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What is a think tank?¹

When I was laying the foundations for the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)² in 1978 and 1979, only a select few in France were familiar with the English term ‘think tank’ and had at least an approximate idea of what it covered.

This term has become fashionable, but still has no consensual definition.

In line with the underlying roots of the phenomenon, I regard a think tank as ‘any open organisation built around a permanent cadre of researchers, whose mission it is to develop, on an objective basis, ideas relevant to policy-making or the formulation of private or public strategies, subscribing to a perspective of public interest.’ Clearly this is a radical and therefore idealistic definition, but one which allows us to examine real institutions which are considered, or which consider themselves, as think tanks.

The criterion of openness to the public is an essential distinction between contemporary think tanks and advisors to heads of non-democratic states, either of times gone by such as the secret cabinet of Louis XV, or of today. For openness implies debate with the outside world. Naturally, openness can be achieved to a greater or lesser extent.

As an organisation, a think tank can be public or private and can have corporate status, typically as an association or foundation.

An administration inherently lacks the same breadth of expression as a private institution, and yet certain public think tanks can enjoy a large margin of independence and openness. By contrast, being private does not by rights guarantee independence and openness. The statutory conditions (internal governance) and the diversification of funding, tried and tested over a long period of time, are the essential factors in this regard. Equally important are the culture of the organisation, also created over the course of decades, and the reputation and integrity of its leaders. Here as elsewhere, time is a crucial factor to obtain a reputation.

All institutions must be placed in context. The Soviet Union, partly inspired by the American example and with the encouragement of the Academy of Sciences, created important think tanks such as IMEMO (Institute for the Global Economy and International Relations), the Institute for the United States and Canada, and many specialised centres, typically organised broadly along regional lines. Their objectives, sometimes contradictory, were to make objective analyses and predictions about the outside world, to develop relationships with their foreign counterparts, to inform and advise the Party, but also to publish many forms of analysis and/or propaganda.

It was through these institutions that I made my first forays into the USSR in the seventies and eighties. There I was struck by the quality and competence of many of those I spoke to, increasingly stifled over time by the painfully large gap between reality and ideology. Hundreds of researchers from the major Soviet think tanks contributed to the transformation

¹ Translation from French of a revised version of a speech given to *l'Académie des Sciences morales et politiques* on the 28th February 2001.

² In French language : *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*.

of Russia in the years following the collapse of the system, precisely because they had a genuine opening to the world.

Although equally endowed with think tanks, Maoist China was less inclined towards interaction with the outside world than the USSR under Brezhnev and his ephemeral successors. Things changed under Deng Xiaoping. I will limit myself to the one example of the CICIR which, in September 2010, celebrated its thirtieth anniversary with much pomp. CICIR is the acronym for China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations. Institutes, with an 's'. It is, in effect, a conglomerate of interdependent institutions, each specialised in a particular aspect of international relations.

CICIR, like other think tanks based in Beijing or Shanghai, play similar roles to their bygone Soviet counterparts, but clearly in a markedly different and fundamentally freer context. Their importance is increased by China finding itself, for the first time in its history, needing to create a meaningful foreign policy on a global scale.

Let us return to the definition of a think tank, as an organisation built around its researchers. It's a key point which differentiates the think tank from other forms of 'ideas societies' such as the Fabian Society (created in London in 1884 to promote social reforms) or the more or less structured political or economical salons and clubs inherited from the 18th Century.

These researchers are not necessarily researchers for life. In the American system, the same person can alternate between being a researcher in a think tank and an actor at the heart of a Presidential administration. This coming and going offers them invaluable experience, which contributes to the distinction of a think tank from a purely academic university tradition. But, as a researcher, each individual must show an aptitude to treat his subject with proven methods, borrowed from human and social sciences, sometimes even natural sciences. Only thus can they advocate ideas or courses of action on a reasonably objective basis and separate themselves from pure ideology or propaganda.

