

On Europe's Current Situation

J (JIANG Feng) :

I'm delighted to speak with Mr. Gromyko on the occasion of the China-Russia Dialogue in Sanya. Please share your views on the current international situation, particularly regarding Europe. We were just discussing Europe, I primarily meant the debate within EU countries about whether Russia belongs to Europe. From the perspective of most Chinese scholars, this is an internal European historical debate that has been revived in recent years and is highly subjective. Before 2022, the dominant European view was that Russia was certainly part of Europe. French President Macron once stated that Russia and Europe share common history and literature. But after the Ukraine crisis, the main-stream European view changed, holding that Russia does not belong to Europe. What is your view?

G (Alexey Gromyko) :

First of all, I am honoured to have this interview with you and to participate in the 3rd China-Russia Sanya Forum attended by so many well-known International Relations scholars.

Secondly, regarding the Russia—Europe issue, this is indeed a core concern for many Russian international relations researchers and identity politics experts. This dispute, or discourse, about the identity of Russia vis-à-vis Europe is more than two centuries old. Its origins are rooted in distant times, when Peter the Great made Russia one of the centres of power in Europe. Of course, Russia for natural causes has always been partly in Europe and in Asia, but before Peter it was not one of the great European powers. Starting from the Northern War, when the Swedish Empire was defeated by Peter the Great, a very long European journey of my country began. The identity debate is so deep-rooted because Russia is indeed a very peculiar country. It is much more distinctive in terms of identity, culture, and civilisation compared with almost all other European states.

If you are situated in the center of Europe, or on its creation margins, things are more simple for the purpose of identity. In Russia we have two old philosophical and historical traditions and currents of thought called Slavophiles and Westernizers. However, if we look at, for example, the United Kingdom or Spain, their identities are also far from being purely European. For example, in the United Kingdom there are different opinions about whether the UK is closer (not geographically but culturally and socially) to continental Europe or to the United States. Or take Spain, this country was heavily influenced by Islam and Muslim culture in the Middle Ages. Italy is also highly diversified between their own North and South. We may go on with this enumeration of different European countries for long. But still in case of Russia there is something unique starting with geography, which is both European and Asian, and then with its cultural, religious traditions and its historical connections with the East and the South.

J: From a historical perspective, the relationship between Germany and Russia was

particularly close. The famous Catherine the Great was German, and under her leadership Russia expanded its territory and consolidated its status as a European power. The renowned Prussian Prime Minister Baron vom Stein also served Tsar Alexander I. He noted in his diary that there were large numbers of German officers in the Russian army, and he praised Russia's defeat of Napoleon in 1812 as the decisive force in liberating Europe and the saviour of European freedom. There is a view that around 1812, nearly half of Russia's officers were German. Could you share some of this history?

G: Indeed, dozens of thousands of Europeans served in the Russian Imperial army or in other professions in the Russian Empire. In the 17th – 19th centuries the most numerous foreign groups serving to the Russian Tzars and Emperors were the Germans, Scots and French. For a considerable period of time, Russian elites spoke German and French fluently. Take Leo Tolstoy's famous masterpiece "War and Peace" as an example—the first pages of it are written in French.

But the important point is this: for Russians who spoke fluent German and French in the 18th and the 19th centuries, or English in the 20th century, that was not a demonstration of their submission to foreign countries or culture. It was a manifestation of the openness and universality of Russian culture and civilisation. This was also one of Fedor Dostoevsky's favourite themes—the openness and universality of Russian culture. However, today we see that Europe, once one of the most open regions in the world, is increasingly viewing itself as a fortress besieged on all sides. This is a fundamental change in narratives. If we examine what the European West is doing geopolitically today, the situation is quite regrettable.

What I call the "European West" now views Russia as the main threat. They also consider China as a threat, and nowadays even the United States. This is a strange phenomenon for Europe. Perhaps, this is a natural thing to happen. When societies face stagnation, slow economic growth, when there are many internal problems, the constant influx of non-Europeans, it becomes politically convenient to blame the outside world for your own weaknesses. History provides many examples of this metamorphosis. Unfortunately, this is precisely what we observe in the contemporary European West.

J: Speaking of the current internal and external challenges facing Europe, please share your analysis.

