

Europe's Defeat Is Much LARGER Than It Seems | Alexander Mercouris

Europe has lost all and any sympathies of Russians for generations and this will alter the course of European history even more than the war in Ukraine. The way in which the EU elites have managed to shock the Russian population is poorly understood in the West but of monumental importance. Kyoto University Symposium 2026: "Geopolitics in the Time of Monsters" Presentation 8: Alexander Mercouris Alexander Mercouris examines the decline of Europe's central role in world politics and the dangers of competition among great powers. He argues that China's rise, Western economic insecurity and Russia's changing identity are transforming the international system. Drawing on history and visits to Russia, he discusses neutrality, diplomacy and the responsibility to preserve peace. Audience questions challenge his interpretation of European identity, explore American strategy towards Russia and China, and assess sanctions, military doctrine and the idea of civilizational states. Alexander's Links: Alexander Mercouris on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@AlexMercouris> The Duran on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@TheDuran> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 War, peace and the role of neutral states 04:39 Europe and the great-power system 11:27 Russia's European identity 16:54 China's rise and Western decline 21:01 The 2008 crisis and pressure on Russia 26:50 Russia's turn away from Europe 35:21 Discussion: military doctrine and great-power politics 56:46 Sanctions and the civilizational state

#Alexander Mercouris

Well, indeed.

#Alexander Mercouris

Well, thank you very much for that very wonderful introduction, Pascal. Well, I'm going to talk about our topic, geopolitics in the time of monsters. And it's been suggested that the subject is global order and international perception. And I'm going to talk a bit about that. And I'm going to start with some statements of opinion or belief. I'm going to express them rather dogmatically. I hope people don't mind, but please feel free to challenge them. Firstly, I consider war to be the collapse of order. I consider war to be a major catastrophe, a humanitarian catastrophe, a catastrophe in every respect.

To my mind, it is times of war that bring forth monsters, and, you know, real monsters. And, well, the jurists at the International Court in Nuremberg in the 1940s, I think, said it best: that war is the ultimate crime because it enables and makes possible all of the other great international crimes.

Now, following from that, it is also my settled belief that the primary duty of a statesman is to do whatever is possible to secure and preserve peace. I think that that is achieved best through careful and skillful management of relations between the great powers, and we will come to a discussion of what great powers are.

I think that the management of relations between great powers can only be successful if it is based on mutual respect. I think that an attempt by one great power to maximize its power at the expense of the others is inherently dangerous and threatens peace. And I think that small powers have an important, indeed essential, role in the system to play. And I believe, and this is a topic I know close to Pascal's heart, I think neutral powers also have a vital role to play in stabilizing the international system. I think when one power seeks to align all the small powers against the other great powers, and when small powers let themselves be aligned in that way, I think that also tends to destabilize the international system and to threaten peace.

And going back to something that Arta said about the dangerous behavior of some small powers and the way that they can also lose sight of the limits of their power, it's important, in my opinion, to say that that is true, but that tends to happen, from my knowledge, when a small power receives the unconditional support of a great power, and the small power believes that it can then pursue its most extreme ambitions and irredentist objectives using the power of the great power that supports it. So we've had examples of this: Serbia before the First World War, Greece, my own country, in the 1960s, Israel today. In the first case, Serbia backed by Russia. In the second case, Greece backed by Britain.

Today, Israel backed by the United States. This is when megalomania takes over, and the effect of the small powers, by the way, invariably has been catastrophic. I would argue that Ukraine is probably another example of this. So these are, as I said, certain statements that I've made, and they've been rather dogmatically expressed. If people want to push back against them, then that's fine. Now, when we talk about great powers, I think there is something else which is very important to say, which is that the international system as it has existed, the global international system, as it has existed for several hundred years, has been centered on Europe.

Europe has been the place where great powers have been located increasingly. So from the 19th century, when one spoke of a great power—and in fact, that was the time when the label “great power” began to be used—when one spoke of great powers, one meant European great powers. And this was the product of the enormous upswing that began to happen in Europe from about the 15th century, culminating in the 20th century. And, of course, the European great powers operated in a system of intense inter-power competition within Europe. And the great wars that tended to happen in Europe happened when relations between the great powers collapsed over times of crisis.

