

Speech by Jacques Santer on the East-West relations (Harvard University, 19 February 1987)


Caption: On 19 February 1987, Jacques Santer, Head of the Luxembourg Government, opens the ‘Harvard National Model United Nations’ Conference at Harvard University. In his speech, he discusses East-West relations from a European perspective.

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East-West relations from a European perspective

In the history of transatlantic relations there has not always existed a perfect identity of views with regard to the organization of the relationship with the East. There have been moments where mutual suspicions, reproaches and even accusations were traded between the Atlantic partners over this subject.

To Americans Europeans often appeared, in their general attitude towards and in their practical dealings with the East, too soft, too accommodating, too timid, too receptive towards Soviet wishes, too addicted to compromise, too much bent on immediate benefits for example in trade but also in the humanitarian field, too mealy-mouthed perhaps as one American official recently said in public.

To Europeans Americans have sometimes been too rash in their judgements of the Soviet Union, too abstract, too ideological, too confrontational if not adventurous in their general approach, too prone to take risks.

Each has accused the other of selfishness and shortsightedness. In the view of Americans Europeans do not always take sufficiently into account the long-term strategic interests of the West as a whole; in the view of the Europeans Americans do not always respect their practical constraints.

Divergences with regard to what should be the best way to deal with the East have been an almost constant source of friction and irritation inside the Atlantic Alliance. Strong concordance in this field has rather been the exception.

What, one might now ask, are the reasons for these divergences? Are there diverse perceptions of the Soviet Union and its allies? Are there even perhaps diverse fundamental interests with regard to the East-West relations on the two sides of the Atlantic?

What are the effects of such divergences upon the Alliance? How do they affect the outcome of negotiations and dealings with the East in various fields? And if there are differences of perception and of interest, is it nevertheless possible to find a common basis for the relationship with the East?

Many problems in international life, also among partners and allies are due to a lack of understanding for the problems of the other, his desires, his constraints and his fears. Such insufficient knowledge can breed strains and even crises. Of course, not all the problems can be eliminated through cognitive efforts; there always will be irreducible antagonisms. But at least between allies there should be no such antagonisms. In fact, I'm sure there are none. And with regard to antagonisms between opponents we should do our best to prevent them from degenerating into murderous conflicts.

I would like to point today a few aspects in the relationship between East and West which may be perceived slightly differently in your country and in Europe and I will try to give a few explanations concerning possible reasons for such differences in perception. I hope to contribute thereby, however modestly, to a better mutual understanding.

This seems to me to be particularly important here in front of representatives of a generation which will determine the fate of things in the decades ahead and certainly after the year 2000.

Let this be understood as an unpretentious plea for more comprehension, more patience and more empathy.

My remarks will of course reflect the experiences of a European. But I hope I will not be too unjust when I will venture, for the sake also of dialectics, to describe the views of your country.

Before addressing some of the main concerns on the two sides of the Atlantic let me first have a look at the recent history of East-West relations in the European context.

The Europe of 1987 is not a haven of peace. But it certainly is a zone of relatively high stability, even of

astonishing stability in view of its history. To be sure Europeans see the shadow of an enormous empire, they are aware of its military might, but they do not think that an attack is imminent.

Through many centuries Europe has suffered in many fratricide wars; wars due to the sheer lust of power, to dynastical rivalries, to greed and to distrust. Twice these conflicts ended in world wars and in mass slaughtering. Europe emerged exhausted from these wars, its populations with a profound longing for peace. This longing was reinforced by the recognition that war in the nuclear age could not be fought. Europeans more than anybody are convinced that a modern war would spell the end of civilization. War avoidance has become the first maxim of all European nations.

World War Two produced a clear military result: Germany was totally defeated, its territory divided for occupation purposes among the victorious powers. But the war-time alliance did not last. First serious tensions appeared. There was no consensus about the political future of Germany. The relations deteriorated. The mechanisms for the common control of Germany broke down. Communist regimes took over in Eastern European countries. A coup in Prague shocked the Western publics. It was the beginning of what was to be called the Cold war.

The main crisis of that period, however occurred around Berlin when the Soviets blocked the access routes to the city. Berlin's lifelines were cut. But the West countered with an airlift and after a year the Soviets ended the Blockade.

By then the political fronts were clear. The relations between East and West had reached a point of no return. West Europeans saw in Soviet Russia with its enormous conventional military power an imminent threat which could only be contained by an American pledge to use its nuclear monopoly in case of Soviet aggression. This American commitment for the security of Western Europe was then, logically, formalized in the North Atlantic Treaty. The treaty which later developed into an integrated military organization provided Western Europe a certain stability even if the Korean War once again aroused the worst fears. But if such more or less direct encounters as well as the uprisings in East Germany in 1953, in Poland and above all in Hungary in 1956 and the subsequent Soviet reactions shocked many people, they did not shake what soon appeared to be a tacit – and perhaps unavoidable – understanding about the spheres of influence: “I don't rock your boat if you don't rock mine.”