G: Usually, internal problems are caused by errors in one's own development. If you want to solve problems, you must change and improve yourself.

But if you don't want to do it, the next step is to pretend that the problems are caused by external forces. And the search for enemies begins, and the blaming of other countries, organisations, and imaginary threats. This is why Russia, often China and unceasingly the United States, are accused of causing problems for "Europe". But the main problems start from within

J: So what are Europe's main internal challenges?

G: There are many. First, for the last ten or fifteen years Europe has increasingly

securitised and geopoliticised its model of development. After 1945, Western Europe flourished due to the welfare state, social market economy, and global trade. Today this philosophy has been largely forgotten. Now many politicians say that the most important thing is security and not the quality of life. If that leads to a decline in living standards, people “must accept it”. This is a very twisted logic.

Second, Europe has adopted an ultra-liberal view on migration.

Third, their approach to the so-called green transition has been extremely radical. Green economy is a good idea, but they chose a very rapid and radical way to implement it. At the same time, they cut off economic ties with Russia even though my country for 50 years had been a reliable energy supplier that could have helped the green transition to succeed. The Nord Stream pipelines were blown up, and Europeans pretend not to know who did it except of some rouge Ukrainians. Another problem is the increasing use of ideology and politicised values in dealing with other countries.

J: These values are also being applied to Europe's own society.

G: Exactly. For centuries, Europe was the model of free markets, free trade, and the sacred principle of private property.

Now these principles are being undermined. If another country becomes more competitive, the European West often responds with sanctions rather than fair competition.

J: Indeed, the social division is a huge problem, and Europe's political landscape is now very fragmented. Now let's talk about the European security architecture, and I am thinking naturally of your grandfather's contributions. He was a great diplomat and master theorist who attached great importance to Europe and greatly influenced Soviet European policy and European security architecture. What do you think were your grandfather's three main contributions to the European security architecture?

G: Andrei Gromyko was one of the architects of the Soviet foreign policy in the second half of the 20th century. He joined the diplomatic service in 1939 and resigned as a Foreign Minister in 1985. Judging from numerous family conversations with him and what he wrote in his memoirs I can single out three contributions:

First, the normalisation of relations with almost all European countries and recognition of the postwar state borders. The high point of these efforts was the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.

Second, the establishment of beneficial economic and political relations with Western countries, not only recognition of borders, but pragmatic, balanced, and respectful relations with the US, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and others.

In 1970, Russia signed the "contract of the century" with West Germany — “gas in exchange of pipes”. Since then, for more than half a century, Russia was the reliable supplier — not only for Germany but for a significant part of Europe — of oil, gas, and many other products. Just to recall: in 2013, the volume of trade between Russia and the Single European market of the EU was close to 400 billion Euros.

Now the volume of trade between Russia and China is about 230–240 billion dollars. So, with the European Union it was almost twice as large. This was a vivid demonstration of how Russia and the European West were intertwined. It was not a dependency where one side sells natural resources and the other buys them; it was a high degree of interdependency in many spheres. Now all of it is in ruins.

Third, Andrei Gromyko's main achievements were in the field of security in the broad meaning of this word. For example, the creation of the United Nations: it was Big Three — leaders of the USSR, USA and the UK — who mainly determined the organisation's concept and structure. Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Tehran in 1943 and in Yalta 1945. That same year the three heads of government—Stalin, Truman, and Churchill (in the course of the conference Churchill was replaced by Clement Attlee) met in Potsdam, not only to agree on how to win the war but to work out the post-war settlement. The UN was created together with its General Assembly and the Security Council with its five permanent members. By the way, the region of Europe from the start held most seats in the Security Council: Britain, France, and the Soviet Union (now Russia).

Under Gromyko, much was done to achieve what was called a policy of “peaceful coexistence”. Together with the United States, Moscow developed a system of strategic stability, and a very significant part of this strategic and regional stability was attached to Europe.

A number of arms control mechanisms were introduced globally and in Europe in the 1960s—1990s. Alas, the United States and European states began to dismantle them in the past 25 years.

So, recognition of borders, the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial economic relations, and the arms control architecture were among the most important achievements of Andrei Gromyko as a Soviet statesman when we discuss USSR/Russia–Europe interaction in the second part of the XX century.