Now, going back to some of the comments that have been made here, I would say that I personally agree that if we're looking at crises, particular crises in Europe, crises between great powers, crises that lead to wars, these unquestionably have internal social, economic factors that drive them. We

see this in the 17th century with the Thirty Years' War, when you have issues of conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. You see it with the period of the Napoleonic Wars, the time of the French Revolution. Perhaps most saliently, we see this in what we call the world wars of the 20th century, where in some way they are connected to the crisis that begins to develop in Europe, of which the rise of labour and socialist movements is undoubtedly a factor.

I am not going to explore this here. I think there are people much better qualified than me. I'm also going to say that I think the scholarship on this remains inadequate, probably because a lot of the scholarship is dominated by English scholarship. The English tend to separate foreign policy from domestic policy. The Germans have at times been different. Probably this reflects the fact that in England we do diplomatic history extremely well, and as a result we tend to isolate it from these other currents. But I would always say there is always, in my opinion, at the root of every crisis that there has been in Europe, an internal social crisis that drives the crisis between the great powers.

#Alexander Mercouris

So this is the background, this is the framework that we have been working with for a very long time in modern history. And to repeat, because the European powers became so powerful, because they expanded globally, because all of the major European powers, except significantly Russia, established overseas colonies in the Americas, in Africa, in India, wherever, when the European powers began to have conflicts with each other, those conflicts had a tendency to become global. The Europeans involved everybody else to a greater or lesser extent in their quarrels. And that, in my opinion, is why we call the wars of the early 20th century the World Wars.

The First World War undoubtedly starts in Europe. The Second World War is somewhat different. At this point, you're beginning to see outside powers, powers outside Europe, begin to assert themselves. Japan, the country we're in, being one example. But even the Second World War becomes truly global and all-encompassing after it begins in Europe. So that is the framework. Now, when I was born in March 1961, European and Western primacy continued to be still almost unchallenged. I say almost unchallenged. Countries that had been former colonies after the Second World War began to achieve independence. India became independent.

China established itself as an independent state in the 1950s. It was already beginning to be thought of by the end of the 1950s as a potential great power, but it was still very much marginal in the European and Western perception as a great power. And if we talk about the phenomenon known as the Cold War, the Cold War, as far as the Europeans, the Americans, and the Russians were concerned, was a conflict centered first and foremost on Europe. And here I want to say something about Russia, because Russia had established itself in the 18th century as a European great power. It was one of the constellation of great powers in Europe.

And without any doubt, it conceived of itself in the 19th and 20th centuries as a European nation-state, a European great power participating in the game of great powers alongside all of the others.

And, of course, it got caught up and, to a great extent, catalyzed the revolutionary events of the early 20th century. I spoke about the rise of socialist and labor movements. That was the time when we had the Russian Revolution. Now, I think there is a major misconception about Russia after 1917. I think many people imagined that this was a major turning away from Europe. In the Russian self-conception, that was emphatically not the case. Socialism, the rise of socialist ideas, was absolutely part of the European mainstream at that time.

And it was because Russia was a European nation-state and so conceived itself to be that those kinds of ideas took hold so powerfully there. And for Russian self-conception, the Second World War was absolutely, primarily, first and foremost, a war fought not just to defend Russia from German attack, but a war in Europe where the Russians conceived of themselves as playing a liberating role. Now, that may seem very strange to us because we don't think of the Soviet Union as a liberating force in Europe, but, of course, the Russians thought, and to a certain extent still think, otherwise. And this is very much the rhetoric that existed in Russia during the Second World War.

So on the 7th of November 1941, with the Germans at the gates of Moscow, Stalin addresses the Red Army on Red Square. He says to them, "You have a tremendous duty. Your duty is not just to defend the motherland. It is to liberate Europe." And this continues to be the theme. And, as I said, it continues to be the Russian self-conception after the Second World War. I will give an example from Russian popular culture. In the 1970s, there was a massive Russian television drama series set during the Second World War about a Soviet spy operating in Germany during the war, and his primary ally is a Catholic priest.

So they're both fighting together against fascism as part of the general European struggle. Now, this continues to be the perspective that the Russians have of themselves as a primarily European country through the whole period of the Soviet Union, up to the 1990s, and until very recently. Within Russia, there's always been a countercurrent. In the 19th century, its most articulate spokesman is Dostoevsky: that actually Russia is not really fully European. It needs to see itself as something else, that it has become excessively involved in European affairs. But this current has always existed, but it has never been the dominant one.

