

The World of Yesterday and Tomorrow

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On 17 October 1989, Ifri celebrated its 10th anniversary in the Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne, where we are gathered thirty years later. The year 1989 is the most important year in the second half of the 20th century, even more important for changing the world than September 11, 2001, which was an indirect consequence of it.

The shock of 1989

In April 1989, the crackdown on protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing ended the “Roaring Twenties” following the fall of the Gang of Four, and the illusion maintained by Western ideologues, who believed in the spontaneous generation of what was not yet called liberal democracy.

However, the crackdown at Tiananmen did not stop China’s rise –on the contrary– and, in France, we remembered the phrase attributed by Alain Peyrefitte to Napoleon: “When China wakes, it will shake the world”. I mention in passing that, according to Jean Tulard, no specialist of the emperor has ever found any sign of such a sentence, which makes it no less accurate.

However, if I had to pick only one day in 1989, it would be easy to agree on November 9, that of the opening-up of the Berlin Wall, the symbolic beginning of a sequence whose completion would come in December 1991 with the fall of the USSR.

In summary, the end of the communist Soviet system was the manifestation of two major trends: the fall of the last empire of the 20th century, after that of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires in the aftermath of the First World War, and that – much slower – of the European colonial empires after the Second World War. Unlike the others, the fall of the Russian empire was sudden, and initially surprisingly peaceful. However, you would have to be devoid of historical awareness to imagine that such a collapse would not have multiple consequences, deferred over decades.

The second major trend is the spread of the information technology revolution, the most fundamental cause of the USSR’s collapse, along with the spread of globalization.

For Westerners, the question then arose of the future of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. In this expression, proponents of the Atlantist ideology take two complementary bodies as a single entity: first, the North Atlantic Treaty, which was just 40 years old at the time, and its organization, NATO; and secondly, the European Economic Community, then 33 years old.

Both were complementary, but distinct, because of the failure of the European Defense Community in 1954, and, much more fundamentally, because of the balance of power with the United States. Clearly maintaining the distinction between the two was one of the pillars of General de Gaulle's politics.

Euro-Atlantic choices

The response to the shock of 1989 was not obvious.

First, we have never seen an alliance survive for a long time after the disappearance of its root causes, in this case the USSR and its goal of imposing communism on the rest of the world. All the analysts had also emphasized that the longevity of the Atlantic Alliance, throughout the Cold War, was remarkable, given the volatility of US public opinion which – as experience has continuously shown – gets easily bored of foreign engagements.

Secondly, the development of the EEC took place according to the principle of alternate phases of *deepening* and *widening*. However, in 1990, we faced the prospect of massive and simultaneous enlargement to very heterogeneous countries because of the history of the previous half-century.

In what context were the choices made? First, with the interference related to the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein (August 2, 1990) and to operation *Desert Storm* unleashed in January 1991. This affair marks the starting point of the spread of political Islamism and its terrorist aspect.

Then, with the spread of the “end of history” or “happy globalization” ideology; with what I call the Fukuyama equation: “*Liberal*” *democracy* + *Market economy* => *Peace* + *Prosperity*. It is in the name of this ideology that, in response to September 11, 2001, George W. Bush, in violation of international law, launched the *Greater Middle East* operation and overthrew Saddam Hussein in March 2003.

More broadly, the ideology of overthrowing authoritarian regimes considered contrary to US interests became established. This, in the name of supposed success ensured by imposing a democratic alternative. How – admittedly cautiously – can you not therefore draw a parallel between US neo-conservatism and the defunct Soviet ideology?

It is astonishing that this ideology has ended up percolating into French diplomacy, even though France has never assimilated its economic aspects. In any event, there is not much left nowadays of the Gaullist or, as some say, Gaullist-Mitterrand tradition.

It was in accordance with the same neo-conservative ideology that we dealt with Russia, bled dry in the 1990s, with due disregard of what I don't hesitate to call "the lessons of history".

The choices made were mainly those of the United States. First: the accelerated expansion of the "Euro-Atlantic institutions" to the East: the Community (which became the European Union in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty), and NATO. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, the organization's stated intention was still to expand to Ukraine and Georgia. At the time, the United States was exerting pressure to speed up Turkey's entry into the European Union. Since then, things have changed in this respect. At the same time, Russia regained some strength and increasingly protested about what it now perceived to be a threat, and again became the enemy NATO needed to survive.

Secondly: due to a lack of respect for the principle of balance between widening and deepening phases, the EU increasingly became heterogeneous and therefore fragile.

During this time, China took advantage of the favorable conditions to be admitted cheaply into the WTO, as if the Chinese economy had become a real market economy with companies mostly independent of the state. It embarked on a major penetration strategy on the five continents, that finally materialized in the *Belt and Road* project. Its goal is to quickly develop all the technological and military attributes of power.

Two imperial thrusts

Where are we now? The best way to describe the situation, in my opinion, is to present it as the coexistence of two imperial thrusts.

First, a rather benevolent one until Trump. In the last century, Raymond Aron already spoke of the United States as an imperial republic. The

United States uses both the Euro-Atlantic institutions and their individual influence on member states to raise the specter of Russia and now of China. More generally, NATO has become a sort of catch-all for expanding US leadership.

Second imperial thrust: that of China, which in any event, for the time being, can use its financial capacity to attract countries far removed from the democratic tradition (including Russia), or that are tempted by “illiberal democracy”, considered by some more effective than liberal democracy.

The European Union is one of the main theaters of operation for competition between the two empires, whose weak links today are as varied as Poland or Italy.

Generally, in the foreseeable future, competition between the United States and China is unlikely to directly lead to a major military confrontation, as long as global economic governance does not get out of control – as, however, may be feared more and more since the 2007-2008 financial crisis. In this respect, Donald Trump is playing with fire through the aggressive politicization of the economy and the systematic use of sanctions to bring his allies, as well as his opponents, to their knees.

A European Union without a political choice?

All this explains the choice, for this conference for Ifri’s 40th anniversary, of the topic: “The Future of Europe in the Context of Sino-American Competition.”

I will limit myself here to a few brief remarks relating solely to security, aside from issues as important as immigration, refugees, or the viability of the euro.

The most fundamental problem is that the European Union is far from being a political entity. The ideology of its founding fathers produced at least a veneer of identity that lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall. This ideology has not withstood this. Yet, without an identity, no common foreign and security policy is possible. This is already true for a constituted state.

Second comment: Brexit highlights the fact that the idea of a *special relationship* between the UK and the United States is a lasting historical one, not necessarily compatible with the French concept of “European

defense". England's traditional politics always was to divide the continent. It should also be noted that the northern European countries, like Sweden, are from this perspective much closer to the Atlanticist vision than France or even Germany.

Third comment: there are also signs that Germany might be tempted by a rapprochement – while demonstrating loyalty to the United States – with Russia. This is obviously in the case of energy. We can hope that France will also one day rediscover the benefits of Gaullism.

Fourthly, EU member states are not clear about their relationship with China, even if they have finally become aware of the dangers of a poorly thought-out opening-up to direct investment by that country. Nor are they certain about their common interests in Africa or the Middle East, that is to say their southern flank.

In the short term, the European Union's survival as a potential autonomous political entity, devoid of all imperial ambition, implies quick fixes that everyone is aware of. To go further, I am convinced of the necessity for a review not only of the thinking but of its members' ulterior motives concerning the major topics of geopolitics and geoconomics. Such a study alone could help to identify potential solutions that are not just plasters on a wooden leg. A work of this kind has never been carried out, and it could be a worthwhile goal for those in the leading think tanks in the European Union who are focused on international relations.

I will conclude with a few words about Ifri. We are rightfully proud to have been ranked for two consecutive years in second place among the most influential think tanks in the world, in the only international ranking that exists in this field. Four decades of experience allow us to set our ambitions over time, like our great British (Chatham House) or US (Council on Foreign Relations) elders, who will be celebrating their centenary soon. But think tanks, like all institutions, are like reeds that can temporarily anchor shifting sands but cannot on their own prevent collapse.

At the end of 1989, I was convinced that the world was entering a dangerous phase, with admittedly exciting prospects, but also a risk of chaos. In human societies, as in the physical world, chaos is a transition to a new, *ex-ante* unpredictable order. And the transition phase can be very painful. A think tank like ours, equipped with a great team of full-time researchers, aims to inform decision-makers and the public in its

areas of expertise. We are not a lobby group, open or hidden. We are committed to the common good. We reject ideologies as much as possible. We try to face reality. We do not seek to be soothsayers. Our studies are based on knowledge and reason, not divination.

Allow me to raise the alarm: the European Union seems to me to be threatened by decline, and if it does not succeed in reversing the trend, the entire world will suffer the disastrous consequences.

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