

JOSEP BORRELL FONTELLES

High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy,
Vice President of the European Commission

Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

We will now have the privilege of speaking with Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and also Vice President of the Commission. This is worth remembering, because not everyone knows, dear Josep, that you are the only person who is a member of both the European Council and the Commission.

Much has happened since we met at the last World Policy Conference. The world has changed profoundly because of the pandemic, of course, but also because of rising tensions between the United States and China and the increasingly aggressive assertion of Chinese power.

We hear you often, much more than your predecessors, because you have the courage to take clear positions. We will start in French because both languages are spoken here, French and English. We will start in French and switch to English during the discussion.

As a starting point, we can take the sequence of events of the last few weeks, beginning with the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. When we talk about the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, there are actually two aspects. There is the withdrawal itself decided by Trump and carried out by Biden, but there are also the conditions in which it took place. These are really two separate issues. One thing is certain: the United States acted unilaterally in both cases.

More recently, there was the AUKUS affair, which we discussed at length this morning. It is a much more serious matter politically than economically and industrially, but it reminds us of a number of realities.

I think this might be a good way to start the discussion, which undoubtedly will quite naturally lead us to talk about broader issues such as strategic autonomy and European security in the coming years.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

Thank you, Professor de Montbrial. Allow me to call you that.

Thierry de Montbrial

Call me Thierry. After all, we know each other.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

Yes, but the respect due a professor must be kept. Maybe they do not know it, but I was 25 when you introduced me to the world of geopolitics and the global economy. He was my teacher at the Institut français du pétrole. I still remember it. Thank you very much for those lessons. Thank you again for inviting me to this conference and for the difficult but relevant question you asked me.

We can say we have made a journey from Kabul to Canberra, and that this journey shines a light on all the global geopolitical fault lines as well as on the role of Europe. It is true that the American withdrawal was a unilateral decision by the Trump administration and that there was not much consultation. When I talk with Blinken, he refuses to say there was no information or consultation. He refuses and he is right.

The Americans said it at NATO, and everybody listened, but without asking clear questions. This shows that we Europeans are sometimes very respectful and do not dare discuss issues that the Americans put on the table. There is a kind of general assent. But it is true that this was a unilateral action by the Trump administration carried out by the Biden administration. This raises three issues.

First, it proves that war, military intervention, is not a very viable tool for settling post-Cold War conflicts. Military intervention is necessary, even as a deterrent, but in practice its effectiveness has been very limited.

The second issue is the role of the United States. Until now, the Americans have faced the dangers of Islamist terrorism. They were obviously shocked by 9/11 and have been fighting terrorism for 20 years. They have radically changed and now their problem is China. That is normal. They have changed their script or let us say their opponent has changed. There is a movement to encircle China and build a new alliance, not in the Atlantic this time, but in the Pacific.

If it is in the Pacific, it is with the countries of the Pacific, just as the alliance to face Russia was forged with the countries that faced Russia, i.e., us. The war against Islamic terror is over. Now they have to face China with allies that face China geographically and economically. This is leading us to a second Cold War, to bipolarity that will be in a multipolar context this time. I do not think this is in Europe's interest.

The third issue is us Europeans. Europe is obviously undergoing a kind of strategic shrinking, and we must fight this. If Europe wants to be a pole in a multipolar world, we must fight against the force that is pushing us to shrink, i.e., to remain in our own immediate environment. We must have an Indo-Pacific strategy, just as we must have a Gulf strategy. We need to be present everywhere in the world, especially in the Pacific. But we must have the willpower to do so.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much. Obviously, the French should be happy listening to you. We are quite happy because your view is close to France's, but it is not necessarily the same as the one

taken by all the European countries. For example, this morning we heard Bogdan Klich, who is in the room. I do not want to give Bogdan the floor right now, but he only spoke about Russia's backyard and the threat to Poland's traditional view of security. When you are Spanish, French or Italian, you see things differently.

We are speaking about strategic autonomy and you are promoting the idea. The term "strategic autonomy" irritates, especially our American friends, of course, but also their closest traditional allies in Europe, like Germany. How do you explain the concept of strategic autonomy without immediately running afoul of some Europeans?