Now, this is the system that, as I said, we worked with: a system with the Russians conceiving themselves as a European nation-state, a great power caught up in the ideological and socio-political and economic conflicts in Europe, operating within the great system of interstate conflict that we have in Europe. Now, this whole system, which in the 1960s, when I was a child, still appeared to be very stable, has begun to break down. And I think that there are a number of factors that have begun to play a growing role. One is that Europe and the West, and that obviously extends to the United States, is losing its economic and technological primacy.

In fact, that is slipping away, and a new great power has erupted—has emerged—which is a power within the global system and which is not only not part of Europe, but has no European background to it. And that, of course, is China. And I think that this is a revolutionary moment in world affairs. It

means that suddenly, the international game is not being played in Europe between European powers or the Americans, who, to some extent—well, to a great extent—have become involved and are very close to Europe. We have a global system in which, as I said, a new power, China, is starting to emerge. We come back to the economic technological issues because there is suddenly a perception in the West, a very, very sharp and, for us Westerners, demoralizing perception that far from being the leaders, we are starting to fall behind.

China has now three times the manufacturing power of the United States. It is leading in all sorts of technologies, but it's not just China. China is just at the forefront. Other powers, other countries in Asia, are also developing rapidly. India is now emerging. It used to be a British colony. It was previously conceived of as a very poor country that could be receiving Western aid and things of that kind, but now it's beginning to take an independent position and is starting to develop aspirations of eventually becoming a great power itself. We've had a lot of discussions about Iran and the role that Iran is playing.

So all of this is very unsettling to the Europeans. To understand how unsettling it is, in 1969, the BBC produced a massive television series about art history, and it called it Civilization. And the civilization is exclusively that of Europe. The Americans are partly mentioned, but the Islamic world, China, India—they're not mentioned at all. Civilization is an exclusively European thing. And as I said, that was the world that I remember. I was there when that series appeared, and the extraordinary thing about it was that conception at that time was unchallenged. I mean, nobody pushed back.

On the contrary, if you go back and you read the reviews of this series, they are exclusively laudatory. Nobody challenges this very strange use of the term civilization to discuss the culture of the West, specifically of Europe. So it's all very unsettling. So we have this crisis of these emerging powers, China first and foremost. And then beyond that, we also have a major economic crisis that strikes the West in 2008. And I think that the significance of this in understanding what has been happening in the international system cannot be overstated. At the time when it happened, I was working fairly... I wasn't in the City of London, but I was fairly close to the City of London.

And firstly, there was the utter shock and dismay that the Western financial system seemed to be on the brink of a complete breakdown. Then what happens further is that a country, a major economy, comes to the rescue by engaging in a massive economic reflation. And that, of course, helps to stabilize the situation. But that country is China. So suddenly, it shows, it confirms to the West that China is becoming not just a rising power, but a critically important power in the fabric of the world economy. And for Western governments, to a great extent also for Western publics, this is a shocking moment.

It is a moment when it's clear that we are facing severe economic problems and that the initiative is passing to someone else. And what I think thereafter starts to happen is that there is this massive gathering reaction, both in Europe and in the United States. I spoke about instability in a great

power system being caused when one great power tries to maximize its power at the expense of others. I feel that this is very much what we started to see happen in the 2000s, but then especially after the 2008 crisis. And one of the major factors that I think plays a big role is this desire of the United States to consolidate its own alliance system and also to bring the other possible great power, Russia, into its camp.

And we have intense pressure on the Russians after the 2008 crisis, and of course that pressure is exerted increasingly through Ukraine. And eventually—and I'm not going to go through all the details of the Ukraine crisis, which are very complicated; you can watch my programs, you can hear about it there—but eventually we have the explosion that happens in Ukraine, which—and this is a key thing to understand—to the Russians appears not a proxy war between themselves and the United States, or a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, or Russia conducting some kind of land grab against Ukraine. They conceive of it more as a Western coalition once again coming together against them and, in effect, waging a war against them.

And the way that war has been conducted, by the way, with drone and missile strikes conducted inside Russia, has undoubtedly reinforced that perception. So the Russians have pushed back, and they've not only pushed back, but this sense that Europe, which in their own self-perception they helped to liberate in the 1940s and which they massively further turned to in the 1990s, has rejected them. There is in Russia at this moment in time an intense sense of betrayal and of anger. Pascal and I were in Russia.

