

This special issue of *Politique étrangère* focuses on the proceedings of the Conference organized by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) for its 40th anniversary, held on April 10th, 2019, in Sorbonne University's Grand Amphithéâtre.

Resulting from deep changes brought to the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, itself founded in 1935, Ifri emerged in an era we now consider as the beginning of the end of the old, Cold War world. In 1979, the Cold War was about to deal its final blow. While the Soviet Union was increasingly struggling to keep up with the US in the race for information technology, the downfall of the Gang of Four opened the way for economic development in China. 1979 was also shaped by revolution in Iran. The Islamic Republic rose from the ashes of the Pahlavi dynasty, marking the beginning of political Islam from a western perspective. At the time, in geopolitical circles however, (the word "geopolitics" was avoided because of its Nazi connotations) the expression "Third World" was still being used to designate underdeveloped countries. Its most ambitious representatives, such as India, Indonesia, and even Africa, dreamed of escaping the East-West bipolarity and endeavoured to achieve an ideology of non-alignment. In 1979, the European Economic Community (EEC) was still young, not even 25 years old. Great Britain had joined its ranks in an opportunistic move seven years previously, but the Community was still steered by the ideology of its founding states.

Forty years later the international system has changed tremendously, even though the past has left its distinctive trace, as it always does. The system is once again tending towards bipolarity, without Russia this time, which has nonetheless managed to keep an important position on the international scene, particularly in Europe and the Middle East. The triumph of economic liberalism in the wake of the USSR's demise has radically altered development issues. The bond that kept the western ideology together is now crumbling before us, while the US has narrowed the scope of its national interest, a shift initiated before Donald Trump's election. Political Islam and terrorism have made their way into the spotlight. Since 2007, the scientist delusion that major economic crises were no longer possible has collapsed. The EEC, renamed European Union, sometimes seems to have lost its sense of origin and direction after all the shocks it has weathered, from economic ones to migratory ones to Brexit. The dizzying development of technology has kindled worry as much as hope, and millenarian fears are growing around climate change and other kinds of uncontrolled interdependency, like potential pandemics. Such was our world in 2019, the year Ifri celebrated its 40th anniversary. Then

came the COVID-19 pandemic. We shall see whether it becomes the wake-up call that will allow the European Union to find its way back to its fundamental purpose.

There could have been a great number of possible themes for the anniversary Conference. And yet, “The Future of Europe in the Context of Sino-American Competition” was obvious to me from the beginning. I have indeed believed for a long time that strengthening the European construction is beneficial for its members as much as it is for the rest of the world, but that it is also under critical threat. Without prior consultation, Bruno Le Maire shared a similar approach, he with an optimism his position demanded, and I with the realistic mind of a committed observer.

Following our introductory presentations, the rest of the Conference shaped itself within the boundaries of a day’s time. We also needed to find a diverse range of high-quality participants. More details would be unnecessary here, except for one : Ifri being acknowledged as one of the main think tanks in the world today, a session on the future of such institutions had to be included as well. It should be reminded that in 1979, particularly in France, the word “think tank” was no more used than “geopolitics”. I will add that “think tank” should be understood not as a “reservoir of ideas”, but as a “reservoir tank of thought”.

Anniversaries offer opportunities not only for commemoration, but more importantly for an active reflexion about the future. Major Anglo-American think tanks such as Chatham House or the New York Council on Foreign Relations were founded in the aftermath of World War I; others, as in Germany, emerged after World War II. In the post-Soviet world, major international think tanks must rethink their purposes and cooperation if they want to have some impact in an era of such uncertainty. Who can say what the world will be like when Ifri celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, in 2029? But it is still in its power to protect its soul.

Thierry de Montbrial

Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri
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