the imagination. There will certainly be completely new surprises. Mistakes are and will always be made in dating even the surest forecast. And let us keep in mind the human propensity to overestimate short-term changes and underestimate long-term transformations. Human beings are not the masters of time, but they are free to choose their own paths. That is especially true in terms of technological and economic development. In addition, change is not just radical. Contrary to popular belief, some topics, such as religion, belong as much to the future as to the past. There are also godless “religions”:

communism, justified by dialectical and historical materialism yesterday and still somewhat today; as well as “singularity” and transhumanisation tomorrow and already today. As for the past, it is important to remain keenly aware of it. Anyway, it never fades from the unconscious. The usefulness of history, on which Paul Valéry meditated so well in difficult times — not just political history and the history of ideas, but also the history of science and technology — remains key. If it can be said that we are living in troubled times, it is largely because the breathtaking growth of knowledge in the 20th century has suddenly left us bereft of our traditional bearings. That accounts for why it is necessary not only to trace those developments, but also to re-examine the very idea of progress. A loss of bearings also means a loss of meaning. To find it again, distance is necessary for perspective. This applies to everything, including religion.

That said, the shock of the present results from the clash of two kinds of tectonic plates, past and future. I address the issue mainly from the geopolitical aspect, for that is the nature of the backdrop of governance. To make cooperation possible, however, the terms must first be defined. The concept of geopolitics is overused, which further convolutes discussion.

The only way to successfully weather troubled times is to personally and collectively try and make the best of the present. We are living in the most amazing epoch in world history. Hard as it may be to fathom the future, it must at least be assumed that humanity is not coming to an end. We owe it to future generations

to work on building a framework, global by necessity, which will safeguard their chances of self-fulfilment. But we must also keep in mind that this will be neither quick nor easy. In this civilisation of instantaneousness, to advocate for the return of a long-term perspective, whether peering towards the future or back to the past, is not the least paradoxical.