We attended a conference in Pskov together. And I'd already had some of this sense of anger when I attended a conference of lawyers the year before in St. Petersburg. But it was absolutely out there in the open at this conference in Pskov. Some of the rhetoric that some of the participants at that conference engaged in, I mean, I found personally shocking and, frankly, extremely concerning. And the antagonism towards the West really was disturbing in itself. So this has led to a major change in Russian self-perceptions because the Russians, as I said previously, conceived of themselves previously as a European nation-state and as a great power. Now, the Europe that they felt they belonged to, as they see it, is rejecting them and is entirely antagonistic to them.

The Russians have been shocked by the extreme hostility they have seen against them in Europe. And they are changing their self-conception of themselves. Now, Chris, you were talking about whether Russia conceives of itself as a civilizational state. That is the Kremlin's position. Russia, in other words, is no longer a European nation-state. It has become a civilizational state. They've been making statements about this. They've been saying this when they do dealings with India or China: "You're a civilizational state. We are a civilizational state." Now, what that means is that we now have a European nation-state, a former European great power, which is opting out of the European system. It is, in effect, seceding from Europe. It says, "We don't want to be this anymore."

We can see that Europe is strongly hostile to us. We are going to look outwards and beyond Europe to other countries, to China, with which we have a strategic partnership, towards India, with which

we also have a strategic partnership. We are going to extend our gaze towards South Korea, East Asia, the other Asian states, even to some extent, by the way, towards Japan. Some inconsistencies, but anyway, that is the Russian outlook. And I think this is intensifying the crisis because we now have this situation that has, as a result of all of this, developed, in which the country that perhaps some people in the United States maybe thought could be enlisted as an ally to shore up the Western system, is now seceding from it. And I think this has intensified the alarm and fear of some people in the United States.

And I think that is perhaps part of the reason for this extraordinary resort to this incredibly belligerent rhetoric that we're now coming to see from the U.S. Speeches like the Rubio speech and other things which basically say it's now a conflict not between great powers anymore, not between ideologies anymore, but it is the West, led by the United States, against the rest, against everybody, which, to say it briefly, is a catastrophe and a potentially massive catastrophe. Now, I want to say a bit more here about the United States, because there is a counter-opinion in the United States. I've been to the United States twice this year, and I met a fair number of people, including from the military, including people who I would definitely say are positioned on the Christian right. But they reject all of this thinking.

They look back to their own conception of the United States as it was founded. They look at the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, all of those things. And maybe they imagine an America which perhaps never in reality existed. But they are very concerned, as they see it, that the United States, like Russia, has been drawn into this European struggle. One former American officer put it to me very vividly. He said, "The disaster for us is that we became a European great power. We became part of the European system. We played the European game. Whereas, in fact, the United States, as it was established, or perhaps as he believes it was established, was a repudiation of those very things."

So there is potential opposition within this system to a turn towards more aggressive positioning within the United States itself. And of course, it also reflects the deeper crisis that exists within the United States, the fact that living standards there have also been under acute pressure, and the sense also that America is falling behind technologically, and also, especially within sections of the military, a general sense of exhaustion, a feeling that the military is being used all the time by political leaders who have little understanding of the limits of power and are asking the military to do more than it can. So potentially, there is a route out.

Now, the other thing that's happened is that I've said that in previous global conflicts, the Europeans, because of their power, have been able to involve everybody else in these conflicts that happen and are centered in Europe. One of the most interesting things about the Ukraine crisis specifically is to see how all the non-European powers are refusing to allow that to happen. They say, look, when someone like Annalena Baerbock or whoever turns up and says, "You must impose

sanctions on the Russians. What the Russians are doing in Ukraine is terrible," they say, "Nothing to do with us. Stay away. We're prepared to deal with you. We're prepared to have good relations with you."

We are not going to sacrifice our relations with the Russians. We're not going to take sides. We're not going to be drawn into this struggle. It is a conflict in Europe. It is a conflict between the West and Russia. It is nothing to do with us. And I spoke about the sense of crisis in Europe. It seems to me that one of the things that's playing out is that Europe, for the first time in its modern history, is becoming marginal. It is no longer the center of global conflict as it was when I was born in March 1961, a month before the Berlin crisis. It is becoming instead an important, wealthy, perhaps economically stressed, but globally peripheral region where the key decisions are no longer being made. So that is what I wanted to say.