J: These were all great contributions. This reminds us how important security is as a guarantee of peaceful coexistence and prosperity even today. But Europe's situation is now changing. Security is no longer guaranteed, and peaceful coexistence is quite difficult. A few days ago, at the Munich Security Conference, I heard EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas say that Russia is no longer a superpower and its economy is broken. This means Russia is merely a regional power that Europe can handle. German Chancellor Merz also mentioned in his MSC speech that the EU's GDP is ten times that of Russia, so Europe should be able to handle Russia. How do you view this assessment?

G: If Russia is a regional power, then, ironically, the logic should imply that the European West is a sub-regional power. So, this is propaganda, not a professional view. Ten years ago they were saying one thing; now — the opposite. In Russia, at the highest political level and in academic circles we have never reduced our assessments to such a poor level.

Even today the official position of Russia is that Moscow is ready to deal with European countries and organisation, to re-establish the necessary level of relations with them, to trade, and to communicate. It was not Russia but the EU who closed the skies to Russia for civic aviation. They also increasingly violate private property rights of the Russians. In many European countries, including Finland, it is now possible just to confiscate property owned by the Russians on the ground of security. In fact, this is a theft. What Kaja Kallas says does not make her look a clever or professional person. By the way, this is also one of the problems of the European West: many people who climb the career ladder are not competent. Often they are appointed not because of their professionalism, but by accident — because stronger candidates are not supported by all EU member-states. So they choose someone who is not a strong, skilful and independent personality.

J: Yes, some experts believe this is an institutional problem in the EU's selection of leaders.

G: What Kaja Kallas is saying is not only untrue with respect to Russia, it also contradicts Europe's own interests.

Russia is a trans-regional and global power. It is a permanent member of the Security Council. It is the largest country in the world by territory. It is one of the leading military powers and space powers, and one of the richest countries in terms of natural resources.

So objectively speaking, it should be extremely beneficial for the European West to deal with my country. They shoot themselves in the foot when they sever ties with Russia.

J: This leads to my next question. Some European politicians argue that Europe's security architecture should be built against Russia, not with Russia. What is your view?

G: When different countries in Europe tried to do that in the course of history, these attempts either failed miserably or led to major violence and conflict. For example, in the 1930s, the Soviet Union consistently tried to persuade France, the United Kingdom, and others to create a collective security system in Europe — to ensure that Nazi Germany and fascist Italy would not do major harm. That was not done. They decided to build security without Russia. We know what happened. After 1945, for a long time, Western Europe and the United States perceived Russia as an enemy, not as a partner. They were very slow in working out some common rules with Russia on arms control: how to limit weapons, how to avoid the arms race. The USSR was mostly consistent in this regard in the 1950s and 1960s, through the 1970s, 1980s, and later, in the 1990s, including the OSCE process. Together we achieved a lot, the situation in Europe in security terms was basically normalised but because Russia was part of the process. Now the European West is trying to repeat the same mistake: to sideline Russia and to somehow build a new European security without Russia.

But this is not possible. However, they define Russia as the main source of threat. In the end, it becomes a self-imposed security nightmare for the European West, the

nightmare, which is based on historical obsessions, twisted imagination and propaganda. But I think that sooner or later more and more people will return to common sense. Not immediately, but in five, ten years, many ideas and principles, which served Russia and the rest of Europe so well, will again be in high demand.

J: So you mean: returning to a common European security architecture?

G: Absolutely

J: Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder believes that European security can only be built with Russia, not against Russia. He believes the Ukraine war occurred because of European political failure—the inability to make proper arrangements for European security after the end of the Cold War. French President Macron and German President Steinmeier also advocated that European security should be built together with Russia, though this changed after 2022.

G: Indeed, Schröder and others believed in this. They were true to the legacy of Willy Brandt, Charles de Gaulle, Harold Wilson, Olof Palme, Mauno Koivisto, Richard Nixon, Henri Kissinger, Aldo Moro and many others.

J: Yesterday you sounded very optimistic that this conflict—the Ukraine war—might end this year. Why are you so optimistic?

G: We know from history that all conflicts end sooner or later. The point is that conflicts should not be artificially prolonged. When a conflict enters a military phase, all parties should do everything possible to shorten this phase.

J: Who will win this war?

G: This is a hot question in the European West where many still believe that Russia can be defeated on the battlefield. But it is impossible to defeat a nuclear power not to mention such a nuclear superpower as Russia. In history most wars were not won by one side. The end of most conflicts was a reflection of mutually acceptable compromises.

J: So, do you think the compromise will involve territorial issues?

G: It would be too simplistic to say that the problem is only territory. That is far from reality.

Territory is one component. From the times of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and later Putin, Medvedev and again Putin, the main security problem for Russia was NATO expansion. The war in Ukraine is not a purely bilateral war between Moscow and Kyiv. It is a proxy war in which several dozen countries participate on one side against Russia. This war cannot be settled on a purely bilateral basis. It has three tracks, and all them must be addressed. First, relations between Russia and Ukraine. Second, relations between Russia and the European West. Third, relations between Russia and the United States. That is why settlement is so difficult because it is very complex.

But I think it is possible to end the military phase by the end of this year.

J: Yes, you mentioned this.

G: There were talks — first in Belarus, then in Istanbul in 2022. And in the past year there were several rounds of talks, including in Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, and recently Geneva, where Russia clearly stated what it wants and how it can be achieved. There are several issues: the rights of Russian-speaking people in Ukraine, the situation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Ukraine should resume its military neutrality. Russia also insists that its new borders should be recognised. If there is a political will — and if the European West does not try constantly to torpedo the negotiation process — it is possible by the end of this year to achieve the first phase of the settlement. But the whole of the peace process will take much longer. It may start this year, but it will continue for months, maybe through the next year.

J: Let us hope together that this war ends this year. One more question: In Europe, some political leaders, such as German Chancellor Merz, stated before visiting China that China plays a very important role in this process. Some say even that if Beijing calls Moscow, Moscow will stop the war, because without China's support, Russia cannot continue. Do you agree with such statements?

G: That was not a very clever thing to say. That was populism, demagoguery, because such complex conflicts do not end with a telephone call. The relationship between Beijing and Moscow is not the one when colleagues call each other to give orders and then everything is done the next day.

China has been playing, and I am sure it will continue to play a very significant role in the settlement of the conflict. At the same time, again, this is not simply a bilateral conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Both Russia and China are among the key world powers. Through the settlement of the Ukraine conflict, they are to try to de-escalate, and then normalise relations between our countries on one side, and the European West and the United States on the other.

J: One final question: Europe is discussing the issue of nuclear warfare, with France, the UK, and Germany beginning talks on the possibility of jointly building a nuclear deterrent capability. They are very concerned that Russia might use nuclear weapons. What is your take on this?

G: This is propaganda. Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, the Defense Minister, the Chairman of the Russian General Staff—all these people who make decisions in the military and political spheres, have never said a word about using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. This could only happen theoretically if NATO conventionally invades Russia, or if Russia or its allies are attacked with nuclear weapons. By the way, the threshold for nuclear use in the Russian nuclear doctrine is higher than in the US one.

And what is Europe doing in the nuclear military field? France wants to deepen nuclear cooperate with Britain and also wants to involve Germany, which is reciprocal. Poland says they want to deploy nuclear weapons on its soil. This are very dangerous developments because such rhetoric is undermining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Many countries in the world are watching what the nuclear powers say and do. There are nine nuclear states, but there are also "threshold states" such as South Korea, Japan and Australia, and also the Taiwan region. In Europe, there are several countries like Germany or Sweden, which have sufficient technical means to manufacture nuclear weapons, unless the United States, Russia, and international law prevent them from doing so.

The so-called "Russian threat" is now an excuse for the European West to behave themselves so recklessly up to the point of possible nuclear proliferation. Now, they also worry that they can no longer rely on the US extended deterrence, that is, the US nuclear umbrella.

Macron has said recently that France will increase the number of its nuclear warheads. He also used the term "forward deployment." This means he is considering not only to increase the stockpile of French nuclear weapons but to deploy some of it in other European countries. That would constitute a radical shift from the current security situation in Europe and a huge blow to the non-proliferation regime. That is why the contemporary Big Three—Russia, the United States and China—should play a leading role in preventing the world from slipping into a total chaos, especially in the field of arms control and strategic stability.

J: Thank you for sharing and for your time.

G: It's been a pleasure having such an in-depth conversation.