I also insist on the fact that in the original sense, a true think tank must rely on a *permanent cadre* of researchers. By that I mean researchers whose work in the think tank constitutes their primary activity, and who can thus conceive and realise substantial projects through eventual collaboration with associate researchers, that is to say, outsiders. For many, the international reputation of a think tank rests largely upon its capacity to permanently maintain such a qualitatively solid research cadre.

I have highlighted above the importance of the *method* in all research activity. Think tanks by nature look to the future. Their activity therefore mainly focuses on the prospective and strategic: they are *policy oriented*. An inherent difficulty of their work is that their analyses and recommendations must be based on a deep understanding of the present and thus of the past, without which they run the risk of committing huge errors of judgement; but at the same time, their spirit must be sufficiently open and enlightened, free of any dogma or narrow thinking, to allow them to identify early signs of change, without succumbing to extrapolation or missing the key turning points.

The two aspects are otherwise complementary. In the seventies, economic development theories based on the notion of technology transfer neglected the cultural dimensions of mastering the technologies and thus led nowhere. In a similar vein, the Shah's admirers had

not sufficiently analysed the state of Iranian society and had not correctly interpreted the 'weak signals' which announced the possibility of a revolution.

In 2010-2011, were the Euro crisis, or indeed the fall of the regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, predictable or indeed statistically calculable? How should we set about thinking about the future of other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East or in Asia (North Korea)?

I could easily give more examples, but the important point is to see that the answer to any question of this type depends on a more or less explicit contextual background, specific to the think tank, upon which more or less subtle influences can play a role, over and above the basic necessities of which I have already spoken.

A particularly interesting aspect of this question is the possible interaction between predicting an event and its realisation, an interaction which depends on the nature and the position (in the geopolitical sense of the German *die Lage*) of the institution which makes the prediction. Making recourse to analogy, I would say that here, there is a type of Heisenbergian uncertainty. These observations bring us back to the importance of the diversity and thus pluralism of think tanks, in which we can also see a democratic requirement.

Another comment on definition. Think tanks engage on private (typically business) or public (typically states or international organisations) policies and strategies, but it is their duty to always maintain a perspective of public interest. Whatever its composition (which is always pluralistic), the public interest can never be reduced to an alliance of private interests. In this regard, think tanks differ from institutions such as consultancies, communication groups or pressure groups, whose job it is to promote and defend their particular interests. In principle, the distinction is radical, but it can be more subtle in practice. Lobbyists often claim to work for the public interest: as they used to say, what is good for General Motors is good for the United States. But their real perspective is the same as that of their clients. As for think tanks, they are sometimes forced to refuse certain potential partners, for reasons of incompatibility with their vision of public interest. In any case, it is necessary to talk about the vision of public interest. The implied position is that public interest is not determined by one opinion. In a democratic system, think tanks must therefore contribute to its definition. On this level, there is a need for truly ideological and pluralistic debates.

With globalisation, global governance has gradually imposed itself as a central theme for the big international think tanks. Due to the qualitative transformation of interdependence caused by the revolution in information and communications technology, a shock or disturbance to a particular segment of the international system – functional or regional – can destabilise the entirety of the system (chaos theory, known colloquially as the 'butterfly effect'), in the same way that in the human body, an injury affecting a critical function can lead to death.

This creates a need to constantly adapt the means of regulation at all levels and to ensure global coordination. Thus we can conceptualise the problem of global governance in an integrated manner. This problem is more arduous than the organisation and running of a business, an initial basis for comparison, because the world does not exist as a political unit. No leader, no institution exists to define the objectives and strategies of 'the world'. For most of the concrete subjects related to global governance – such as energy, climate, food, water, health or indeed security, macroeconomics and finance – the main partners are, to varying degrees, a combination of states and businesses.

Some think tanks are openly involved in ideological confrontation. I will cite the examples of the Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, and the Hoover Institution, established in 1919 but radically remodelled between 1960 and 1989. These two institutions are convinced of the idea of the absolute supremacy of the American model, in its conservative form, and of the need to protect against liberal influence.

However, most American think tanks have more operational objectives, even if they aren't immune to an ideological background (such as monetarist or Keynesian, in the field of economics). They raise issues – such as non-proliferation or elimination of nuclear weapons, ethnic coexistence, climate change, energy, water, agricultural revolutions etc. – analyse them and present diverse options to resolve them. In that sense, they are loyal to national tradition, in the Tocquevillean sense.