Josep Borrell Fontelles

Some people prefer the term "open autonomous strategy" instead of "strategic autonomy". The word "open" is added to mean that it is not a matter of moving towards some sort of commercial autarchy. It stirs up passions and sows divisions. It has always been that way. To me, the idea is quite simple. Besides, I would not want to align myself with France's positions, as you say.

Thierry de Montbrial

I didn't say that.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

You sort of did. You know, the idea of strategic autonomy should not be like a big French garden, all neatly laid out with rational lines. It is a practice, not a theory. It does not mean building a grand design but working every day with a simple idea: we have our own interests and we must know how to defend them. We, not others. Nobody else will do it for us.

Every time I utter the words "strategic autonomy", somebody raises their hand and says, "What about NATO?" This has nothing to do with NATO. It is not against NATO. To be clear, there is no alternative to NATO for the territorial defense of Europe.

This should reassure countries that think strategic autonomy means disengaging from the United States and going it alone. It does not. President Biden and President Macron have made it clear that European military capabilities are complementary to NATO's. They make NATO stronger and more balanced. In my view, what is missing is a better political balance within NATO. With a better political balance, what happened in Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific could have been avoided.

As I said, it is not a matter of going it alone, but of strengthening Europeans' autonomous capability to defend their own interests in the world. This is not limited to the military field; technology and trade are also part of it. We are not autonomous when we depend on others, either for medicine or for technology.

It is a versatile, not just a military, concept that must be built every day with modesty, but also willpower, in a practical way. We will talk about it in a few weeks when the strategic compass is presented but do not expect the "big day" to clarify what it is.

I repeat, it is a matter of understanding an idea that in my opinion is quite simple and hard to brush aside. We Europeans want to exist in a multipolar world dominated by the Chinese and Americans, and we must have the capability to defend our interests on our own.

Thierry de Montbrial

Yes, but if we say that defending Europe is a matter for NATO, or more precisely the Atlantic Alliance—indeed, we must always remember to distinguish between the Atlantic Alliance, NATO and the integrated military organization, these are three levels—but if we say, to put it simply, that it is NATO's responsibility, this assumes that we all have the same view of relations with Russia, for example. So this is actually a matter of foreign policy.

Obviously, we have quite different views of the relationship with Russia. Many people believe, as I have for a long time, that if we have reached this point today with Russia, it is because we completely missed the turning point in the 1990s.

How can we speak of strategic autonomy on this level, even in the very general sense that you have given, without talking about the unification of foreign policy? There is no united foreign policy in Europe at the moment.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

There is no united foreign policy.

Thierry de Montbrial

Towards Russia, for example.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

The same thing can be said about Turkey and China.

Thierry de Montbrial

Absolutely.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

Practically speaking, Europeans have different views on the whole matter, which should not be surprising. It is all about history and geography. In the United States, whether you live in Alaska or Miami you view the relationship with Russia exactly the same way. But in Europe, if you live in Seville or in Venice, you do not. The reasons are quite obvious.

Thierry de Montbrial

Of course.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

And at times this pushes us into conflicts that some do not feel are ours.

We can say the same thing about migration. Obviously, migration is seen as much more of a problem on the shores of the Mediterranean than on the Baltic. But this summer we saw that it can also be a problem on the Baltic. When Iraqi migrants started arriving in Belarus and then at the Lithuanian border, Lithuanians understood that yes, migration can be a problem. We care about the problems that affect us.

So yes, there is a lack of unity. That is why the strategic compass must continue to build a common strategic culture, which means a common assessment of the threats we are facing, some more than others. They must be seen as common challenges. It is hard to have a common foreign security policy if we do not see the threats facing us as challenges that we share.

Thierry de Montbrial

Concretely, let us take the case of the Sahel today. Today there is no common view at all in Europe on the Sahel.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

I could say the same thing about Libya.

Thierry de Montbrial

Yes, except that we, especially we the French, are committed to a major military operation there with casualties, as we have recently seen again. So this is particularly important to us.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

And it is clear that France cannot bear the burden of the Sahel alone. It is too much. That is why we have considered the possibility of having a task force, a European force capable of going to the Sahel, for example, to do what France is doing with marginal, important but unsubstantial help from other European countries.

Either an alliance is formed each time with a leader and others who more or less willingly join in, or there is a structured, organized standing force that can be mobilized whenever there is a problem.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much.