

Thierry de Montbrial: “France should not be ashamed of defending its own interests”

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Published 26/1/2017



INTERVIEW. The founder of the Institut français des relations internationales says it's time to break with “value”-driven diplomacy and return to the idea of national interest, which will allow France to safeguard its identity and rank in the world.

Notre intérêt national by Thierry de Montbrial and Thomas Gomart, Odile Jacob

LE FIGARO: Does France still have a foreign policy?

Thierry de MONTBRIAL: First of all, it's useful to recall that the basic goal of foreign policy is to ensure the medium- and long-term survival of a political unit. But the concepts of survival, security and identity are intertwined. Ensuring security means preserving identity. There's no getting around that, even though it's been set aside for years. An example is the simmering debate over multiculturalism. Is it good or bad? In any case, nowadays it has a lot of people feeling anxious, and that must be taken into consideration. France's anxiety is one reason it has so much trouble defining a foreign policy.

You advocate returning to the idea of “national interest”.

Yes, it's fundamental. The idea of national interest is the operational side of safeguarding identity and integrity. That interest is declining and must not be identified with values, a distortion of the previous two presidential terms. The intervention in Mali is a typical example. It was the right decision and in France's national interest because a destabilised Sahel and North Africa would put us in danger. Yet, François Hollande felt it necessary to explain that we weren't intervening for our interests, but in the name of values and principles. That's surprising, even shocking. It gives the impression that we're ashamed of defending our national interests. No other country on the planet has any trouble invoking its national interest. Is France the only one that doesn't dare to utter the word?

But doesn't that idea inevitably lead to stepping away from the world?

National interest mustn't be understood too narrowly. A great country must take part in shaping its environment. And that is a matter of governance, alliances and action in the European Union or the UN.

From the United States to China, most powers have no trouble defining their “national” or “vital” interests. Why is it so complicated for France?

France has an ideology handed down from the Revolution. France is *the* country of human rights. We're in competition with the United States on that point. We're the only two nations in the world claiming to be beacons of freedom. A concern for human rights honours France, but we still obsessively stress that aspect even as our ability to act steadily decreases. The United States is good at both. They always invoke universal human rights while advancing their security and commercial agenda. We don't know how to do that.

So do you advocate a “realistic” foreign policy?

I think operational matters must be kept separate from issues in the area of essential ideas, such as the relationship between Islam and democracy. The problem is, we're at a point where foreign policy is mixed up with a discourse on values.

Is rereading Machiavelli a good idea?

There are so many ways to read Machiavelli. And I don't think realism and idealism are mutually exclusive. In the fog of combinations, it's easy to get lost in the calculations. So a beacon, an ideal, is necessary. Otherwise, anything goes. Claiming that the end justifies the means is unacceptable. Ethical guidelines, a moral compass, are needed to orientate action in general. That said, in the short and medium term, it's very important to be realistic, which doesn't mean cynical. It means looking at reality as it is and acting with a clear awareness of the consequences that acts will have. That is the ethics of responsibility, which is necessary.

Saying that, do you have in mind armed interventions where all the consequences were unforeseen?

Of course. In Libya, for example, there was no follow-up on the idea of responsibility; now we see the disaster that resulted. The principle of precaution must be observed. Why is it invoked for food and medicine but not international policy? For example, Barack Obama's mistake in Syria wasn't his decision not to intervene. That would only have made matters worse. His mistake was talking about red lines without backing it up, without making a commitment in blood and treasure. Statements like that undermine credibility if they're not followed through.

If international policy isn't set out in 140 characters, it seems increasingly subject to accelerating news cycles.

That's right. It increasingly boils down to reacting to external events, which is not a real, long-term foreign policy. The time factor is crucial. Does China have a vision? The answer is yes. Does the United States? The answer is also yes. What is our vision? Being missionaries, disciples of Saint Paul? And giving that mission meaning?

Meaning is one thing, means are another. Aren't ours woefully inadequate?

An ambitious foreign policy is impossible without putting money behind it. If France remains incapable of carrying out the reforms it's been dodging for so long, the emphasis on values will ring increasingly hollow. That is the present drama. There's an impression that policy is merely a matter of identifying good and evil. We take shelter under values as a brand image.

