EUROPEAN SCHISM

IS IT REPAIRABLE?

Alexey Gromyko

EUROPE has never been a single whole—neither in relation to the outside world nor in the interstate relations crowding the Old World. In history, European states not only befriended but also fought with each other no less often than with non-European competitors. For centuries, Europe has been a motley crew and a patchwork of cultures, interests, and aspirations. An attempt, so fashionable today, to reduce Europe to the EU or NATO countries in the region can produce nothing but a smile of sadness. For historians, philosophers, linguists, and culturologists, Russia is essentially a European country, which transcended the geographical borders of Europe a long time ago—at least since the eighteenth century. It extended Europeanness to a vast swath of land reaching the Pacific Ocean, the High North, and Central Asia. European civilization does not belong to anyone in this grand region; it can exist only as a shared history and an inevitable common future for about 50 states. There is a grain of truth in saying that, as of today, Russia is more European than certain states in the region—for example, in matters of fidelity to Christianity or adherence to traditional values. This does not contradict the fact that several states in this part of the world may express a credible claim to be a state-civilization, including Russia. A civilization within civilization? Why not?

If the basis of any civilization is culture, then it is difficult to disengage French, German, Italian, Russian, and many other cultures from the common heritage rooted in the Ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine past, as well as in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It is also true that Russia is the most peculiar state within European civilization, as it represents a unique fusion of nations, ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. Still, its linchpin is the Russian language, Christianity, and the lion's share of history, which is part of the history of Europe as a whole.

There are many markers that reveal which part of the world a nation associates itself with. Among them are legendary victories and military glory,

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Peter the Great commands his army in the Great Northern War, the beginning of Russia's geopolitical focus on the West

which shape a nation's mentality and demonstrate its strategic geopolitical journey. For Russia, a historical military victory against enemies in the East, which contributed to shaping its identity, dates back to the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 near the Don River, between the forces of Dmitry II, Prince of Moscow, and Mamai, ruler of the western part of the Golden Horde. It paved the way for the overthrow of the Mongol-Tatar yoke (the Horde captivity). The latter, which lasted for more than 200 years, was not purely a foreign occupation of Ancient Rus, but a dialectic between the Eastern Mongol-Tatar civilization and the East Slavic world. It was as much a fight between them as a certain model of coexistence and mutual enrichment.

But it was the last time in Russian history when the country experienced an encounter with the East in the form of symbiosis. In later centuries, there were many military clashes, such as the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 or the Soviet-Japanese War in 1945—not to mention the numerous wars between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a short but fierce military conflict with China in 1969. But unlike the

period of the "yoke," all of them were about the struggle for territories or the extension of spheres of influence—not about co-enrichment. Thus, for the last 500 years, the main civilizational and geopolitical thrust of Russia has been a westward one, representing a fusion of periods of peace and war.

Starting with Peter the Great and the Great Northern War (1700-1721), fought between the Russian and Swedish empires, the focus of Moscow's—and later St. Petersburg's—geopolitical attention was on relations with its western neighbors. Europe was the place where Russia established itself first as a European power and later, in the twentieth century, as a global one. This status was forged by Russians in World War I, World War II, and ultimately during the Cold War era. Thus, Europe served as a springboard for Russia to acquire the role of a superpower in the bipolar system of international affairs. It was a historical achievement for a country that had survived the intervention of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century, the invasion of Napoleon in 1812, and the life-or-death struggle with Hitler between 1941 and 1945. In the last two cases, the French and the Germans headed broad coalitions of European forces. However, periods of belligerence alternated with periods of alliance and cooperation. Europe, from London to St. Petersburg, was a dense web of kinship ties among monarchs.

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Although it is commonplace to say that the core of the Cold War was the relationship between the two superpowers—the USSR and the U.S.—for the Kremlin, it was the European political and diplomatic theatre that remained a priority throughout the 1950s and 1960s, until the conclusion of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The Roosevelt course toward the Soviets and the spirit of the Elbe had already been overtaken by the policy of the Truman administration. In parallel, the Cuban Crisis of 1962 and the chain of events that led to the establishment of military-political parity between Moscow and Washington in the 1970s generated a unique model of bilateral relations, elements of which remain noticeable even in the twenty-first century. Today, as in the time of Peter the Great and most of his successors, it is still the European continent where the fate of Russia is being decided—now in the flames of the Ukrainian crisis.

