PARALLEL WORKSHOPS' REPORTS

Thierry de Montbrial, President and founder of the WPC

The energy-environment workshop was fairly specific as regards the general theme. However, it dealt with it in quite diverse ways. The third workshop was, by its very nature, different, because, unfortunately, there is a potentially – I won't say unlimited – but in any case very extensive list of major risks. Nevertheless, we limited ourselves to certain subjects.

Dominique Moïsi will now summarise what he took from it all.

Dominique Moïsi, Special Advisor at Ifri

Thank you, Thierry. I think that the participants were a bit troubled when they came out of the roundtable. Some told me that they were really depressed. We learnt three things that stayed with us.

The first is that every day we gain an extra six hours of life. That's very good news. We were assured that this was good, but that we don't know how we're going to pay for this additional longevity.

We were also told that if global warming continues – which unfortunately is likely – this conference will end up being held on a boat. In other words, it would be possible to return to Cannes, but on boats, because there would be 60 metres of water beneath us. This news left the participants dazed. Some liked the idea, because it would be nice for the World Policy Conference to be turned into a cruise, whereas others were a bit worried, in particular those who had invested in property on the Côte d'Azur.

The third point, which left participants even more bewildered, is the idea that hacker attacks could even cause malfunctions in pacemakers.

These three anecdotes summarise the diversity of subjects covered. More seriously, I am going to try to reconstruct what was said and the way in which it was said.

There were three themes, like an expanding pyramid. The first theme consisted of prioritising risks which are new or considered to be major. The second theme consisted of emphasising the dysfunction which could exist between the totality of risks and the absence of global institutions to deal with these risks. And the third theme actually consisted of saying that the major risk, over and above what had just been mentioned, was perhaps the refusal by leaders to take risks themselves compared to the present: what is known as the short-sightedness of governments.

Within that there was a national approach, which I think was justified, where the Japanese participant, in the aftermath of Fukushima, spoke about the impact of a major event on the national psyche.

Three of the risks that we covered were prioritised. The first was the risk of a cyber-attack on a nation's critical systems. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, it is very interesting to see the Americans, who are hugely interested in cyber-security issues, saying: "Look what happened. See how nature blocked the systems. For a few hours, a few days, there was no electricity, no light, etc. Imagine what would happen tomorrow if it wasn't an explosion of nature, but a manmade explosion which blocked your systems like that."

The speaker who presented the subject had a legitimate desire to dramatize it. We start to view hackers as Robin Hood figures who want to take power from the rich and give it to the poor. It starts like Wikileaks, etc. But that's not actually what it's about at all. We are in an increasingly interconnected world. In 2020, there will be 55 billion interconnections possible between us; the war has already started.

The war was started by terrorists, by states which use the weapons of mass destruction of communication. Take Stuxnet: it's so sophisticated that it's obvious that only an ultra-sophisticated government agency could have conducted this war, because what actually happens is a virus is sent which infiltrates the most secret codes and propagates itself within the system. Forces of reservists against cyber-terrorists are being formed. The US and Israel have extremely sophisticated centres in desert locations. So, a world was presented by pointing out the threats; planes losing control of their instruments, infiltration of banks, even threats to individual health, as hackers can block pacemakers and even put a virus in the pacemaker system which will propagate from one person to the next.

The second prioritised aspect of the risks was food security, with the idea that the definition of 'food security' is completely different depending on whether you are talking about countries in the Northern hemisphere, which are rich and plentiful, or countries in the Southern hemisphere, which are poor. Food security for countries in the north basically means nutritional safety: is what we eat of a sufficiently high quality?

In countries in the south, food security means access to food. The real problem is poverty. Today there are a billion human beings who wake up each morning not knowing what they're going to eat that day. They don't die of hunger but, for them, food is a daily preoccupation which has become an obsession.

There is no global response to this global problem. There is no legitimate institution and there is talk of the delegitimisation of international institutions (such as the FAO) which are not responding to the problem.

