

Towards the Second Crusade?

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL

Europeans first grew aware of a possible pandemic exactly one year ago. The wave is here. It has submerged the world, claiming many lives and causing tremendous collateral damage. But a kind of miracle has occurred in this maelstrom: the development in record time of not one but several apparently effective vaccines. Two of them are based on technology that has long been gestating but are nevertheless revolutionary. Perhaps Donald Trump is not being showered with tributes, but at least he deserves credit for having believed in and funded these vaccines at the right time. Unfortunately, hopes of quickly beating the virus have been dashed for at least two reasons. First, vaccines cannot be produced and distributed with the snap of a finger. The rollout has hit various organizational snags, particularly logistical ones. We are on a war economy footing for which few countries were prepared. Vaccination is a public good in that every vaccinated person also protects others, but the operational translation of this fact piles difficulty upon difficulty, especially in developing countries. Second, and perhaps above all, the arrival of more contagious, if not more dangerous, variants has thrown cold water on hopes that the crisis would end soon. At present, no one expects a return to normal before 2022 at best. And even then, it would be a new normal.

In other words, at least the first quarter of Joe Biden's presidency will be taken up with two crises, as intertwined now as they were in 2020: the virus and China. They are intertwined because China clearly won the first round of the fight against the pandemic from both a health and an economic standpoint, although the risk has not vanished. The United States still has a long way to go. Moreover, China quickly grasped the opportunity of the pandemic to undertake active health diplomacy everywhere, first with masks, then with medical devices and now with a vaccine. Beijing seeks to portray itself as the champion of openness and multilateralism at a time when, despite the new president's outreach and soothing words, US allies and partners remain traumatized by his forerunner's term and show little hurry to rally behind the star-spangled banner against the rising power. Biden's desire to restore America's "global leadership" is mere wishful thinking: during the Cold War, the

Thierry de Montbrial
*is Founder and
Executive Chairman
of Ifri*

The opinions expressed in
this text are the
responsibility of the
author alone.

ISBN: 979-10-373-0301-1

© All rights reserved,
Paris, Ifri, 2021.

**How to quote this
publication:**

Thierry de Montbrial,
"Towards the Second
Crusade?",
Éditoriaux de l'Ifri, Ifri,
January 26, 2021.

Ifri
27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris Cedex 15
Tel.: (0)1 40 61 60 00
Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website:
www.ifri.org

United States was the only leader of the "free world", as it was called then, and that was already a lot. Today, the People's Republic of China has no intention of positioning itself as a "follower" of the US. When the 46th president speaks about restoring American leadership, it is to be understood that for him the system of alliances developed after the Second World War must now be reorganized, not only because Russia is still considered threatening, but also and above all because of China, accused of trampling on freedoms at home and wanting to impose its hegemony in its backyard by force, particularly by threatening Taiwan. Moreover, it is around Taiwan that everything will play out.

Do not expect 2021 to be decisive in this regard. The domestic problems facing the United States are too serious for the successor of Donald Trump—the first to denounce the Chinese menace out loud—to be able to immediately start a new Cold War. At least at first, he will try to carry out a strategy of competitive rivalry, in the words of famous Harvard professor Joseph Nye—a highly respected Democrat—while, without flexing America's muscles too much, trying to keep Europeans and others from economically and technologically cooperating too closely with China. Still reeling from the Trump experience, Europeans have no intention of letting themselves be pushed around and are trying to widen their margin of maneuver. Hence the investment deal with Beijing, which the US surely wants to block. Even in Europe, the agreement does not have unanimous backing. It is criticized for giving too much away to German interests and turning a blind eye to human rights violations.

International relations do not take place in a world of teddy bears. As the new administration in Washington finds its footing, it will carry on its predecessors' policy of promoting American economic and technological interests by any means, of which legal extraterritoriality is the most worrisome for its partners. In this regard, it will be interesting to see the conditions of their possible return to the nuclear deal with Iran (the JCPOA). But on the level of discourse or "narrative", America's material interests, while being defended tooth and nail, will remain more or less masked behind ideological pieties at both the White House and Congress. The new crusade on the horizon will be waged, like the first, in the name of liberty.

At the risk of repeating myself, I do not think things will be decided in 2021. Trump and the pandemic have spurred on Europe's quest for

technological, if not strategic, self-sufficiency, and America's other major partners have also drawn their own lessons. Looking ahead to Biden's term as a whole, the key issue is the evolution of China's image and, therefore, its perception by the "free world", understood as the free-market liberal democracies. Obviously, since the arrival of President Xi Jinping and the strengthening of his power, this image has deteriorated for reasons that are both objective and subjective. The objective one is China's increasingly impressive rise and assertion of its "rights" over Hong Kong, the South China Sea and, especially, Taiwan. The subjective reason is that many outside of China's cultural sphere perceive Beijing's ambitions as boundless. In other words, China is frightening. That said, Beijing also projects a reassuring face, if only from the balance-of-power viewpoint, including the economic and social development angle. Objective interdependence means that neither China nor anyone else is ready for a violent clash with the United States.

In 2021, then, more or less serious skirmishes can be expected, but in a framework that remains still more cooperative than confrontational. Things will surely settle down in the next four years. Soon, but not right away, we will know if the second crusade is in sight. Much will depend on the Chinese. If it really does take place, it is highly likely that cultural reflexes will come into play: the Chinese world will not turn away from China, the European world will turn to America, and everybody else will go wherever they can. What will be the consequences? We are not there yet.