The idea of a united Europe is a very old one. However, as in earlier periods of history, the possibility of arranging it as a closely intertwined space remains an illusion. Europe has harbored such aspirations more than once, including at the turn of the twentieth century (La Belle Époque) and in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War. Projects and attempts to bring the Old World to a common denominator were many, but most rested on the might of force—whether in the times of the Roman or Carolingian empires, the Habsburg monarchy, the Napoleonic wars, or the aggression of the Third Reich. All of these projects collapsed, with Russia playing a key role in dashing the hopes of at least two pretenders to the title of conqueror of Europe: Napoleon and Hitler. Time and again, Europe has demonstrated that it is too diverse and mosaic to submit to any single ruler or force.

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Large-scale integration processes in Europe were launched soon after 1945, when the Iron Curtain divided the region into two camps: the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact versus the European Economic Community and NATO. On both sides, member states reached a high degree of interdependence. However, toward each other, they remained in a state of systemic competition—at times on the verge of military confrontation, as during the Berlin crises (1948-1949; 1961). Descendants of those major postwar trends are the European Union and a new Russia, with the Russia-Belarus Union State and integration projects in the post-Soviet space.

In the 1990s and especially the 2000s, the level of cooperation between Russia and the EU reached its peak. Moscow and Brussels referred to each other as strategic partners; in 2013, trade volume between them neared €400 billion. The dominant opinion was that such intensity of interdependence benefited Europe as a whole. By comparison, in 2025, trade volume between Moscow and Beijing stood at €240 billion, while trade between the United States and China totaled €660 billion.

Russia, formerly as both the USSR and the Russian Empire, remains a global center of power. However, its genesis, the cradle of its statehood and

worldview, including the Byzantine injection, are European phenomena. A powerful attempt at reconciliation between the two parts of Europe was made in the 1970s, during the period of détente, symbolized by the signing of the Helsinki Final Act as the concluding accord of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This year marks its 50th anniversary. Later, steps toward rapprochement were undertaken during the perestroika period in the USSR, and for many years by the authorities of the new democratic Russia—with concepts such as a "common European home" and a "united Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok." From time to time, even the idea of Russia's membership in NATO and the EU surfaced.

That was not without precedent in history. In the mid-1950s, the Kremlin submitted an official proposal to join NATO. In hindsight, had this military bloc been dissolved after the end of the Cold War—giving way to the OSCE as a truly pan-European organization for security—the Old World might have had a good chance to avoid the present schism. However, the European West chose a different path. As a result, the problem of security became a stumbling block for the development of Europe as "whole and free." Over time, the diverging views of Russia and NATO on hard security issues were compounded by growing discord between Moscow and Western Europe in the ideological sphere and in their approaches to values. The former identified itself as a defender of traditional ways of life, as a conservative power; the latter, as a guardian of liberal and postmodern values. Now, Europe is limping along the path of lasting strife. Soon, this rivalry management may morph into tense cohabitation, a far cry from the intentions of strategic partnership 20 years ago.

The reasons and symptoms of the ongoing crisis stretch back to times when few foresaw that the worst was yet to come. The expansion of NATO became a key strategic irritant for Moscow, although for a long time it was not sufficient to break the camel's back. The writing on the wall became visible in 2008, when NATO in Bucharest proclaimed an open-door policy toward Ukraine and Georgia.

