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Marc Hecker now has the floor.

Marc Hecker

Thank you very much, Thierry. I would like to try to answer the question that is the title of this round table: “The end of illusions?” To start with, I asked myself what the word illusion means. There are three accepted meanings. I will discuss each one and respond to some aspects of what has been said over the past three days.

The first accepted meaning of the word illusion is an erroneous interpretation of sensorial data. You think you see something that does not exist, a mirage. By extension, in international relations, it could be said that this is an error not only of perception, but also of analysis, as Robert Jervis writes in his book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.

The war in Ukraine can be seen as a shock of illusions. There were an enormous amount of misperceptions and mistaken analyses on both sides. In the West, many leaders and analysts got it wrong. They thought that Russia would never invade Ukraine. In the end, they did.

If analysts got it wrong, it is mainly because they did not know that the Russians and Vladimir Putin would misjudge the Kremlin’s vision, the strength of many actors, the strength of Ukraine, the strength of Europe and the strength of the United States after the pullout from Afghanistan. A conjunction of misperceptions and erroneous analyses helps to explain the war.

The second accepted meaning is wishful thinking. Taking our dreams and desires for reality. An example from literature is *Lost Illusions*, in which Lucien de Rubempré dreams of being a great writer but does not succeed.

In international relations, I think the closest example is the illusion of power. I think it could be said that Russia harbored this illusion. Russia believed it was stronger than it really is and thought it could defeat Ukraine in three days. Then it crashed into the wall of reality.

Russia has not been the only actor to crash into that wall in recent years or decades. We have just discussed the war on terrorism. The United States and their allies hit that wall in Afghanistan. To a certain degree, the French and their many allies, for there were over 10,000 personnel in MINUSMA, collided with reality in Mali and have not managed to stabilize the situation despite human and financial efforts.

The third accepted meaning is an effect created by an artifice or trick that makes something look real or true. It is an illusion with an illusionist and enters the world of manipulation, fake news, disinformation and propaganda.

In the area of strategy, there is a very wide spectrum, from influence to psychological and hybrid warfare. Examples abound. Some have been given over the past three days. I am thinking in particular about Zaki Laïdi's remarks on disinformation about food insecurity in Africa, in other words that the shortages were orchestrated by the Western countries, and on the efforts Western countries and the European Union have made to try and counter disinformation, much of which comes from the Russian troll farms that have existed for years and continue to be extremely active, especially in Africa.

Now, the end of illusions. What does the end of illusions mean? It is a subjective notion. The question is to know who has what illusions. I will not venture to answer; it could take a very long time.

Some collective illusions have been more present in the West than in other parts of the world: illusions on the universalism of values, the spread of democracy and respect for human rights and the possible pacification of international relations. This could be a long discussion, so to keep within the seven-minute time limit I will not go into it now.

I would now like to get to the last part, which is the question of what the end of illusions can lead to. I think it can lead to three types of attitudes.

The first is denial. We refuse to believe the end of illusions and remain deluded. The discussions on climate change in the past few days reminded me of the Netflix movie *Don't Look Up*, which illustrates the definition of denial.

The participants at one of yesterday's workshops talked about an attenuated version of denial, the NIMBY phenomenon. There is awareness that something must be done, but nobody wants to take action, at least not in their backyard. The neighbors are expected to do something about it but they also have a not in my backyard attitude. In the end, the problem goes undealt with and the can gets kicked down the road.

The other extreme is disillusionment. I would like to draw your attention to a survey of 250,000 young people in 163 countries that UNICEF conducted just before COP 27. It really speaks to the disillusionment and even despair they feel over climate change. One of the most striking findings is that two in five young people do not want to have children, a figure that rises to 44% in the Middle East and North Africa. This is a result of disillusionment and despair.

The third approach is more pragmatic and proactive. It is about seeing illusions not as illusions but as ambitions or goals that are missed in the short term, but can still be achieved in the longer term. The point is not to get discouraged, but to roll up our sleeves and try to deal with the problems.

I am thinking in particular about what was said this morning about world hunger. After decades of trending downwards, since 2015 it has been rising. The goal that the UN set in 2015 to wipe out hunger by 2030 seems increasingly unattainable, which should lead to discouragement,



disillusionment and despair. On the contrary, it means that we must step up our efforts and double down on our resolve.

I will conclude with something you said: “short-term realism and long-term idealism”. But how do you define realism? This is a question worth answering because, especially since February 24, I have noticed that the idea of realism is often used with many different meanings and subject to controversy, if not misunderstandings. I will stop here. Thank you.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you for taking the title seriously, which is a good approach. I chose it. It took me a few seconds.

I could have chosen “the end of an illusion” or “the end of the illusion” in the singular. Had I done that, it would have referred to the illusion of the neoliberal order after the fall of the Soviet Union, in other words the flat world.

I thought carefully about the choice of words because people talking about the breakdown of the world order today forget that there was never a world order to begin with. The order of Bretton Woods and World War I actually only involved a part of the world because it was soon divided. It would have been an invitation to become aware, to shed the illusions of what the world really was after the fall of the Soviet Union. Saying the end of illusions allows everyone to interpret it. Thanks for laying out this typology.

Before giving the floor to Holger Mey, I would like to return to one point: the illusion or misperceptions in the months or weeks before the invasion of Ukraine. This is a question that someone in the next session might be able to answer. There was certainly mistrust about the Americans’ intelligence because it recalled their assertions in 2003 that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

If the Americans had increasingly accurate information about what Russia was planning, the real question is, why didn’t they meet with their allies to prepare for it together. This is a real and, in my opinion, very serious question.

In any case, thank you for tidying up the idea of illusions.