#Alexander Mercouris

Thank you very much, Alexander.

#Pascal

And I know there will be a lot of questions, so we open the floor immediately. We start with Nell, and then to the back.

#Speaker 1

Well, thank you very much for your presentation. I wanted to make like two comments, or let's say two observations, that I have had in my research that might be interesting for this. On the one hand, I have also researched the change in military doctrine, like in the U.S. military, in the U.S. Navy, and so on, in the last 10, 15 years. And what I have seen with this change towards a doctrine of hybrid warfare, multi-domain warfare, and so on, actually in the years 2017, 2018, 2020, et cetera, the rhetoric behind this, or to justify this new military doctrine of hybrid warfare, was to say that China and Russia—or let's start like this—that Russia is actually, that the U.S. thought, or the U. S. security establishment thought, that Russia was a European nation and that it actually isn't, that it is Eurasian.

And then they, for example, also say, well, and then there is China. And what they are basically saying is that none of these countries actually work through the frameworks of reason, of distinguishing. It's in the articles and reports of the U.S. military that they don't have these concepts, also not the concept of war and peace that they have. And so this type of rhetoric, like the one that we see with Marco Rubio now in 2026, was actually already being developed and openly stated in U. S. military articles and reports and so on 10 years ago, and continuously exactly to justify hybrid warfare.

And then the other thing I want to add is that, for example, very recently, in a U.S. military research paper, like 100 pages long, which is quite, I would say, is like for the different branches of the military to look at what they will research next to develop their coming strategies. They divided this report into the so-called different global theaters. Of course, one of them is Europe. And what they state there is that Ukraine—that Europe failed to use Ukraine effectively as their proxy. They didn't arm it enough and fast enough, which is then why Europe now needs to take on the role of a so-called attritional buffer zone, which means they now need to take on the role of the human resource, the armament, produce it, et cetera, and so on, so act as that proxy against Russia. So these are like my observations.

#Alexander Mercouris

Absolutely, and I think you point to a source of the crisis, because I said right at the start that, as far as my own belief, very much is that the duty of a statesman is to work for peace. This is not working for peace. It is working for conflict. I mean, it is talking about hybrid war against China, against Russia, about arming Ukraine against Russia. There was, at this time, the very time that you're talking about, a framework agreement, the Minsk Agreement, which existed and to which everybody was, in theory, signed up, which the United States voted for when it was taken to the UN Security Council, which could have been used as the map towards achieving peace in Ukraine. But instead of doing that, instead of taking that approach, we have this approach, which is a militaristic approach, great-power-maximizing-power-competition approach. And of course, when you take that approach, inevitably, in my opinion, you're going to end up with a crisis, which is exactly, exactly where we are.

#Speaker 2

Thank you, Alexander. That was articulate, as expected. I've got two, three observations, a question. So let me start with the question. I think that's a simple one. You make reference to a visit you made to Russia about two years ago, and you observed what you say was a concerning expression of antagonism towards the West. So I find that a bit— is it not the other way around? And then you do say twice that Russia is opting out, kind of seceding from Europe. Is it not Europe that kicked Russia out? Because you started by saying that Russia originally conceived of themselves as Europe, and you also did say, in regard to the history, the evolution of Russia as a world power, that they were a European world power. So which is which? Is it Russia leaving Europe or Europe kicking Russia out?

#Alexander Mercouris

These are very excellent points. Let me first of all explain. I made two visits to Russia. One was in 2025, when I attended a conference of lawyers. The other was a conference that I attended together with Pascal Lottaz this year in June in Pskov. Now, the lawyers that I met were mostly commercial lawyers, people who've had many dealings with the West. They are all English-speaking. They were all people who could be described as being very much on the liberal end of Russian

politics and ideas. And I was very, very interested and a little surprised to see the extent to which they have repudiated their own attitudes about the West.

They have come round to the view that the West, and Europe in particular, are implacably hostile towards Russia and completely unreasonable to it. So I think that that was that group. And then there was a second group that Pascal and I heard in Pskov. I don't want to say that everybody was like this, but one did hear some statements about the West which were concerning, and some statements about how Russia itself should internally develop which were concerning as well. Some people took the view that there should be a much more authoritarian turn within Russia, which I don't believe is the mainstream. But these are views which certainly have, to some extent, been provoked and empowered by the sense of crisis in which Russia finds itself.

#Speaker 2

Now, your second point is actually—it's one point yet. I've not made the second point.

#Alexander Mercouris

Sorry? I'm still on the first point. You're still on your first point. Okay. Your point about Russia and did it secede or was it pushed out? That is actually a very good one because, of course, within Europe, there has always been a certain attitude towards Russia, which is that it really shouldn't be part of Europe at all. It's too big. It's too different. It practices Christianity differently from other parts of the Christian world. Its language is not, you know, easy to understand, and it doesn't relate exactly to, you know, French and German and Italian, whatever. And that attitude towards Russia has always been there, and it has recently become much more powerful. But what has happened up till now is that the Russians have tended to see past that.

I mean, they did during the Second World War, when you could argue the Germans were attacking them and were at that time also saying the Russians aren't really part of Europe. We are protecting Europe from the Russians. But the Russian response then was, "We are Europeans. We are part of this European cultural space. And we are part of the conflict between capital and labor, between left and right, which is playing out in Europe itself." So this was the Russian liberating mission, that we were on the side of progressive Europe against reactionary Europe. Well, those sentiments just don't exist anymore. I mean, they've now seen that Europe dislikes them, and they've decided they don't want to be part of it any longer. They're packing their bags and they're leaving. And that, I think, is a revolutionary moment also, by the way, in global affairs.

#Speaker 2

Okay, thank you. So these two are more general, and they don't need specific references. The way you refer to China, you said China is starting to emerge. I find that word interesting. You also said "suddenly." I'm concerned that it is this temporality that those words signify, and you're a lawyer,

you're a media person, you choose your words carefully. But it reflects, for me, a very fundamental Western approach to life in general. The idea that China's successes, recent successes, represent emergence and that it's sudden, it bothers me a bit. Then I really like how you start by talking about great powers. And then you say something about this crisis—that's the way I understood it—when one great power tries to maximize its power at the expense of another great power. Is that not a fundamental problem? Oh, absolutely. The fetish of power and greatness of power, and the almost total ignoring of any other person who exists. It's like the entire world is the playing field for great powers.

#Alexander Mercouris

Don't you see that? I am describing, in both terms, a European system and a European reaction. The Europeans, for them, the emergence of China as a great power is both sudden and unsettling. They are accustomed to a world in which they, and people like them, like the Americans and indeed the Russians, are the great powers. That suddenly a country that is outside the system completely should emerge as a great power is shocking. I'll give an example. Again, over the Ukraine crisis, Xi Jinping came up with a peace plan for Ukraine, appointed a peace envoy, and sent him to speak to the Russians and to speak to the Ukrainians to see whether peace could be achieved. And the Europeans were incredulous.

They said, "Peter, what are the Chinese doing? They're coming and they're trying to sort out our problems? I mean, this isn't what they're supposed to be doing at all." And I remember the reaction at the time. So this is the sudden shock. And if you're talking about great powers treating this as a game, again, I'm describing the European system, specifically the European system, because, to repeat, the great wars that we have lived through across the world in the last two, three hundred years have had either a European origin or a European connection. Even the war between Japan and China that was fought in the 1930s, for example, is heavily influenced by, and part of, what was happening in Europe at that time.

#Speaker 3

Okay. Thank you, Alexander. I wanted to touch on the animosity you said you saw in Russia and how, in the West, Putin is represented not simply as the face of Russia, but as Russia, where he is a villain, Russia is guilty of his crimes, and the danger that you think there might be in the West not acknowledging that he's actually a moderating force in Russian politics.

#Alexander Mercouris

Well, you're absolutely... That is absolutely correct. I mean, Putin's background was very much that of a Russian who conceived of Russia as a part of Europe. And if you remember, I mean, Yulia mentioned him coming to the Bundestag. He spoke there in German. He stayed in Germany. Whatever it was he was doing there in the Soviet times has never been quite cleared up. But

anyway, he was there. And his friends, his major friends, 15 years ago, were not Xi Jinping or Narendra Modi. They were Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schroeder, and Silvio Berlusconi. Those are the people that he felt comfortable with.

Now, he's changed, but of course he remains the same man that he was before. So when it comes to relations with Europe and the United States in particular, he obviously has been a restraining and moderating force. But even Putin is now changing. His rhetoric towards Europe over the last six months has become much harsher. He still speaks more sympathetically about the Americans. I'm fairly sure myself that this is more about, you know, opportunism and diplomacy than any real deep-seated sentiment anymore. Even Putin is now beginning to sound increasingly angry and betrayed.

#Speaker 4

I just have one sentence to say, which is: if Russia is no longer perceiving itself as a European country, Europe is dead. That's basically— and I looked up for my new book, I looked up, because you say it's part of the cultural sort of hemisphere, but it's also part of the political hemisphere. If you look at Rousseau, you look at Kant, you look at all these writers of 1780-something, they were all saying that in the power system by then, which they called the European Republic, the Tsar comes first. In Rousseau's writings, the Tsar comes first. So if we drop Russia out, Europe is dead.

#Alexander Mercouris

Well, can I just say to that, we're talking about the AfD. I mean, one of the mistakes I think they're making, the illusions they have, is that if they come to power, they can come to Moscow and everything will go back to the way that it was. It won't. The attitude, the shift that is taking place in Russia, which I think is irreversible, is not to re-engage with Germany and the rest of Europe in the same way. I think they want peace on their western borders. But the sense of being part of this system, Europe from the Atlantic, not to the Urals, because the Russians were never happy about that, but Europe all the way up to Vladivostok, our common European home, all that rhetoric, I think, is not believed in Russia anymore.

#Speaker 5

I'm going to ask a very basic question. When discussing the foreign policy of the United States, people are always saying that there is a strong China lobby, people who prioritize the conflict with China, and that, you know, there are war plans that have been made, et cetera. I mean, how credible do you think this is? And sorry, an associated question: what is the, you know, I mean, but at the same time, the war with China remains potential, while the war with Russia is real. So what did you think of Russiagate, and what prompted, in a brief account, what prompted the US to launch the war on Russia?

#Alexander Mercouris

It's very difficult to explain sometimes, your American policy. And I get the sense that there's lots of different people within the United States government with different ideas, and some people who change their ideas all the time. I think that if you're talking about perhaps the sort of deeper, wider consensus in the United States, there is a sense that China is the great adversary. It's obviously a much more powerful country than Russia is. It's the country that has the great fleet, the enormous manufacturing, is the challenger on the modern technologies. But, of course, if you also see Russia as a country that is leaning too closely towards China.

And if, as I suspect some people within the sort of MAGA world, perhaps other parts of the American intellectual world too, they think that, you know, Russia really shouldn't be aligned with China at all, that this is an unnatural alliance in some way, that Russia really ought to be closer to us than to China. And at the same time, you see Russia as relatively weak, certainly relatively weak relative to China, then you can start to see why you might start to say to yourself that, you know, this is the place which we should really go against and try to push on and, you know, foment political crises in Ukraine which can put pressure on the Russians to do things. I have to say, I think there are other factors at play too, and I think some of them are bureaucratic.

I mean, there's a lot of inheritance from the Cold War. A lot of the structures were conceived during the Cold War to be hostile, obviously, to the Soviet Union, and that carried over after the end of the Cold War and became opposed to Russia simply because Russia took the Soviet Union's place. And I think that partly explains, for example, the strong support for the Baltic states, strong support for Ukraine, because let's face it, the Russians are the enemy, and were the enemy, and must always be the enemy. And I think there are people, for example, older people in Congress, who think in that way. But as to trying to understand American policies, I find it very difficult because America is taking on too much in too many places at the same time.

#Speaker 6

Yeah, thank you very much for your brilliant insights. You mentioned the Western sanctions against Russia. Two questions. Number one, why did the SWIFT nuke not blow up? Number two, did these sanctions maybe in some way help support Putin and his system?

#Alexander Mercouris

Well, I think you've actually asked an excellent, very important question, because one of the things about Russia is that they were very nervous of sanctions. I mean, one of the great reasons that the Russians themselves took so long, as they would say, to respond to what was going on in Ukraine was because they said to themselves, "Our GDP is relatively small. The GDP of the collective West is enormous. If they sanction us, they will crush us." And then the sanctions after 2022 were imposed, and to the Russians' own astonishment, they discovered that they could live with the sanctions. And in terms of SWIFT, the Russians—and they're not unique in this, by the way—the Russians had

already, because they could see that this disconnection from SWIFT was coming, they'd already created their own interbank payment system.