The reasons and symptoms of the ongoing crisis stretch back to times when few foresaw that the worst was yet to come. The expansion of NATO (and the bombing of Yugoslavia, so neatly coinciding with the new wave of the alliance's enlargement in 1999) became a key strategic irritant for Moscow, although for a long time it was not sufficient to break the camel's back. The writing on the wall became visible in 2008, when NATO in Bucharest proclaimed an open-door policy toward Ukraine and Georgia. Afterwards, the Saakashvili regime attacked Tskhinvali in South Ossetia, killing more than 20 Russian peacekeepers and several hundred local residents. The events of 2014, beginning with the *coup d'état* in Kiev in February and the ensuing "Crimea Spring," made a looming crisis almost inevitable. Almost, because for eight years, there were serious hopes that the Minsk II negotiation track could defuse the military dimension of the crisis. This track was increasingly sabotaged by Kiev and its Western supporters, while other mechanisms to prevent escalation were either absent or dysfunctional, including the Russia-NATO Council and the OSCE.

It is not beyond imagination to presume that a new balance of forces will establish itself in Europe. Such a balance will remain unlikely unless a new modus vivendi is reached at the global level.For Russia, the core of this is a sustainable and long-term solution to the country's paramount goal: to halt NATO's advances toward Russian borders and to stop the militarization of contact zones.

As a result, Europe—almost in its entirety—has been submerged into a new phase of military-political, ideological confrontation and information warfare. Nothing can be ruled out under these circumstances. At the same time, history teaches us that the Old World has weathered many crises in the past. It is not beyond imagination to presume that, sooner or later, a new balance of forces will establish itself in Europe. Such a balance will remain unlikely unless a new *modus vivendi* is reached at the global level—within the framework of a polycentric system of international relations. For Russia, the core of this is a sustainable and long-term solution to the country's paramount goal: to halt NATO's advances toward Russian borders and to stop the militarization of contact zones.

There is a strong party of war in Western and Northern Europe, particularly in the Baltic states and Poland. If their attitudes toward regional security persist, one cannot rule out the possibility of a confrontational model of interaction. It may prove no less durable than a mutually beneficial and cooperative model. Each can be self-sustaining. So, the question is

what strategies the confronting parties pursue—whether they intend to normalize relations in the medium term or prepare for competition with almost no rules and with an eschatological overtone. Until this is clarified, it is important to provide a certain safety net and stabilization mechanisms amid the current level of escalation, to prevent it from cascading into a direct military clash between major powers, especially nuclear ones. The main responsibility in this regard is supposed to be shouldered by the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5).

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The longer the P5 remain quasi-functional and riven with internal conflicts, the more difficult it will be for the "nuclear five" to influence the behavior of the other four nuclear states (India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea)—not to mention potential threshold states. A recent manifestation of this was the four-day war between India and Pakistan, and the twelve-day war involving Israel and the U.S. on one side and Iran on the other (notably, four of the five states directly involved in these uses of raw force are nuclear powers). When nuclear states are unable or unwilling to control and resolve problems among themselves, non-nuclear states may likewise be tempted to diverge from strict adherence to international law or respond more emotionally and impulsively. For example, there were several military clashes between Cambodia and Thailand in the past, but it would not be unreasonable to presume that the new wave of violence on their border in July 2025 was linked to the tense geopolitical situation at the global level.

More than once in its modern and contemporary history, Russia has exerted efforts to stimulate and contribute to a pan-European security system—and more broadly, to international initiatives in the sphere of security, rules of war, and humanitarian law. On the initiative of Nicholas II, the First Hague Peace Conference was convened in 1899. In 1907, the Second Hague Conference was proposed jointly by Washington and St. Petersburg. In the 1930s, the Kremlin spent considerable political and diplomatic capital—up to the summer of 1939—calling on France and the UK to jointly establish a system of collective security in Europe to deter Hitler's aggression. In the 1990s and beyond, Russia was systematic and consistent in urging key European capitals and the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joseph Biden to halt the expansion of the Alliance. Still, these efforts were in vain. Ultimately, the belt of friendly or neutral states between Russia and NATO collapsed. That was not something one of the two military superpowers was ready to swallow. Instead of accommodating Russia's core security interests, NATO pretended that the only matter deserving attention was its open-door policy—a new sacred cow of the Alliance. Meanwhile, the principle of the indivisibility of security, embedded in all doctrinal documents of the OSCE from the 1975 Final Act to the 2010 Astana Declaration, was thrown out the window.