As examples, I will mention three institutions from different times. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) was created in 1920 to bring convergence between the closed world of university economists the world of government and economic policy. It was in the NBER that Simon Kuznets (Nobel prize-winner in 1971) completed his pioneering work on national accounting, and Milton Friedman (Nobel prize-winner in 1976) did his research on the demand for money.

Second example: the Brookings Institution, Washington's oldest think tank. Although it isn't the largest, it is today considered the number one in the United States, and by extension the world. Founded at the time of the First World War by Robert S. Brookings, a Saint Louis businessman aged 70, the institution was built around the idea that, to be effective, public policies needed to be based on a solid factual foundation, which was at the time completely absent. Today, the Brookings, as it is colloquially known, stands on three pillars (still working on public policy): the economy and internal issues, national and international security, and international relations.

Third example: in 1981, at the start of the phenomenon which we now call globalisation, Fred Bergsten founded the Institute for International Economics – later renamed the Peterson Institute after its principal donor – today considered the number one think tank in the world dedicated to public policy in the economic domain.

Such institutions seek to be practical and objective in their work, which – as I have already said – does not necessarily mean they are immune to any ideological background, intended or unintended. I am among those who believe that what Max Weber called *Wertfreiheit* – one could call it axiological independence – is an ideal which can only be approached in social and human sciences, natural or applied. Everything is a matter of degree and personal relationship to the truth. To talk about this subject in depth would side-track me too much.

Let us pause at the origin of the term 'think tank'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'think tank' was used colloquially to refer to the brain at the turn of the last century. Military jargon took it over, perhaps after the First World War and especially during the Second, to mean a secure place to discuss plans and strategies. In the fifties it was used freely to refer to research organisations contracted to the military, the most important being the Rand Corporation.

The use of the word grew at the start of the sixties, when public attention focussed on the 'whiz kids' in the Pentagon, that is the experts surrounding Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense named by John Kennedy. Many of these experts came from the Rand. The later increase in the number of more or less comparable institutions led to greater use of the term, firstly in the United States and then outside, with globalisation.

In the history of think tanks, the Rand Corporation occupies a special space. Founded in 1948 by the US Air Force, mostly for its own needs, this institution – whose acronym means 'Research ANd Development' – now represents something of a colossus with a thousand employees near its original site in Santa Monica, California, and around five hundred in Washington, D.C.

After the Second World War and the deployment of the new atomic weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it might have seemed that large-scale aviation (both aircraft and missiles) would become the decisive weapon in future wars. On the strength of this assumption, the Rand took on mathematicians, physicists and engineers for whom politics needed to be a rational activity, able to be broken down into problems which the scientific method could analyse and solve. We can say without exaggeration that this paradigm was a major, if not dominant influence on the American government until the fiasco of the Vietnam War.

It was the Rand Corporation which was the brain behind the nuclear strategy in the fifties and sixties, and if there is an institution which deserves the name 'think tank', it is the Rand. It was also very active at the start of the eighties, with the launch of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly called "Star Wars". Although this project never came to light in its original form, it is generally agreed that by dragging the Soviet Union into a qualitative arms race which it could not maintain, the SDI contributed to its downfall.

With the increased risks of nuclear proliferation, and the polarisation of attention on Iran and North Korea, American think tanks and their offshoots have once again turned their interest to the development and deployment of antimissile systems, the major challenge of the SDI. George W. Bush made this his war horse during his 8-year Presidency, and in this matter, his influence was powerful enough to turn it into the centrepiece for the new NATO concept, adopted in Lisbon in November 2010. To go into details would necessitate tracing the history of NATO since the fall of the USSR.

The example of the Rand shows the major influence of defence in the emergence of what are now called second-generation think tanks, during the Cold War. More generally, the American desire, unchanged since the Second World War, to increase its qualitative and quantitative lead in weapons systems, has continued to act as a catalyst for technological innovations which have nourished the economy as a whole.

