

Europe and Africa

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Translated from French by Philolingua, edited by David Quin.

Thierry de Montbrial

Louise Mushikiwabo is quite an extraordinary person, who I have had the honor of knowing for some years. She was the Rwandan Minister of Foreign Affairs for eight years. She obviously has a deep-rooted African culture, even though Africa is a huge continent. She spent twenty years in the United States, and, of course, speaks perfect French. To have a person with a deep-rooted understanding of the American world, the European world and the African world performing her important role is an exceptional opportunity for La Francophonie.

General Secretary, before focusing on Africa, how do you react to what you've heard this morning?

Africa at the world table

Louise Mushikiwabo

The conversations we are having this morning, we should have them more often than every 40 years... The anniversary celebrated today is important, simply because the world is changing, and we citizens of the world, but also, we as institutions or politicians do not have the luxury of not thinking about the state of this world.

Relations between Europe and China, or the United States, also represent only a part of what is happening in the world. As for my continent, Africa, I question its future in relation to China, Europe and the rest of the world. Therefore, it is a very diverse debate, and I've very much enjoyed the preceding panel's comments, because they wanted to guide us towards what brings us together rather than what separates us.

The concepts of "economic enemy" or "political enemy" do exist, but, in response to what is happening around the world, and above all in Europe, we are striving to build on what brings us together. Differences

exist, the demands of today's world are varied, but trade wars, migration crises, climate crises, confrontations between countries of the Global North and Global South, are also opportunities. It was a bit strange that Africa was absent from the introductions to our debates. We are here to rectify that.

Thierry de Montbrial

Africa, I have mentioned it, but from a particular angle. The big problem for Europeans – I mean: for the European Union – is that they've never had, that we've never had deep-rooted discussions about our different approaches, including between our own countries. Jean-Louis Bourlanges said the same thing in a different way when he noted that we are still searching for an identity that was never actually developed.

Once again, you cannot have a foreign policy or political unity, if you have not first clarified your relationship with yourself, and hence if you have not reached a certain unity of point of view vis-à-vis others. This is where we come to Africa: obviously, we do not have a shared vision among Europeans vis-à-vis Africa. Africa is a vast continent and talking about it as a comprehensive whole is already an achievement.

In terms of diagnosis, how do you perceive the different European points of view vis-à-vis Africa? What would you advise us to do to have a more accurate vision, knowing that Africa is also a theater of operations for the Chinese and US, or even Indian or Russian greed? Also, knowing that so far we have devoted very few resources to it, and very little strategic thought?

Louise Mushikiwabo

Our relationship, which is very important for both Europe and Africa, needs upgrading. I am talking to you as Secretary-General of an organization that represents the five continents and has to ask questions about its importance and what it does. For Africa and Europe, the time has come to redefine our relationship in relation to the times we live in today, and perhaps especially – and I say this as an African – in relation to the perception of Africa as a continent needing to be rescued. If I had to give advice – and I believe that my organization, la Francophonie, is a privileged gateway to redefine our relationship – it would be to seek a proper definition of our mutual interests: what are Africa's interests today; what are Europe's interests today? And where do these interests meet?

Africa should and must be perceived as a partner by Europe. This is still missing in the discourse or in the institutional relationship. I am

pleased to see, however, that the European Union has been trying to redefine this relationship for some years. Africa-continent-of-assistance, of charity, continent-that-must-learn, must-take-lessons, this is no longer correct. The relationship between Europe and Africa should now be part of a partnership reality.

Thierry de Montbrial

However, Africa is at least as divided as the European Union. How, then, do you define Africa's interests?

Louise Mushikiwabo

The whole world is very divided. When I spoke of "what brings us together", I was mainly thinking about what brings Africa together. I worked for my country for about ten years in foreign affairs. I've traveled all over Africa and the world and also welcomed the world to my country. And I know that, although Africa is not necessarily united in its interests, this does not prevent the few factors that unite us from defining us.

Africa today – let me generalize – needs to sit at the table of major powers and take part in the conversation. Africa can do it through its representatives – institutional Africa and the African Union, an organization that has evolved, is reforming, and is rightly trying to find points of convergence between all its members. With 54 states it's difficult (you can see this with 28...). We will not invent a supra-governmental or inter-governmental organization that makes all the interests come together. But could Europe and Africa now, for example, not discuss a shift in the idea of assistance towards the concepts of investment and trade?

Africa – this is a continental interest – would need nowadays to have a serious conversation with Europe about security and migration issues. I regretted, when I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, not having seen any real serious discussion between our two continents on the migrant issue. We are going too quick: Africa is disorganized and Europe does not have the time. Yet, there is a natural relationship of history and geography between Africa and Europe, which is a remarkable advantage. Africa's interests on global issues – security, trade, investments, technology – do not differ from those of Europe.

Thierry de Montbrial

I would like to stress the importance of regional organizations in today's world. Their development and their strengthening are essential – and, from here, African unity is the first example of this. Not everything can take place at the UN in New York.

Secondly, I stress that you do not hesitate to use the word “interest”. At Ifri, we have done important work to reclaim the concept of “national interest”¹. We must not be ashamed to talk about interests, and indeed to find out what African interests are – which means work that is specific to you – and common, shared interests in terms of security. And we must do this work by saying things frankly.

I would now like to broaden my discussion to La Francophonie. In the end, the International Organization of La Francophonie is not very well known, and its image is all the more blurred because it includes countries that are clearly not francophone. What are your initial impressions, and how do you think we can add value more than we have done so far to this concept of Francophonie?

The role of La Francophonie

Louise Mushikiwabo

I was astonished to see, arriving in Paris three months ago, that La Francophonie was little known, when we have our headquarters in Paris. I asked the President of the French Republic and the ambassadors of francophone countries in Paris to do something about the questions of identity and self-definition. If the 30 francophone countries in Africa – more than half of the African continent belongs to the organization – knew how little our organization was known, I think they would be somewhat offended. But what is the point of La Francophonie for the French and other members?

La Francophonie is an organization that has a history, focused for a long time on France and the relationships of France with countries where the French language dominated. Over time, La Francophonie has become a sort of mini United Nations. It has become a cooperation agency, an international organization linked to our partners: the University Organization of La Francophonie, Senghor University in Egypt, the Parliamentary Assembly of La Francophonie, where there are many members of the French parliament, etc.

La Francophonie must be redefined now, be visible, relevant – and this is one of the major mandates that I have been given as Secretary-General. We are also an organization whose added value certainly is due to the meeting of different worlds and cultures. Our people, beyond the heads

1. T. de Montbrial and T. Gomart, *Notre intérêt national : quelle politique étrangère pour la France ?*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2017.

of state who meet at summits every two years, are now asking us for something tangible. When we can give them this tangible, concrete thing, in the service of defending citizens' and member states' interests, our legitimacy will no longer be challenged.

It is the fate of many multinational organizations nowadays, challenged by a certain critical cynicism about the multilateral. The criticism is also often justified: by dint of being politicized, these organizations have forgotten that they represented first and foremost citizens with real demands.

Of course, La Francophonie's role is to promote the French language. Originally, the founding fathers of La Francophonie were not French: a Cambodian, a Senegalese, a Nigerian and a Tunisian decided to found this organization based on the French language, the intercultural aspect and solidarity, which are the very essence of our organization.

In 2019, the issues have broadened, beyond defense of the French language, and we are being asked for something tangible. Personally, I am very interested in the youth – the francophone community is very young – and in digital technology, a tool that will reach out to knowledge, education, employment and innovation. We must focus on these areas: we have this significant added value of being a catalyst, a gateway between the different members of our organization.

Thierry de Montbrial

I fully agree with you, and I am often sorry to hear speakers at international meetings speaking in bad English; it is better to speak French when you can, rather than broken English. The World Policy Conference, which I founded 12 years ago, definitely promotes both languages – French and English – with simultaneous interpretation, because I've often found, particularly in Africa, that Africans were shocked to see the French themselves abandoning their language.

Louise Mushikiwabo

I come from a country with four official languages. I've grown up in a multilingual world, and the French language, which is a beautiful language, has its place there. It's simply this place that we're claiming.

Thierry de Montbrial

In India, you have 20 language names on the banknotes, and yet this only represents a fraction of the languages spoken in the country. You come

from Rwanda, which is not, presumably, the most francophone of African countries, you've spent 20 years in the United States, and you are now a little bit enamored of the French language, and your country has remarkable relations with France despite a still unresolved dispute. Where does this love for French and France come from?

Louise Mushikiwabo

The answer is in your introduction. I was born and grew up in Rwanda, a very francophone country, since my country is a former Belgian colony, and I have family in several francophone countries, including Canada, Mali, France, Belgium and Gabon. So, it is a bit of my identity, but I also learned English in very francophone Rwanda, I have an English degree from Rwanda, and a Master's in French from the United States!

Rwanda is situated between anglophone East Africa and francophone Central Africa: so, we have both heritages. For about twenty years, Rwanda has, however, been focused on East Africa, because this region is our most important economic partner.

Rwanda is a country where all citizens speak the same language, Kinyarwanda, unlike many francophone African countries that have several local languages and have to use French in order to understand each other. In fact, Rwanda is a very rwandophone country... Among those who speak foreign languages there, people speak French more than English. English is the language of technology and trade, and Rwanda is a member both of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, and we are building between these two identities.

It is in this world that we are developing, that French is developing. The French of countries like Ireland, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Louisiana, etc. The attractiveness of the French language is strong, and it's a wonderful experience to be able to say that La Francophonie is so attractive for so many countries.