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History does not tolerate anything in perpetuity—not even friendships or rivalries. Only national interests endure. The USSR did not regard the European part of the West as existentially hostile. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the Kremlin and Soviet diplomats invested heavily in normalizing relations with nearly all European countries within the Western sphere of influence. For example, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer visited Moscow in 1955, barely ten years after the fall of the Third Reich. In 1970, Moscow signed the famous Moscow Treaty with Bonn, soon followed by the FRG's treaties with Czechoslovakia and Poland. Several months earlier, the Soviets and the Germans concluded the so-called "deal of the century": pipes for gas. Until recently, Moscow maintained excellent relations with several major European politicians, including Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Germany's Gerhard Schröder. In the early 2000s, Moscow's ties with London were marked by amicability. In 1997, Russia and NATO signed the Founding Act, and in 2002, they established the NATO-Russia Council in Rome. Twenty years later, the experience of post-Cold War cooperation is in limbo. One may only wonder whether, 20 years from now, Europe will again look very different from how it does in 2025.

Even now, Moscow positions itself as open to contacts with EU member states and to resuming dialogue with the western part of the "European continent." In November 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin took a call from then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and in July 2025, from French President Emmanuel Macron. Major powers with long historical experience tend to prefer predictable and stable relations with their neighbors and other centers of power,

rather than being obsessed with the idea of "eternal friends and eternal enemies."

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and the creation of the United Nations. Some would say that, compared to those distant times, we now live in a radically different international environment. However, it is also true that continuity in history remains a constant fixture. Russia is the successor state of the Soviet Union and, together with the United States, one of the two military superpowers. From the USSR, Russia inherited its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, its nuclear arsenal, and an outstanding legacy of diplomatic cooperation with both large and small countries across the planet. According to Article 24 of the UN Charter, member states of the United Nations "confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." It is worth remembering that after 1945, a paramount task of Soviet diplomacy was to stabilize the situation in Europe and, through cooperation and peaceful coexistence, create favorable conditions for the country's development. This is a vivid reminder of how history can be a cyclical affair.

CIRSD Vice President Stefan Jovanović Speaks at Regional Conference on China's Role in the Western Balkans

Vice President of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) Stefan Jovanović, participated in the regional conference "Democracy Meets Strategy: Parliament's Place in China Policy", held in Belgrade. The event gathered parliamentarians, policymakers, and experts from across the Western Balkans to examine the region's evolving cooperation with the People's Republic of China.

Speaking on a panel dedicated to assessing the scope and impact of China's presence in the region, Jovanović underscored the need for strategic realism in Europe's response to global power shifts.

"We Europeans are facing what I would describe as a three-body problem — a geopolitical dilemma in which Europe is caught between the gravitational pulls of the United States, Russia, and China," Jovanović stated. "Europe must adopt a more pragmatic approach — we cannot afford to be in strained relationships with all major powers at once."

He cautioned against the European Union's prevailing tendency to define China primarily as a strategic rival, warning that this perspective risks closing off opportunities for constructive engagement. **"Europe should avoid a lose-lose dynamic and instead seek out areas for win-win cooperation"** he said, pointing in particular to the green transition as a space full of potential.

"Green transition is a strategic decision for Europe, where it leads in regulation; meanwhile, China leads in scalable technologies — from electric vehicles and hydrogen to solar power," Jovanović noted. He highlighted the example of Chinese EV manufacturer BYD, which has become an official mobility partner of UEFA Euro 2024 in Germany and is constructing its first European plant in Hungary.

Turning to Serbia, Jovanović described cooperation with China as part of a broader multi-vector foreign policy. "We don't have the luxury of relying on a single global pole. Our engagement with China has delivered visible infrastructure results" he said. "There are still lessons to be learned — particularly regarding transparency and long-term sustainability — but the foundations are tangible."

The conference featured a dynamic exchange of views on how national institutions can navigate global complexities while upholding democratic values and development priorities. Participants included parliamentarians and civil society leaders from North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia.