

# WHAT THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL WORLD REALLY LOOKS LIKE

Hubert Vedrine

*What the New Geopolitical World Really Looks Like*

EA: The word appears inclined to analyze the world in terms of the concept of "international community." What is your thinking? HV: To understand how things will change tomorrow in every sphere - the environment, energy, strategy, demography - it is better to tackle issues without over-optimistic assumptions. In the 1990s there was a lot of faith in notions such as the "international community." That arose from "the end of history," which we were all talking about and which meant that our [Western liberal democratic] values would catch on all over the world. It was a time of great optimism, comparable to post-World War I when the League of Nations was created even though the law of the jungle still prevailed. Or like 1945 when the United Nations was created, even though the key member states were deeply divided (as we saw during the cold war). Or even like the moment after the collapse of the Soviet Union when President George H.W. Bush talked about a new "international order" under the enlightened leadership of the United States, a vision that has turned out to produce very different, very disappointing results, as we've seen in the last few years. The optimism in the 1990s benefited from a climate of strong international economic growth and the ascendancy of American power incarnated by President Bill Clinton, who, by putting a smiling face on America, made it seem like the U.S. was no longer a hegemonic power. That era is gone and there has been a drastic change in the last few years as developments showed that no "international community" exists yet. So people need to rid themselves of such empty rhetoric, including "Europe as a superpower," "the Mediterranean" and other such hollow concepts - words that no one knows what they mean. Interestingly enough, it is the ex-communist countries that have quickly adopted this new perspective in which such labels are recognized as devoid of any meaning. What actually happened in the early 1990s was not the "end of history" but instead a redistribution of the cards - specifically, the end of a Western monopoly on global power that dated back to the 16th century. In its place, some new countries and some old countries emerged or reemerged as powers in the contemporary world. This has raised the current challenge of our time: how to reorder relations between the old established powers and these new powers? You coined the term "hyperpower" for the United States in the 1990s. Do think it is still valid? It is. But you should remember that it wasn't meant in a negative way. In French, the word "hyper" is not associated with some kind of pathological excess the way it is in English. Once I used the word, it caught on in ways that go far beyond what I was saying. I simply meant that the U.S. was by far the biggest world power anyone had ever seen. The Roman Empire and the Chinese Empire were territorially limited so they didn't really mind what happened in the rest of the world. In contrast, the United States is literally a "global" power - a first. That means it has strong influence in every sphere of international life. I like to compare it to a bicycle wheel with the U.S. as the hub with "spokes" into every country and sector of activity in the world. For every capital, the first preoccupation is that country's relationship with Washington. So the word "hyper-power" is not outdated. But, of course, it never meant "invulnerability" (as September 11th showed) or "omnipotence" or "infallibility" (think about the U.S. error regarding Iraq). But it is also true that the U.S. remains the only superpower, and we will have to wait a long time before China acquires the Americans' combination of hard, soft and smart power. You call Iraq "a fiasco," we know the U.S. is in an economic recession, and many people talk about a loss of American strategic and diplomatic credibility. Taken together, don't these factors weaken U.S. superpower status? Certainly, but is there any other country in the world that can assume a similar rank? No. None. The problem of Iraq arose from a specific policy pushed by neo-conservatives and Zionists in the neo-con ranks (with ideas like Richard Perle's) and can also be attributed to the alliance between American nationalists and Southern evangelicals about the direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Under the influence of this coalition, Washington has simply ignored the rights and wrongs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has tried to transform the Arab countries with a coerced democratization - what the French expert Pierre Hassner calls "Wilsonian idealism with guns." That now can be seen as a glaring failure. Think of the initial plan of creating a pro-democracy fever in Iran and Syria. The result would be almost comical if it were not so sad. As for Iraq, the problem is not just with the war but with the post-war. Even if Americans started the war with phony arguments, and intervened on a purely unilateral basis, the errors would have been largely overlooked if they had succeeded in solving the post-war challenges. But they did not. If they had found a miraculous recipe to allow the Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds to coexist, that would have been a very significant precedent. But, the Americans made an incredible mistake based on a combination of unbelievable ignorance and naiveté that confused contemporary Iraq with post-war Germany and Japan, in which the policy-makers brushed aside the specialists at the Department of State who knew the region. When you think about it, it was truly a monumental error. So today I remain worried. American voters largely oppose the war but their view is largely ignored by the Bush administration. The U.S. as a nation has not analyzed the reasons why the war was a fiasco. Despite a vigorous presidential election-campaign, Americans are not going to the source of the political problem, so I fear they could make the same mistakes again. Do you believe that the U.S. is morally and strategically bound to define Western interests and intervene in defense of them nowadays because allied countries no longer have the means to act? Certainly the level of U.S. power brings a concomitant need to assume for moral and political authority. Currently, that position is undermined by the Bush administration and its policies. U.S. prestige will be restored in January 2009, at least temporarily. The entire world will breathe a sigh of relief when either McCain or Obama is elected president. Beyond that, everything depends on how the incoming president uses this newly-restored authority. Real leadership means involving and convincing others. For Europeans, the ideal scenario would be for Americans to recover their self-confidence and assert their leadership in a collective system of international power. At the same time, I am not naïve, I know that by nature a dominant national power will guard its sovereignty and never place its fate in the hands of some kind of international "general assembly." But there is a difference between a United States that utterly disregards the multilateral system it helped create in 1945, and a United States that uses the system intelligently to strengthen its legitimacy. The rest of the world accepts the Clinton method of international action, insisting on cooperation between allies and acting alone only in the absence of an accord between partners. There are many places in the world where the hegemony of a far-off America is preferable to the domination of a neighbor. In fact, this could be a significant resource to the Americans if they knew how to use it well - for example, in Iraq. In Iraq, a rapid and hasty American retreat would be catastrophic to the entire region. All this means that the United States has responsibilities that are not to be taken lightly. In Iraq, even those most opposed to the war also acknowledge that certain issues need to be resolved before an American pull-out. Do you think that ideas of a "federal Europe" are dead? I never believed in a federal Europe. I believe strongly in a Europe of joint projects and collaboration. When Europeans agree on a specific project, their cooperation carries enormous weight, but I have never believed in fusing our nation states or in any comparison between the European nations and the United States of America. France and Germany are not North and South Dakota. We need to abandon this utopian vision and concentrate our energies on realistic plans. Ideas of a federal Europe were perhaps a useful corrective in the post-World War II era when they countered fears of irredentist nationalism or an inward-turning of Europeans' vision. But the notion no longer corresponds to any reality or the will of the people. When presented with this type of structure, the people say no. On the other hand, if we present the concept of one common European energy policy, a policy that would give us the upper hand with Russia, no one opposes this prospect—not even those who voted against the European Constitution. When you say Europe's fate remains very uncertain, does that mean that Europe has still not found a power base of its own? Does it mean that the notion of "European-American rivalry" has now become outdated? When I say, as I do in my Atlas, that "of all the foreseeable poles in the multi-polar world, it is the European pole whose future is the most uncertain," it is because I question whether Europe truly has the will and motivation to become a full player. Maybe Europeans will prefer becoming a huge Switzerland - a well-protected zone with a very high standard of living and great liberty, but without the responsibility of power. European public opinion seems to suggest a desire for this condition of being detached from responsibility. You ask about transatlantic rivalry: Europe never believed in a competition of this nature. The concept of "rivalry" arose when Washington reacted forcefully to some European initiatives it did not approve of. But, objectively, no "rivalry" existed. For a long time the French have been giving speeches about European power that reveal our desire to resist America's hegemony. So Chirac's diplomacy about Iraq was perceived in Washington as an affront. But the rest of Europe did not view Chirac's decisions as a challenge to U.S. power. Remember how Eastern European countries promptly joined NATO ranks after the collapse of Soviet power because they wanted protection from any recurrent threat from that direction. They still want that kind of protection. And what about a role for Europe in collective security? This is more complicated because NATO already guarantees our security. What we do between Europeans can only complement the existing structure - we are not going to create a second system. But it is a complicated question because, given that there is no longer a Soviet threat, NATO is outdated in some sense. The first President Bush, aided by Secretary of State James Baker, used American authority shrewdly to maintain and expand NATO. Now some people in both the U.S. and Europe are beginning to wonder if Westerners should come together around their supposed common interests and values and develop a common response to China's rise, Russia's return, the Arab world, and India's emergence. So at this point, there are two possibilities. One is that the U.S. leads the West and Europeans follow because they are too tired to make a move of their own, so we keep the classic system we call "Atlanticism." Or we advance towards an alliance between Americans and Europeans in which we can discuss frankly what we want to accomplish together. I prefer the latter, but I do not know if Europeans are ready to stand up for it. If we had an alliance, what do we want to do with it? Do we intend to impose our values by force because we fear we will never be at peace if our values are not enforced everywhere? How far should we stand up for our interests when negotiating with countries like China or Iran? If we were working together in a transatlantic partnership, we would have to decide what we think is indispensable and what is secondary. You can see the debate in the World Trade Organization. We are living in the midst of a pivotal period of tectonic shifts in world power. The Western response can be realistic or paranoid, clumsy or united. It's difficult. Do you think that it is still appropriate to use the term "Western" to categorize France and other European nations? The rest of the world sees us in a category called "Western." This shocks idealistic universalists who view the world according to United Nations jargon but, in reality, we are one entity in the eyes of the Chinese, Russians, and Arabs. While we ought to take into account this simplistic vision of the West, we must not internalize it. Even while recognizing what others think of us, we must work internally, as Europeans, to combat this stereotypical view of the West. How high are expectations of change under Obama or McCain? Is the rest of the world setting itself up for disappointment? The U.S. is not suddenly going to become a multilateral power in the sense that modern "enlightened" Europeans understand this notion. We came to it only after colonialism, imperialism, unilateralism, and militarism had convinced us that the only solution was multilateralism. But it is too idealistic: no real world power functions this way. But the U.S. can do much to gain greater acceptance. Do you believe that an Obama victory will make America turn inward to concentrate on domestic policy? That would not be sustainable. Some Americans may long for the isolationism of the past, but there is no way it could return: the U.S. economy depends too much on the rest of the world. When did it start dawning on you that the world was moving into a phase of these "tectonic shifts" you're describing? When I became foreign minister in 1997, it seemed to me that the widespread belief in an "international community" was already inadequate. I remember making a speech at the time in India when I said that the vision of a "multi-polar world" was not a panacea because there was no guarantee that the poles would be stable or live in mutual trust. Since then, things have accelerated dramatically, particularly because of China's impressive leap forward. But, in a way, China is the tree hiding the forest. The Boston Consulting Group's study on emerging global companies cited players in more than thirty countries. So this is not just a Western restructuring, it is a fundamental global shift that will take shape over the coming 10 or 15 years. And France's role? Has it lost all its clout? No, France is more than just a medium-sized power, we are 12th in my ranking of powers with "world influence" - including some established ones, and some newcomers. None of them are on the scale of the United States. Some qualify by population, others by their geographical size, and others by having permanent Security Council seats or being in the Group of Eight. France belongs to this group. We are stronger than the fatalistic attitude of some - who like to describe themselves as "realistic" and rate France as having only mediocre strength. France is more powerful than that, and so are Germany and Britain. But looking ahead twenty or thirty years, we do not have a potential comparable to China's, so the French need to find a balance between excessive pretensions and excessive pessimism. Traditionally, that's been a hard equilibrium for our nation to find and sustain. (These excerpts of an exclusive interview conducted by François Clemençon on April 30, 2008 will appear in the forthcoming issue of the European Affairs quarterly.)



Source: <https://www.hubertvedrine.net>

Homepage > Publications > What the New Geopolitical World Really Looks Like



22/07/2008