Should authoritarian regimes be accommodated for the sake of stability?

Let's take a look at the Middle East. Realism suggests that the priority is restoring some semblance of order, unsatisfactory from the values point of view, but better than chaos, which is getting worse and being exported. Obviously, we'd rather see liberal democracies in Libya

and Syria but in the short-term that's not what the new order will look like. For now, it's hard to avoid the chaos/strong regime dilemma. Delicate work is necessary. We need to cooperate with unlikeable regimes while doing all we can to discourage their autocratic tendencies. Tocqueville was right when he said that authoritarian regimes are most vulnerable when they try to reform themselves. But if they don't reform, they end up imploding.

The Russian question is back at the forefront to the point of becoming a domestic policy issue. How can it be “managed”?

The situation is very unpleasant for everybody. It's become totally divisive. We're summoned to take a stand either “for” or “against”, which is always a dangerous simplification. We need to cool down, take out the passion and try to restore calm relations and work together on issues in the common interest. Everything that had been built, including when the USSR was still standing, has collapsed. We've reached a catastrophic degree of defiance and propaganda. Russians and Europeans share a common need for a minimum of order. Mustn't we have a certain degree of cooperation to fight Islamic terrorism?

How did we reach this point?

Probably because we mixed geopolitics up with foreign policy. They mustn't be, because then ideas get muddled. Geopolitics remains ideology relating to territory. When Brzezinski said Ukraine was the key for controlling the Eurasian continent, he was talking about geopolitics. What happened with the idea of bringing Ukraine into NATO, which the Russians perceive as a lethal danger, has been the outcome of that ideology.

But the idea of a “Russian threat” has made a big comeback.

Again, let's take a cool-headed look at things. Russia's GDP is much smaller than Italy's, so I think the Russian imperialist threat must be taken with a grain of salt. Things must be put into perspective. True, Russia is pursuing an activist foreign policy. But it also has a struggling economy and weak demographics.

Is Europe still France's “Archimedes' lever”, as General De Gaulle put it?

Today Europe is in jeopardy. There's no doubt about that. The Germans don't let on much, but they're terrified about France's situation. If we keep putting on band-aids without carrying out the necessary economic reforms, the euro zone will break up. It might take five or ten years, but it will. That would really spell the beginning of the end of the European Union. If that happens, it would take us back decades in geopolitical terms. And ten or twenty years later, another European war might break out.

What can be done?

First, the main European States need to agree on the reality of the threat. Then, the focus must be on what really matters, in other words security and economic issues. There must be clarity on the fundamentals but not dogmatism on the institutions. The Commission needs to shift the focus back to basics instead of getting bogged down in details. Of course, France and Germany must lead the way. Perhaps the only silver lining in Trump's election is that it reminds us of de Gaulle's basic principle: other nations cannot be relied upon for long-term security. That's why keeping a strong defence is necessary.

Is the rise of religion a challenge for foreign policy?

When talking about religion, a distinction must be drawn between four different levels. There's the basic, anthropological level, which involves the individual's personal relationship to the spiritual; the ethnological level, in other words, religion's imprint on a nation; the sociological level, with the influence of cultural heritage; and the political level, with the manipulation of religion. Pointless fights can be avoided if a distinction is made between those levels. The political level is the only one that should hold our interest.

Why has religion grown so important in politics?

In countries that are sociologically part of the Muslim world, and that once belonged to European colonial empires, every political system, whether authoritarian or based on Marxism, has been tried and failed. Religion is the only ideological principle left. It is politically appealing when all else fails.

How will Donald Trump's election affect international affairs?

Trump has a shocking, disturbing way of expressing himself, to say the least, but nonsense is not all that comes out of his mouth. Routine arrangements dating back to the Second World War will be cleared away. They're finished. But the reality of interests is not. Trump will realise that the world is interdependent in many ways, that a certain amount of stability is in the common interest and that a weak, chaotic Europe isn't a good thing for America. That said, he'll be very tough. He reasons in terms of visible, short and medium-term results, without a long-term vision. He has no qualms, no ideological passion and no broad vision. But I don't believe in catastrophic predictions, in the end of every alliance and trade agreement. Some of them will be swept away, but I don't see Trump as an orchestra conductor leading to the world's disintegration.