

## Meeting

### Reflections on the 'Post-American' World Order

On 15 January 2009 the Netherlands Atlantic Association organised a meeting with Professor François Heisbourg at 'Sociëteit De Witte', The Hague. Heisbourg is Chairman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, and of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. He is a renowned expert on international security and strategic issues. His latest book, *L'Épaisseur du monde*, deals with the changing balance of power, new actors and multiple challenges in today's and tomorrow's world.

Professor Heisbourg started with the remark that he did not intend to make predictions about Barack Obama's first term as president of the United States. He wanted to look beyond that to the long term and the challenges facing the next generation.

#### What Has Changed?

- 20 years ago the Cold War came to an end and with that the rivalry for power between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The United States became the only superpower – according to some even the 'hyperpower' – in the world. That uncontested power of the United States has recently begun to decrease.
- Unity of the Western world is no longer self-evident. The Iraq crisis, that reverberated within both the European Union and NATO, was a clear example of the apparent disunity of the West.
- Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the West lacks a constant threat. This has diminished the need for permanent organisations to respond. Heisbourg quoted former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, while strongly agreeing with him: "The mission determines the coalition."
- A new 'trade' in international relations is the 'globalisation of globalisation'. Worldwide, massive attention is now being given to global warming. Heisbourg said that we live in a world in which every crisis has the potential of becoming a global one, like the credit crunch. Which one, and under which circumstances we unfortunately do not know. This has operational consequences: we have to organise ourselves differently to cope with unforeseen major crises.
- The rise of Asia is an ongoing trend. Asia has become the primary contributor to global growth with a GDP responsible for almost 50 per cent of the planet's economic growth. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the world has changed from an Eurocentric into an American-centric world order. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this is developing into an Asian-centric world.

#### What Has Not Changed?

François Heisbourg also discussed a number of factors that seemed to remain the same.

- Energy problems are of all times. What is new is the global warming issue together with the emission level of carbon dioxide.
- The "permanent state of crisis" in the United Nations seemed to Heisbourg like a "linear process". The UN still lacks unity and power to enforce its resolutions.
- Sub-Saharan Africa still is a very problematic area. Heisbourg called this region the "orphan of the globalisation process". A steady flow of legal and illegal emigration confronts the EU.
- The crisis in the Middle East is also a constant factor. However, the conflict used to be segmented. Events in Iran did not seem to have much influence in for example Syria. Now, events within the broader Arab world seem to have become interconnected. Events in Gaza today are influenced by and influence developments in other Arab nations.

## Characteristics of the World Today

The nation state is no longer the only major player in the world, although states will remain actors, Heisbourg said. An ongoing empowerment of non-state actors is taking place. An example of these are non-governmental organisations or terrorist cells. Those non-state entities have never been as powerful as they seem to be today, caused by globalization, the spread of technology and the worldwide media. Contrary to Thomas Friedman's thesis that the world is 'flat', Heisbourg asserted that the world has become increasingly complex and



more difficult to understand. It is therefore a major asset to understand what can be understood. Heisbourg advised the West to invest more in knowledge. Next to this, security will have to be organised differently. Heisbourg remarked that the U.S. will not 'run' the world any longer in the future. Non-state actors are the most probable to become the new world leaders.

Western power today has become limited. The West experiences difficulty in making the rules. Many people in the world are unhappy with the rules of the game and with the people who make them. However, the West is not going to fully lose its leading position. Europe with the U.S. are still responsible for about 50 per cent of the world's GDP.

The limited power of the West has consequences for the military, that is globalising too. Instability occurs no longer solely in Europe, but more and more in other parts of the world. Missions are being carried out further away. For this, expeditionary armed forces are needed. These are expensive. This development also has political and strategic consequences. Low-paid and low-skilled labour is very much needed in the military. The EU is definitely lacking 'boots on the ground'. We cannot provide for as many soldiers as we need for missions far from home. Around 90 per cent of the soldiers in the peacekeeping missions around the world come from developing countries with less advanced militaries.

### 'Wild Cards'

Heisbourg named three 'wild cards' or uncertainties.

#### 1. *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*

Heisbourg said that we can look back on 40 years of successful nuclear non-proliferation. Of 62 countries with nuclear power or research reactors, only eight or nine have actually produced nuclear weapons. However, challenges do lie ahead. According to Heisbourg especially Iran is a critical case.

#### 2. *The EU Integration Process*

The European integration process is ongoing for some 50 years now. Even if the Lisbon Treaty may be very important to manage an ever-larger Union, if it will not be ratified the

EU will not collapse. Commenting on the cohesive power of the euro, Heisbourg said: "Thank goodness for the euro. It could turn out to be the greatest thing in the world!" The global economic crisis poses the first real challenge to the European currency. Will other countries from the eurozone show solidarity with countries having difficulties that possibly affect the whole zone, or will they choose to leave it? If they would leave, the European Union could disintegrate.

### 3. *China*

How will China respond to the global economic crisis? Its government has given a nine percent GDP growth forecast for this year, but both exports and imports are declining. Will there be a 'regime change'? How will the relationship between China and the U.S. develop?

In his closing statements Heisbourg said we have to focus on prevention. Societies have to be more resilient in the face of threats or else they will pay the price. The UK showed itself to be very resilient after the terrorist attacks in London (2005): these did not fundamentally shake British society.

In response to a question from the audience on Russia Heisbourg said he was very concerned about the situation there now oil and gas prices have dropped considerably. How powerful is Prime Minister Putin? We do not know for sure and therefore it is difficult to predict where Russia will go in the future.



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