The third aspect prioritised was ageing. How are we going to pay for what is good luck, an opportunity but at the same time a risk? Over the last 50 years, between 1960 and 2010, the life expectancy of the Chinese population increased by an average of 36 years. This is great, it's extraordinary progress by civilisation, but we have no way of funding this increase in life expectancy, and the major debate presented to us today was, of course, that of finding a balance between public and private funding. We were shown the British example, the American example, the continental example – there aren't any, but – the French example, to illustrate the various ways of managing this problem which is – I repeat – an opportunity but also, in terms of funding, a major risk.

This is where a national approach from Japan was added, from a people still traumatised by the fact that the water brutally rose by 15 to 20 meters in two hours and that 19,000 people lost their lives in the space of those two hours. The Japan which came out of Fukushima is a Japan which is stronger in its society and proud of its resilience, but at the same time completely distanced from a political class of which it has become increasingly contemptuous; eight heads of government in the space of seven years, if we include the next Japanese Prime Minister voted in at the forthcoming elections.

I would say that the talk by the Japanese participant actually served as a link between the description of certain major risks and the description of "Political" risk with a capital P. In other words, the inadequacy of the response of policies and Politicians to the major changes taking place. What was very interesting in this roundtable was that we didn't actually talk about geopolitics. We talked about it much more in the roundtable on energy than in the roundtable on major risks, as if the idea that geopolitics in itself can still be a major risk had almost been put to one side by nearly all of the participants. However, we spoke about politics by asking the following question on two levels: is there a balance between the transformation of risks and the transformation of the Politician? Has he adapted? Can he – does he want to – think long-term, beyond immediate political calculations? Is there a difference between the way in which civilisations and political systems deal with the long-term and risks?

In a way, we could, of course, say that some civilisations find it easier to think in the long term than others: China, for example. But just because you find it easier to think in the long term, does that necessarily mean that you integrate the necessity of taking risks in the very short term to adjust the system? Isn't today's biggest risk the inability of governments to take risks and the inability of politicians to rise to what Politicians and politics should be? Thus, we concluded by saying: "Politicians should possess four qualities:

the ability to inspire the power of ideas which mobilise a population on a theme;

the ability to resist populism and the comfort of the status quo;

the ability to inform and explain the issues: we said to ourselves at the end of the roundtable: 'Why aren't there any politicians today who can explain the nature of the issues with which we are confronted as clearly as the participants?';

and for Politicians, the final quality is the need to make compromises, because without the ability to make compromises, the ability to lead amounts to nothing."

There you have it Thierry, the summary of a roundtable which, of course, went off in all sorts of directions and which I have tried to reconstruct in a way that, due to my wish for clarity, was no doubt artificial.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and founder of the WPC

Thank you Dominique. I wanted to say something about the ideas that inspired us as we put together these roundtables, these workshops rather, and particularly the last on major risks. In summary, there were two. Of course, we tried to structure things by making the choices that you summarised so well. There are two ideas that I would like to highlight and which were presented at the start.

The first is that these major risks are risks, but they are also certainties. I am sure – I talked about it a lot with some of the speakers before – that the risks discussed in this workshop will come about. There will be, whether tomorrow, in two months or in two years, extremely serious cyber-attacks like those mentioned by Dominique, which will have literally unpredictable consequences. Imagine banking systems suddenly annihilated overnight…

Secondly, the question of Politicians: I'm going to use a word that I don't think you used but I would simply like to mention it – it's too late now, we won't discuss it but I think we need to come back to it – the question of democracy. The question of the functioning of democracy, the question of the short-sightedness inherent in the democratic system. I see that my friend Sergey Karaganov is pleased but let me straight away add that non-democratic systems are not necessarily better. The Chinese system, whose qualities are praised, is it any better, for example, at anticipating the consequences of ageing which were also discussed in this workshop?

I think that the issues discussed in this workshop are absolutely major and – I'm going to use a strong word – dramatic.