Of course such an acceptance of the power situation created by World War Two did not alter the fundamental political configuration in Europe: latent tensions remained high, there was an almost total absence of trust in the other's intentions.

A second crisis over Berlin occurred at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties: Khrutchev threatened to solve unilaterally the Berlin problem which for him was an open, bleeding wound, a focus of unrelenting political uproar, a source of unbearable instability. As the West remained steadfast, Moscow decided to draw a concrete wall which would stop the flow of people leaving the eastern part of Berlin. The wall was an expression of helplessness but also of resoluteness not to accept any modification in the situation created by the War.

In none of these crises Europe was on the brink of war. None of the major actors tried to enlarge a crisis or to exploit it. Both sides worked towards de-escalation. The imperative of war prevention prevailed over possible temptations to profit from the situation. Of course such an attitude favoured in some way the actors who tried to settle definitively a situation inherited from the War. And Europeans became aware – sometimes painfully – that they were no longer able to determine the course of events. But they also realized that it would only be through patient endeavours that they might induce an evolution which then might improve the overall situation of Europe.

The contours were clear, the borders fenced. The time appeared ripe to accept also formally the unavoidable. What could be done, was to improve, at least at the margin, the lot of those who did not live where they wanted to nor how they wanted to. And the risks of a conflict could be further decreased through the progressive elimination of distrust, of the sources for misinterpretation, for overreaction and unfounded pre-

emption.

Efforts not to change drastically the overall situation of Europe but to facilitate the life of its citizens, to remove some sources of distrust and to increase stability started at the end of the sixties and were cast into agreements at the beginning of the seventies. They were paralleled – perhaps made possible, perhaps only favoured – by overtures of the Nixon Administration towards Moscow and Peking and the negotiations on the limitation of strategic arms between the United States and the Soviet Union, negotiations which led in 1972 to important agreements.

Through what was called Ostpolitik a new German government recognized the obvious: that it would not try to change its eastern borders by force. This recognition paved the way for a conference which for the first time had been discussed some twenty years before: the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

Helsinki consecrated in a multilateral context what had been pinned down a few years earlier bilaterally: the acceptance of the territorial status quo in Europe. Which in the view of the advocates of this policy did not mean that there could not be other forms of change. Quite on the contrary.

Helsinki provided for concrete measures in the field not only of security but also of humanitarian problems: dissidents were to be allowed to leave their country, families which had been separated were to be brought together, the free flow of facts and opinions was to be facilitated. Helsinki was followed by other meetings where cultural exchanges and human rights were discussed and some progress was obtained.

But there was also the problem of the enormous concentration of military manpower and hardware in the central area of Europe. The West insisted that if the East had its conference on “pan-European collective security” there should also be a forum where the conventional problem should be addressed which from the Western point of view was a problem of imbalance, namely of notable Warsaw Pact superiority. The East accepted the conference but not till today the Western demand for asymmetrical reductions of forces. The stalemate after more than thirteen years of negotiations on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) is such that the only way out seems to reside in the dissolution of that very restricted forum into a larger one. This larger one would be situated in the framework of the CSCE or more precisely the CDE, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe, also called Conference on Confidence and Security Building Measures and Disarmament. This latter conference had a remarkable success when it adopted in September of last year a whole catalogue of measures which are to reduce the risk of surprise attack, to improve transparency and thereby contribute to foster more confidence in an area extending from the Atlantic to the Urals.

All these efforts have not definitively solved some of the fundamental questions which have confronted Europe for four decades but they have contributed to award it an unprecedented stability. No major crisis has erupted in Europe in the last fifteen years. The situation of Germany and particularly of Berlin, the situation in many of the Eastern European countries may not be satisfactory for many people, at least these places are no longer burning focuses of tensions.

But it is also in this context that divergences with the American ally set in. Some of these divergences are due to differences in basic, may I say in existential conditions, between the United States and Europe, differences which cannot but engender different outlooks and concerns.

The United States has a strategic relationship with the Soviet Union. It perceives East-West relations from a superpower perspective. The relationship is also in some sense largely abstract as it is situated at the level of nuclear deterrence. The threat to the United States is not a direct threat of being invaded, of losing its freedom, but a missile threat. A window of vulnerability is less a threat of existential vulnerability than it is a threat of falling behind in the superpower contest. Strategic superiority may mean for many Americans the capacity to prevail, at least in the psychological realm and for a short period, over the rival. It may also signify a certain capacity for political and ideological containment of the rival.

The outlook of the Europeans, on the other hand, is largely determined by their profound sense of exposure

and frailty. Europe has a physical relationship with the Soviet Union. It knows that in some sense its fate is tied to it, that the shocks the Soviet empire would suffer would also shake its own foundations. A crisis for the Soviet Union will always be a crisis for Western Europe. And stability for the Soviet Union will also signify a certain degree of stability for Western Europe, however superficial that stability may be and however unsatisfactory the underlying overall political settlement of the Continent may appear.

Whereas the United States is a self-confident power, fully aware of its impact on the present path of history, endowed with a strong will to fulfil what it perceives as its mission in history, prepared to accept change in the international order and even to favour such change, Western Europe knows about its limits and its relative weakness. European nations have made efforts towards unification and they have succeeded to a certain degree, in certain areas. But even if that integration were to be more complete, if Europe were to become a genuine political community, it would not at once gain the necessary strength to become a totally autonomous actor on the world scene, its military power would not at once form a sufficient counterweight to Soviet power.

Since, however, it is today far from having adequate strength and since it depends on outside help to assure its security, Europe has no choice but to look for a *modus vivendi* with the power that dominates the Eurasian landmass. It tries to do this without giving in, without giving up its identity and its most highly cherished principles. It tries to find out what is feasible in its dealings in the short term without renouncing long term objectives. These long term objectives are the creation, in the whole of Europe, of a zone not only of stability and peace, but of freedom and human dignity. Such an attitude is not a form of neutralism, defeatism or appeasement. Appeasement is the acceptance of potential long-term catastrophic developments for the sake of short-term advantages. Appeasement stems from a fear to assume the future. Most Europeans are not afraid of the future.

Through their vast experiences Europeans have learned to be patient with regard to the course of history. They know how ephemeral political constructions are. To try to accelerate an evolution, they think, may not only be counterproductive, it may lead to disaster.

Europeans do not want to blur the differences which exist with the political societies of Eastern Europe. They do not want equidistance and they are not engaged in an operation of moral equalizing. They want to create, in the whole of Europe, the political conditions which would allow the vital forces of the nations to develop freely, in true competition. Endless ideological quarrels, they think, are sterile; they poison the atmosphere without furthering any goals, they breed distrust, they divert attention from the main objectives and are therefore in the end self-defeating.

It seems reasonable to Europe, in its dealings with the East, to bet on its strengths. And its strengths are not in the military field. The Soviet Union is better able to concentrate its energies on militaristic ends. Democracies, in peace times, are only prepared to do a minimum for their defense. West Europeans have strong scientific, technological and economic assets. Why should they seek competition in the field they are least good in, why offer the other side the pretext to use, be it only for political purposes, its relative strength?

Most Europeans do not minimize the Soviet threat. They are aware of the military strength of the Soviet Union and of the possible implications for them of a use of this powerful instrument. They observe the doctrinal proclamations which predict the final triumph of the forces of socialism. They know that their economically highly developed countries cannot be but a constant provocation to the Soviets and their allies.

They also see, however, the constraints of a huge empire which is surrounded by states or state groupings which cannot be considered as friends, an empire which has problems with its own allies and even with parts of its own population, which has to struggle with persistent economic woes, which is obsessed by deep-rooted historic apprehensions and self-doubts with regard to its capacity to defend itself against external challenges.

And, finally, they notice the recent efforts towards a certain democratization of many aspects of the Soviet

society. It is too early to say how far this process may go. There are Europeans who think that one could favor the perceptible trends by adopting a more positive approach towards the Soviet Union in the foreign policy area. At least, such an attitude might prevent the tensions existing inside the Soviet system from being exasperated or even exploited by certain groups who do not like the new course.

In any case these new developments confront the West with new strains. Indeed, if it seems relatively easy to build up a common political front against a villain, it is far less easy to adopt a tough stance against a country which seems to be striving hard to improve its record. Some Americans are afraid Europeans might be lured into a false sense of security by the internal reform moves as well as by the peace or rather the disarmament offensive of the new Soviet General Secretary. They suspect that Europeans think more about arms control than about defense. And they dread a unilateral psychological disarmament which might be followed by unilateral neglect of defense efforts.

Most Europeans, however, want to keep a strong defense. But they do not want a defense posture which might appear provocative, which might negatively affect the existing stability and which would be very costly in economic terms. Many of them observe with a certain uneasiness the American plans for a strategic defense based in space, not because they think that these plans are bad in themselves but because they fear negative consequences for the future of strategic arms control.

At the same time, many Europeans are anxious that their interests might not be adequately represented in a US-Soviet agreement on the reduction or even the elimination of certain categories of arms. Europeans expect from arms control agreements that they provide at least for an undiminished security at a lower level of armaments in the whole area covered by the North Atlantic Treaty, that they guarantee enduring strategic stability and that they contribute to an improvement of political relations with the negotiation partner. Since the concentration of military power in the heart of Europe is so enormous, spectacular changes in the equation might engender instabilities. Any measure of reduction of this arsenal should therefore, in the view of Europeans, be not only mutual and balanced but also progressive – taking into account the numerous military and non-military factors which condition the balance.

The talks at Reykjavik in October of last year between President Reagan and General secretary Gorbachev have aroused substantial concerns among Europeans. They think that a radical reduction of strategic arms such as the total elimination of ballistic missiles might endanger the American nuclear guarantee for Europe. They wonder whether the renunciation of long-range intermediate nuclear forces – the so-called zero option for Europe according to which the United States and the Soviet Union would keep only 100 nuclear warheads on US territory respectively in the Asian part of Russia – would not give a strong and inopportune importance to the lower levels of short-range nuclear systems and also of conventional forces in both of which the Soviet Union has a considerable superiority. Considering such implications many Europeans have had second thoughts about Reykjavik. One could even notice some late sighs of relief among them about the fact that in the end Americans and Russians did not reach an agreement.

In fact there are in US-Soviet relations two kinds of behavior which Europeans think to be detrimental for their interests: confrontation and collusion. They prefer their American partner to steer a middle course between these two extremes, a policy which would not blur the fundamental differences between the political systems but which would nevertheless resolutely work towards a common strategy for survival.

Let me, before I conclude my remarks, say a few words concerning two controversial items in East-West relations: the issue of linkage and the question whether détente can be divided.

Ever since President Nixon entered arms control business with Moscow, people in your country have wondered whether one should ask for a Soviet concession in the field of human rights, of emigration of Soviet Jews or the release of dissidents in exchange for an American concession in the field of arms control or rather the acceptance, by the United States, of arms control. A formal linkage was introduced after the signature of SALT I. The policy of linkage has overshadowed the SALT II process and contributed to prevent the ratification of the SALT II Treaty. It also has interfered with the later talks on strategic arms reductions.

I personally think that arms control is such an important business not only for the superpowers or their Allies but for the whole mankind that one should avoid to render it even more arduous by trying to use it for other ends, however laudable these ends may be.

It seems, moreover, that tying arms control to progress in other fields would mean that one enters the arms control process with the conviction that one side has to profit more from it than the other. Now, such an attitude cannot be but detrimental to the whole process, deviate it from its true track and end infallibly in deadlock and frustration.

Can détente be divided? Can the European arena be insulated from the broader context of East-West relations?

To a certain degree any development in the relationship between East and West will be felt in Europe. But this does not mean that Europeans should, be it for the sake of fairness and loyalty, echo any dissonances in the superpower relationship. Nor should they dissociate themselves on questions which are of great significance for the West as a whole from their American ally.

Indeed, the most important in this respect is to work towards a common basis for the relationship with the East. To succeed in such an endeavor we have first to be conscious of our common fundamental predilections, convictions and interests, namely that we defend a common model of society characterized by pluralism, free choice of the way of life, democratic institutions and so on.

We have then to define clearly the ends and the means.

What is the ultimate objective in our dealings with the East? Is it simply a change in atmosphere or is it change in the other side's system or at least in its political culture? Should the main emphasis be on economic benefits resulting from trade or should it be on war avoidance? Shall we strive for a lessening of the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe? Shall we simply seek to gain time in the search for a – to my mind elusive – superiority? Shall we try to win détente since a confrontation can no longer be won?

And how should we proceed, in which kind of framework? Shall we talk bloc to bloc, Alliance to Alliance, or bilaterally: the United States to the Soviet Union, France to the Soviet Union, West Germany to East Germany and so forth? Shall we use a pan-European forum such as the CSCE or the CDE? Do we need, except for arms control purposes, an East-West negotiation forum at all? Or should we integrate the relevant issues into the general framework of relations going on between East and West?

Whatever may be the answers to such questions, I am convinced that most of us believe that it is useful to deal with the East at many levels, in different instances on all possible subjects. We should respond to the overtures of the other side and take ourselves, whenever feasible, the initiative.

We should of course remain aware of the fact that détente is not an end in itself, that it has to be related to some carefully reflected political objectives. The first of these objectives is the prevention of war. It is only when the realization of this objective is guaranteed that all the others can be pursued.

To build up a constructive relationship with the East, to avoid stagnation and even regression we have to devise a comprehensive approach which integrates all the means and the ends, the expectations and the constraints. To develop such an approach the Western countries have to improve the mechanisms of information, consultation and decision-making.

But here we already are in the midst of my next lecture which is entitled: “The Future of the Atlantic Alliance”. I hope that I will see at least a few of you back tomorrow for the logical *suite* of this fascinating story.

Or should tomorrow's speech have come first? I'm not sure. But whatever should come first – the two

subjects are complementary. Both will remain topical. And we will do our best that they will stay with us – stay properly with us.