This role is visible in many if not all industries, particularly the information processing industry. The computer science of the fifties and sixties has gradually become Information Technology, the lexical shift representing the gradual movement of the centre of gravity away from hardware and towards software. The Rand also played a role in the birth of Arpanet, and thus the Internet.

In short, no think tank has ever been, nor probably ever will be, as influential as the Rand Corporation was during the Cold War.

It is not only in think tanks and technology that the military agenda left its mark. General Marshall, the Secretary of State between 1947 and 1949, introduced the concept of planning into the Department of State with the creation of a body called the Policy Planning Staff (PPS), intended to bring coherence and greater foresight to the making of American foreign policy. He placed the PPS under the management of George Kennan, undoubtedly the most profound thinking diplomat of his generation. It was there that the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty were conceived. One of the natural roles of the PPS was to edit the Secretary of State's speeches, or those made in his/her name.

Another post-war institution, the National Security Council (NSC), reporting directly to the President, coordinates all the actions of the executive which are relevant to national security. Initially relatively modest, the NSC has grown progressively. The most illustrious National Security Adviser, appointed in 1968, was Henry Kissinger, who eclipsed his rivals within the government. Richard Nixon named him Secretary of State in 1973.

That was the year in which Michel Jobert, President Pompidou's Foreign Affairs Minister, wished to endow his ministry with a think tank. His modest goal was to throw a bit of itching powder at the diplomatic corps... Drawing on our experience at the Rand Corporation and the University of California at Berkeley respectively, Jean-Louis Gergorin and I suggested to him that he create a service inspired by the Policy Planning Staff. We gave him the less ambitious name – and therefore a name less provocative to the old guard at the Quai d'Orsay – of *Centre d'Analyse et Prévision (CAP)*. The CAP was renamed the *Direction de la Prospective* in 2009.

Between 1973 and 1979, as the CAP's first director, I dedicated myself to creating a true think tank for the benefit of the Foreign Affairs Minister, and also for the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, with which we maintained a direct link, and to developing what I called an 'intellectual diplomacy'.

On the first point, Michel Jobert and his successors (Jean Sauvagnargues and Louis de Guiringaud) gave us a real freedom of thought, with the agreement of the Presidency. We had a great deal of liberty to publish articles and speak publicly and thus a substantial degree of independence and openness.

There were, of course, a few exceptions. We were initially prohibited from reflecting on the Common Agricultural Policy. In the politico-military sphere, our work on the concept of widespread deterrence and our contacts – particularly with the colleagues of Lord Carrington, the British Defence Minister – was bound to total confidentiality. Its outcome was, however, visible after the Military Planning Law of 1976.

Another example: when I was an official guest in Israel in 1978, I was forbidden to visit the Golan Heights. But I took the risk of disobedience and was glad to have done so, for nothing compares to visits on the ground to understand geopolitics or geo-strategy.

Throughout these years, the CAP's work was dominated by the different facets of the energy crisis, whose beginnings we had analysed in the spring of 1973 under the theme of the new

international economic order which followed the quadrupling of the price of oil, or indeed by the evolution of Eastern countries and politico-military affairs.

I have already mentioned the question of deterrence. I should also mention the major reorientation of the French position towards nuclear proliferation (which only led much later – in 1992 – to France signing the Non Proliferation Treaty).

As for the economy, we didn't yet speak of governance or globalisation, but rather the International Monetary System (Bretton Woods' system had perished in 1971), the volatility of primary resource markets, protectionism and multilateral commercial questions were (already!) our greatest concerns.

In intellectual agreement with Raymond Barre, appointed Prime Minister in 1976 and who received me regularly, we considered the idea of an 'organised liberalism' [*"libéralisme organisé"*] while rejecting the prevailing Marxist models and the pure, hard-line liberal paradigm, which had taken hold in the United States and Germany.

In Europe, we looked into the consequences of the collapse of the last authoritarian regimes (Franco and Salazar) and we took interest in the perceptible movements in Eastern Europe. The phenomenon of Eurocommunism demanded all of our attention. We worked on Asia, particularly Japan, and China after the downfall of the Gang of Four.

As for 'intellectual diplomacy', it manifested itself naturally in our relations with our counterparts, mostly but not exclusively Western. Our links to the PPS of the US Department of State were particularly close in the Kissinger period. We participated in multilateral meetings such as the Atlantic Alliance planning group. We inserted ourselves into influential organisations where France was under-represented, such as the Bilderberg Group or the Trilateral Commission.

I particularly remember, in this latter group, verbally sparring on the concept of organised liberalism with Count Otto Von Lambsdorff, the brilliant liberal Minister of Finances for the Federal Republic of Germany. We thus left the exclusively French environment and international relations 'among ourselves', and took the risk of presenting our ideas to the outside world and debating them. More generally, 'intellectual diplomacy' manifested itself in our exchanges with major foreign think tanks, particularly American, British, German and Soviet, and through the relations we maintained with research centres in many countries. Thus we introduced in France the practice known to Americans as 'track 2 diplomacy', which is comparable to the most structured manifestation of 'intellectual diplomacy'. We also dedicated ourselves, at the purely French level, to establishing links beyond our partisan divisions, which was not at all an obvious step in the intolerant environment of the seventies.

The CAP was able to exercise its influence thanks to its freedom of contacts and its access to the heart of the State, its right to attend many high-level government meetings and to choose where it distributed its publications. At every election, we would prepare what we called an *aide mémoire au roi* (AMR) for the incoming minister, a sort of review of France's major international interests.

Since the seventies, the CAP (which had by now become the DP) experienced highs and lows, but is now well and truly a part of the French administrative landscape. Essentially, it built upon the foundations that we had laid in the first years, through which I discovered the world

of think tanks, still unknown to the French elite. That was when I discovered my desire to build an institution in France comparable to the Council of Foreign Relations in New York or Chatham House in Great Britain. It would become IFRI.

But before talking about that, I should briefly return to the origin of ‘think tanks’, before the term was used, and mention the circumstances following the Great War. The American mentality of the time was to attribute the cataclysm to fundamental flaws in the international system, and therefore to want to change the system itself. In that spirit, two large private and independent institutions were created almost simultaneously: one in 1921 in New York, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR); the other in 1920 in London, the Royal Institute for International Affairs (RIIA), also known as Chatham House.

These two institutions, which correspond perfectly with my definition of a think tank, targeted similar goals from the outset: objectively analyse international situations; create ways to peacefully resolve conflicts; organise debates on related issues, involving actors, analysts and observers; and contribute to public education on international relations.

I will not attempt here to trace IFRI’s rich history. I will instead try to describe its current characteristics, and to use its example to make a few broader observations.

IFRI’s missions seek to follow those of its Anglo-Saxon older brothers at their inception: to objectively analyse, in a prospective way, international political and economic situations – regional and functional; to contribute to the development of means of government which reinforce the structural stability of the international system (I will come back to this notion of structural stability in greater detail); from there, to help public and private actors – particularly businesses – to create their own international strategies; and to participate at all levels in debates on these subjects in France, Europe and the world.

To accomplish its missions, IFRI currently has around sixty permanent staff, of whom half are researchers and half support staff. These researchers are accompanied by external associate researchers, according to their needs.

The researchers are divided between centres and programmes. Ideally, a researcher at IFRI should be familiar with the domain in which his work has an influence, know the relevant networks and the main actors, and make an identifiable contribution, in France and the world, to the debates surrounding his subject.

The researchers are peer-reviewed, as far as their publications are concerned. IFRI management also assesses their managerial qualities (their ability to lead a team or identify and secure funding). Our difference with academic research comes mainly in the audience for our work, beyond the researchers’ peers.

Like its main global counterparts, IFRI must reach targets which are found in what I call ‘decision making factories’. It must also directly address members of the public who are interested in major international issues.

The compatibility of these two targets is not apparent, either from the point of view of methodology or that of time management. The former target group seeks confidentiality, the

latter widespread publication. To work towards public interest, which is inherent to a think tank's quality, necessitates finding a balance.

Beyond appearances in the written or audiovisual media, which are but a marginal activity for an institution founded on the quality of its research, IFRI reaches its targets or its partners by distributing publications or organising debates. The French public is familiar with the annual report *Ramsès*, whose thirtieth edition will be published in September 2011 and which has become the leader in its field. Specialists also know the quarterly review *Politique étrangère* ['Foreign Policy'], which was started in 1936 by the Centre d'Etudes de Politique Etrangère ['Centre for Foreign Policy Studies'] and whose continuity is assured by IFRI.

The Institute publishes, or participates in the publication of, books and reports resulting often from shared projects with foreign personalities or counterparts. Increasingly, Ifri distributes electronically its notes on very specific subjects. As far as possible, these publications are distributed in two or three languages, which is the only way to maintain a presence in the global intellectual debate.

The utilisation of digital technology leads to the conception and development of 'derivative products' targeting audiences which were previously difficult to access. But the extension towards these audiences must be compatible with preserving existing relationships with decision makers and opinion leaders, who are at the centre of IFRI's *raison d'être*.

The Institute organises around two hundred debates a year, which range from international conferences based on specialists, to low-key dinner debates, convened under the Chatham House Rule to allow economic and political figures as well as opinion leaders to have a dialogue with high-level decision makers (Heads of State or government, CEOs of large multinationals etc.).

Much as journalism is not IFRI's primary vocation, these dinner debates (or other meetings of the same type) do not follow the same logic as events organised by communication agencies or lobbyists, whose job is fundamentally different from that of think tanks. It is IFRI's job to promote mutual understanding through in-depth and informal dialogue, which implies a respect for the confidentiality of debate. More generally, IFRI organises specialist meetings for its major partners in order to fulfil its advisory role, while always being mindful of its public interest vocation.

Having thus defined in broad terms IFRI's missions and productions, I should talk now about its structure. Any serious study of a particular think tank must examine in detail three essential questions: (1) its legal structures and its governance, in theory and in practice; (2) its financing; and (3) its culture and therefore its history. I cannot conceive of how to conduct a comprehensive study of think tanks without an in-depth comparative examination of these three aspects.

IFRI is an association, according to the 1901 law, recognised as being for the public benefit, counting around 430 individual members and over one hundred corporate bodies (mostly businesses [60] and embassies [60]). It is led by a Board of directors composed of between 18 and 24 members, hired for their abilities in the areas dealt with by the Institute and for their commitment to defending its independence.

The board convenes four times a year and works according to strict rules of governance. The director general, appointed by the board, prepares and executes the budget. He works within the authorities granted to him. IFRI's operations are subject to two checks, private (an annual certification by an account commissioner) and public (a regular examination by the Court of accounts).

Recently, the Institute has decided to professionalise its management, introducing measures comparable to those found in the business world. I am convinced that such a professionalisation is a necessary condition – which is not to say a sufficient one – to ensuring the longevity of the Institute. The work of the Board of directors is completed by a Strategic Council, in communication with the general management, which more specifically deals with the different aspects of research policy.

The question of financing is dealt with in a similar way to the membership of the Board of directors. In 2010, IFRI's turnover increased to nearly 6.7 million Euros. As a percentage, the contribution of the French government represents around 27%, in the form of an allowance in the Prime Minister's budget (and not that of the Foreign Minister, as is often thought), and voted upon by Parliament. Since 2005, this subsidy is subject to an agreement with the government. This agreement lays out in broad terms the Institute's missions of public interest, and confirms its independence.

The contributions of its members represent around 16% of IFRI's income. These contributions come mostly from businesses, among which are a growing number of SMEs. The rest include financing and donations, dedicated or otherwise to research programmes and other specific activities, such as the organisation of conferences. The important point is that no individual payment exceeds 300,000 Euros, i.e. less than 5% of the Institute's total budget. Most are far more modest.

Moreover, IFRI's management scrupulously ensures that none of these donations come with conditions, explicit or implicit, which might endanger the principle of independence. This requirement has more than once led to IFRI rejecting opportunities which were otherwise very tempting!

I will add that, since 1995, the Institute has owned its office building, financed entirely at the time by a private fundraising campaign for an amount equivalent to around twelve million Euros. Then as now, this campaign was run in a way that ensured independence.

Without good governance and without healthy, solid and balanced financing, independence is an empty word. But these two necessary conditions are not in themselves sufficient. An institution's identity is anchored in its culture and therefore in its history. In the final equation, independence is a state of mind. IFRI has no political affiliation and has never strayed from that line, which is also proven by the composition of its Board of directors.

Researchers are recruited overwhelmingly on the basis of their abilities, but also according to their sense of responsibility, for their opinions gain greater impact by being expressed at IFRI. It is as if the Institute were giving them a loudspeaker. They share certain fundamental values, such as moral integrity, the desire to obtain objectivity but also to add a building block to regional or global governance more respectful of individuals and peoples. In this quest, they do not underestimate the benefits of structural stability, in other words the harnessing of reforms, in which failure leads to decline or chaos. Nor are they apostles of *'droit de*

l'hommisme [Human Rights-ism], according to Hubert Védrine's famous expression, nor do they wage crusades for or against a particular country, regime or cause. And if they are generally committed to European development, for example, it is through reason rather than militancy. In a word, IFRI's work subscribes to a long-term idealism and a short-term realism.

I will conclude by openly expressing a dream for a new think tank, which would have as its mission to observe and dissect all other think tanks according to objective criteria, and placing them in the general movement of the marketplace of ideas. A Pennsylvania University professor, James McGann, in 2007 began a global annual ranking of think tanks, based not on concrete facts but on opinion polls. IFRI cannot complain, because it comes out as the top think tank in France, the third in Europe and the only French think tank appearing in the global hierarchy. All that is left is to fine-tune the methodology of this ranking, or rather these rankings. In addition, Anglophone institutions are evidently at an advantage.

A think tank about think tanks would clearly consider the characteristics which differentiate them from other institutions. As they become more complex, political units need time for critical self-reflection, as independent as possible from their classical institutions. By classical institutions, I mean all kinds of organisations (for example, administrations, central banks, universities etc.) in charge of the internal and external functioning of these units.

The think tank paradox is that to exercise the influence which is their *raison d'être* without falling into short term quasi-journalistic commentary, they must themselves exist as tangible institutions, but institutions of a peculiar type as they are stripped of all *explicit* responsibility in the running of public or private affairs. Their social interest is a product of their freedom of analysis and thought which only such a disconnection allows. In their role as decision enablers, think tanks also distinguish themselves from other professional public or private consultants, whose intellectual openness is by nature restricted.

Since the world is nowhere near ready to become a single political unit, think tanks would be left in the void if they did not subscribe to a specific social context: for most of those mentioned here the State is their context or a community of experts (for example, the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London was originally for the Atlantic Alliance).

Just as there are few truly 'global' businesses under the current state of affairs, so too are all think tanks rooted in a particular cultural environment, which gives them their stature and defines their boundaries. Hence the importance, in this era of globalisation, of a large, diverse and interactive ensemble of think tanks. By their nature, these institutions are well placed to play a part in the cross-fertilisation of cultures, and give meaning to the vague and stilted idea of the 'dialogue of civilisations'. In the same way, the world of think tanks can act as an embryonic global civil society and thus a major aspect of the extension of democracy.

In order for this optimistic vision to be realised, the liberal spirit must spread, that is to say that the material and spiritual conditions in which true think tanks might blossom – which requires them to have a vision beyond their individual interests – must be brought together. This is yet a distant goal. Even in a country such as France, the economic or political viability of think tanks worthy of the name is uncertain. The risk therefore is that actors dominated by

specific interests or questionable ideologies might impose themselves on the ideas markets, with the pretension of upholding a think tank's quality.

Progress is a double-edged sword. To trust in mankind is to believe that the positive edge will eventually prevail. Let us suppose then that the think tank phenomenon, which was formed throughout the 20th Century, will flourish in the 21st and, with the help of information and communications technology, will play a crucial role in the creation of a more equal, more just and more peaceful global society.