



# HUBERT VEDRINE

Former French Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Can you say a little something about Carl's idea of public opinion also playing a key role now? I'll ask another question, too: is diplomacy really in danger, damaged by the lack of security, the lack of secrecy in the world?

**Hubert Védérine, Former French Minister of Foreign Affairs**

Obviously I cannot contest the importance of public opinion, which, by the way, isn't that new, it's something that developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And now we've reached the point of "democracies of opinion" or "regimes of opinion", at least in the democratic part of the world. We no longer know exactly what the word "democracy" really means; there's no denying that. So when there's a big factor weighing on a political or diplomatic decision, we must take it into account and try to influence it. And that brings us back to all the technologies, which I'm not going to list, and that everybody knows about, because there's the opinion factor. But to me, even though that's taken into consideration, it's still absolutely essential to try and have a long-term view — what is the objective? — and to balance two things at the same time: on the one hand public opinion, listening to public opinion, responding to public opinion, calming public opinion down, neutralising public opinion if necessary. That is a considerable activity. But to me it's not the core of diplomatic activity. It shouldn't even be the core of political activity. On the other hand, to keep a political and diplomatic vision, you've got to know what you want. You've got to have a long-term view that can only be based on historical reasoning, etc. So they're both necessary: if you spend all your time managing enormous opinion and reaction mechanisms, at the end of the day there's nothing. There's nothing, it's totally incoherent. So I think both are necessary. I find that very complicated. Take the Iranian issue, for example: the recent agreement opened up a very important process. If the process develops correctly, it will be one of the most important global events in the past twenty or thirty years. Iran can become pre-emerging a country very fast, so its return to the international chessboard has colossal consequences. At the same time, as we've just seen, there are groups bent on foiling the process in Iran, because the normalisation process jeopardises one, but not all, of the regime's foundations, the Pasdaran, or the Guardians of the Revolution. There are also people in the United States determined to derail the process, people who don't want Obama to succeed in any area whatsoever. And there's an Israeli opposition, a Saudi opposition, and perhaps others as well. What are tweets, Facebook, things like that going to change in this situation? They don't change the need for a vision strategic in the least. A strategic vision means saying we're going to leave no stone unturned for this process to lead to security, of course, the requirement of security. On the other hand, other groups will say, "We're going to do everything we can to scuttle the process", and every day they'll look for pretexts to make good on their word. That's the basic choice, in fact, in foreign policy or diplomacy. The rest is ways to adapt, but when major shifts in public opinion need to be managed, masses of wind and clouds in every direction, it's more complicated. But I'll repeat my answer. I think there's no getting away from it, we must keep the heart of the definition of what a foreign policy or diplomacy is.

On secrecy, the problem is the lack of instantaneous secrecy, that's the issue. There is no perpetual secrecy, almost none, although the reasons why Julius Caesar went to war against the Gauls are still up for debate. No secret lasts forever, which in my opinion threatens not just the diplomatic function, but all kinds of other functions as well, the medical or other functions. It's this sort of ideology of transparency, and therefore the lack of instantaneous secrecy, as though all forms of secrecy are bad. In general, the media are the ones saying that. But if you tell them this also applies to naming sources, they disagree because they're living with the naïve idea that if they impose the idea of transparency as something that's good for its own sake, it won't have any effect on the secrecy of sources, on medical secrecy, on bank secrecy, on privacy. That's just not true. So I think there needs to be an almost philosophical shift in civilisation by saying, "There are some cases when secrets, or the length of time a secret is kept, or conditions of secrecy, are justified." Some professions, including the diplomatic profession, must accept this even though it runs counter to the spirit of the times. I think this also goes for the time of political maturation.