The Russians, when they need to do something like that, they do it very well. I mean, they can come together and work very fast. So they've got their own interbank payment system up and ready long before the SWIFT cutoff was announced. And then, of course, at that moment, when everything continued as normal, when the Russian economy didn't implode—well, that's the other thing that has happened. I mean, before 2022, the Russians were scared of us. Now they're not so afraid of us anymore. And the war, to some extent, has played out that way too, that they've seen that we arm Ukraine, and now we've run out of air defence missiles and things of that kind. So suddenly, we look militarily less powerful than we were assumed to be before. And now they see also that Iran can hold up against what they call the collective West. And so this is also changing perceptions.

#Speaker 7

Alexander, thanks for a great presentation, as always. A couple of comments. One is, you know, when we think about Russia, it's true that Russia, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, ended up having a very European-centric view. But I, in a way, interpret it a bit differently, because Russia perhaps was the first non-European state that was enamored or ensnared by the glitz and glamour of modernity that came. There's our look to France and Paris, right? So this is not very much different from the experience that you would also get in the Ottoman Empire or in the Persian Empire later on. It would trickle down and go farther east as modernity expands.

So I think, in a way, I don't consider Russia a European power or a European state power, but it was a state that tried to self-identify in the same way that many other non-Western or non-European countries tried to do so, to kind of share in the big pie of modernity, advancement, civilization, progress, all those kinds of things. And I think now we're seeing a kind of correction towards that, which is in a way helped by Europe as well and helped by America. But in that sense, I think what you said about Europe being marginal and marginalized, it's absolutely on point. There is no way in the post-unipolar order that Europe can play the role, the imperial role that it played before. And Russia will never return to Europe. I think that's a sense of idealism that comes from a time that's already forgotten. And so I think that's one point.

And the other thing is, when we think about sort of the—you mentioned Russia self-identifies as a civilizational state. I very much agree. I think Russia is a civilizational state. I think the problem here, and I think Chris also noted when he was talking, there is a confusion because Putin himself, as you said, is a bureaucratic, legalistic, Europeanized, utilitarian kind of character, again, enamored with this Western order. And what is this Western order? It's a Westphalian European system. And so that UN Charter, all of that is about national sovereignty. It's national and international sovereignty.

And so it's very hard for Russia to recalibrate, other than just rhetorically and symbolically call itself a civilization, to actually play as a civilization and not just call itself a civilization and just abide by the same rules of the nation-state. So I wanted to get your thoughts.

#Alexander Mercouris

Your criticism, your point about Russia, is exactly one that has always been made within Russia itself by this subcurrent of opinion that has always existed that says, well, actually, we're different from Europe. I mean, Dostoevsky, but not just Dostoevsky—there's a whole line of mostly conservative Russian thinkers in the 19th century who were making exactly this argument. And he would say, you know, European civilization is wonderful and we need to take from it, but we are different and we shouldn't merge ourselves with them. And in fact, when we do, it creates massive problems and issues for us internally.

But since the 18th century, since Peter the Great, that had not been the prevailing Russian view. And I think one of the reasons was that what Peter did was so successful. Eighteenth-century Russia absolutely established itself as a great power. By the time of Catherine the Great, they said to themselves, "We're there, we've made it. We've got St. Petersburg, which is a European capital. We all dress in Western clothes. We play an active role in European affairs. We're invited to all the best parties in Paris." And so, from that time, as I said, the prevailing view in Russia was very much that we are European.

And it seeped through to the wider population, and it became very much involved with a domestic crisis that developed in Russia within the 19th century. The sense that the system that existed then had become outdated, had become obsolete, oppressive, that we needed to have change, and of course it had to be revolutionary change, and it was going to be revolutionary change that was part of the socialist left-wing current that was also sweeping Europe at that same time. It was imported from Europe, but the Russians also felt that they weren't just importing it, that they were part of it, that it was something that they were involved in as Europeans themselves.

#Pascal

Alexander, you literally worked yourself forward into a very complex topic. We did reach the time limit. I would like to close this session by thanking you very much for your explanation. Thank you.