

## Who are the leaders of tomorrow? A tribune by geopolitician Dominique Moïsi

*published on 01.09.2014*

In a multipolar and asymmetric world where change is accelerating erratically, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between the trends and the trendy. Harvard professor Dominique Moïsi\* looks back at our recent history and offers to make sense of the present through a better understanding of our recent past.

\* Dominique Moïsi is senior adviser at The French Institute for International Affairs and a professor at L'Institut d'études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po). He is the author of *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World*.

"Trends have profound and long-term implications while *the trendy* is fashionable but not that important. In the recent past, it has become more difficult to distinguish between the two. Maybe our recent history can help us make sense of the world as it is today, and 2014 is a great starting point to do this.

### What do commemorations teach us?

2014 is a year of many landmarks, starting with the outbreak of World War I that marked a dramatic change in the history of Europe and the world. In Beijing and Tokyo, people are wondering if today's Asia could go down the same path as yesterday's Europe. And the seizure of Crimea by Russia raises fears that Europe might prepare for a new Anschluss. Meanwhile, as we celebrate the 70th anniversary of D-day, there are signs of fear for the freedom we fought for. Another commemoration of high significance is the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago, which gave way to a democratic Poland while shortly afterwards, on Tiananmen Square, protesters were crushed by tanks. 2014 is undoubtedly a special time for reflection.

Looking back at our recent history is supposed to give us keys to better understand where our world is going. Yet the diversity and number of processes at stake makes it difficult to read - the most important being the equivalent in geopolitical terms of a tectonic shift. For the first time since the end of the 18th century, the West is no longer the sole centre of the world. The course of history is shifting in front of our eyes from west to east.

### America: from emergence to retreat

Till 1914, the West was incarnated by Europe. The fact that America had emerged as the first world economic power as early as 1872 had had no geopolitical impact it came to the rescue of western democracies in 1918. But even then, it kept to itself for over 20 years. America's century truly began in 1941. From 1991 to 2001, it had its fist and unique unipolar moment. The USSR had crumbled, and China was slowly and discreetly emerging.

Suddenly, at the turn of the 21st century, America becomes much less secure, willing and

capable of being the referee of the world. There are many reasons for this. The USA did too little to prevent 9/11 and too much afterwards, engaging into two costly military adventures that further weakened their economy, a trend that was worsened by a major financial and economical crisis. Then America elected a president whose agenda was more domestic than international. Based on the belief that the US foreign policy began at home, his programme focused on reducing domestic inequalities based on a true US health system.

## **Meanwhile, the world goes on**

But the world would not wait for America to recreate a sense of unity. Instead, it accelerated. In a region that has been frozen for decades, the Arab Spring started as an eastern French revolution that quickly turned into a kind of a religious war. The result is a process of fragmentation that is occurring at the very door of Europe and threatens the influence of the US in that part of the world. Europe's boundaries are also being challenged for the first time since borders were set by the Sykes-Picot agreement. Lines drawn in the sand are moving, and this new order trying to emerge in the Middle-East brings a great disorder in Africa.

A continent of paradox, Africa is just reemerging for the first time since the 16th century, fuelled by economic growth, modernisation, urbanisation and above all, a demographic boom that will take it from 180 million people in 1950 to about 2 billion in 2050. Yet such transformation goes with shocking political violence. Will Africa be a continent of great hope or a land of disarray? A similar contrast is to be found in Latin America's, and with Brazil no longer driving prosperity in the region, will Mexico benefit from the USA's regained prosperity to play its neighbour's lost part?

## **Who's the new policeman of the world?**

Now comes the big question. Russia is emerging, frustrated to have been left out of the new international game and determined to prove that it counts. So *why now?* Washington condemning but not taking action further to Syria using chemical weapons was interpreted as an encouraging sign for Russia to make its move in Ukraine -a country that is neither a key economical nor political player.

Whether Crimea feels it belongs to Russia or not is not what is at stake. Crimea is as anchored in Russian's hearts and minds as Kiev. But it is the first time since 1945 that the boundaries of Europe are moved by military force. So a question arises: as the rules of the Cold War do not apply any more, which country is willing to replace America in being *the policeman of the world?*

China is eager to be Asia's economic leader but it has no geopolitical ambition. Unique in recent history, a power is coming to the fore with no sense of a mission and no universal message. But while some think that universal messages are a curse, others find that China does not take the responsibility that comes with its new rank.

## **Four divorces**

Right now we are in between two orders, one that has collapsed and another one that remains to be built. It is at this very moment that Europe is hit by its most severe identity crisis, fuelled by four *divorces*.

The divorce between the elite and the people has led to the victory of populist parties

throughout Europe. How can we celebrate D-day while empowering the enemies of freedom? The second divorce is between a Europe that succeeds and that one that fails; i.e. the north vs. the south. Now France and Germany - the two founding fathers of European unity- are also divorcing. No French leader can match any German chancellor in implementing courageous reforms; and today's France is no more playing in the same league as Germany.

The 4th divorce is more classical but as significant: it is the success of the euro sceptic UKIP party, combined with the perspective of David Cameron ?provided he is still Prime minister by then- losing his 2017 referendum. But isolation will bring nothing good. As Angela Merkel put it, Germany only accounts for 1% of the world population, so it can only succeed through and with Europe.

### **Political leadership: the key word**

At the end, it's all about political leadership. But where are today's leaders? Look at India: the largest democracy in the world is not culturally at ease with the concept of leadership. In that respect, India's outlook at the world today resembles America's post-World War II.

In her latest book published in 2013, "The war that ended peace", the Canadian historian Margaret McMillan admits that no one can be named responsible for the outbreak of WWI; but that conversely no one prevented it to happen. The fact that great leaders of the 19th century like Bismarck and Salisbury were long gone when WWI broke out calls for many questions.

Where in Asia are the Bismarck's and the Salisbury's of tomorrow? How does Putin fit into the new world picture? Apart from Angela Merkel, who can be considered as a great leader in Europe today? And will Barak Obama be solely remembered as a symbol, or will he go down in history for his great achievements?

These are some of the many questions we must seek answers to, and the only tool we have at our disposal is historical understanding, combined with a little bit of what I call *flair* or *intuition*?

## **Netherlands Antilles**

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.cashmanagement.bnpparibas.com/our-solutions/trends-vision/who-are-leaders-tomorrow-tribune-geopolitician-dominique-mo%C3%AFsi>